



Consortium on
Gender, Security & Human Rights

Feminist Peace Activism in Sri Lanka

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Consortium Lecture

February 23, 2004

Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

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Malathi de Alwis: This is my second time at the Kennedy School. During my first foray here, I spoke to Swanee Hunt's class about my research on the Mother's Front in southern Sri Lanka. Today I will talk about my more recent work on peace activism in South Asia. This project is funded by the Ford Foundation, as is the Boston Consortium. I will share some thoughts on peace activism in Sri Lanka and the challenges being faced in that regard.

I will start with a polemic: feminist peace activism in Sri Lanka has been over-determined by the war, but the war has not been adequately addressed. Feminist peace activism began to coalesce as a movement after the anti-Tamil riots in July 1983 and the escalation of the civil war in the north and east of the island. In July 1983 Tamil civilians living in Colombo, the capital city, as well as in other regions of the island, were attacked by Sinhala mobs instigated by politicians in the then government after some Sinhala soldiers were killed by Tamil militants in the north of the island. In 1984, Women for Peace, which I was a part of, was founded. Our primary focus was to produce a critique of ethnic chauvinism and militarism and to publicize these critiques through our publications, through the media, through schools etc.

In fact, 1983 was a watershed for the feminist movement, as it caused a split within the movement between those who condemned the riots and those who condoned them. Critiques only lead to a strengthening of a movement, rather than the other way around. So my presentation today is very much a self-critique and a re-thinking; I see myself implicated in many of the practices I seek to critique here. We often do not have time to focus on these critiques or to fix problems because we are constantly reacting to political events in the country. This has led to us falling into easy practices of protest and activism.

This was a project I really pushed to the Ford Foundation: to get activists and scholars together to re-think activism throughout all of South Asia by having them spend a substantial amount of time in a feminist organization in a different region of South Asia. However, we could not really get such a project off the ground because there was so much reluctance from feminist activists themselves. They noted that language would be a barrier and they would have to spend all their time acting as translators to the visitors which would debilitate their own work, they were too busy to spare a block of time to spend in another country and they were suspicious of young scholars interning with them, given past experiences with such women who used their organizations as launching pads for their own careers or to write a MA or PhD thesis. The latter issue was cited as primarily a generational problem. Feminism is no longer a political project, but has become a professional activity for the younger generation.

Let me explore this 'professionalization of activism; further; what is the reason for this ideological shift from the political to the professional? The early days of feminist activism in Sri Lanka were much more focused on a critique of militarism and ethnic chauvinism, but now it has been diluted and fragmented into catch-all projects focusing on 'women's empowerment,' 'gender sensitization,' documenting human rights abuses, and participation in 'good

governance.’ There is no longer an autonomous women’s peace organization. This does not mean there is no longer a women’s movement, but that peace activism is no longer the sole focus of any feminist organization.

One of the reasons for this is the fact that it is a very small group of men and women who are involved in activism, human rights documentation, doing trauma counseling, supporting micro credit ventures etc.—it is the same group of people who are doing everything and garnering the international attention that Sri Lanka has been getting. Also, this institutionalization or professionalization of activism is linked to the flooding of international aid to Sri Lanka. One can find employment as a full time activist. Consciousness-raising and political commitment is no longer necessary. Women get jobs such as “gender coordinator” at large international non-governmental organizations or the UN without ever questioning these categories or understanding the history of feminist struggles. There is also the belief that all gender coordinators must be women; it is not true, there are a lot of things that men could do, but these days a gender activist who is male is unimaginable. So, lots of young women are participating in ‘gender coordination’ and ‘gender mainstreaming’ projects simply because they are women.

Obviously, certain aspects of professionalization can provide greater stability in the lives of activists and make their work more efficient. It can also enable the sustainability of organizations and internal cohesion of feminist projects, but funding is never a one-way process. Funding networks subtly influence your agenda. For example, right now, many international organizations are very supportive of local organizations pushing for an increase in the representation of women in Parliament. But such an exclusive focus has taken us away from discussing issues linked to ethnicity and devolution of power, two very pertinent issues because of the current context of the war, and how the constitution will need to be amended to arrive at a political solution to it.

This is one of the problems with institutionalization: the sustainability of the institution becomes the primary focus, and everyone plays safe so that they can keep getting funded. Most of the radical feminist groups in Sri Lanka have either folded, or become more mainstream and now work on “safe issues.” These safe issues are reflected in the kinds of agendas we have started adopting. Thus there is a shift in the form that activism takes. Instead of “refusal activism,” where you really place yourself at risk (*e.g.*, civil disobedience, non-cooperation, strikes), we have moved to “request activism,” where the focus is on signature campaigns and charters and issuing statements that are quicker and easier. In a day, you can get a thousand signatures by posting a statement on the internet. In fact, we feminist peace activists in Sri Lanka have become so predictable that after every bomb blast or other violent event, the press expects some sort of statement from the feminists, and if one does not come they joke, “Oh, that happened so quickly the feminists have not even been able to put out a statement yet.” But what happens after the statement—that is the question.

Since the ceasefire, a lot of international funding has also gone towards ‘peace building’ and ‘conflict resolution,’ so the focus of peace activism has changed. Now the focus is on enabling interactions between women in the north and the south. The majority of feminist organizations are focusing on exchanging women north to south and vice versa, but no one seems to be doing anything besides raising consciousness at the grassroots level. Instead of having a range from radical to liberal, everyone is starting to do the same thing, depending on what current themes are

'hot' among the funders! Thus, we are all adopting very similar strategies despite the heterogeneity of feminist organizations. We need to think about new strategies and not always fall back on what is familiar, easier or quickest.

This process of homogenization of strategies is also encouraged by the broader influence of the UN and the kind of processes that have been promoted by the UN in terms of women's rights. Lots of international meetings are being held. The energy of the feminist movement has been going into petitioning governments and holding them accountable to international charters. You develop an international framework, and local issues get sidelined. We spent a lot of time preparing for the Beijing conference, even when we were at war. A great deal of energy and funds went into disseminating information about what would take place in Beijing, and lots of the local issues got lost. This leads us to ask the question: How can we accomplish both?

Questions

Q: I think your point about having lots of variation in people's approaches is critical. When I was meeting with women in Eastern Europe after the communist era, I would ask a group of 30 women, "Are any of you feminists?" and absolutely no one would raise their hand. They would make a big point of not being feminist. I told them that they should be grateful to the feminists because they make other women look moderate. The point is that without variation, it is too easy for everything that is labeled as a "women's" issue to be sliced off.

Q: Can you talk about the effect of institutionalization on the feminist movement?

MA: During the ceasefire, there was the creation of a Gender Commission, as well as different commissions that were appointed so that different discussions could take place. These commissions were supposed to be advising the two major groups involved in the peace talks. About a year into these commissions operations, the feminists agitated and asked for a separate commission on women. It was seen as a great victory; women and children became the next big issue. Eventually the women's issue became a side issue, then women could not even discuss their conditions. There was some attempt to include women's issues, but it became a very constricted and constrained voice; you could only raise certain issues. There was also an opportunity for women in the south to converse with militant women, but I think the kind of conversation in the south was really laid out for the commission. Someone would get up and make a speech, and it would be really hard to have a good conversation. But when the peace talks broke down, the commission fell apart, and it has been hard to have any conversation.

Q: Can you comment on UN resolution 1325 and the UN funding of women? Is it successful, how are they doing it, and where are they having problems? And, as a second question, do you think there are situations where you find that instead of being equal, they could be fair?

MA: UN resolution 1325 is not an issue that has really been in the forefront in the media. In organizations, it has been much bigger. For example, CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency) when enabling the formation of community groups, really stresses that half of them should be men, and half should be women. But there is an interesting difference between the level of policy and workings on the ground. Most of the women who are appointed

to these committees because of CIDA's gender equality rule do not feel comfortable speaking up at their committee meetings. This is especially a problem in the Muslim community where they have no support base. So even though on paper it looks very nice and equal, in terms of actual input, equal representation falls apart.

You see the same problem with insisting on there being a gender coordinator in every NGO. People are put in the position of gender coordinator, but no one asks if they are qualified or competent for that position. Sometimes it has worked, and some women can really use that role for change, but other times it has not. It is going to take much more time. A different approach is used by the World University Services of Canada (WUSC), which supports non-traditional forms of employment for women. They teach the women, and they also work with the people who employ the women. They work with the community and the women's families, they try to educate about gender equality at a variety of levels. Still, the training of women in non-traditional employment has not been very successful because it is very difficult for women. But there is a widening circle in which to educate women and set up a support network for them, taking roles for women that they have never had before.

Carol Cohn: I have a follow-up to Mala's comment. Two meetings ago, we talked about a UN Commission on the Status of Women Expert Group Meeting on using peace agreements to support gender equality in post-conflict societies. I was in a sub-group working on the responsibilities of donors and facilitators in peace building, so I want to ask: what would it take to make this work? By this I mean: what would it take to make sure that donors and facilitators know that women must be involved at every step in the decision making process? What kinds of women's mobilization have to go on before the peace process can even begin, and how can you do that during a war? Could someone fund this? How does it shape what is the agenda? What is considered too militant? And finally, if we can get women to the table, what sort of power do they have once there? How do you get this right?

MA: Well, the Gender Commission is an attempt to have some participation.

Q: But that is just gender, what about everything else?

MA: Yes, but the committee itself had so many problems that imagining women at the peace table at all is hard, and even the minority parties hardly get heard. However, Ireland is a good example; In Ireland, women were at the table, even though they said to be heard was such a challenge. They were constantly playing the role of moderators in that conflict. But we are a long way off. It is one thing to insist that women should participate and another to have women participate fully and well. Women need a support base that they can develop for a long time in society before they can do this well. There is such a small group of activists in Sri Lanka doing 150 different things! The Women's Coalition for Peace was inspired by the Irish group of the same name and wanted to talk about peace at many different levels, but the political parties wanted to talk only to each other. The militant groups also have a very specific agenda. Women do not really have much, and this is even in a country where the President is a woman.

Q: You said that one of the problems is that women in the Muslim committees do not usually speak out. So, is the problem that there is lack of preparedness in how these women are chosen, or is it that they deliberately choose women they know will not speak out?

MA: Perhaps sometimes, but most of the time, women get on committees by taking exams, and usually they do better than the men. So there is a generational difference because the younger women who are better educated are picked. I think in different contexts, it would be different once again. There are some very articulate women. For example, the President is at times very courageous. At other times she is very opportunistic, but she really does take the rights of minorities very seriously and calls for the input of the feminists when she needs to.

Q: I would like for us to talk about solutions. We work hard to get women appointed to these bodies, and now it is clear that it is not enough. How do we help them to be successful and effective? Can you think of examples where there has been a great job of selecting and training women?

MA: The closest I can think of is the Irish example. Just talking to women who were in the early stages of the talks and continuing the conversation between the different parties was very hopeful. They made a conscious effort to involve younger women in these processes. I have tried to do that in Sri Lanka, but our problem is that we can't keep the younger generation in the country because of the war. No one wants to go to university in Sri Lanka—they all want to study 'abroad'. We are facing a huge youth drain to foreign climes on the one hand and a huge decimation of the youth population due to war, on the other. Children are conscripted to the LTTE when they are as young as 10 years old and you can join the Sri Lankan military once you attain the age of 17. And of course, there are all the children and youth who are killed every year due to being caught in crossfire, bomb blasts, strafings, stepping on landmines etc., etc.

Q: I work for the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Afghanistan, and one problem we have is the donor group telling you what the problem is and what to look at. So you start a project and do it for four months and raise everyone's expectations, but then you cannot finish because there is not enough funding. This is a continuous problem that keeps on happening. How do you get out of this cycle?

MA: That is the other problem; you have hit the nail on the head. Have a conversation with the feminist groups. Ask them why they have relocated to urban areas. It is a huge issue, and I do not really know how to get out of it. Donor programs usually do not think research is important, and they keep replicating work. It is also with the source of money, how they operate. It seems that every year they have a different area they have to focus on. One year it will be gender, and then everyone else has to focus on that too. I have been trying to get some local research organizations together to meet donors as a collective and get money on their own terms, with a three-year minimum of funding. My own research institute has only one successful story in this regard, when we managed to get a three-year grant from NORAD (Norwegian Development Organization) which allowed us decide which issues we thought were most pressing in our country and to study those in depth. Sometimes donors just have to be hands-off, give you the money, and let you decide what to do with it, but it is rare that they do that.

CC: At a UN Expert Group Meeting I attended, we recommended the creation of a permanent fund to be there for women's use, to let the women decide what to do with it. The moment we came up with this idea and spoke to even the friendliest member states, they told us to forget it. They said they would only fund specific projects, not just a general idea.

Q: I want to get back to this idea of success in Sri Lanka. What are some of the major success stories of Sri Lanka? What is something the international community can look at and say, "Wow, they really have a good idea, and they did something positive?"

MA: I think you can look at the way some organizations began, such as Women for Peace. When the feminist movement was split along ethnic lines, that group came together as a multi-ethnic organization. That is the only example I can come up with.

However, I would like to expound upon further work that needs to be done. I think we need more work to be done by multi-ethnic groups and on multiple fronts. We need groups looking at what happens to minorities that fall between the cracks in the ethnic divide, such as the Muslim population. It is not just gender issues, but ethnic and class issues, which drop out of the dialogue. Even Women for Peace was primarily a middle class effort. There have been some organizations that stretch across class, but frequently they fall apart. We have not been able to sustain these because we are not able to have a group that reaches across lines.

I would also like to reflect again upon this issue of donors. I cannot lay all the blame on the donor community. A lot of the problem has to do with nationalist notions that we carry within us. However, I would like to add one more issue facing feminist organizations. With the way funding works, the donor community does not always want to fund the same group; they want to fund different groups. What happens is that organizations break apart to get funding, and then everyone is fighting for the same money and doing the same sort of work. I really think we need to have some sort of division of labor with some groups focusing on certain things and other groups on other things. Right now, everyone does the same thing, depending on the flavor of the month. Projects are not really thought out; instead everyone just goes with the flow, trying to access the money.

Q: Sri Lanka First [a peace initiative of the business community] seemed like a very successful campaign, even if short lived.

MA: I am not sure I agree with that. Well, at first it was successful in terms of saying 'enough is enough,' and that did cause a stir because finally the business community in the country was speaking up and voicing a collective opinion. But in terms of their campaign, they had beautiful ads – I have collected and analyzed these ads – but their only slogan was to call for peace. Yet they never explained what they really meant by "peace." No one is agreed on how we can have peace in Sri Lanka --only that we must have it, and soon! That is just too superficial a way to run an entire campaign. If they had pushed for constitutional changes, for example, it would have been very powerful because the government had not yet been pushed to do that.

I think the ability to sustain voices of protest is a bigger issue that the country faces. For instance, the fact that the business community is part of the anti-war lobby now is good, but you do not really hear from them much except for an ad in the newspapers from time to time. Even in the feminist groups, we are just not able to sustain our campaigns, and that is unfortunate. The only sustainable campaign is human rights work because it is couched in the more acceptable language of reform rather than transformation.

Q: Earlier you mentioned the training of women in non-traditional employment. In what capacity is that happening? Is teaming up with church programs possible? Is it happening already? If not, would it work? Also, in terms of selection of women in the negotiating process, how can we alter the decision to select women based on performance on exams and instead choose someone based on her ability as a leader?

MA: I will start with your second question. It was not the Gender Commission that selected women based on exams. I was talking about committees set up in displacement camps. In terms of the national Gender Commission, the government chose women who they thought would be representative. In the south, they tried to choose a multi-ethnic group, but the militants (LTTE) said they did not want any Tamil women in the group; the LTTE wanted to be the sole representatives of the Tamil community. Many of the Muslim women on the committee were well-respected leaders in their community. There were many articulate women who would have liked to bring up many issues, but the framework of the discussion had already been laid out.

In terms of your first question, there has been a lot of critique about training women in non-traditional employment. Many say that non-traditional employment is just some Canadian agenda, but I am more hopeful. I think those programs are more helpful because they try to educate the community and start from there. Hopefully, more people will see that this can be done, but unfortunately so far they have not been very successful. The classes have gone on, but how many women have become technicians or mechanics? One of the problems is that if you are working in the war zone and mobility is restricted due to security reasons, there are only a certain number of masons you can have in a specific region. So women have found other forms of employment, such as work in the government sector where there is more stability. If you look at how many women trained in non-traditional employment actually continue to work in those areas, it is not as hopeful. I think it would help to apply these programs at a more national level.

Q: I was in Sri Lanka (I am not an academic, but a journalist) and I was looking at women in the tea industry. Have women been interested in that industry?

MA: Yes, well not a lot of feminists have been looking at that, but a few groups have been working for many years among women in the plantation industry. It is a very unionized, patriarchal and politicized industry, so the question of how to get access to it is quite complicated. There have been some women within the trade unions that feminists have worked with, and there have been small efforts by one or two feminist organizations to work with them on more general issues: not just gender, but also the livelihood of people. Women are the worst off within the industry, and the most depressed, so feminists have tried to push the trade unions

to address many issues specific to them such as reproductive health, education, equal pay etc., but they often have not been very successful.

Q: When you mentioned problems in Sri Lanka, I was surprised that it seemed similar to Africa, that women must follow the donor's agenda but do not have their own agenda. Do you see a partnership between the north and the south? Could northern institutions strengthen the south, especially with regard to research?

MA: Yes, I do see a partnership between the north and south, but it depends on the issue. For example, with human rights, there have been networks. But in many areas, even just south-south conversations are necessary. There needs to be more networking within South Asia, between other parts of South Asia, where there are amazing groups and where people are facing similar kinds of issues. But I think it works best depending on the issue, and I would not say that has to happen on every issue.

Q (Same person): I was thinking specifically of the gender issue. Can you talk about peace building, for example, since it is your own work?

MA: Yes, well as I said, we were very influenced by the group in Northern Ireland, and we actually had some of them come to Sri Lanka and have conversations with us. There are frequently international issues that we take up in Sri Lanka, such as nuclear weapons, so I think the feminist movement has always been an international movement. We started a "Women in Black" movement in Sri Lanka, and there is a feeling of solidarity – that this same movement also exists in Israel, in England, and in many other countries.

Q: I am curious about youth as change agents. Is there a framework that would allow for piloting projects relating to these issues with younger generations, in order to raise a new generation of boys and girls thinking about this?

MA: Well, my issues are primarily among feminists and younger women.

Q (Same person): I am talking about high school and pre-high school.

MA: Women for Peace had a school program where we went to schools and talked about issues, and that worked for a little while. That sort of program has been more institutionalized and incorporated within the field of human rights now. For example, UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) has been including children's rights in a lot of their work.

Q: What about gender issues?

MA: Some organizations have been doing it under other programs. For instance, when you talk about children's rights, you bring it up. You have to talk to the educators themselves to have an idea of how you get this across. In a society so dependent on exams, you may have some children learning it with exams. I do not know how well integrated it is into the mainstream

curriculum, but we have definitely recognized the need to educate the younger generation, particularly looking at textbooks, which have been dissemination all sorts of chauvinistic ideas.

Q: I support equality as a laudable goal, but it will take time. In the interim, I have been thinking that perhaps women could be involved, not equally, but fairly. For example, women's organizations develop where women participate and lead within them. They would be naturals in local government, but not naturals to be elected to parliament. If you could at least take groups like that and incorporate them at the local level, it would lead to fairness and pave the road for equality. Would that make sense?

MA: Feminists have put out a women's manifesto that calls for participation at all levels, including the parliament, and it starts at the local level. It demands more participation in political parties as well, because they are the ones doing the appointing. We have not really been that successful in having those sorts of changes made. People accept the manifesto, but do not really follow it. They make frequent excuses, such as, "we do not really have the women." The other reason that a lot of women do not want to come forward is that parliament has become very violent. One argument is that it will not change until women come into politics, but the other problem is that you have particular families involved in politics. For example, there was a man in parliament who could not run in the provincial government, so he had his wife run, and she won. Then he resigned his seat in parliament, and she gave up her seat for him. There was very little furor about it as it was accepted as standard practice. The feminist column we write once a week, *Cat's Eye*, was one of the few places where this switch was vehemently protested.

Q: I just wanted to add that a couple of months later, someone petitioned the Supreme Court, and judgment was given that you cannot do that, though I do not know if it affected her.

MA: Well, that is good to know.

Q: On a more upbeat note, I think it is wonderful that you are here. I left Sri Lanka when I was six months old, and I grew up in Nova Scotia, and you do not meet many Sri Lankans. Now I am sort of figuring things out. I am very optimistic that you can even have a forum like this. I am so far removed, even from my aunt. It is hard growing up Canadian, knowing that my uncle got shot in front of his family just because he broke curfew. So, to have a venue to listen to all of this is actually encouraging to me. We have wanted to go back to visit my aunt, and even that is optimistic, because we have not been able to go back for years. So, I am an optimist, and I believe in education, and now they have the Internet.

MA: It is not that I do not have hope. Though there was a time when I felt quite hopeless (when the director of my institute –Dr Neelan Tiruchelvam– was assassinated), and then Nira Yuval-Davis was sent this quote of Gramsci's: "Pessimism of the mind, optimism of the will," and I always try to remind myself of that when I get depressed. But my critique comes from the feeling that we cannot really rest on our laurels, and that has been my focus and my disappointment. Yes there is progress, but there are still people who are suffering. There is still child conscription going on in the east, and I feel it is up to us, the activists, particularly in the south, where we can speak without fearing being killed like those in the east. It is up to us to

critique everyone. I feel everyone is just so glad the war has ended that the activists are celebrating too much, and I think we cannot relax, and our task is not over. That is the most difficult part: you can never rest.

One group I am so in awe of is the University Teachers for Human Rights because they have never rested; they are constantly documenting human rights abuses despite the fact that they are constantly under death threat by the LTTE and have to live underground, constantly on the run. One of them wrote this amazing book but could not even come to his own book launch. So there are people doing amazing and important work.

Q: What are you teaching at the New School University?

MA: I am an anthropologist, so I teach social theory and feminist theory.

CC: I have a question about the issue of not having time to reflect; your description of NGOs around war zones is similar to NGOs around the UN. They are constantly faced with crises in various countries, and they are trying to keep up-to-date with what is going on in the UN. There are constant externally-defined tasks, and conversations do not happen very often on the issue of finding the most important leverage point. I am wondering what you think is a way to create that kind of space and process so all of us can benefit from each other's collective thoughts?

MA: It is difficult, and I think people get very defensive when they hear what I say because they see it as a critique of what they are doing. It is not to take away from the work they do, but I think at first you need to be ready to admit that we need to re-think, and many people are not at that stage. I do not know how you get people to that point. Once that is acknowledged, then half the battle is won. And how far do you go with this critique? It could also become very disabling. I am sorry, but I do not have answers; I am just trying to raise questions.

Q: Can you elaborate on a point you touched on earlier: the necessity and utility of negotiating the tension between making full use of international mechanisms of pressure without losing sight of local contexts or sacrificing activism at the local level?

MA: There have been different kinds of international interventions. I have been talking about developmentalist or humanitarian interventions, but what I find more interesting is politicized interventions; it is more ideologically based, so there is more of an edge to it. They do not use the kind of discourse the state uses. I think the existence of a space like the International Centre for Ethnic Studies is very hopeful because we do hope to attract young people back, as well as other scholars who would come to Sri Lanka and share their knowledge and work with us. This is my critique of interventions that come from outside, where organizations think they know the issues and tell us what to do. Other organizations want to work with us and ask us what we want. But sometimes, even if you ask women what they want, they have already been taught which requests are usually more successful, so the internationalization of issues gives us a vocabulary that we are very quick to use without thinking about it.

I think it is very hopeful that we have had a lot of people coming back. But the funding is also

very important. Unlike in India, where the state is involved in research, if you are doing research in Sri Lanka, you are dependent on outside sources.

Q: So the key is how to forge a two-way partnership so that you can take advantage of international funding?

MA: Right. My organization is very clear (having “international” in the title) that you really have to work internationally, and there are many gains. In the peace process, we were trying to provide examples from around the world to think about conflict and conflict resolution and to educate people about alternatives.

Biography

Malathi (Mala) de Alwis, PhD, is a visiting Associate Professor of Anthropology at the New School for Social Research in New York and a Senior Research Fellow at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Colombo, Sri Lanka, where she is currently coordinating the ICES project "Gendering Peace Movements in South Asia." She earned her PhD in Socio-Cultural Anthropology from the University of Chicago and was a founding member of the Women against War Coalition at the University. She has authored/co-authored many books including *Casting Pearls: The Women's Franchise Movement in Sri Lanka*, *Feminists Under Fire: Exchanges Across War Zones*, and *Embodied Violence: Communalizing Women's Sexuality in South Asia*.