

Women, Men and War Talk: Gendered Nature of Parliamentary Speech on the War

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It is well known today that the political representation of women in both parliament and local government remains at an unacceptable low in Sri Lanka. In a bid to understand what may be the consequence of the virtual absence of women in legislative bodies in Sri Lanka, a research project by the Women and Media Collective explored the gendered nature of parliamentary talk. This paper explores one element of such talk -- the manner in which parliamentary speech during the last decade in Sri Lanka (2003-2013) -- featured different issues around the ethnic conflict. Paying special attention to references to the war, the military, assistance for families of dead servicemen, rehabilitation of ex-combatants, displacement of women and pregnancy including child pregnancies in displacement, this paper will explore the nature of parliamentary speech on the war and the gendered assumptions underlying such speech. The paper's argument is that commentary on women is a substantial *absence* in parliamentarians' interventions regarding the war. Pointing out the many ways in which women's lives are impacted by the conduct of war, the loss of social safety nets, and livelihood options due to the destruction brought about through the war, this paper will argue that most parliamentarians' framing of the war as necessary, positive, and as a success story of the previous regime, precludes discussion of the effects of war on affected women. The gender differences that appear in parliamentary discourse will be analyzed using theories of masculinity and intersectionality. Describing the nature of parliamentarians' understanding of the war and its conduct, and the manner in which male soldiers and LTTE's female ex-combatants are framed, this paper will delineate the limited and circumscribed nature of women's roles articulated by parliamentary discourse. The paper will argue that such an understanding in turn has substantial policy implications for how the state will view its' responsibility towards female citizens—especially those affected by the conflict.

Keywords: Political representation, Women, Parliament, Conflict