



**SAMUEL CENTRE
FOR SOCIAL
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The Inheritance of Trauma
Mitigating the Stresses of Forced Migration and
Immigrant Integration

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August 2018

ABSTRACT

My research found that the roots of intergenerational trauma in the Tamil Canadian community can be traced back to the conflict of the Sri Lankan civil war, but that this trauma was further compounded by the refugee process. Refugees were forced to endure the loss of the home they had always known, followed immediately by strict requirements to prove both their identity and their desperation for asylum, culminating in sustained anxiety about attracting negative attention or being branded as a “bad immigrant.” Refugees pass these self-monitoring anxieties onto their children in small ways, by limiting the sort of activities their child participates in, or restricting how outspoken they become about issues in their motherland. These confusing limitations and inherited fears are only further complicated by the absence of open discourse about emotions that appears to persist within refugee families.

My recommendations include working actively to welcome and integrate refugees into local communities, empowering youth groups to create peer-matching programs that help first generation students achieve the same access to campus resources that someone with university-educated parents would, and encouraging governments to make small adjustments to the immigration and asylum-seeking process in order to create more warmth and care in a system that deals largely with vulnerable populations.

INTRODUCTION

My fellowship is focused on exploring the presence and pervasiveness of intergenerational trauma, particularly through the lens of how trauma can be transmitted from forced migrants and refugees who fled regions of conflict to subsequent generations born into entirely different circumstances. The question of how this trauma is passed down through generations is of utmost interest to me because not only does it tap into the psychology of trauma, but it also weaves in the impact of cultural particularities and how certain norms and practices might intensify or dilute intergenerational trauma. My research takes the Sri Lankan Tamil community as a case study because of the multidimensional challenges they have faced as refugees and immigrants.

Sri Lanka is a small island just below India that has been mired in violent conflict between its Sinhalese majority and its Tamil minority for nearly three decades. A longstanding struggle for political power that started in July of 1983 led the Tamil minority to seek separation, feeling that they were being discriminated against and marginalized by the Sinhalese administration in government. Mounting tensions led to a 29 year long civil war between the Sri Lankan army and Tamil guerilla groups, leading to the loss of a staggering number of civilian lives. As a result of the political tensions they faced at home, many Tamils fled to other regions of the world, with the largest populations ending up in Canada, the United Kingdom, India, France, Germany and Switzerland.¹ Nearly ten years after the end of the civil war, 60 000 sons and daughters who were disappeared during the years of conflict remain

¹ Sarah Wayland, "Ethnonationalist networks and transnational opportunities: the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora," *Review of International Studies* 30, no. 3 (2004), 414.

unaccounted for. These are the circumstances that fuel my curiosity about war, migration and trauma. Having gone from a homeland steeped in the traditions and rituals that have been standard for their families for generations, to new lives in American and European countries with vastly different codes of conduct, refugees are faced with the unique challenge of adapting to a brand new way of living whilst also trying to secure financial stability in a job market that might deem their credentials or language qualifications to be lacking. In these new countries, children were born to Tamil parents, deep brown in skin, and Tamil in tongue, but different from the previous generation in many other ways. Rifts in styles of emotional communication, cultural stigmatization of mental health issues and clashing approaches to addressing past traumas created not only tense familial dynamics, but a breeding ground for unspoken hurts and buried triggers to fester.²

In the conversations I conducted with Tamil Canadian youths from immigrant families over the course of this fellowship, there was a clear pattern of reports that their parents preferred to communicate their affection in less openly emotional ways, perhaps performing favours or cooking their children's favourite meals instead of verbalizing their feelings.³ This can create tension in immigrant families where parents might still adhere to their traditionally stoic norms whilst their children adopt more Western modes of emotional expression. Furthermore, understanding this issue in greater depth might allow us to mitigate the continued presence of trauma in future generations. The main stakeholders with respect to this issue are

² Derrick Silove, Zachary Steel, Patrick McGorry, Peter Mohan, "Trauma exposure, postmigration stressors, and symptoms of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress in Tamil asylum-seekers: comparison with refugees and immigrants," *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 97, no. 3 (1998), 523.

³ Anonymous group interview (youths aged 20-24 in Markham, Ontario), interviewed by Vino Wijeyasuriyar, Markham, ON, June 2018.

refugee populations and their descendants, particularly those whose cultures differ significantly from those of their host countries. The actors relevant to this study are Tamil community members themselves, as well as government-level policy makers at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels who can reduce barriers to integration and social mobility, which are two factors whose absence can compound trauma. This issue will be discussed in greater detail in the next section of this report.

Cumulatively, what these questions form is a framework that studies the process of migration as something that can create traumatic experiences at each step of the process. There is the trauma that comes “before”; this includes whatever unpleasant situations migrants were forced to endure before they were able to flee. There is also the trauma that comes “during” the immigration process; this includes getting detained at a border crossing, being discriminated against at airport security and being crudely examined, or having one’s application for permanent residence denied. Finally, there is the third wave of trauma, of which comes “after” immigration; this includes migrants in poor socioeconomic standing who face multifarious obstacles as they try to find stable employment while potentially also being discriminated against for their imperfect English or manner of dress. These are simply a few of the innumerable resettlement stressors that migrants might face. Even after finding a job, there is the continued threat of being taken advantage of, where some employers try to capitalize on the notion that it may be easier to manipulate a new migrant with a frail or non-existent social network and likely no means to seek legal aid. As these migrants have children of their own, they find that the young ones adapt rapidly to their new country, which is at once hope-inspiring and terrifying. On one hand, migrants might hope these children will fare far better

in this country than they themselves ever could. On the other hand, they worry that they might not be able to understand and connect with their own children, facing a cultural rift that is not as pronounced when both parent and child grow up in the same homeland. As these traumas accumulate, families are left to suffer, adjusting poorly to shifting household dynamics whilst also struggling through adversities such as racism, discrimination, and alienation outside the home.

ISSUE, EVIDENCE, AND KEY FINDINGS

The research presented in this report was harvested from many mornings, afternoons, and evenings of sitting down with strangers over cups of hot, thickly sweetened chai. The issue of immigration and inherited trauma is always a delicate one, but it seems to have accrued a particularly impenetrable veneer in the Tamil diaspora. This is the result of a couple of intersecting factors; despite being a vibrant and lively culture when it comes to arts and celebration, emotions within immigrant and refugee households are often brushed under the carpet. In what appears to be an effort to “remain strong” for each other, members of the family tend to guard their emotions from one another and ruminate on their sadness in moments of solitude. Furthermore, the civil war waging in their homeland of Sri Lanka led some immigrants to feel as though they were better off starting their lives in this new country without looking back or embroiling themselves in the political tensions they had worked so hard to leave behind. The first of these two factors arose frequently during my interviews, albeit in different ways, depending on the age of the person I was talking to.

Familial Dynamics Across Generations

Youths, comprised largely of young people that were born in Canada to immigrant parents, expressed that they wished their parents were more communicative with their feelings.⁴ These youths expressed how difficult it was to exist in a sort of limbo where they don't feel entirely Canadian, still occasionally feeling alienated or “not like the others” in some group situations. They know that the colour of their skin, the spiced meals they are served for dinner, the percussive music that sounds through the radio while their dad works on his car in the garage, they all stem from this culture that is distinctly foreign and exciting. They know their parents came from Sri Lanka to start new lives here, but they express frustration at not hearing more stories about how their parents grew up, why exactly they left, or why the family can't go back to visit this island of nostalgic stories and memories anytime soon.⁵

Along with this reluctance to discuss history, youths also brought up their parents' aversion to verbal affection. At one group interview, when one individual shared with a sheepish smile that his parents had never outright told him “I love you, son”, empathetic laughter broke out across the table.⁶ Every person at that table agreed that words and proclamations were not their parents' preferred method of expressing affection. Instead, they had learned to recognize love in the hot meals their parents surprised them with at school, in the little nick knacks they left for them as gifts in their rooms when they were away, and the sometimes

⁴ Anonymous interview no.1 (youths aged 20-24 in Brampton, Ontario), interviewed by Vino Wijeyasuriyar, Brampton, ON, May 2018.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Anonymous group interview no.3 (youths aged 18-26 in Montreal, QC), interviewed by Vino Wijeyasuriyar, Montreal, QC, June 2018.

overwhelming concern parents showed when even adolescents or young adults expressed their intent to go out with their friends late at night. Although these kids had grown up in the West and could seamlessly express themselves with their peers, they were able to shift gears between emotional styles in order to receive and give affection to their parents in a more unspoken, gesture-based manner. One interviewee provided a touching example of this, saying that though her parents became shy and withdrawn at the possibility of discussing emotions, her mother always made sure that there was a cup of her favourite ginger tea timed exactly to be at a hot but drinkable temperature by the time she got home from work every day, without fail.⁷ She became slightly emotional at this next part, saying that when her mother was briefly hospitalized for a minor surgery, her dad made a point to ask his wife for the instructions and ingredients so that he could rush home briefly from staying at the hospital with her just to make sure the cup of ginger tea was still waiting for his daughter when she got home from work. She recalls that the tea was slightly sweeter than usual, and there was less ginger than she was used to, but she drank the full cup of tea with immense gratitude, knowing that her parents were demonstrating their love for her in their own way.⁸

My interviews with the parents' generation, composed mainly of the immigrants and refugees who resettled in a new host country (unlike the youths, who were born here, and the grandparent generation, who were sponsored over by their adult children to live with them and help raise the grandchildren), unearthed

⁷ Anonymous no. 2 (daughter of immigrants in Montreal, Quebec), interviewed by Vino Wijeyasuriyar, Montreal, QC, August 2018.

⁸ Anonymous no. 2 (daughter of immigrants in Montreal, Quebec), interviewed by Vino Wijeyasuriyar, Montreal, QC, August 2018.

an entirely new perspective on this issue. Adults expressed that they have given up everything in order to escape the horrific conditions they endured in their homeland. They spent their last pennies on airline tickets, knowing that they would have to work tirelessly to secure a job and a solid income as soon as they landed. Knowing that the guerilla group known as the “Tamil tigers” was seen in the West as something like a terrorist organization, they did their best to detach themselves from their ethnic identities. One man explained to me that his name, which I can't mention without compromising his anonymity, was a long, multi-syllabic, distinctly Tamil name.⁹ He remembers sitting in a cramped apartment and brainstorming ways to shorten and anglicize the name whilst still maintaining its original sounds. When questioned about his reasons for leaving Sri Lanka, he would simply say that life was hard there; he wanted to avoid getting into a conversation about the civil war, as he was worried that people would recoil and wonder about his own capacity for violence, although he had never gotten involved the conflict or carried arms. All he had done was run, hide, weep, and try to protect his parents and siblings. Looking up now, and blinking the tears out of his reddened eyes, he says that this is why he prefers not to speak of the past. He left so much behind in order to give his children their best chance at success; he feared that allowing his children to get too involved in the Sri Lankan might stigmatize them or comprise their opportunities in the future.¹⁰ Despite being rooted in a protective instinct, this reluctance to allow the

⁹ Anonymous no. 3 (adult male immigrant aged 47 in Montreal, Quebec), interviewed by Vino Wijeyasuriyar, Montreal, QC, August 2018.

¹⁰ Anonymous no. 3 (adult male immigrant aged 47 in Montreal, Quebec), interviewed by Vino Wijeyasuriyar, Montreal, QC, August 2018.

past bleed into one's future is what appears to fuel the younger generation's feeling of unresolved curiosity about the homeland from which they derive their ethnicity.

It is also important to note the role of trauma in shrouding this topic in unexamined mystery. For people who have experienced so much violence and hostility firsthand, it is understandable that revisiting those memories has become very painful and triggering, with some people even reporting PTSD-like symptoms. A recurring theme during my interviews was that the immigrant generation did not realize that their children had grown up feeling like they had been deprived of anything. The young ones had been given the things they had yearned for in their own childhood; a safe and hopeful land, uninterrupted nights of sleep, a home that doesn't need a designated closet full of packed bags and tattered suitcases that they would grab in case of emergency and run. In group interviews, upon hearing about the younger generation's longing to connect with their homeland, they were touched and expressed their willingness to help the youth learn more about Sri Lanka. It was fascinating to see that two generations could hold such differently conflicted feelings about the same country, and heartwarming to see how they were able to help one another work towards developing a healthier conception of a motherland.

Finally, my interviews with Tamil grandparents shed an entirely new light on the matter of immigration, adaptation, and remembering one's mother country from a distance. This is the group that had grown up and lived out their adulthoods in Sri Lanka, married, and had children. When war broke out in their country, they were older, more rooted in their villages, and less likely to take the risk of being the first to flee their country. However, many of their children left the country upon reaching

adulthood and eventually went on to sponsor their elderly parents over to Western nations once they had started to set down their roots. This “grandparent generation”, who came over to live in their children’s homes and help with domestic tasks and childcare, faced an entirely different kind of isolation, since they had fewer opportunities to interact directly with the culture of their new country. During my interviews, many grandparents expressed that due to a perception that their grandchildren were under stress with their schooling, and their adult children were busy working to support the household, they should not impose their own troubles onto the household. This view of emotional transparency as a burden on loved ones was a topic that arose frequently during my interviews. Even during the interview process, many elders would initially answer my questions about the traumas or sadnesses by saying they were “happy, always happy”. It often took multiple meetings and extended conversations in order to get to a point where the elders were comfortable expressing small moments of sadness or worries that they had carried over the course of their lives.

A very moving example of this emotional shielding was illustrated during our community gatherings. During the first gathering, this woman had been vivacious and a little playful about the mental health topic. When we discussed being patient with ourselves and the importance of taking the time to explore our emotions, she laughed and facetiously called out “or just take a vacation!”¹¹ Over the course of this first session, she often resorted to jokes and focused on her fitness, highlighting her daily walks and weekly Zumba workouts. Although some women were more quick to

¹¹ Anonymous no. 4 (elder female member of community gathering in Montreal, Quebec), interviewed by Sabrina Sassi, Vino Wijeyasuriyar, and MJ Gauthier, Montreal, QC, August 2018.

open up, I got the sense that this woman might very rightfully not want to get too serious with this freshly assembled group. During the second community gathering, we devised a more specific set of questions, going around the circle to name a time in our lives where we had faced adversity and how we had managed those emotions in the moment. When it was her turn, the same Tamil elder delved into a story about something that had happened a couple of months ago. She said that her daughter was seven months pregnant and looking forward to starting a family with her husband. One morning, her daughter had a check-up with her obstetrician and called her mother from the doctor's office.¹² They had found a potential concern regarding the health of the baby and the daughter did not want to be alone. The elder left her Zumba class immediately and rushed to the hospital, where they found out together that the baby no longer had a heartbeat and had to be removed that day to reduce risk of infection for the mother. As she continued with the story, the elder's voice began to shake. "She was on the table and she turned to me and begged me not to look at him. I shook my head 'yes' and gripped her hand tightly. As soon as her eyes fell closed, I peeked as they rushed him off in a cloth. He was green. My grandson was green." At this point, she was fully in tears. "I drove my daughter home, made her eat lunch and cooked supper and left it in the fridge. I had not even shed a single tear in front of her. To this day, no one in my family has seen me cry about this."¹³ She says she then drove herself home, played a sad song in her native tongue at full volume, and began to wail. She recalls pacing around the empty rooms of her house and alternating between sobs, and moments of singing along, and yelling out in

¹² Anonymous no. 4 (elder female member of community gathering in Montreal, Quebec), interviewed by Sabrina Sassi, Vino Wijeyasuriyar, and MJ Gauthier, Montreal, QC, August 2018.

¹³ Ibid.

despair. By the time her husband came home, the house was clean, she was showered, and dinner was on the table. No one had to know how she had suffered. Their empathy was better spent on her daughter, who had just lost the life she had held so lovingly within her, and in this woman's mind, expressing her own pain would only detract from the care that she wished to have fully bestowed upon her daughter.

This story was so powerful in exemplifying the many dynamics I had been so curious to explore; obscuring one's emotions as if loved ones would not want to be weighed down by another's grief, feeling great pain but expressing it privately and carrying it for years, the pressure to "stay strong" for others in the family. These are all themes I saw time and time again during my personal interviews. Immigration is a lonely experience, and when those solitudes and moments of suffering are compounded by the pressure to present a strong face to the world, there is fertile ground for small traumas to accumulate and multiply over time. The next portion of this report will examine how aspects of the asylum-seeking process might present challenges to vulnerable populations.

Accounts of the Asylum-Seeking Process

Canada has held a strongly pro-multiculturalist stance since Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau announced the "Canadian Multiculturalism Policy" to the House of Commons in 1971.¹⁴ By highlighting the cultural contributions of diverse ethnic groups to Canadian society, this policy sought to preserve cultural diversity. The

¹⁴ Sarah V. Wayland, "Immigration, multiculturalism and national identity in Canada." *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 5.1 (1997), 46.

Immigrant Settlement and Adaptation Program was launched in 1974 to fund settlement services for new immigrants. In 1978, the new Immigration Act was enacted, accompanied by Immigration Regulations that created the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program. This sponsorship program allowed certain ethnocultural, religious, or humanitarian groups to privately sponsor a refugee by providing proof that each applicant has been recognized as a refugee by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The sponsoring group is evaluated on its settlement and financial profile before being approved to sponsor a refugee. These sponsors are responsible for the care, lodging, settlement assistance, and support of the refugee during the sponsorship period, which is normally the twelve months following the refugee's arrival in Canada.¹⁵ There was a time between the years 1978-1981 where refugees actually represented 25% of all immigrants coming into Canada.

I am emphasizing this notion of Canada's "open arms" immigration policy as a tenet of Canadian national identity because it is something that many of my subjects cited when explaining their decision to seek refuge here. Between 1979 and 1980, 60 000 refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were resettled in Canada. Many of them arrived at our shores by boat, having fled the conditions of the Vietnam War. These refugees received immense media attention, so when the Sri Lankan civil war reached its peak, many Tamils worked hard to leave behind the fallen palm trees and landmine-littered shores of Sri Lanka for the safety, security, and refugee-hospitality of Canada.

¹⁵ Citizenship Canada, "Guide to the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program – 2. Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program," *Canada.ca*, Government of Canada, 17 May 2017.

One of my interview subjects had fled Sri Lanka in the 80s as a young man. He chose to apply for asylum in Canada because of its reputation for showing warmth towards people in need. He explains that documentation and passports were things his mother had tried to keep safe in a leather suitcase for as long as she could during the war, but they lost them when they had to evacuate their childhood home, delaying the possibility of leaving until he could get their papers in order again.¹⁶ Their little neighbourhood was shelled, artillery cutting through the sky with a high-pitched whine before exploding thunderously upon meeting the wet earth and thatched roofs. He explains that the conditions were so bad in Sri Lanka that he still has nightmares about it. “During the early years of the conflict, they would come through the villages and rally up the young men and take them to forests. Sometimes, a few of them returned, but more often than not, we never saw them again.”¹⁷ At this point, he breaks eye contact with me and looks down at his hands before proceeding. He explains that on one occasion, he and his little brother were taking a shortcut home from school when he heard muffled voices coming up behind them. “I stopped walking and put a hand over my little brother’s mouth. The sound of military boots hitting the ground was unmistakable.” He recalls diving into the bushes by the side of the road. He remembers the feeling of gravel against his elbows, and the shaking form of his little brother crouched next to him. When the boots stopped walking just a couple of meters ahead of their hiding spot, he remembers pushing his brother to the ground and covering as much of him as he

¹⁶ Anonymous interview no. 5 (adult male aged 54), interviewed by Vino Wijeyasuriyar, Markham, ON, June 2018.

¹⁷ Anonymous interview no. 5 (adult male aged 54 in Markham, Ontario), interviewed by Vino Wijeyasuriyar, Montreal, QC, June 2018.

could with his own body. “My fear was that they would shoot into the bushes. I couldn’t imagine the look on my mother’s face if anything happened to my little brother. He still is her whole world and he’s 45 now!”¹⁸ He says this last sentence with a laugh, but his voice still breaks. He explains to me that this is a story that he has not even told his own children. “These are problems that that they will never have to suffer firsthand. It does not bother me to protect them from this part of my life.”¹⁹

I expect him to stop there, but he continues by saying that what does bother him is the feeling of continued persecution he felt upon landing in Canada. “I am not a bad man. I did not come to Canada for riches or luxury, I came here so I could walk through the streets without the fear of having a gun held to the back of my head. I wanted to ride a city bus without worrying that there might be a suicide bomber sitting next to me. I wanted to grow up, get married, and send my children to school without worrying that they’ll be dragged into military vans by the collars of their little white school uniforms.” He expresses that despite being extremely grateful that Canada has allowed him to experience every single one of those joys, he still feels singled out by the way people look at him sometimes. “When I landed here, I feel like no one was pleased to see me.”²⁰ He explains that he went to a hearing and had to explain his story and provide adequate justification for making a refugee claim in Canada. He recalls how they questioned his ethnic background, implying repeatedly that a young man of his age might have been a rebel fighter in Sri Lanka. “They were

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Anonymous interview no. 5 (adult male aged 54 in Markham, Ontario), interviewed by Vino Wijeyasuriyar, Montreal, QC, June 2018.

²⁰ Ibid.

doing their due diligence,” he says, “but each question was a punch to my heart.” He explains that he was forced to recount his experiences of fear and violence in his homeland, things he had just barely escaped recently, and things that family members of his who were too weak to travel were still subject to at home. He asserts that he had worked hard, not only for himself, but for his family. He explains how he worked two restaurant jobs and a newspaper route, waking up every morning at 4AM and saving enough money to sponsor his parents over to Canada and provide for them. “I never came to ask for charity. I only asked for empathy and the opportunity to prove myself as a Canadian. I worry sometimes that I am being punished, not for something that I have done, but for something that I *am*.”²¹

After years of facing violent conflict and political tensions at home, and then encountering feelings of otherness and suspicion in their new host countries, many refugees deliberately distanced themselves from the politics of their homeland. In 2009, diaspora networks across the globe, comprised of Sri Lankans who had left their homelands and settled in parts of North America, Europe, and Australia organized demonstrations to protest the attacks carried out by the Sri Lankan military against Sri Lankan Tamil civilians. Although many activists organized to make these large-scale mobilizations happen, just as many stepped back and discouraged their kids from getting involved. “My mother never talked much about what life was like back in Sri Lanka,” says the daughter from a mother-daughter pair I interviewed, “I learned more from the news and my own internet searches than I did through her stories. When I told her I wanted to go to a protest happening in front of Parliament

²¹ Anonymous interview no. 5 (adult male aged 54 in Markham, Ontario), interviewed by Vino Wijeyasuriyar, Montreal, QC, June 2018.

Hill, she became so anxious.”²² The young woman’s mother had made many sacrifices in order to ensure a peaceful future for her family in Canada, and it terrified her to think that something like participating in a protest might brand her children as the “wrong” kind of immigrant. “She did not want me to be disruptive or angry or self-righteous,” the young woman continued. “I grew up here, I was given so many rights, and the courage to demand that they be upheld. It was shocking to be presented with the reality that my mother still felt like she had to keep her head down.”²³ At this point, her mother, who had been staring quietly out of the windows with a glassy expression turned to me and spoke for the first time during the interview. Her voice broke as she recalled the lines of a poem that had resonated with her long ago: “you have to understand; no one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.”²⁴

This notion of protecting younger generations is something that breeds disconnect by isolating parents and children from each other’s lived experiences. The mother had not been very communicative about the difficulties she had faced at home, leaving her daughter in the dark about certain anxieties and apprehensions she might hold. As a result, the daughter was left to piece together the history surrounding her own ethnic idea through mainstream media sources and search queries on the internet. Culture and identity is such an important piece of our self-conception that having that part of familial exchange be swept under the carpet can be disorienting. Author Reyna Grande elaborates on this concept in *The Displaced*, a

²² Anonymous interview no. 6 (immigrant mother and Canadian-born daughter in Scarborough, Ontario), interviewed by Vino Wijeyasuriyar, Montreal, QC, June 2018.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

collection of accounts from refugee writers, saying that “we’d missed so many years of each other’s lives that emotionally and psychologically there was still a barrier between us. Immigration had turned my parents and me into strangers.”²⁵

The Unifying Power of Woman-Led Community Organizing in Sri Lanka

Having discussed the ways in which refugees have endured and overcome multifaceted adversities, this next portion of my report examines some examples of how Sri Lankan Tamils on the island have fostered connection and channeled their own resilience into positive community action in the postwar period. Following the years of the conflict, many people continue to be unaccounted for following white van abductions, disappearances at military/police checkpoints, and surrenders to security forces.²⁶ Although some might assume that these people lost their lives amidst the chaos and bloodshed of war, a large part of the missing either surrendered or were taken by the military after active conflict had ended. This implies that either the disappeared are still alive and being held in secret detention camps, or that they were perhaps killed in the custody of the military. This longstanding question is what fuels the pain and confusion of the families of the disappeared. As agonizing as it is to know you have lost a loved one, it is torturous in an entirely different way to languish in limbo, not knowing whether to give up hope or keep fighting for a family member that might still be in need of saving. The numbers of the disappeared in Sri Lanka are staggering. In fact, the UN Working

²⁵ Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*, Abrams Press (2018), 77.

²⁶ Whitney Kimball, “Over 60,000 People Disappeared; Here Are the Families Trying to Find Them,” *The Slot*, Gizmodo Media Group, 1 July 2018.

Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances says Sri Lanka is second only to Iraq in the number of claims filed about disappeared loved ones.²⁷ Amnesty International suggests estimates that 100 000 were disappeared in total during the thirty years of the civil war.²⁸

It is for this reason that *ammās* and *ammāmmas* (the Tamil words for “mothers” and “grandmothers”) of the disappeared have taken to the streets, completing over 500 continuous days of ongoing protest to date. These mothers hold up photos of the children whose disappearances have them longing for reunion, closure, and accountability from the government. They are calling for a list of all secret detention centres in the country and their respective detainees, as well as lists of all those who surrendered to security forces. We know that these documents exist, because former cadres have mentioned rigorous documentation processes, saying their names, handprints, and ID numbers were taken. Despite various promises from the government, the mothers have yet to receive any answers.²⁹ However, even in the face of government resistance, these *ammās* continue to collectively persevere, quietly and bravely demanding justice for the children they might never see again.

Another example of woman-powered mobilization is the case of the twin islands of Iranaitheevu. Native inhabitants of Iranaitheevu were displaced to the mainland 26 years ago when the navy moved in and barred its 650 residents from accessing the land they relied on for their livelihoods and basic sustenance.

²⁷ Mathusha Senthil, “Womyn in Activism with Dharsha Jegatheeswaran.” Audio blog post. *Dash the Curry*, August 19 2018.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Whitney Kimball, “Over 60,000 People Disappeared; Here Are the Families Trying to Find Them,” *The Slot*, Gizmodo Media Group, 1 July 2018.

Following the end of the civil war, inhabitants started writing petitions to regain access to their traditional land. Seven years later, civilians, frustrated with a lack of response from the government, began a continuous protest outside a port town closest to Iranaitheevu in May of 2017. A group of older women identified as the Iranaitheevu Women's Development Society soon realized that, in the face of government inaction in response to even larger scale protests, theirs was unlikely to effectuate change. They strategized for a year, securing a group of witnesses comprised of human rights activists who could evaluate or condemn the actions of the navy in case of violence, clergy who could bring a level of moral authority to their plan, and journalists to document this undertaking.³⁰ In an effort to reduce the chances of an attack by the navy, the women made sure to tie white flags to each of the motorboats they had acquired, communicating that they were unarmed. They also made large, legible signs asking for the release of their traditional land in all three of Sri Lanka's languages. Accompanied by their strategic witnesses, the *ammammas* in their brightly coloured saris and grey hair pulled into chignons called out in Tamil to ask, "we're leaving now, are you coming?" before taking off towards the island currently occupied by armed men.³¹ Upon arriving at the shores of their rightful land, a priest stepped forward and politely informed the navy officers that the Iranaitheevu people were here to reclaim their homes. Taken aback by the sight of elderly women climbing out of motorboats to survey the land, the navy officers

³⁰ Lisa Fuller, "How Women Led a Peaceful Flotilla to Reclaim Their Island from the Sri Lankan Navy," *Waging Nonviolence*, 31 July 2018.

³¹ *Ibid.*

retreated. Three weeks later, the government officially granted the community with official permission to remain there.³²

These powerful examples of mothers and grandmothers taking non-violent yet bold action in the context of their militarized homeland demonstrate their immense courage and strength of character. Not only are these women able to rally together in times of difficulty in pursuit of a shared goal, but their organizing capacity is remarkable considering the lack of resources they face in a developing country recovering from three decades of war. Instead of allowing the experiences of war and violent conflict to stun them into silence, they built networks of solidarity and support to reassert their agency and recover from their traumas. Although further research would be needed to validate this suspicion, I believe that as a result of being detached from access to direct participation in processes of justice with regards to fallout from the civil war, the refugees who fled Sri Lanka are particularly susceptible to intergenerational trauma. One of my interviewees suggested that, due to the pressures of adapting to a new host nation, refugees might display a tendency to restrict their participation in the kinds of activities that might lead to further exclusion or alienation. “Not all Canadians know about the problems that are still ongoing back at home,” said one young woman, “sometimes I worry that instead of calling attention to the injustices in Sri Lanka, I will only brand myself as a nuisance or disruptor.”³³ Her concern made me recall a passage I encountered earlier this summer in *The Displaced*, a collection of accounts from refugee writers. Viet Thanh

³² Lisa Fuller, “How Women Led a Peaceful Flotilla to Reclaim Their Island from the Sri Lankan Navy,” *Waging Nonviolence*, 31 July 2018.

³³ Anonymous no. 7 (daughter of immigrants in Montreal, Quebec), interviewed by Vino Wijeyasuriyar, Montreal, QC, May 2018.

Nguyen, an author that has written extensively on his own experience as a Vietnamese refugee, insightfully noted that refugees are made to feel “either invisible or hyper-visible, but rarely just visible.”³⁴ This comment about the prolonged and inherited discomfort of refugees and their children about their place in Canadian society reflects a common thread amongst my conversations with youth from the diaspora. Feeling fully connected to neither the motherland from which they derive entire generations of culture and history, nor to the new host country in which they hope to develop their futures, refugees and their children are left searching for belonging, but never quite finding it. The next part of this report will explore how diaspora networks and host nations can better support refugees in their pursuit of peace, justice, and belonging.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In a later chapter of *The Displaced*, Nguyen writes: “To become a refugee is to know, inevitably, that the past is not only marked by the passage of time, but by loss - the loss of loved ones, of countries, of identities, of selves.”³⁵ As the quote suggests, the refugee and immigration processes are not bids for easier lives abroad, they are experiences marred by deeply cutting losses. Refugees are leaving behind not only family members, and a homeland, but also a version of the self that is transformed irreversibly by the processes and consequences of immigration. My policy and program recommendations seek to mitigate these traumatic losses.

³⁴ Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*, Abrams Press (2018), 15.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 22.

My recommendations seek to provide durable solutions by addressing this multifaceted issue from various angles. On the level of the individual, adults in the Tamil community can more actively create opportunities to better connect with their children and avoid amplifying or propagating cycles of intergenerational trauma, perhaps by taking a more open approach to discussing emotions and mental health within the home. By deliberately creating safe and encouraging spaces for discourse, households can minimize conflicts and misunderstandings between family members of different generations, opening up the lines of communication so that parents and children can sit down and create valuable moments of sharing without being hindered by differences in conversational styles and degrees of openness. A lack of access to these kinds of conversations was a recurring theme during my interviews. Children of immigrants feel as though there is a struggle to find common ground with their parents on topics such as anxiety and depression, which were seen as heavily stigmatized problems in their homeland.³⁶ Eliminating the need to “code switch” can nurture intergenerational communication and emotional understanding.³⁷

At the level of community, networks of intersectional advocacy can be nurtured by community organizations to actively empower relevant and culturally sensitive programs that educate others about the difficulties of the immigration experience. Not only can Tamil community groups (whether it is an elders’ association, temple administration, or youth networking group) galvanize this

³⁶ Anonymous group interview no. 2 (youths aged 18-23 in Scarborough, Ontario), interviewed by Vino Wijeyasuriyar, Montreal, QC, July 2018.

³⁷ Code switching refers to the subtle manners in which we reflexively change the ways we express ourselves when dealing with different groups of people, with the intention of more effectively communicating with them.

movement themselves, but even unrelated interest groups (like political riding associations, parents on school board committees, or local newspapers) can take on the role of allyship by advocating locally for refugees. This can be achieved through small but tangible actions such as organizing casual mixers or backyard barbecues to welcome families new to the neighbourhood, or hosting cooking classes to which the refugee family is invited to participate, share stories, and connect with the community in a relaxed setting. A certain amount of self-monitoring behaviour seems to come from the fear that refugees are perceived as over-burdening welfare systems or coasting on the tax dollars of hard-working citizens. As discussed in earlier portions of this report, refugees express an anxiety about needing to be on their best behaviour and refraining from participation in activities or events that might give others a reason to judge or ostracize them. By eliminating the roots of these misconceptions and working to create a more welcoming environment for refugees via intersectional advocacy, both refugees and native citizens can develop a better understanding of one another and how they stand to enrich each other's lives. A stellar example of a group doing this kind of work is *Action Réfugiés Montréal*, an organization in Montreal that "promotes partnerships among refugees, faith communities and society at large for mutual empowerment."³⁸ They provide support with their private sponsorship program, which allows groups to sponsor families living in volatile situations overseas, by helping to prepare documentation and offering free follow-ups during the sponsorship period.³⁹ They also run a "twinning program" that pairs newly arrived refugee women with Montreal women

³⁸ Action Réfugiés Montréal, "Mission." *Action Refugees Montreal*, 2017, actionr.org.

³⁹ Ibid.

and holds regular meetings to allow local women to learn about the refugee experience firsthand, supplanting any potential unfamiliarity and curiosity between the two groups of women with friendship and solidarity.⁴⁰ I think this program could grow and be expanded to include twinning between refugee and Canadian children, to increase their exposure to one another and help shy or anxious children develop an ease of interaction with local children, perhaps improving their comfort with speaking in English and/or French along the way.

The Tamil community can also organize within itself to create small scale welcoming programs that introduce new migrants to local customs, help them access available resources, and host community-building events. The youth have already spearheaded efforts to create networking opportunities amongst young people from different fields of study, or mentorships between newly graduated Tamil youths and people at more advanced stages of their career. In addition to this, Tamil student associations on campus create a rich nexus for students to engage meaningfully with their heritage.⁴¹ What I think is lacking here is a guidance program for students who are the first in their families to pursue university-level education in Canada, a group I will henceforth refer to as “first generation students”. Both in my personal experience and in my research, what I find is that although elementary school and high school are relatively straightforward, since these levels of education operate at a small enough scale that resources are relatively easy to access, universities are a different beast. The pathways to seeking mentorship, finding

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ These cultural activities span from casual events like hosting movie nights on campus to watch classic films, to something as involved as a Tamil dance troupe that competes with other universities at a national level.

housing, applying to graduate school, deferring payments, or even accessing mental health services can be entirely overwhelming when no one else in your family has navigated these challenges before and there is somehow both an overwhelming and yet entirely unenlightening amount of information presented on the university website. These obstacles can leave first generation students at a distinct disadvantage, who might resort to skipping meals in order to pay their tuition in time (instead of arranging for a payment plan), or causing grades to plummet while they're experiencing deep anxiety without adequate professional care.

To address this isolating inequality, I propose a sort of "matching" system that allows first generation students who feel isolated, lost, and overwhelmed, with more experienced students who can help them with the university experience. Such a project would ideally be initiated at the student level and developed into a network that has working relationships with other community outreach clubs, charity/NGO clubs, and cultural association clubs. There are already clubs on campus working, for example, to raise awareness about families caught in conflict overseas, and women working to establish stability after escaping a crisis situation, so a peer matching program would be a very substantial and hands-on way for these student activists to have a direct impact on someone's life whilst also fulfilling their mandate.

By allowing young refugee students or children of refugees to experience university on a level that is equal to students whose parents and grandparents have been through the academic system before, we increase their chances of accessing the services they need (whether they be emotional, financial, or purely academic), which might in turn afford them access to levels of social mobility that might otherwise be difficult for them to achieve. This, in turn, lessens the chance that

intergenerational trauma will be passed one generation further, to the grandchildren of the refugee generation, since their parents are not carrying the same mental or fiscal burdens that their grandparents endured in order to lay the foundation for a brighter future.

Finally, governments need to improve existing processes and facilities that perpetuate cycles of trauma amongst immigrants and refugees. Detention centres exist even in Montreal, and these facilities can be cold and isolating places that exacerbate the existing isolation of being an asylum-seeking refugee in limbo. Although some governments are better than others when it comes to welcoming vulnerable persons into their country, the American example illustrates that taking a few steps backwards to disrupt families and treat asylum seekers like criminals could result in years of damage emanating from this experience like a series of ripples coursing through future generations. It is difficult specify a narrow target for this recommendation since responsibility for immigration is shared between federal and provincial governments under the Canadian Constitution.⁴² Although most of the funding decisions come from the federal level, provincial governments could help take the strain off of refugee families by issuing a time-restricted employment authorization so that refugee claimants can work while they're awaiting the results of the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB), the main body adjudicating refugee and immigration cases. Since the backlog of cases handled by the IRB is immense (at the end of 2017, there was a backlog of 43 000 cases), and the average wait time is 20

⁴² Citizenship Canada, "Federal-Provincial/Territorial Agreements," *Canada.ca*, Government of Canada.

months for new claims, this would allow the claimants to be productive whilst also reducing the stress on the provincial welfare system.⁴³

Furthermore, some changes could be made to the IRB itself; at this time, the IRB adheres to the international legal definition of a refugee and grants refugee status only when the claimant can prove a well-founded fear of death, torture, or persecution based on their nationality, religion, or social or political affiliation. This is a restrictive definition that doesn't account for people fleeing problems like natural disasters, gender-based violence, or discrimination based on sexuality. Increasing the budget of the IRB would not only allow this definition to be broadened, but reducing the backlog would reduce the feeling of uncertainty and suspended hope experienced by refugee claimants and asylum seekers. To address another facet of this issue, it must be noted that having their futures teetering on the overloaded and underfunded apparatus that is the IRB is a trying process, and refugees should have access to mental health care that is both culturally and linguistically suited to them. One last recommendation is to increase the budget allocated by the federal government to offering legal aid support to claimants; representation would empower claimants with legal resources to make their best case whilst also giving them the feeling that someone is on their side, fighting for them to stay in this country. Just a little bit of extra funding and care could be invested into making the experience of immigration warmer and less hostile, so that immigrants fleeing chaos and seeking stability can do so with dignity.

⁴³ Vicky Mochama, "Canada Vastly Unprepared to Process Migrants and Refugee," *Thestar.com*, Toronto Star, 1 Mar. 2018.

Government officials at both the federal and provincial levels can also reduce the likelihood of new traumas being generated and transmitted intergenerationally by taking a bolder stance in condemning human rights violations and calling for justice. One politician I interviewed cited the importance of vocabulary. “When people are in a situation that makes them feel powerless, advocacy is so important,” he says. “Most people are not in a position to single-handedly improve policies, but humanitarian groups and activists can apply a sort of acute pressure by, for example, highlighting specific actions of governments and political actors as going against UN conventions, or labelling intense and violent persecution of an ethnic group as an instance of genocide. These are terms I do not use lightly, but they wield a certain amount of power and they can be used strategically to push and fight for less hostile environments for vulnerable groups via activist circles and advocacy networks.”⁴⁴

IMPACT

The Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness (SCSC) has the capacity to play a vital role in reducing the isolation and intergenerational trauma that might plague immigrants and refugees. The community gatherings we hosted this summer were immensely powerful examples of generations reaching through a sort of obstructive film that had always existed between them to create connection and understand one another. I have been working with the Tamil community for a long time and I’ve never seen young women and female elders being welcomed into the same room with the explicit purpose of addressing personal mental health. The stories that were

⁴⁴ Anonymous no. 8 (non-Tamil male politician in Montreal, Quebec), interviewed by Vino Wijeyasuriyar, Montreal, QC, August 2018.

shared, and the connections that were formed were truly remarkable. These meetings can be held at minimal cost (maybe a small room booking fee, and some hot water for tea), and the value of the outcomes and insights from these deliberately curated moments of empathy and sharing is immense.

SCSC can also help develop a peer matching program across Canadian campuses (perhaps starting with a pilot program at McGill University) to help remove potential obstacles to success for first generation students. This not only has benefits for the generation immediately being matched with a peer, but the success and stability of this generation will set the next one up to flourish, encumbered by even fewer barriers. The cost of this program could be kept close to zero (minus any administrative costs if it involves changes on the side of SCSC), since this program can be run on a volunteer basis amongst youths who are passionate about working with the refugee community.

As the researcher, I am personally invested in bringing my two recommendations above to fruition to the best of my ability. Even if I must work on a smaller scale, I would love the chance to help first generation students access the opportunities I myself did not have in my first years of study. I would be willing to match myself with 2-3 students for the first year and tap into my various networks (since I do not think such a program would need to be exclusive to Tamil students) to interview and match mentoring candidates up with new students. If this initiative could sustain itself and grow, I would subsequently seek official McGill Interest Group status to secure funding for future iterations of the program.

As for the community gatherings, I am interested in exploring the possibility of hosting them at the local temple in the West Island. I once sat next to a grandmotherly figure during the mealtime and started talking about the vivacity of the Tamil community. By the time my plate was empty, a crowd of around twenty of us were sat in a circle, having talked about our culture and community for close to an hour. The momentum for community organization is very present here, and it is a venue that most members of the Tamil community are not only familiar with, but which they feel at ease in. In addition to this, sharing food has always acted as an accelerant for connection, and food is cooked in the on-site kitchens in massive quantities and offered to all temple-goers at a relatively low expense. A community gathering that takes place within a space that people trust and ascribe value to makes the experience more organic and meaningful.

CONCLUSION

The key findings of my report are that Tamil Canadians experience intergenerational trauma not only as a result of the Sri Lankan civil war, but as a result of the “leaving”. Leaving behind the place you have known to be home is traumatizing in and of itself, especially when it occurs during a time of urgency and duress. Leaving behind this homeland and the version of themselves that existed within it, refugees come to a new host country where they face a different sort of struggle. Upon landing, many of them worry about being accepted and allowed to fully integrate into the fabric of Canadian society. Some pressure themselves to behave as ideal citizens, worrying that straying from this notion of a “good Canadian” and participating in protests or making bold remarks about the political

climate of their homeland could lead them into new kinds of trouble in the country that was supposed to be a safe place to build their futures. This pressure to conform shapes the way they interact with their children, limiting the scope of connection their children have with their cultural heritage. Norms that limit emotional expression lead traumas, fears, and anxieties to go unaddressed, handed down from generation to generation like a weight; not an anchor to keep you planted at a safe harbour, but a bag of rocks that pulls you down and forces you to swim against a current just to keep your head above water.

One factor that struck me as being of particular interest for future inquiry was the work schedules of immigrant and refugee parents. Due to the disruptive effects of the civil war on secondary education, many refugees entered Canada with an unskilled background. A heartbreaking ratio of the fathers I interviewed mentioned how little they got to see their kids, lamenting the sad irony of working 16 hours a day to provide for a family that they basically only ever see asleep. They come home from work around midnight and leaving again before sunrise, having passed through the home without getting so much as a hug from their children, who have been asleep for the duration of his return. If I had more time, I would explore the effects of this intense work schedule on the relationship between parents and children, the detrimental consequences it might have for the mental health of an individual, and the pressure it might put on the child to perform academically so that their father's suffering is not entirely fruitless. I also wonder why these parents are not afforded the vacations, health and dental benefits, or even working hour limitations they rightfully should have for working 100 hour workweeks. Are their low pay and poor working conditions a byproduct of the precarious labour market

alone? Is there an element of exploitation or racism that is at play that could be mitigated by forming intersectional advocacy networks with figures like lawyers and activists? I think there's definitely an interplay with intergenerational trauma in this follow-up question about immigrant parents and their work, but that remains to be examined further at a future time.

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