RECONCILIATION IN SRI LANKA: OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND PATHWAYS

by

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ABSTRACT

This research critically examines the opportunities and challenges of Sri Lanka's post-civil war reconciliation efforts since 2009. Despite hopes that decades of ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil and Muslim minorities could be resolved, substantive reconciliation remains elusive fifteen years after the war's conclusion. Through a qualitative case study methodology informed by feminist critical theory and postcolonial frameworks, I prioritise experiential knowledge and 'everyday' understandings of affected communities. Drawing on investigative reports, case studies, and ten semi-structured interviews with subject matter experts (academic researchers, grassroots activists, civil society leaders, and government administrators), I have identified three primary themes. First, I found a significant gap between state and community perceptions of reconciliation, with government actions at odds with local expectations and experiences. Second, I observe how intensified military presence through surveillance and land appropriation threatened livelihoods and deepened economic exclusion in the North and East, which eroded civil liberties, perpetuating fear and mistrust. Third, I analyse how minority rights issues, particularly concerning the 13th Amendment of the Sri Lankan Constitution, language rights, and political representation, continue to reinforce inequalities that undermine reconciliation. In the absence of meaningful state-led initiatives, my research highlights how grassroots organisations and civil society actors have developed innovative bottom-up approaches to facilitate 'everyday' reconciliation. By centring the visions of Tamil and Muslim communities regarding pluralism, security, political inclusion, and systemic justice, I explore pathways for a holistic reconciliation. My findings reveal a disconnect between official reconciliation rhetoric and the lived experiences of affected communities, suggesting that sustainable peace requires addressing structural inequalities and embracing community-centred approaches within a holistic reconciliation process.

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ACRONYMS

CID Criminal Investigation Department

COI Commissions of Inquiry

CPA Center for Policy Alternatives

CTF Consultation Task Force

IDP Internally Displaced Person

LLRC Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission

LTTE Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam

NGO Non-Governmental Organisations

NPFSI National Policy Framework for Social Integration

PCOI Presidential Commissions of Inquiry

PTA Prevention of Terrorism Act

SLMC Sri Lanka Muslim Congress

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Situating the Research: 'Post-War Reconciliation Process of Sri Lanka'

The end of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009 brought hope that decades of ethnic conflict and inter-community violence between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil and Muslim minorities could finally be resolved through reconciliation (Uyangoda, 2007). In the aftermath of the war, political discourse emphasised concepts of national unity, invoking ideals of 'one country, one nation' and the promotion of "national unity, so that all citizens of Sri Lanka, irrespective of ethnicity or religion, could live in dignity and a sense of freedom" (LLRC, 2010).

Over fifteen years, successive governments have established more than 50 reconciliation commissions and projects, and numerous Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) contributed through grassroots initiatives. This period presented Sri Lanka with the opportunity to foster peaceful cohabitation among communities devastated by war. This process was facilitated by important mechanisms, including two truth commissions: the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) of 2010 and the Consultation Task Force (CTF) on reconciliation mechanisms of 2016 (Herath, 2018). The state also created the National Policy Framework for Social Integration, the Office of Missing Persons, and the Office for Reparations to address the legacy of conflict, acknowledge historical injustices, and create pathways toward sustainable peace. However, the recommendations provided by these commissions were largely ignored by the government, reflecting a persistent reluctance to pursue meaningful accountability (Thiranagama, 2013).

Despite these institutional efforts towards reconciliation, Sri Lanka continues to experience periodic ethnic tensions and communal violence (Razick et al., 2020). Existing literature and media reports have characterised reconciliation as a 'failed endeavour' in the Sri Lankan context, as substantive change has not been achieved (Silva, 2018, p.1075). The

discriminatory political ideologies and power structures that fuelled the civil war have remained largely intact, whilst the military continues to maintain an oppressive presence in the Northern and Eastern provincial regions (Venugopal, 2018; Kapur, 2024).

The persistence of Sinhalese political dominance, systemic inequalities, and unfulfilled rights of victims (particularly regarding land restitution) has undermined reconciliation efforts. The failure to establish language rights and political representation has contributed to the persistence of ethnonationalist narratives in the post-war period (Gupta, 2021; Kapur, 2024). The military occupation of significant portions of land in the Northern and Eastern provinces has prevented many displaced families from returning to their ancestral homes, creating protracted displacement and economic hardship. Military-run businesses in these regions have further marginalised local entrepreneurs, exacerbating ethnic tensions and resentment. The ongoing militarisation has taken on an unprecedented role in civilian affairs, normalising the presence of security forces in 'everyday' life, and reinforcing the state's ability to suppress dissent through coercive means. Recent scholarship indicates diminishing public confidence in official reconciliation mechanisms, as the government has failed to implement effective policies despite the official rhetoric (Thiranagama, 2013; Gunasekara, 2024; Kapur, 2024).

The gender dimensions of reconciliation have also received inadequate attention in official processes, disregarding the disproportionate impact of the war on women. Media reports indicate that female-headed households in war-affected regions face multiple layers of marginalisation, such as social stigma and limited access to decision-making processes, creating a pattern of discrimination that state-led reconciliation mechanisms have failed to adequately recognise and address (Gunasekara, 2024; Azmi, 2021).

Despite these obstacles, grassroots activism that sustains reconciliation efforts through localised initiatives has continued to emerge. These represent spaces where reconciliation is *lived, felt,* and *practised* through community-driven interpretations and approaches that

complement as well as challenge formal institutional frameworks. Such initiatives help build trust and address immediate community needs whilst advancing long-term reconciliation goals through the 'everyday' experiences of those most affected by war (Walpita, 2023; Lonergan, 2023). The formal reconciliation process without transformative social change underscores the need for a holistic reconciliation centred on social justice (Dayasiri, 2022; Upuldeniya et al., 2022).

1.2 Research Questions and Objectives

My research aims to critically examine the opportunities and challenges of Sri Lanka's post-civil war reconciliation since 2009 by offering an assessment of major issues, including gendered dimensions identified by the communities and how local actors and grassroots organisations continue to advance reconciliation despite institutional constraints and limitations. I will explore pathways for a holistic reconciliation that centres on the visions of minority groups, particularly Tamils and Muslims in the North and East of Sri Lanka, with regard to pluralism, security, political inclusion, and systemic injustices through a critical perspective informed by critical feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks.

There is significant justification for this research given the gap between official reconciliation rhetoric and the *lived, '*everyday' experiences of affected communities in how reconciliation is experienced, interpreted, and practised by communities as they navigate, adapt to formal reconciliation processes in their daily lives. By centring the perspectives of those most impacted by the post-war reconciliation efforts, this research contributes to ongoing debates about reconciliation, peacebuilding, and social reconstruction in divided societies. It challenges simplistic narratives of post-war 'normalisation' and interrogates the political, social, and cultural factors that continue to obstruct genuine reconciliation on the ground. The research critically explores recent institutional efforts by the Sri Lankan state promoting reconciliation, the successes, gaps and limitations in existing top-down reconciliation models,

mechanisms, and programs and offers vital insights into reforms needed and alternative non-state approaches to facilitate an ongoing holistic reconciliation.

The overarching research questions are: (1) What opportunities, challenges, and implications have been associated with reconciliation efforts since the end of the civil war in 2009? (2) What pathways would lead to a holistic reconciliation process in post-war Sri Lanka?

1.3 Structure of Thesis

In this Chapter, I introduce the objectives and contributions of this thesis. In **Chapter 2**, I establish the context for my study by examining Sri Lanka's ethnic landscape, investigating instances of social disruption that transformed inter-ethnic relations, and analysing post-war reconciliation mechanisms. In **Chapter 3**, I offer a synthesis of the literature review on Political Nationalism, Reconciliation, and Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka through critical feminist and post-colonial lenses, which elevate subaltern epistemologies and scholarship from the Global South. This contextualises reconciliation efforts, power structures, periodical governmental responses, and grassroots initiatives in post-war Sri Lanka and identifies key gaps and underexplored dimensions, highlighting the unique contributions of this study. In **Chapter 4,** I outline the methodology employed to explore my study, detailing data collection methods including remote semi-structured interviews and document analysis with diverse experts. In Chapters 5 to 7, I offer a presentation of the empirical findings. In **Chapter 5,** I set out to examine the disparities between state and non-state actors' approaches to reconciliation, contrasting these with official policies from the LLRC and CTF. In **Chapter 6,** I explore the implications of military presence in the North and East, land appropriation issues, and the role of NGOs and grassroots initiatives in addressing these challenges. In **Chapter 7,** I examine minority rights in the reconciliation process, the 13th Amendment of the Sri Lankan Constitution and language rights, and highlight how grassroots organisations facilitate reconciliation through bottom-up approaches to overcome limitations of state-led initiatives. Finally, in **Chapter 8,** I offer a

summary of the findings and elucidate the overall implications for achieving a holistic reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

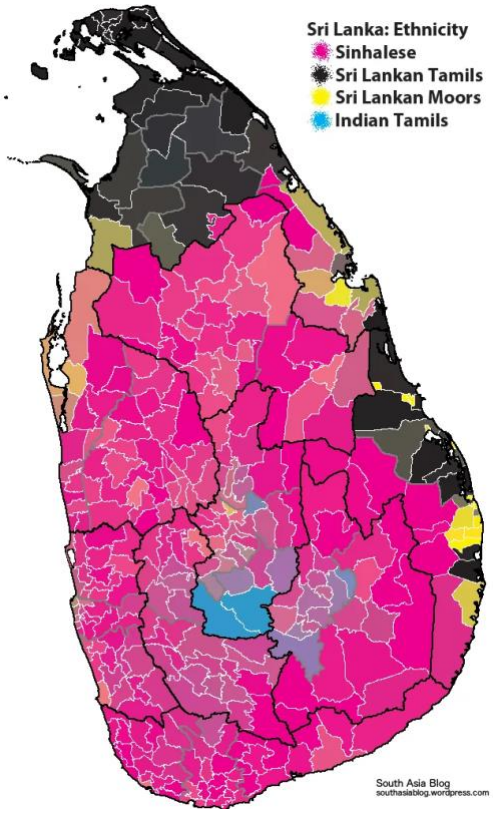
CHAPTER 2. RESEARCH CONTEXT

2.1 Chapter Introduction

In this chapter, I establish the contextual framework that underpins my empirical analyses by delving into Sri Lanka's intricate ethnic landscape, describing the country's demographic dynamics and outlining the colonial strategies employed by British administrators that strategically manipulated and intensified ethnic divisions between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority. Tracing the progressive escalation of ethnic tensions, I highlight critical historical exigencies that culminated in the conflict and explore pivotal moments of social rupture, including landmark events of communal violence that fundamentally transformed inter-ethnic relations, giving rise to the formation of the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE). Informed by feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, I undertake a critical focus on post-war reconciliation mechanisms by situating the contextual, structural, and psychological aspects underlying the prolonged conflict.

2.2 The Ethnic Makeup of Sri Lanka

The ethnic landscape of Sri Lanka, illustrated in Figure 2.1 (Nazliben, Renneboog and Uduwalage, 2021, p. 681), is characterised by diverse communities with distinct historical origins and cultural identities.



The **Sinhalese**, Sri Lanka's majority ethnic group, trace their ancestry to the sixth century BCE. The Mahavamsa and Deepavamsa[1] chronicles state that their forebears migrated from the East and West coasts of Northern India (Kulatilake, 2016). According to the national census of 2021, Sinhalese constitute 74.9% (15.7 million) of the total population of 21 million. The majority of the Sinhalese (70%) are Buddhist, 4.9% are Roman Catholic, and a smaller percentage are Protestant (Lanka Statistics, 2023).

The **Sri Lankan Tamil** community originated from South India and is primarily concentrated in the Northern region (Pfaffenberger, 2019). They comprise 11.2% of the total population and amount to 2.8 million individuals. Hinduism is their predominant faith, but a notable minority are Christians, and a smaller minority are Buddhists (Lanka Statistics, 2023).

[1] These are ancient Buddhist chronicles from Sri Lanka (c. 4th-6th centuries CE) that document the early history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, royal lineages, and the island's ancient history (Kulatilake, 2016 p. 426-7)

It is also important to note that a significant Tamil concentration is present in the Eastern province, and is also thinly spread out across the island (Pfaffenberger, 2019).

During the British Colonial occupation, around 861,000 Tamils, commonly known as 'Indian Tamils' or 'Plantation Tamils', were 'brought over' from South India to work in the island's tea and rubber estates. When Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948, the Plantation Tamils became stateless as neither Sri Lanka nor India was prepared to recognise them as citizens. However, through a series of agreements between Sri Lanka and South India between 1960 and early 2000, citizenship rights were granted to the Plantation Tamils (Verité Research, 2019, pp 3- 4).

The Sri Lankan Moors[2], colloquially referred to as **Sri Lankan Muslims**, represent another significant ethnic group (McGilvray, 2016). Their historical roots can be traced back to Arab traders who established settlements along the North-Eastern and Southern coastal regions in the 9th century CE. Linguistically, those indigenous to the Northern and Eastern provinces predominantly communicate in Tamil, and their counterparts in other parts of the country often use Sinhala as a colloquial language (Wahab-Salman, 2016).

My study primarily focuses on the principal ethnic groups directly involved in the war and subsequent post-war tensions. Other minority communities, including **Burghers, Malays, Chinese, and Veddas**, are excluded from the scope of this research. It is acknowledged that whilst the broader conflict has undoubtedly impacted these groups, their experiences remain insufficiently documented in the existing literature. The decision to exclude war-related experiences of these communities from my empirical analysis reflects the specific research objectives and constraints of this investigation.

[2] 'Moors' is a term inherited from the Portuguese and Dutch colonial occupation of Sri Lanka (née Ceylon) (Wettimuny, 2020) and continued under British dispensation. The Ceylon Muslims adopted the term 'Moor' much later due to local political exigency at the end of the 19th Century (Balachandran, 2021).

2.3 The Roots of Ethnic Conflict: From Colonial Legacy to Civil War

A significant body of historical literature exists on how British colonial policies purposefully exacerbated tensions between Sri Lanka's Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority as a means to consolidate their power (Daluwatte, 2023). The British favoured minority Tamils for jobs in their civil service to suppress professional employment opportunities for the Sinhalese (Janík and Janíková, 2018). Disharmonies between the Sinhalese and Tamils that predated colonialism were re-aggravated by British ethnologies and censuses, which reified each community as a distinct race. The resentment by the Sinhalese catalysed an ethno-nationalist resistance. British policies centralised state power among English-educated Sinhalese, Tamil elites, and selected members of other minority groups that promoted anti-pluralist Sinhalese nationalism (DeVotta, 2004; Janík and Janíková, 2018). Tambiah (1986, p. 120) employs the concept of 'parallel monopolies' to describe the separate ethnic-occupational niches held by Sinhalese and Tamils under British rule. Competition for limited resources and privileges in the Imperial structure exacerbated perceptions of discrimination (Tambiah, 1986), and the emergence of Sinhalese nationalism in the late 19th century was an attempt to redress the inequalities to regain socioeconomic control (DeVotta, 2004).

Since Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, the Tamil Community was dissatisfied with the country's unitary form of government and promoted a 'decentralised institutional governance'[3] (Herath, 2009). This concern was further heightened in 1956 when prime minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike brought in the 'Sinhala Only' Act[4] making Sinhala the official language, and instituted censorship measures targeting Tamil media and cultural productions, enacting the 'Language of the Courts Act', which expanded the use of Sinhala in judicial proceedings, and implemented the 'Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Act of 1958' (DeVotta, 2007).

[3] I use the term 'decentralised institutional governance' to draw a distinction from the unitary state structure.
[4] Official Language Act, No. 33 of 1956

Through legislative enactments, the Sinhalese Nationalistic governments bestowed privileges to the Sinhalese majority, discriminating against Tamils, particularly in agriculture, education, and public sector employment (Janík and Janíková, 2018).

These moves galvanised Tamil political parties to voice concerns over potential cultural assimilation and the erosion of Tamil cultural and ethnic identity. Opposition to these policies, spearheaded by Chelvanayakam, the leader of the Tamil United Liberation Front, was confronted with violence from Sinhalese nationalist factions, culminating in the Anti-Tamil Riots of 1956[5]. Actions taken by the armed forces with impunity appeared to defend the Sinhalese against legitimate opposition brought about by the Tamil people, who viewed state actions as discriminatory and undermined their civil liberties (DeVotta, 2004; 2007).

A decision by the government to establish Sinhalese settlements in traditional Tamil lands in the North and the East that began with the Gal Oya project in 1956 is considered by many Tamils as an 'ethnic cleansing often with the use of violence' (DeVotta, 2004, p.140). The preferential treatment in the allocation of land and water resources to these settlers contributed to the marginalisation of the local Tamil inhabitants, leading to a situation where the native Tamil population became a minority in their own lands. Another critical factor to consider was the failure of both Sinhalese and Tamil political parties to make decisive efforts to prevent ethnic majority domination in the parliament during the transition from British colonial domination to an independent and sovereign country (Geiser, 2022).

During the 1970s, several Tamil militant groups emerged, challenging elite Tamil politicians who advocated peaceful resolutions to issues affecting the Tamil population, and the arson attack on the Jaffna Public Library perpetrated by Sinhalese extremists led to a violent

[5] Commonly known as 'The Gal Oya riots of 1956', these were a series of violent clashes between the Sinhalese and Tamils, triggered by the 'Sinhala Only' language policy. Following peaceful Tamil protests in Colombo against the policy, violence erupted and spread across the country, particularly in the Eastern Province. During the riots, many Tamil labourers were killed, marking a significant escalation in ethnic tensions (Wijesuriya, 2024).

confrontation. On July 23, 1983, an ambush by the LTTE[6] resulted in the deaths of 13 Sri Lankan Army soldiers. This incident precipitated the notorious anti-Tamil pogrom during which widespread violence, including looting and extrajudicial killings, were carried out against Tamil civilians by Sinhalese ultra-nationalist groups (DeVotta, 2004; 2007).

The 'Black July riots' prompted many Tamil leaders to demand a separate federalist state called the *Tamil Eelam* in the Northern and Eastern regions of Sri Lanka (Wettimuny, 2024). In the 'war for Eelam', the LTTE fought against the Sri Lankan government for three decades. The Norway-brokered ceasefire in 2002 granted the LTTE *de facto* statehood (Trinn, 2019), and the LTTE established administrative structures in areas they controlled, providing local governance and public services alongside guerrilla training and indoctrination to sustain their political agenda. In response, the Sri Lankan government employed numerous counterinsurgency strategies, and an expanded army carried out large-scale offensives to reclaim LTTE-held areas to weaken the LTTE militarily (Wettimuny, 2024). On the diplomatic front, the government managed to get the LTTE branded as terrorists by India in 1992 and 33 countries worldwide by 2008 (Amarasingam, 2019). Mahinda Rajapaksa, as President (2005–2015), continued the military engagements and defeated the LTTE, culminating in the LTTE's capitulation in May 2009 (Siddiqa, 2021).

2.4 Reconciliation Policies in Sri Lanka

Post-war reconciliation policies were implemented by the government over 15 years through multiple Commissions of Inquiries (COIs), Presidential Commissions of Inquiries (PCOIs), and a Consultation Task Force (CTF). These include the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) of 2010, the National Unity and Reconciliation of 2016

[6] The militant organisation officially known in Sinhala as දෙමළ ඊලාම් විමුක්ති කොටි සංවිධානය (*Dêmāla Êlām Vimukthi Kôṭi Saṅvidhānaya*) and in Tamil as தமிழீழ விடுதலைப் புலிகள் (*Tamiḻīḻ Vidutalaip Pulikaḷ*), referring to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, has been abbreviated in international media coverage to 'LTTE'. This abbreviated version has since become widely adopted in both Sinhala and Tamil language local media when discussing the militant group, superseding the original terms used in the respective languages.

and the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission established in 2023 (Fonseka, and Perera, 2024). The LLRC covered the incidents from February 2002 to May 2009 and made recommendations to ensure that there would be no fresh outbreaks (Wakkumbura and Wijegoonawardana, 2017). In 2011, it advocated legal and political solutions to achieve enduring positive peace, followed by a National Action Plan in 2012 outlining multi-ethnic, multi-party solutions within local opportunities, cultural values, and history (Fonseka and Perera, 2024).

The *bona fides* of LLRC were criticised by human rights groups that it was a ploy to circumvent international pressure over alleged human rights violations during the war. Subsequently, LLRC proposals were restated to include legal actions the state intended to take for crimes committed, along with a Presidential Commission to Investigate into Complaints Regarding Missing Persons. Amnesty International, in 2021, noted that a considerable number of people attended the Commission to document their accounts of wartime experiences. The LLRC's recommendations included immediate steps to be taken regarding long-term detainees not formally charged with criminal misdeeds, assurances that privately owned land and property will not be acquired by the state, and removal of language inconsistencies in the processes and procedures of local and central administrations. In 2016, the government led by President Sirisena promised an independent domestic inquiry to investigate the abuses during the civil war and instituted a Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms by incorporating the Consultation Task Force, Office of Missing Persons, Office for National Unity and Reconciliation, and Secretariat for Reparations (Wakkumbura and Wijegoonawardana, 2017).

In 2023, President Wickremasinghe gazetted the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission and the Commission for Truth, Unity and Reconciliation, effective from January 2024, to identify core issues behind the violence and strengthen the truth-seeking process to

uncover alleged abuses that took place during the civil war (Fonseka and Perera, 2024). However, the continuation of land appropriation and intense outcomes of ethnonationalism led local think tanks to claim that the plan did not offer solutions to the victims of violence and abuses as mandated by the objectives of reconciliation. Furthermore, many considered that the proposed transitional justice did not constitute a sincere attempt but a means to forestall international pressure and scrutiny (Fonseka and Perera, 2024; Mohammed and Hampton, 2024).

2.5 Critique and Limitations of the Reconciliation Process

Instead of instituting political solutions and institution-building processes, the Sri Lankan government's post-war reconciliation approach failed to speedily concede requests from Tamil communities seeking information on disappeared loved ones, and the return of the seized private properties, that stemmed from the majority political power enjoyed by the government to act with impunity (Wanigasuriya, 2020). This resulted in the prolonged negligence of ethnic grievances amid escalating tensions **(**Arambewela and Arambewela, 2010).

A significant portion of land in the North and East was requisitioned by the military at the end of the war (Kelegama, 2024; Williams, Dhamruwan and Carrico, 2023). To date, the government has released approximately 63,000 acres of privately owned land, but there is still a significant amount of civilian land under the military (Economy Next, 2024).

Feminist social science scholars in Sri Lanka highlight the gendered impacts of violence and displacements whilst challenging nationalist narratives that often exclude the voices of the women affected by the conflict (Munaweera, 2024; Meegaswatta, 2018). As Thiranagama (2011) writes in her book 'In My Mother's House', the war created "a story of isolation" (p. 2), with different ethnic groups failing to understand the suffering of the 'other' and thus stresses the need to challenge narrowly construed identity politics and disruptions caused by 'cycles of violence' embedded in social structures in Sri Lanka (Satkunanathan, 2020).

The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, arising out of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, is a significant move towards reconciliation and power-sharing between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils (Sivakumar, 2013; Aliff, 2015; Welikala, 2016) through establishing provincial councils with legislative and executive powers in education, health, agriculture and economic development (Sivakumar, 2013; Aliff, 2015). Different ethnic communities will have the political right to decide upon local government policies and allocation of resources (Welikala, 2016). However, successive governments were reluctant to move for a full implementation, and the provincial councils were left with limited legislative powers to actively pursue their delegated mandate (Pullé and Ratnapala, 2019). There are divided opinions between Tamil political parties and Sinhalese nationalist movements on the lack of political will: the Tamils view this as unfair and dishonest, whilst the latter maintain that the full 'devolution package' is a threat to national unity and security (Pullé and Ratnapala, 2019; Aliff, 2015). One of the main reasons for this disparity in the constitutional pledge and power dynamics on the ground is the adherence to ethnic majoritarian ideologies by the state (Pullé and Ratnapala, 2019). This has contributed to weakening the commitment by Tamil political representatives and civil society groups within the post-war reconciliation spaces. Reconciliation efforts were downgraded and compounded Tamil marginality, creating dependency without enabling collective agency for restoration and development grounded in the cultural context (Junik, 2023). Continued application of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which sanctions surveillance, intimidation, and arrests of Tamils, has sustained a climate of repression in the North and East (Amnesty International, 2022), resulting in psychological traumatisation of women and children (Jayawickreme et al*.,* 2017). This situation, in the backdrop of prolonged exposure to extreme violence and forced recruitment of Tamil youth into terrorist groups, resulted in trauma, personality changes, and anti-social behaviour (Thomas et al*.,* 2024). It is estimated that by 1993, 400,000 children were displaced

in active combat zones, and familial structures and support systems were ravaged (Thomas et al., 2024).

Despite reconciliation efforts, the eruption of violent outbreaks signalled inter-ethnic tensions on unresolved issues (Junik, 2023), and increased violence is a reaction to social and economic marginalisation, communal divisions and mutual suspicions (Ramasamy, 2023). Notable post-war incidents included violent attacks on Tamil students at the University of Jaffna (2011), the vandalisation of the Jaffna Public Library (2013), student clashes in Trincomalee (2014), and Sinhalese-Muslim communal riots in Aluthgama (2014). The 2019 Easter Sunday bombings targeted Catholic Churches and several hotels, causing 277 deaths and 400 injuries (Saravanamuttu, 2021). Anti-Muslim riots swiftly followed, with attacks on mosques, Muslim properties, and individuals (Mujahidin, 2023). The government continued to dismiss these violent incidents as isolated occurrences, although the recurrence of racially motivated attacks in different parts of the country suggested rising animosity against ethnic minorities, indicating that violence can be sparked off by a triggering event such as an inflammatory speech made in the parliament or during a political rally can damage ongoing reconciliation efforts on the ground (Klem, 2025).

2.6 Conclusion

The trajectory of violence in Sri Lanka's post-war context reveals systemic marginalisation and unresolved grievances sown during the post-independence period through discriminatory policies, unequal resource allocation, and consistent prioritisation of the interests of the Sinhalese majority. Despite numerous institutional mechanisms put in place, such as truth commissions, presidential inquiries, and transitional justice processes, genuine reconciliation remains elusive. The state's approach has been predominantly top-down and has failed to address the psychological and structural damages that occurred during decades of

conflict. The persistence of ethnic tensions is a root cause for anti-Tamil riots and anti-Muslim attacks in present-day Sri Lanka.

Within this backdrop, the implementation of state-led reconciliation mechanisms and multiple truth commissions has resulted in commission fatigue, a state of diminishing returns. My research investigates critical gaps in existing reconciliation efforts, exploring unaddressed issues and unanticipated opportunities together with the challenges posed by rising ethno-nationalism, persistent militarisation in conflict-affected regions, and the systematic marginalisation of minority political and cultural rights. Through an updated and nuanced outlook, I seek to contribute to the understanding of achieving holistic reconciliation and positive peace at the grassroots level.

CHAPTER 3: THE MULTIDIMENSIONALITY OF NATIONALISM, RECONCILIATION AND PEACEBUILDING: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

3.1. Chapter Introduction

This literature review synthesises research on the theory and practice of Political Nationalism, Reconciliation, and Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka. I have utilised a multidisciplinary social sciences perspective situated in an interdisciplinary framework for examining the broader research questions of my study spanning key academic fields, including International Relations (IR), Political Science, Peace and Conflict Studies, International Security Studies, and Area Studies to comprehensively understand the interplay in ethnic tensions, nationalist politics, societal divisions, and grassroots efforts toward peace and reconciliation. Underpinning this multidimensional analysis is a post-colonial feminist lens that seeks to elevate subaltern epistemologies and scholarship from the Global South, contextualising reconciliation, peacebuilding, and power structures, as well as post-colonial contexts documenting government responses, civil society grassroots efforts related to reducing violence, marginalisation policies, rights abuses, and advocacy campaigns in post-war Sri Lanka. By critically examining existing scholarship, the literature review identifies key gaps, methodological challenges, and underexplored dimensions, highlighting its unique contribution and empirical significance.

The current debate and literature are largely set by mainly cis-gendered white male academics in the Global North, *"*whilst scholars in the Global South are often forced to follow suit" (Weerawardhana, 2019, p. 1). I have attempted to engage with scholarship from the Global South, especially Sri Lanka, as well as feminist scholars from the Global North for a broader decolonising methodology that can inform locally grounded perspectives.

I begin this chapter by exploring the literature on conflict and nationalism in post-war Sri Lanka, critically examining how societal tensions evolve and transform, delving into the role of nationalism, and investigating how political nationalist ideologies shape and constrain

societal interactions. This is followed by a critical analysis of how nationalism operates as a political principle, its capacity to mobilise ethnic groups and create intricate power dynamics, and how these dynamics are influenced by peacebuilding programs. I then situate and examine the extensive literature on reconciliation in Sri Lanka, critically highlighting the disconnection between formal reconciliation strategies and the lived experiences of individuals, explore the disconnect in existing literature between the theoretical and practical dimensions of reconciliation, and offer insights into the social dynamics that shape post-war recovery. Finally, I focus on the current landscape of peacebuilding literature and the critical tensions between top-down interventions and locally-driven efforts.

3.2. The Role of Conflict and Nationalism in Post-War Environments

3.2.1 The Role of Conflict

In examining reconciliation within post-war societies, I attempt to understand *how* societal conflicts evolve and transform (Maddison, 2015). Broader political science academic literature conceptualises 'conflict' as a *recurrent phenomenon* characterised by stages (Lake, 2022; Monaldi, 2020; Becker, 2023) where initially latent social tensions germinate beneath the surface, eventually emerging into public consciousness. The incipient tensions progressively intensify, culminating in a prolonged and destructive stalemate before erupting as a conflict (De Dreu, 2010; Maddison, 2015). Through a reconciliation phase, this critical juncture typically precipitates a process of de-escalation, leading to conflict resolution (Maddison, 2015; Pabón and Duyvesteyn, 2023; Singh and Siddiqa, 2023), wherein societies attempt to reconstruct social cohesion and address the underlying structural fractures that precipitated the initial conflict (Maddison, 2016; Singh and Siddiqa, 2023).

The above model provides a valuable analytical framework, but it oversimplifies the *multifaceted* nature of societal conflict. In practice, conflict manifests as an intricate social phenomenon that becomes deeply entrenched within socio-political relationships, perpetuating

both overt and systemic violence, ultimately shaping and limiting political discourse and action (Hajir et al., 2022; Omelaenko, 2021). These patterns are observable across various social contexts and manifest with intensity in societies transitioning from a legacy of historical trauma through periods of acute violence or civil wars, as in the case of Sri Lanka. Such societies face difficulties in determining specific historical injustices that can be practically addressed, the mechanisms, and the order of priority (Åkebo and Thurairajah, 2024). Therefore, 'conflicts'[7] manifest along embedded societal fissures with the potential for renewed violence (Maddison, 2016).

Ethnicity as a possible cause for conflict has been critiqued because ethnic identity is a meaningful category for defining group behaviour (Castro-Gómez et al., 2023). However, ethnic identities can be instrumental in fostering conflict to gain political and economic advantages (Vogt et al., 2021). The roots of violent conflicts are instrumental outcomes of political manoeuvring rather than ancient hatreds and a strategic tool to harness ethnic members for political leadership or to take up arms for a 'cause' (Ruse, 2022). This framing is evident in post-war narratives of how communities and individuals conceptualise their social reality through interpretations of historical truth, asserting the primacy and accuracy of *their* historical perspective whilst dismissing opposing viewpoints as biased, incomplete, or deliberately misleading. This polarisation frequently culminates in absolutist positions that demand unequivocal allegiance to nationalism (Maddison 2015; Korostelina, 2024).

3.2.2 The Role of Political Nationalism

Nationalism is a political principle that the state promotes to maintain power. The agenda of nationalism promotes political power as a major instrument for the mobilisation of ethnic groups (Howe, Szöcsik, and Zuber, 2022; Visoka, 2020) to obtain increased representation in

[7] I suggest here that these 'conflicts' are not necessarily active, ongoing conflicts/ protracted wars but rather underlying tensions that *could* escalate (Maddison, 2015).

political and administrative institutions, greater autonomy over local resources, and the promulgation of native languages to establish a social identity and a means of communication (Visoka, 2020; Mylonas and Tudor, 2021). In post-war Sri Lanka, state policies have often prioritised majoritarian Sinhalese narratives to maintain centralised control over minorities (Ramasamy, 2024; Daluwatte, 2023; Subedi, 2022; Kadirgamar, 2020). The political manifestation of Tamil nationalism emerged as a response to perceived marginalisation, seeking enhanced political representation, linguistic rights, and greater regional autonomy in the Northern and Eastern provinces. The politicisation of Tamil ethnicity is largely a consequence of structural inequalities in resource distribution, particularly in former conflict zones since 2009 (Ramasamy, 2024; Venugopal, 2024). Vigorous challenges confronting the 13th Amendment of the Constitution[8] and power devolution (see Chapters 2 and 7) exemplify how ethnic demands can spark off and exacerbate tensions hindering the process of reconciliation (Sivakumar, 2013; Aliff, 2015).

Nationalism is also a prominent driver of civil wars and a major obstacle to the implementation of peace efforts (Subedi, 2022). As observed in Sri Lanka, efforts to transform conflicts through power-sharing arrangements have failed due to the rise of nationalism. Peacebuilding interventions focusing solely on aggrieved ethnic minorities can contribute to the emergence of a reactive nationalism by majority groups, creating barriers to genuine reconciliation. (Visoka, 2012). However, nationalism in its *'*everyday' manifestations is not thoroughly examined within the post-war context of Sri Lanka (Brounéus et. al, 2024). Richmond (2011: 16, p. 3-4) perceives the 'everyday' as a space for "Offering care; respecting but also mediating culture and identity, institutions, and custom; providing for needs; and

[8] Sri Lanka's governmental structure centres on a unitary system with centralised power distribution. Following the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord between Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President JR Jayawardene, the 13th Amendment introduced significant constitutional reforms that would "contribute towards creating the necessary conditions for reconciliation" (Bandarage, 2012, p. 109).

assisting the most marginalised in their local, state, regional, and international contexts", where emancipatory forms of peace can emerge. The 'everyday' is an arena *(which will be discussed in section 3.4 below)* where local traditions intermingle with external approaches towards hybrid forms of peace (Mac Ginty, 2014). I will be exploring how ethnonationalism dominates and impedes key post-war reconciliation efforts by creating and sustaining ethnic divisions in Sri Lanka.

Critical Feminist scholarship posits that gender norms and identities are intricately linked with ethnic and political identities and nationalist ideologies (Lazar, 2005; Prügl et al., 2021). In post-conflict settings, women's sexuality, safety, and mobility acquire a critical concern, an integral component of nationalist identity and honour for healing and progress to set in. In Sri Lanka, Tamil women dealing with the trauma of losses and navigating strict cultural expectations on widowhood face multiple layers of discrimination, experience restrictions on their autonomy and public engagement, with notions of femininity closely tied to the private domestic sphere (Thiranagama, 2021; Koens Gunawardana, 2021). However, women are not passive and powerless members of ethnic or national collectives but are active participants in shaping nationalist practices and ideologies (Kandiyoti, 2015).

Women have strategically utilised ethnic and nationalist frameworks to legitimise their mobilisation and advocacy efforts in Sri Lanka. Women activists and organisations have often adopted the patriarchal discourse of women as mothers and protectors of the nation, but have leveraged these ideologies to gain public visibility and political voice to advance peacebuilding initiatives, service provision, and political demands that benefit themselves and their communities (Wickramasinghe and Kodikara, 2012; De Alwis, 2012). For example, the 'Mothers' Front' movement leveraged maternal identities for political activism whilst operating within patriarchal constraints (De Alwis, 2012; Malathi, 2012).

3.3. Decolonising ‘Reconciliation’ in Post-War Divided Environments

3.3.1 Rethinking ‘Reconciliation’ Through the ‘Everyday’

The term reconciliation implies the restoration of a previously existing relationship (Sonal et al., 2020). Although the terminology and concept of reconciliation have long been used in the social sciences within the process of ‘conflict resolution’ especially among post-war contexts in the Global South (Bendana, 1996; Leiner, 2025), only at the turn of the 21st century, the study of reconciliation emerged within political science (Bar-Tal and Bennink, 2004) and IR (Lederach, 1997; Rothstein, 1999). The epistemology of ‘reconciliation’ evolved beyond the traditional ‘Western’ focus on conflict resolution to expand the study of peacebuilding to encompass the micro-interactions through which people navigate tensions, practice tolerance, and construct meaning post-war (Mac Ginty, 2014; Bar-Tal and Bennink, 2004, p. 11).

Within the broader literature, reconciliation is also surrounded by different perspectives and is frequently contested (Wakkumbura and Wijegoonawardana, 2017; Rettberg and Ugarriza, 2016). Bhargava’s (2012, p.371) writing on the broader post-colonial literature identifies ‘reconciliation as resignation’ where people co-exist with others despite past hostilities, without a binding sense of pleasant and agreeable interrelationships. Critical theorist James’ (2008, p. 115) posits that in ‘slow reconciliation’, evocation of past images, memories and attendant emotions can surface the possibility of ‘positive reconciliation’, of ‘bringing together of persons, practices, and meanings’ in ongoing ‘places of meeting’ (Porter, 2016, p.12). Therefore, reconciliation as a concept is contextual and varied, and post-conflict societies require a tailored approach that captures unique historical, cultural, and social dynamics. It is a process, a goal, and a continuous dialogue, adaptable yet anchored in the fundamental human need for understanding, respect, and collective healing (Porter, 2016).

In the post-war context in Sri Lanka, reconciliation is a catchword for a broad range of peacebuilding activities undertaken by the state and non-state actors (see Chapter 5) including rebuilding infrastructure, promoting social investment, tending to the *affected* and internally displaced populations, overcoming ethnic divisions, making reparations to victims, and reintegrating former combatants into communities (Silva, 2018; Ruwanpura, 2016; Pannilage, 2015; Keethaponcalan, 2019). The variations of interpretations are a consequence of political influence by international actors and colonial epistemological hegemony that failed to enfold local perceptions of reconciliation. These divergent understandings on the ground contextualising the local perceptions are one of the foundational inquiries within my empirical analysis.

Post-colonial scholars also argue that reconciliation must be re-centred around locally embedded, historically conscious, and 'everyday' processes of meaning-making and coexistence (Bar-Tal and Bennink, 2004; Leiner, 2025). Whilst the literature on 'everyday' reconciliation remains relatively scarce, emerging ethnographic research conceptualises the 'everyday' not simply as a politico-affective space where subjectivity, memory, and identity intersect, but also goes beyond formal conflict resolution (Suffla et al., 2020). This reconceptualisation enables an understanding of 'everyday' peace as a 'hidden script' of resistance, avoidance, and improvisation (Longba'am-Alli, 2022). It critiques Western-focused reconciliations' overemphasis on institutional metrics, offering instead a relational approach grounded in proximity, interaction, and temporality (Njeri, 2022). Applied to Sri Lanka, these perspectives explore the absence of attention to the emotional, cultural, and embodied aspects of everyday life. There is limited recognition in current literature on post-war Sri Lanka of how everyday life functions as a site of holistic reconciliation. Therefore, by drawing on postcolonial and critical feminist ethnographic readings of the 'everyday', my empirical data highlight how reconciliation is not only spoken but also *lived* (see Chapters 6 and 7).

Widely shared emotions such as fear, anger, hatred, and fundamental beliefs and attitudes can perpetuate conflictual relations and cause severe obstacles to peacemaking even after a conflict is resolved through a peace agreement. A robust reconciliation process that is instituted with the active support of all the parties to the conflict can begin to change these obstacles (Bar-Tal and Bennink, 2004, p. 13). Feminist critical literature informs that a relational understanding of *selves* is based on the type and nature of relationships we form with others (Porter, 2016). 'Human lives are led narratively', and war disrupts individual, communal and national narratives (Porter, 2016, p. 16). Reconciliation can therefore facilitate conflicting parties to effectively deal with damages caused by violent disruptions to human relationships. My study is focused on understanding and exploring the interpersonal exchanges necessitated by reconciliation processes, highlighting the non-linear, constantly negotiated 'everyday' dynamics that determine whether or not parties believe and accept that they have reconciled.

3.3.2 Truth in Reconciliatory Spaces

Reconciliation spaces remain predominantly structured around formal institutional settings, negotiation tables, legal tribunals, and governmental administrative chambers, which are systematically controlled by men with established societal privileges (Shapiro, 2020; Sonal et al., 2020). In contrast, women and marginalised gender groups generate meaning and construct narratives through alternative, less hierarchical platforms (Atabay et al., 2024; Sonal et al., 2020). These informal spaces, ranging from kitchen conversations and community gatherings to creative collaborative environments, create safer, more nuanced, emotionally secure contexts where individuals can authentically express personal experiences, listen to diverse perspectives, and gradually build mutual understanding and collective healing among communities providing opportunities for genuine dialogue and building trust (Deane, 2021; De Mel, 2021; Sonal et al., 2020).

The main objectives of a public truth hearing are clarification and acknowledgement of the occurred events, and truth commissions address the needs of war victims, make recommendations for criminal prosecutions, evaluate institutional responsibility, recommend reform actions, and promote reconciliation for dealing with widespread human rights violations and impunity (MacDonald and Garcia-Moores, 2024; Fijalkowski, 2020). In cases where not all perpetrators can be prosecuted, at least the 'truth' can be said (Bangura et al., 2023). Critical feminist scholarship on reconciliation processes focuses on the conditions under which public testimonies are given, and the gendered nature of such processes (Ronderos, 2024; Opongo, 2021; González, 2024; Höglund, 2019). Research in Sri Lanka has documented that women survivors of war as witnesses are often subject to silencing, disrespect, and humiliation, and consequently, many suffer from psychological ill-health, new insecurities, and re-traumatisation (Sonal et al., 2020; Höglund, 2019). However, there remains a significant gap in understanding the long-term implications of systemic silencing, disrespect, and humiliation experienced by witnesses in Sri Lanka's reconciliation process. This critical oversight has become a key focus within my empirical analysis (See Chapters 6 and 7).

3.3.3 Gendered Notions in Reconciliatory Spaces

War and conflict alter many social norms and structures and directly impact gender roles and responsibilities in a society (Sonal et al., 2020, p. 1). Women experience conflict and respond to violence and deprivation in ways different from men, and these must be taken into account to ensure successful and sustainable reconstruction and reconciliation in post-war societies (Sonal et al., 2020; Brüntrup-Seidemann, 2021; Weber, 2023). However, the concerns of women are often overshadowed in post-war 'everyday' reconciliation efforts by issues dealing with cessation of violence, infrastructural rebuilding, and economic recovery (Sonal et al., 2020).

The security of the state incorporates human security, prevention of sexual violence, economic opportunities, social safety nets, and environmental security (Sonal et al., 2020; Brüntrup-Seidemann, 2021; Zucatto, 2023; K.C. and Whetstone, 2022). However, post-colonial and critical feminist scholars emphasise that the security of the state must include women and other marginalised groups (Purewal and Dingli, 2020; Sonal et al., 2020). Currently, more attention is paid in Sri Lanka on issues such as the state and gendered nationalism, gender and conflict, militarism and militarised masculinity, sexual and gender-based violence in wartime, women's roles in conflict as victims, perpetrators of violence, and post-war reconciliation (Sonal et al., 2020; K.C. and Whetstone, 2022; Brounéus et al., 2024; Azmi, 2021). Although the Sri Lankan civil war was identity-based and driven by ethnonationalism, women in their repression and liberation acquired an important political identity (Sonal et al., 2020; Hettiarachchi, 2023; Azmi, 2021). The interplay between gender and ethnic dynamics in Sri Lanka has led to intersectional influences with widespread consequences for women as victims, combatants, and agents for change. The war exacerbated socioeconomic and physical vulnerabilities of women, but at the same time created conditions for their empowerment (Sonal et al., 2020; Azmi, 2021).

Post-war literature reveals that in heavily militarised zones, women were targeted for sexual violence more than their male peers (Sonal et al., 2020; K. C and Whetstone, 2024; Fonseka, 2021). Some were forced to provide sexual favours for obtaining government services and information on their missing relatives (Sonal et al., 2020; Wijeyesekera, 2020; Guruge et. al., 2017; Höglund, 2019). In addition to discrimination and victimisation, a significant number of Tamil women participated as militants and combatants in the war (Sonal et al., 2020; K. C and Whetstone, 2022; Höglund, 2019).

Vasudevan (2013) researching female-headed households in Northern Sri Lanka, argued that their vulnerabilities stem from the loss of assets during the conflict, discriminatory

administrative laws, shortage of paid employment opportunities, physical disabilities and lack of direct compensation or assistance from the government, and the risk of sexual harassment and abuse (Meegaswatta, 2022). In an ethnographic field report on experiences of Tamil women during the post-war period, Gowrinathan and Cronin-Furman (2015) state that the lack of legal redress for violence further contributes to their insecurity in the North and the East. Tamil women formerly associated with the LTTE are marginalised in post-war Sri Lanka by their reluctance to report sexual and gender-based violence committed by either security forces or members of their own communities (de Mel and Medawatte, 2021; Deane, 2022; Emmanuel and Saroor, 2022). Furthermore, to push behind the troublesome LTTE past, Tamil communities tend to ostracise LTTE widows (Premaratne and Klimesova, 2015). Former female combatants are unwilling to speak about their experiences in the war for fear of retribution within their communities (Jayawardena and Pinto-Jayawardena, 2016). Reconciliation programs focusing on these gender and identity aspects of former combatants have not been designed (Sonal et al., 2020). Reconciliation should be considered a gendered process (Sonal et al., 2020; Giri, 2023; Brounéus et. al, 2024), and relationship-building within the processes occur in a *culture of reconciliation* as a visible contrast to militarised violence (Satha-Anand, 2020).

3.3.4 Reconciliation as a 'Process' versus an 'Outcome'

Since the end of the war, the discourse on Reconciliation in Sri Lanka has been a continuing theme. An extensive criticism in academic literature depicts the reconciliation process as a failed attempt to achieve peaceful cohabitation, whilst other analyses recognise opportunities for a reorganisation within the divergent sociocultural, political and economic landscape in Sri Lanka (Silva et al., 2020; Subramaniam-Nisanka et al., 2021; Jayathilaka, 2020). Notably, there is a significant gap in the existing literature regarding the perspectives of people directly affected by the reconciliation process, in terms of a ground-level understanding

of how local populations *view* reconciliation: whether they believe the process should be abandoned or it is an *iterative* approach that requires a consistent critique, remodelling, and progressive advancement. This significant gap in scholarly understanding has been a primary motivation driving my empirical analysis. Whilst existing literature examines reconciliation through various analytical frameworks (Silva et al., 2020; Subramaniam-Nisanka et al., 2021; Perera and Samarathunga, 2023) there is a critical need to deeply comprehend the local understanding of reconciliation as both a journey and a dynamic process within the context of Sri Lanka's ongoing reconciliation efforts.

Recently, the reconciliation process emphasises a dialectical standpoint seeking to synthesise its process and outcomes. Reconciliation is both a journey and a destination distinguished by iterative, non-linear progression (Bloomfield, 2006). For instance, the reconciliation process in post-apartheid South Africa showcased that institutional mechanisms can simultaneously serve as both process catalysts and potential outcome indicators, and demonstrates that this dual functionality poses a strong challenge to a simplistic dichotomisation between process *or* outcome in reconciliation (Rigby, 2001). Critical literature in Sri Lanka posits that, as a by-product of conflict resolution efforts, leaders engaged in reconciliation may forge unexpected personal connections. However, for a holistic reconciliation, conflicting parties must secure broader societal support from a majority of stakeholders to achieve a sustainable and enduring peace that fundamentally transforms relationships (Subramaniam-Nisanka, 2021).

Critical peace theorists in Sri Lanka emphasise that psychological transformation must permeate the social fabric, capable of being embraced by the majority of society members to establish a sustainable reconciliation supported by peaceful relationships (Silva et al., 2020; Subramaniam-Nisanka, 2021). Psychological transformation is a nuanced journey that requires extensive cognitive and 'emotional recalibration', a comprehensive unlearning of entrenched

beliefs and attitudes, involving sophisticated mechanisms of information processing, logical persuasion, and cognitive re-categorisation (Upuldeniya et al., 2022).

The state's desire to treat reconciliation as an outcome is to appease international donors and allies, both for economic assistance and political stability (Jagannathan, 2020). This stems from a colonial Western perspective to measure reconciliation in terms of monetary and economic criteria (Maddison, 2022; Amundsen, 2018). However, reconciliation is both context specific and aligns with the local, as illustrated by reconciliation attempts labelled 'communitarian social harmony' by Buddhist and Catholic religious leaders in the North and East leveraging religious paradigms to facilitate community dialogues and healing processes through public apology and forgiveness, supplanting past conflicts with community consensus (Hirsch, 2012, p. 1-2) Nevertheless, these efforts often come against the deep-seated mistrust between Tamils and Sinhalese influenced by historical power dynamics and unresolved grievances (Lonergan, 2016; Jayathilaka and Gamage, 2024).

Postcolonial theorists posit that a holistic reconciliation cannot be achieved until hierarchical institutions with oppressive agendas and internalised superiority/inferiority psychological orientations are dismantled, and socio-cultural-political identities that give rise to marginalisation and historical violence are removed (Wakkumbura and Wijegoonawardana, 2017). The benefits include surfacing collective healing and mutual accountability among former antagonists, new orientations and commitments to everyday lives, fostering cultural inclusion, equitable justice in laws and rules, and life-satisfaction and overall well-being (Orjuela, 2024; Thiranagama, 2013).

3.4. Peacebuilding in Post-War Sri Lanka

3.4.1 Challenges to 'Top-Down' Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka

Peacebuilding is an intervention to prevent the recurrence of violence and foster sustainable peace in post-conflict societies (Zaum, 2012). It is also considered an infrastructure

within and between nations, offering alternatives to and removing causes of war (Galtung, 1976). International focus on peacebuilding grew when former UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali (1992) defined it in 'an Agenda for Peace', differentiating between peacemaking, peacebuilding, and peacekeeping and emphasised post-conflict structural peacebuilding (1992, p. 8): *"Rebuilding the institutions and infrastructures of nations torn by civil war and strife and building bonds of peaceful mutual benefit among nations formerly at war."*

Boutros-Ghali expanded post-conflict peacebuilding to encompass humanitarian, economic, and political assistance beyond combatant demobilisation and transition to participatory elections (Zaum, 2012). Contemporary mainstream peacebuilding, often termed *liberal peacebuilding,* is rooted in liberal peace theory (Newman, 2009), grounded in universalistic thought, which holds that democracy ensures peaceful, stable domestic politics within states (Richmond, 2014). According to the concept of 'peace-as-governance', a blend of institutional regulation and liberal freedoms, external and internal actors working towards an overarching universal liberal peace vision can bring about comprehensive reforms in social, economic, political, and cultural regulations and governance frameworks (Richmond, 2014). Liberal peacebuilding has dominated the field of IR, albeit with numerous criticisms over its legitimacy and effectiveness, lack of local involvement and failure to consult local stakeholders (Newman et al., 2009; Zaum, 2013).

An examination of peace accords reveals that the negotiation processes and comprehensive medium and long-range peace strategies have become inextricably linked to international peace interventions and involve substantial international participation (Selby, 2013). Through a standardised, universalist model, these impose a one-size-fits-all framework that neglects the intricate cultural, social, and contextual nuances of specific communities. Post-colonial literature critiques this universalist approach and argues that liberal peace approaches instrumentalise, especially gender, and suppress postcolonial histories by

promoting technical ‘fixes’ rather than relational transformations. Gender is frequently ‘added in’ to peacebuilding agendas as a quantifiable target (such as participation quotas indicators), rather than understood as an active set of power relations embedded in the ‘everyday’. These frameworks decontextualise the lived realities of war-affected women and men, stripping peacebuilding of its transformative capacity. These contested spaces where global peace agendas clash with local, embodied ‘everyday’ experiences of insecurity illustrate this tension (Hudson, 2021; 2018). This critique led to the ‘local turn’ in peacebuilding research (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013; Paffenholz, 2015), which emphasises local agencies, indigenous (local) practices, and ‘everyday’ peace and conflict experiences (Beyene et al., 2024). The top-down and standardised approaches failed to address context-specific grievances and power dynamics (Mac Ginty, 2011) and disregard local conflict resolution mechanisms, traditional mediation practices, and the deeply personal ways communities experience and understand ‘everyday’ peace, factors which framed a critical framework of analysis across my empirical chapters.

Extensive literature documents Sri Lanka’s international involvement in post-war peacebuilding based on hegemonic dominance of politics (Jirasinghe, 2018), in which economic rebuilding is a primary focus of state-driven peacebuilding efforts (Uyangoda, 2010). A critical shortcoming in Sri Lanka’s approach to post-conflict recovery is that it promotes a narrow perspective that fails to capture the holistic dimensions of reconciliation (Pannilage, 2015; Dharmawardhane, 2013). This narrowness is indicative of a deeper structural bias that equates peace with institutional functionality and state control. Existing literature ascribes this narrowness to a failure of gender-relational and ‘everyday’ peacebuilding approaches, prioritising institutions over non-state actors and local agents, and thereby, these methods risk re-inscribing colonial hierarchies rather than dismantling them (Hudson, 2021). In particular, the privileging of state-centric, masculinised logics of control, such as surveillance and militarisation over the lived, gendered experiences of communities, reflects the persistence of

'gendered coloniality' in peacebuilding. As a result, holistic peace becomes more about managing populations than mending ethnic relationships, ultimately undermining the sustainability and legitimacy of reconciliation on the ground (Ruwanpura, 2017).

3.4.2 The 'Localisation' of Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka

The evolving landscape of Sri Lankan peacebuilding increasingly turned toward civil society as a potential catalyst for reconciliation and social transformation (Keethaponcalan, 2022; Kaiser, 2020; Walpita, 2023) by active involvement of societal actors to counterbalance an intrusive state, and reaching local communities in bottom-up interventions (Jayawardana, 2022; Beyene et. al, 2024). These approaches start locally, addressing 'everyday' experiences and needs of conflict-affected populations (Lonergan, 2023) and are more process-oriented, valuing relationship-building, trust, and social cohesion (Beyene et. al, 2024), including community-based healing of trauma, local peace committees, and local conflict resolution practices (Ramsbotham et al., 2011; Beyene et. al, 2024).

Existing literature in Sri Lanka presents a scenario of post-war reconciliation with political contestation over the efficacy and sustainability of peacebuilding efforts (Saravanamuttu, 2021; Upuldeniya et al., 2022; Keethaponcalan, 2022). Despite the promise of localisation as a transformative approach, the inherent tensions between empowerment rhetoric and the persistent dynamics of political power structures continue to challenge the fundamental premises of bottom-up peacebuilding strategies. The discourse surrounding *localisation* in peacebuilding contexts is not a novel development. The significance of local contexts, communities, and agencies has been a central theme in reconciliation literature for approximately twenty years (Keethaponcalan, 2022; Beyene et. al, 2024). International organisations, including the UN and its partners, have consistently emphasised local governance, capacity building, and ownership in their theoretical frameworks. However, incorporation of superficial, centralised peace processes that inadequately address local

dynamics remains largely rhetorical rather than substantive in implementation (Gray and Burns, 2021; Beyene et. al, 2024).

Internationally funded community rehabilitation[9] projects, such as the UN Secretary General's Peacebuilding Fund, often struggle to engage local communities. In Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi, these interventions adopted a top-down approach that overlooked local trauma experiences and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms (Subedi and Bulathsinghala, 2018). Families seeking information about disappeared relatives experienced a gap between theoretical empowerment and practical implementation in bureaucratically and emotionally distant mechanisms (Kodikara, 2023; Wanigasuriya, 2020). However, there is an emerging shift to address these limitations in peacebuilding programs across Sri Lanka, prioritising 'everyday' local dimensions, encompassing contextual specificity, agency, and partnership dynamics (Nair and Sudevan, 2024; Millawithanachchi, 2020; Weerawardhana, 2019). The relationship between effective local governance and sustainable peace has long been acknowledged, and recent scholarship has undertaken more nuanced examinations of this relationship (ibid., 2024, 2019; Walpita, 2023). Several empirical studies in Sri Lanka suggest that strategically conceived and effectively administered decentralisation can contribute to stability through multiple mechanisms: enhanced legitimacy, strengthened accountability, increased inclusivity, and expanded civic participation (Jirasinghe, 2018).

Literature highlights post-war local community initiatives such as *'shramadana'* (voluntary labour-based construction activities) (Mallawaarachchi, 2020; Jayathilaka and Ansari, 2019) and women's organisations, engaged in community dialogue and psychosocial support, capacity-building, mentoring, educational advancement, and skills development (Nair and Sudevan, 2024; Brounéus et. al, 2023). These initiatives, however, are contingent upon

[9] Rehabilitation projects represent structured interventions designed to support post-war societies by addressing systemic challenges through external financial and technical assistance. These projects aim to restore social infrastructure, support economic recovery, and facilitate community healing in regions devastated by prolonged conflicts. (UN, 2024)

sufficient sub-national autonomy and resource control (Jirasinghe, 2018). Critical research indicates that decentralised war-mitigation potential in Sri Lanka may be compromised by several factors: local elite capture of resources and power, insufficient administrative capabilities, and inadequate resource mobilisation (Nair and Sudevan, 2024).

Delays in peacebuilding implementation and constraints in resource allocation impede post-conflict reconciliation efforts (Wakkumbura, 2021). I concur with Jayawardana (2022) that these challenges in effective state-community engagement require both enhanced policy efficiency and strategic deployment of competent human resources. Within the critical literature, I identify significant disjunctions between local governmental authorities and grassroots peacebuilding initiatives in Sri Lanka's war-affected regions, undermining the sustainability of peacebuilding efforts. Structural disconnections are compounded by a lack of effective bridging mechanisms and generate long-term negative consequences for comprehensive reconciliation and social reconstruction. These systemic challenges reveal deep-rooted institutional barriers that prevent meaningful collaboration between official governance structures and community-level peace initiatives, hindering genuine, holistic reconciliation on the ground (Wakkumbura, 2021; Upuldeniya et al., 2022; Nair and Sudevan, 2024; Walpita, 2023).

3.5 Conclusion

The literature on post-war reconciliation in Sri Lanka reveals a landscape marked by persistent challenges of ethnonationalism, institutional barriers, and deep-seated historical tensions. Nationalist dynamics continue to impede meaningful peacebuilding efforts, and state policies often prioritise majoritarian Sinhalese narratives and marginalise minority experiences, creating significant obstacles to genuine reconciliation. Women occupy a significant role in this context by strategically navigating nationalist frameworks to redefine traditional patriarchal narratives, operating within and challenging existing ethnic constraints,

innovatively adopting advanced peacebuilding initiatives to gain political visibility and advocate for community needs. This highlights the importance of understanding 'everyday' reconciliation as a multi-layered negotiation of identity and healing, and not as a top-down process. In post-war reconciliation, truth commissions serve as a critical mechanism for addressing historical trauma and promoting societal healing. Although my research does not primarily focus on truth commissions in Sri Lanka, I find them significant as a crucial link to the broader reconciliation process by creating spaces for acknowledging and documenting collective trauma. International interventions and state-driven reconciliation efforts often fail to genuinely engage with local cultural practices, historical traumas, and the specific insecurities of post-conflict communities. This disconnect undermines the sustainability of reconciliation processes, creating a fundamental challenge in addressing the deep-rooted divisions that persist in Sri Lankan society.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY & METHODS

4.1 Chapter Introduction

In this chapter, I will outline the methodology and methods used to explore the challenges and opportunities within the reconciliation process in post-war Sri Lanka by integrating a qualitative case study approach focusing on the social, political, and cultural dimensions of ethnic communities directly involved in the conflict. At the outset, I set out the methodological approach based on a feminist post-colonial framework that centres on reflections of 'everyday' experiences of marginalised communities. I will follow up by detailing specific data collection methods, including remote semi-structured interviews and document analysis from diverse backgrounds, to provide a comprehensive overview of the data analysis strategy. Finally, I will offer a reflection on my positionality as a Sri Lankan, Sinhalese researcher, and the ethical imperatives of conducting research on decolonised knowledge production and amplifying marginalised voices.

4.2 A Case Study Approach to the Reconciliation Process in Sri Lanka

This research focuses on the opportunities and challenges of the reconciliation process embedded within complex social and political relationships among Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim communities in Sri Lanka. It aims to understand different perspectives surrounding the 'everyday' structural challenges and implications among the majority and minority communities. I attempt to accomplish these objectives by adopting an inductive, exploratory methodology within the qualitative case study paradigm.

Lai and Roccu (2019) state that methodology is more to do with strategy that will be aimed at claims of knowledge about social phenomena of interest, and challenges the assumption that academic research automatically catalyses 'positive social change' (Heucher et. al., 2024) particularly within postcolonial contexts such as in Sri Lanka. Research instituted through Western epistemological paradigms remains deeply rooted within wider realities of

injustice in Sri Lanka (Pradeepkumar, 2023) exploiting local communities to advance abstract knowledge disregarding localised realities (Jemia, 2021) and fail to dismantle institutional oppression underlying ethnic marginalisation (Perera-Mubarak, 2013) and reinforce existing power dynamics (Rafique et al., 2024). Research can illuminate patterns of oppression and marginalisation in the complex relationship between knowledge production and social transformation, but does not inherently lead to their resolution (Rafique et al., 2024; Björkdahl and Selimovic, 2021). The challenge I face lies beyond producing knowledge about narratives of marginalisation and inequality, and employing my research methodology to actively refute rather than reinforce existing power dynamics within Sri Lanka.

To this end, I have chosen a feminist post-colonial methodological approach adopting methods that prioritise experiential knowledge and embodied understanding (Björkdahl and Selimovic, 2021) that demands a consistent critical reflection on the power dynamics inherent in knowledge production concerning epistemic violence perpetrated against or *through* knowledge systems (Batool and Petrov, 2023.). Throughout my research design, I have interrogated the power dynamics inherent in knowledge production, reflecting on the critical ethical dimensions of my investigative process: *Who has the legitimate right to represent others' experiences? Which voices are amplified, and which remain marginalised within my research framework? How do the diverse perspectives of my participants actively shape and co-construct the empirical narrative?* By persistently confronting these fundamental questions, I aim to dismantle traditional research hierarchies that represent an ongoing commitment to decolonising research practices grounded in post-colonial and critical feminist theoretical perspectives.

According to Westhues et al. (1999), the qualitative methodology can offer a deeper understanding of a phenomenon under consideration that is contextualised within complex processes by surfacing subtle dynamics in operation. On the other hand, quantitative

methodologies can assess surface opinions through standardised data-collection instruments that reduce complex opinions into predefined numeric scales and categories defined by the researcher but fail to capture nuanced narratives lying behind viewpoints shaped by oppressed histories (de Souza Minayo, 2017). An open-ended qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews gives control to marginalised citizens over issues discussed, whilst the analysis builds concepts from the ground up without fragmentation (Westhues et al., 1999).

Through this particular mode of interviewing, voices and experiences of marginalised women and others have been surfaced by feminists (Reinhartz, 1992). I have applied qualitative methods capable of providing thick, rich descriptions of personal contexts that shape beliefs and modes of thinking (Smith and Smith, 2018). I have interviewed experts who describe everyday experiences of people from different ethnic communities, shedding light on the insights into challenges and opportunities faced by Tamil and Muslim minorities and the majority Sinhalese in Sri Lanka that can be ascertained within the reconciliation process and help explain narratives lying within popular perspectives and misconceptions. In this manner, qualitative methodology can offer a *holistic* understanding using personal stories to augment statistically based data presented in quantitative studies (Mohajan, 2018). In examining post-war reconciliation, I have engaged with the lived experiences and 'everyday' realities of my participants and their reflections of local minority citizens on the ground, exploring the emotional landscape of pain, anger, frustration, and hope (Delatolla et al., 2024) that reveals the intricate ways emotional experiences are reproduced and negotiated in post-war environments. Unlike quantitative post-colonial feminist research that seeks to minimise researcher bias and uncover objective truths, qualitative feminist methodologies embrace subjectivity as a fundamental analytical lens (Herron, 2023) and actively practice reflexivity, critically examining how their own perspectives and interpretations shape the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). This approach requires nuanced ethical decision-making and an

acknowledgement of the often-messy nature of real-world social experiences and practices (Herron, 2023).

Numerous scholars have applied qualitative methodology approaches to examine ethnic tensions and interactions in post-war reconciliation and peacebuilding in Sri Lanka. Pieris (2012) used interviews to surface narratives of prejudice between majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil youth, uncovering deeper cultural roots behind violence. From field visits conducted across Sri Lanka, Amarasuriya's (2010) research found inequalities in higher education as an abiding grievance among Tamil youth. Perera-Rajasingham (2019), employed ethnographic methods to chronicle colonial histories of ethnic oppression and resistance (Amarasinghe, 2024), placing a central value on human stories within complex social divides.

I have adopted a case study design, incorporating a case study analysis on the challenges and opportunities of the reconciliation process in Sri Lanka. According to Yin (2014), a case study methodology enables an in-depth, multi-faceted exploration of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world context. It is a theoretically informed methodology that can surface 'everyday' practices and experiences within local contexts, facilitating the researchers to observe broader socio-political influences that shape a specific context (Lai and Roccu 2019, p.73). This methodology is suited for addressing *'how'* and *'why'* questions on drivers of challenges and opportunities present within the post-war reconciliation process in a specific social milieu in Sri Lanka. A qualitative approach using interviews in combination with document analysis of media reports, government publications, NGO communiques, and other relevant texts can provide thick, rich descriptions of participant perspectives as supporting material for data triangulation (Mohajan, 2018), situating ethnic dimensions of minorities in Sri Lanka within the context of reconciliation.

4.3 Situating Feminist Critical Theory and Post-Colonial Theoretical Approaches

In academic inquiry, theory and methodology share a profound and symbiotic relationship fundamental to the generation of knowledge (Reiter, 2017). Theories provide an intellectual platform for researchers to formulate hypotheses, anticipate potential influences and implications, and develop valid theoretical approaches towards understanding complex systems (Bhattacherjee, 2012). According to Smith (2021, p. 42): "[T]heory… helps make sense of reality. It enables us to make assumptions and predictions about the world in which we live." Theories constitute epistemological frameworks that organise perceptual experiences, categorising analytical priorities, and generating meaningful interpretations of observed phenomena (Smith, 2021) and translate abstract ideas into actionable research strategies, helping researchers negotiate uncertainties, reconcile apparent contradictions, and construct coherent narratives about the world (Jaccard and Jacoby, 2020; Bulmer, 2021). My research study is informed by feminist critical theory and postcolonial theory, providing complementary lenses to critically examine the challenges and opportunities of the reconciliation process whilst interrogating dominant ideological assumptions that perpetuate discrimination, oppression, and conflict affecting marginalised ethnoreligious minorities in Sri Lanka.

Feminist critical theory emerged from the intersection of feminist thought and the critical theory tradition (Spivak, 2012; Frost and Elichaoff, 2014), offering viable and practical insights for analysing ethnic conflicts and grievances in the Global South by centring on the intersections of gender, colonial legacies, and power relations often understated in mainstream conflict analysis frameworks (Madhok, 2020; Roberts and Connell, 2016). On the other hand, complementary perspectives are provided by postcolonial theory to analyse the lingering contemporary impacts of European colonialism upon formerly colonised societies of the Global South, focusing upon identity relations, political institutions, knowledge paradigms and cultural representations (Spivak, 2012; Al-wazedi, 2020).

Feminist critical theory and postcolonial perspectives jointly inform scholarship on ethnicity, race, indigeneity, and nationalist conflicts focused upon minority and marginalised groups within divided, postcolonial societies such as Sri Lanka, characterised by legacies of hierarchies, imposed institutional frameworks, asymmetric power relations and tensions (Ziai et al., 2020).

I am interested in focusing a post-colonial lens upon the structural limitations that fundamentally constrain the authentic potential for reconciliation by subjecting reflections of local experiences to external frameworks of understanding (Silva et al., 2020; Subramaniam-Nisanka et al., 2021; Upuldeniya et al., 2022). The concept of 'local turn' offers a nuanced alternative to linear reconciliation models in existing literature in which reconciliation is not a simple implementation of external peace templates but a dynamic process of negotiation, resistance, and transformation (Richmond and Mac Ginty, 2020). Local actors are not passive recipients of international interventions but active agents who continuously reshape and reinterpret external frameworks through their own cultural, social, and political contexts (Ejdus 2021). Surpassing traditional gender-centric narratives, feminist critical theory provides an analytical framework for interrogating the power dynamics underlying ethnic conflict and post-war reconciliation in Sri Lanka (Divakalala, 2024; Obeyesekere, 2023). In my research, I have adopted the feminist critical theory to study the intersectional experiences of war-affected and marginalised subaltern Tamil and Muslim communities and explore the systems of power, inequality, and injustice within the implementation of reconciliation process by deconstructing the interlocking systems of oppression that have silenced and marginalised minority populations during prolonged ethnic conflict (Ruwanpura and Mohamed-Saleem, 2025).

Experiences of those positioned on the fringes of both ethnic and gender hierarchies are examined by feminist critical theory to challenge monolithic narratives of reconciliation backing existing power structures and colonial legacies of divide and rule (Obeyesekere, 2023).

In the Sri Lankan context, this approach allows me to examine how patriarchal power mechanisms and ethno-nationalist ideologies converge to create multi-layered systems of exclusion that disproportionately impact women, internally displaced persons, and economically vulnerable ethnic minorities in marginalised communities (Divakalala, 2023; Obeyesekere, 2023). This can highlight post-war reconciliation processes negotiated through masculinist and state-centric approaches (Sonal et al., 2020), ignoring the lived experiences of those traumatised by prolonged conflict (Jayawardana, 2022; Walpita, 2023; Beyene et al., 2024). Critical feminist analysis exposes the limitations of top-down reconciliation strategies that fail to address the fundamental structural inequalities embedded in Sri Lanka's complex ethnic landscape (Subedi, 2022; Walpita, 2023; Nair and Sudevan, 2024). Feminist critical theory provides a powerful framework for centring the agency and resilience of marginalised communities (Choi, 2021), particularly women and gender-diverse individuals in grassroots peacebuilding and community healing efforts (Munaweera, 2024).

I have adopted this framework by privileging subaltern narratives and exploring the intersectional nature of oppression in the empirical data I have collected towards a more holistic understanding of the reconciliation process focusing on the present-day reconciliation process through a transformative approach recognising the multiplicity of 'everyday' experiences and how power, identity, and historical trauma intersect (Kumar, 2024, Grewal, 2023). I have challenged the dominant narrative of 'victimhood' (Krystalli, 2021), highlighting the sophisticated strategies of resistance (Sonal et al., 2020) and survival adopted by communities navigating persistent systems of oppression (Daluwatte, 2023). Throughout my analysis, I have not positioned marginal communities as passive victims, but as active agents of transformation (Krystalli, 2021). In the post-war reconciliation landscape in Sri Lanka, I have noted the resilience of women and marginalised groups, and their resistance strategies for political agency and survival. Through the lens of feminist critical theory, I have viewed these acts of

resistance not as isolated, 'dramatic moments', but as intricate, 'everyday' practices of negotiation, survival, and radical world-making (Juncos and Bourbeau, 2022) These are not simply reactions to oppressive structures; but active reimaginations and reconstructions of social realities through persistent, creative forms of resistance that challenge dominant narratives and power dynamics (Kumar, 2024; Sonal et al., 2020). My research foregrounds the perspectives of citizens from Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim ethnic backgrounds living in Sri Lanka, supported by academic literature to reach contextual balance against hegemonic interpretations.

I have adopted the methodology that centres on local narratives (from Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim communities living in Sri Lanka) as sources of wisdom, deliberately moving away from deficit portrayals, thus shifting the focus of research to recognise them as constructive participants actively directing the research process (Heltai and Tarsoly, 2024) for understanding and analysing '*what* is happening', '*why* is it happening' and '*what* are the *implications'* in the reconciliation process. However, it is important to note that this research does not aim to present findings as a definitive explanation for claims of "failure" of the reconciliation process, nor does it prescribe *how* reconciliation *ought* to be implemented by the state. Instead, I am interested in understanding how local actors identify and ground their perspectives in 'everyday' aspects of reconciliation, examining both challenges and opportunities that have emerged over the past 15 years (2009 – 2024) and the disparities between existing policies and practices of the formal reconciliation process.

4.4 Data Collection

This research utilises qualitative methods, drawing on insights from published investigative reports, case studies, as well as interviews with subject matter experts, to critically examine the opportunities and challenges of Sri Lanka's post-civil war reconciliation process in addressing minority grievances and fostering reconciliation since the conflict ended in 2009.

The timeline of the research covers the past 15 years (2009 – 2024), from when the official reconciliation process began, and continues to the year of data collection (2024).

I have conducted 10 remote semi-structured open-ended interviews (see Table 1 below) with academic researchers, civil society leaders, grassroots activists and government administrators residing in Sri Lanka with knowledge and expertise related to reconciliation processes through their professional work. Using the University of Northern British Columbia's (UNBC) encrypted Zoom meeting rooms, I adopted purposive and snowball sampling methods to capture insights from these participants who were willing and data-rich (Babbie, 2020) experts with relevant proximity to the reconciliation process in Sri Lanka.

Table 1 Breakdown of Interview Participants

Participants	**Female**	**Male**	**Total**
Academic Researcher	2	2	4
Grassroots Activists	2	1	3
Civil Society Leaders	1	1	2
Government Administrators	1	-	1
Total Participants	6	4	10

The interviews explored the 'everyday' lived experiences, perceptions and perspectives of individuals from four distinct and diverse backgrounds on social cohesion, inclusion and social justice in relation to the existing reconciliation efforts, and invited to offer viewpoints on existing policies, initiatives and processes aimed at promoting a holistic reconciliation. They were also requested to offer their insights and recommendations on potential areas for positive reforms and improvements to advance sustainable peace, mutual understanding and harmonious coexistence among all communities. Initially, civil society leaders directly engaged in inter-ethnic reconciliation mediation programs for Tamil and Muslim communities,

as well as Sinhalese communities affected by the war, were included to foreground local minority and majority perspectives on current challenges and opportunities within the reconciliation process. This was followed by interviewing grassroots activists familiar with ethnic tensions and grievances, and capable of providing valuable insights into current grievances, concerns, and perspectives that may be overlooked by external observers and top-down policy approaches. Academic researchers who specialise in post-war reconciliation and conflict analysis in Sri Lanka were invited to provide interpretative lenses that contextualise current challenges, spill over effects, and implications. Government administrators directly involved in crafting previous reconciliation policies were included to offer reflections on the limitations and opportunities in past institutional and political attempts to redress issues, foster structural reforms, and share considered opinions for enhancing state-led efforts. Additionally, the interviews were designed to obtain critical insights from local experts on reconciliation policies, the militarisation of the Northern and Eastern Provinces, failures of accountability, and minority political and language rights. Specifically, the interviews provided recent data on how unresolved historical complaints of disadvantaged Tamils and Muslims concerning language, land, and development policies have transformed into contemporary drivers of unrest. Although my participants are formally recognised as subject matter 'experts', they are also local actors embedded in and directly affected by the reconciliation process. Rather than positioning them solely as detached analysts, I approach their narratives as both reflections on and enactments of the 'everyday' experiences of reconciliation. Many of these participants, particularly those from minority communities, shared insights grounded in their *own* lived experiences, navigating the 'everyday' implications, challenges, and opportunities of local reconciliation initiatives. At the same time, they also reflected on the experiences of other community members. In this sense, their 'expert status' is inseparable from their own

positionality as individuals who are knowledgeable about, personally engaged in, and also shaped by the dynamics of 'everyday' reconciliation on the ground.

In selecting my participants, I explored public websites of government and local activists, think tanks, and university websites, along with referrals and obtained a gendered balance in the sample composition. Since the Sri Lankan reconciliation, conflict resolution and peacebuilding academia is dominated by male voices in scholarly and administrative categories, I requested referrals of women experts, citing a purposive outreach for recognised female scholars, activists, and advisors who can help mitigate participant biases in gender. Representativeness was maintained by obtaining a broad range of accurately documented perspectives without contamination of researcher bias in ethnic affiliation, locale, class, and ideological positioning (Sprague, 2016).

First, I reached out to scholars and fieldworkers in Sri Lanka, requesting their voluntary participation in the study by emailing them. After participants provided their initial consent, each individual was requested to join in a virtual interview lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes, scheduled at a time and day of their convenience. Confidentiality and security of the interviews were maintained by conducting remote sessions exclusively through UNBC's licensed student Zoom account with a protected meeting link. During the recording, I reiterated the contents of the information sheet (See Appendix 1 for Participant Information Sheet), outlined the objectives and aims of the interview, and proceeded to obtain their verbal consent (See Appendix 2 for Interview Guide). At the end of each confirmed expert interview, I asked each participant to recommend 1 to 2 other suitable candidates from their professional networks, whom they regard as highly knowledgeable about contemporary drivers of the reconciliation process in Sri Lanka. This referral-based, snowball sampling technique, with the concurrence of the UNBC Research Ethics Board guidance, allowed efficient expansion of the pool of relevant participants within the expertise criteria (Noy, 2008). As familiar community

members vouched for the research integrity of their trusted peers, this helped mitigate legitimacy barriers between the subjects and myself in discussing sensitive issues of structural marginalisation and facilitated insider introductions (Adikaram et al., 2022).

The use of remote interviews gained momentum since the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, during which most ethnographic fieldwork and critical feminist data collection efforts were restricted to online spaces (Howlett, 2022; Lobe et al., 2020; Tremblay et al., 2021). This has influenced where and how interactions occur with participants, complicating the 'placeness of ethnography' (Haverinen, 2015, p.82). My ability to connect 'face to face' with my research participants was determined entirely by participants' willingness to invite me into their 'worlds' in the cyberspaces created (Howlett, 2022). Digital research methods create a meaningful interactive space that transcends physical locations (Lobe et al., 2020; Sattler et al., 2022; Tremblay et al., 2021). Critical feminist research perspectives highlight the transformative potential of remote interviewing in democratising research participation. Traditional face-to-face interview methods often restricted participant pools to those with travel capabilities or proximity to research institutions. The home-based nature of remote interviews significantly enhanced participant convenience and agency. Thus, I managed to dismantle geographical barriers for both myself and my participants and conducted remote interviews within the participants' chosen environments, affording them a feeling of enhanced control of the research process, which reduced power differentials and the degree of formality in the research relationship (Howlett, 2022). Specifically, it allowed me to engage with civil society leaders and grassroots community activists in Sri Lanka who are made inaccessible by logistical constraints.

Interview data collected was augmented by 150 published reports, academic journals, newspaper articles and government policy documents in English, Sinhala and Tamil. Additionally, data documenting political, economic and cultural discrimination was gathered

from political scientists, peace and conflict researchers, Sri Lankan civil society groups and international human rights organisations. Published reports were obtained through a combination of online searches across academic databases, think tank repositories, civil society organisations, direct requests from research participants and collaborating with a research assistant to conduct secondary research from a number of universities, think tanks, libraries, and government data repositories to access important policy documents that cannot be referenced remotely from Canada. Collection and analysis of past investigative reports, academic analyses, and case studies were carried out by documenting the historical grievances, the incidence of marginalisation, eruptions of riots, implementation of reconciliation, transitional justice, and peacebuilding initiatives, both during the war and post-war years.

Systematic identification of relevant investigative reports, academic analyses and case studies documenting ethnic grievances, reconciliation attempts and risks of renewed tensions was made by searching online databases such as ScienceDirect, JSTOR, and Google Scholar using a defined string of keywords associated with the research questions and literature review. I also made use of the publication repositories of prominent think tanks focused on Sri Lankan affairs, such as the Centre for Policy Alternatives, Verité Research and the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, to study their periodic monitoring reports, surveys and field accounts examining inter-ethnic relations. I explored the websites of the National Peace Council, the Centre for Human Rights and Research and Women and Media Collective involved in peacebuilding and mediation, to obtain data from their published reports on outcomes of community-based reconciliation initiatives. At the conclusion of the remote interviews, I requested participants to recommend specific investigative reports, surveys and analyses that they consider relevant to the study. I accessed material with restricted online availability to enrich my empirical analysis, for instance, unpublished reports of women, gender and gender disparity, on minority grievances, extremist influences, previous reconciliation attempts, and

institutional and political reforms. The data-collecting methods I employed provided high-quality primary and secondary data to meet the study goals of exploring the challenges and opportunities of the current reconciliation process in Sri Lanka.

4.5 Limitations of Methodology and Methods

A key limitation in the qualitative nature of remote interviews and document analysis is the inability to generalise across contexts. Whilst offering rich, context-specific insights, the sample size of 10 experts and 150 reports is limited in breadth. The interpretations and conclusions reached cannot claim to represent all minority viewpoints of reconciliation across Sri Lanka, with the result that certain regions, religions, classes, and ideological positions may be compromised. Similarly, my document analysis might have overlooked niche publications from less 'prominent' organisations. Notwithstanding the above, I have made a conscious effort to centre locally published reports and journal articles augmented with academic knowledge from the Global South.

Due to the constraints of a strict timeline and limited resources as a Master's student, I was unable to access a broader range of local citizens who are actively engaged in reconciliation initiatives in the North and East. This includes war widows, individuals living with war-related disabilities, youth activists, and other ordinary citizens directly affected by the war and its aftermath. The online nature of my data collection further limited my ability to reach these groups, as participation required a degree of digital access, connectivity, and, in many cases, some level of institutional affiliation and community visibility. As a result, the representation of the 'everyday' in this study is necessarily mediated through the perspectives of participants who were both willing and able to engage in virtual interviews.

Additionally, the snowball sampling I used risked participant referral biases by focusing on affiliated networks sharing similar opinions. Those likely endorsing substantially differing perspectives might have been excluded (Leighton et al., 2021). However, I overcame this

limitation by requesting my participants to recommend experts not in their peer circles and carried out purposive outreach with experts known for alternative viewpoints to reach a fair and acceptable spread of perspectives.

The remote interview format has limitations in reading non-verbal cues virtually. Due to the sensitive nature of grievances and tensions, a few participants felt reserved to align with their opinions, and this limited participation contributed to potential *'biases'* [10] in the collected data. Anonymity protocols were employed to mitigate these limitations and help participants feel comfortable without undue concern for personal implications. Furthermore, in the write-up of results and discussion of the findings, I took great care and sensitivity to ensure how participant data is *presented*, particularly around contentious issues, characterisations and relations among ethnic groups. Safeguards regarding data security, confidentiality, consent, and avoidance of harm and risks to participants will be elaborated under ethical considerations.

Misrepresentation could have occurred on certain key events due to obscure, disputed, or lost data over time. Political rivalry might have created bias in sentiments and accounts on successive administrations' implementation of the reconciliation process. I have not removed these biases, but instead, moved to elucidate how the multiplicity of standpoints has emerged from people's lived realities by directing my interview questions towards an open sharing of outlooks without leading participants to reach specific responses. Following reflexive principles, I have critically examined my own assumptions, framing of questions, choice of methods, and interpretation of findings filtered through my positionality at every stage of the research process. By cross-checking responses, my intent was not to capture inconsistencies as untruths but to understand complex and evolving positions people hold to enrich the quality of

[10] Rather than viewing bias in narrow terms as simply a *contaminant* to objective truth, it was vital to me to recognise that all people's perspectives are shaped by their unique experiences, positions, and subjectivities. As such, biases reflect the complexity of how people see and understand the world around ethnic relations, tensions, and reconciliation policies in Sri Lanka.

data. All contributions of people's reasoning and contexts were valued rather than defined as contaminated. This shaped how biases were understood and findings were presented.

Interviewing on ethnic relations carries risks of participants concealing sensitive information, exaggerating claims, and providing socially desirable responses. I mitigated potential distortions by using non-leading questions and anonymity protocols. Errors of recall and memory bias can distort historical events and past policies (Graham et al., 2003), and these were addressed through cross-checking and corroborating participant evidence against documented details in published investigative reports and academic analyses in the study. Where noticeable factual discrepancies were detected between a respondent's recollection of key events and policies that conflict with the formal documentation, I made non-critical probing to uncover rationales for divergent perspectives and interpretations. The investigative reports and documents provided a crucial data source to complement the insights gained from the interviews with established details that helped jog respondents' memories.

4.6 Approach to Data Analysis

I employed a thematic qualitative analysis strategy on the gathered documentary evidence and interview transcripts that allowed salient themes to emerge inductively through systematic coding (Terry et al., 2017). Initial open codes captured key points within documents and interviews relating to grievances, reconciliation attempts, and peacebuilding. Empathy towards lived grievances was maintained to avoid generalisations entrenching inter-ethnic divisions (Walsh, 2018). The thematic technique allowed constructive engagement of structural discrimination on grievances and psychosocial reconciliation visions, and textual triangulation provided checks against reductionism. A total of 82 codes surfaced from the participant interview transcripts, and from the initial codes, reconciliation, militarisation, and minority political and cultural rights were identified as three common themes.

The document analysis of investigative reports, academic analyses, case studies, and insights gained from the interviews provided vital historical and contextual foundations to situate the challenges faced by minority communities in achieving a holistic reconciliation. Tracing the patterns of recurrent riots, cultural suppression policies, regional inequalities, and limitations of reconciliation attempts illuminated the systemic foundations and contextual shifts underlying episodes of radicalisation and ethnic tensions. The interview data led to up-to-date assessments from experts closely monitoring contemporary reconciliatory efforts on the ground. Strengths and limitations of reconciliation attempts since the end of the war in 2009 were studied to identify unresolved issues by previous interventions. Interview data, documents and personal reflections offered multi-layered insights on macro-historical discrimination and limitations of prevailing reconciliation paradigms.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

One of the critical ethical considerations associated with this research is centred on interviews with participants because these focused on a highly sensitive social and political issue in Sri Lanka. Open discussions on experiences of marginalisation, oppression, post-war peacebuilding and reconciliation could have triggered psychological risks of re-traumatising participants through recalling distressful memories of conflicts and violence, discrimination, wartime displacement, and evoking deep-seated fears and grief over lost loved ones (Alessi and Kahn, 2023). On the other hand, not engaging with ethnic minority participants to chronicle experiences of violence will keep vital data invisible and not justifiably address critical gaps in dominant historical narratives (Walsh, 2018).

Involvement in a politically sensitive study can endanger participants if confidentiality is breached (Knott and Kostovicova, 2024). Sri Lanka's Public Security Ordinance has enabled arrests of activists for *disaffection* charges, thus heightening risks in conducting this research (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Internationally recognised principles of ethical research were

upheld at every stage, safeguarding participant privacy through confidential storage of recordings and transcripts under coded identifiers. Following the guidelines of the University of Northern British Columbia's Ethics Review Board (2023) and the Canadian Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics (Government of Canada I.A.P. on R.E., 2024), all interview data were strictly anonymised. Remote interview links and recordings were used to facilitate data privacy laws following British Columbia's Personal Information Protection Act (2024) and UNBC's Research Ethics Board policies applied to threats of surveillance.

I was also aware of ethical risks for myself as a Sri Lankan Sinhalese researcher, for critically examining highly sensitive issues of ethnic marginalisation and violence in Sri Lanka. I managed to mitigate some of these concerns through regular debriefings with my research supervisor.

4.8 Positionality

My thesis deviates from an impersonal, objective stance traditionally expected in academic discourse in maintaining distance between the researcher and the researched, mainly because, during my interviews, this professional distance was untenable to maintain.

My positionality as a Sri Lankan Sinhalese, international studies researcher affiliated with a Canadian university was shaped by my coming of age during the final decade of the civil war. Growing up in the majority community, yearning for peace amidst widening divides, I was faced with complex self-identities and accountabilities. Navigating tense ethnic ruptures as a child, with many classmates of ethnic minorities disappearing from school, imprinted in me an early bewilderment regarding the challenges of coexistence, and seeded a calling to make sense of the lived experience of the post-war period through later academic learning. Pursuing higher education in the Global North awakened me to internalised worldviews that normalise ethnic hierarchies despite oppression back home. Learning alternative paradigms of pluralism and minority rights prompted an acknowledgement of my own socialisation to

remain silent amid injustices in the post-war realities. However, it prompted a reflexive re-examination of unearned privileges within inherited power structures in Sri Lanka that sustain the marginalisation of minority ethnic and religious groups (Reid et al., 2018). This "insider-outsider" positioning created complex relational dynamics, trust building, and disclosure during remote interviewing on sensitive political issues with Tamil and Muslim civil society leaders (Türkmen, 2023). My physical distance from contemporary ground realities posed credibility barriers to adequately grasp nuanced descriptions of obstacles to reconciliation, and insider partiality defensiveness in confronting necessary structural changes to relieve minority grievances. I am only conversant in English and Sinhala, and this limitation risks linguistic alienation of Tamil participants; therefore, I have made upfront transparency on my shortcomings during this research, and appropriate participant guidance was made in direct interviews to ensure accurate elevation of narratives, avoiding distorted accounts. I have consistently strived to empower marginalised voices to guide analysis in line with the axiological imperative (Türkmen, G., 2023).

Nevertheless, I maintain that an outsider analysis of a protracted civil war, without ongoing anchoring through relationships and accountability to those who bore its trauma, risks misrepresenting ground realities. Furthermore, I am a remote researcher encountering distinct challenges in fostering empathy and trust with minority communities in Sri Lanka who have endured severe emotional, physical, and political traumas, as well as violent majoritarian supremacists and terrorist organisations such as the LTTE. However, I can utilise scholarship privileges to trace pathways through truth, forgiveness, and freedom with those still fighting to transform post-war conflicts into lasting peace back home. My positionality demands that before acquiring any academic capital, research relations should culminate in building trust, and research goals must follow the communities' self-determined paths to reconciliation.

4.9 Conclusion

My research employs a critically reflexive qualitative methodology to explore the complexities of post-war reconciliation in Sri Lanka, and I have adopted a feminist post-colonial participatory approach to challenge traditional research hierarchies and centre historically marginalised local narratives in academic discourse. By combining remote semi-structured interviews of 10 experts, including academic researchers, civil society leaders, grassroots activists, and former government administrators, with an extensive review of 150 published reports and documents, I constructed a framework for understanding reconciliation dynamics. My research design was underpinned by a commitment to ethical considerations and methodological reflexivity by acknowledging the political sensitivity and potential risks of re-traumatisation inherent in studying ethnic conflicts, and my thematic analytical approach reinforced grounded, inductive research, facilitating themes to emerge organically from the data, respecting the complexity of participants' lived experiences and the evolving nature of reconciliation efforts. Limitations of my methodology include the challenges of generalising from a relatively small sample size, potential sampling biases, and the complexities of remote interviewing. Overall, my research process embodies a broader epistemological commitment to decolonising knowledge production, challenging hegemonic narratives, and creating spaces for marginalised voices to articulate their own experiences of conflict, trauma, and reconciliation.

CHAPTER 5: RECONCILIATION POLICIES: "FILTERED TRUTHS AND FAILED PROMISES"

5.1 Chapter Introduction

In post-war Sri Lanka, the ongoing reconciliation process has faced challenges related to understanding, implementation, and trust. Since 2009, numerous commissions, task forces, and institutions have been established by the Sri Lankan state to facilitate the official reconciliation process (see Chapter 2). Two central documents in this respect are the LLRC report of 2011 and the CTF report of 2016, identified by my research participants, due to the focus on mass testimonials and truth-telling mechanisms, and creating platforms for the marginalised. Drawing on empirical evidence, I explore the significant disparities between the official reconciliation policies and how state and non-state actors conceptualise and approach reconciliation in the post-war landscape, highlighting a fundamental disconnect between top-down governmental initiatives compared to grassroots community experiences, creating a polygonal narrative of reconciliation. I then critically examine the implications and impacts of the official truth commissions and policy documents, and provide a comprehensive framework for addressing post-war reconciliation on the ground.

5.2 Navigating Disparities in Sri Lanka's Reconciliation Process

5.2.1 Widespread Divergence in Understanding Reconciliation

One of the key narratives echoed by my participants was that the *concept* of 'reconciliation' is challenging to define conclusively in the Sri Lankan context. Gibson (2004, p. 12) situates this dilemma in the existing peacebuilding literature:

> *"The problem with reconciliation is not that it is devoid of content; the problem is that reconciliation is such an intuitively accessible concept that everyone is able to imbue it with her or his own distinct understanding".*

I began my analysis by exploring and deconstructing the localised understanding of reconciliation and how it is *perceived* in post-war Sri Lanka, given that reconciliation is a

borrowed term from Western-centric post-war IR scholarship introduced by both Western and some local actors when peace talks were initiated on the ground level (Herath, 2018). Academic Researcher '2' points out that many scholars in Sri Lanka faced the formidable task of interpreting and translating this "broad, western-centric and context-driven concept" into the two national languages: in Sinhala as ***"ප්‍රතිසන්ධානය"*** *[prathisandhānaya[11]]* and in Tamil "***நல்லிணக்கம்***" *[nalliṇakkam[12]]* (as cited in translated LLRC documents by CPA, 2012). Academic Researcher '4' explained that after the civil war, it became challenging to communicate the concept and process of reconciliation to people deeply polarised against each other, and the "whole process of reconciliation seemed unfamiliar". Academic Researcher '4' points to the definitional lapse:

> *"Without defining reconciliation in a proper way, the government has gone ahead embarking upon a reconciliation process by focussing [only] on a few preliminary requirements that can be incorporated in a proper definition of reconciliation."*

A common issue that is noticeable in the two key official reconciliation policy documents, LLRC report (2011) and the CTF report (2016), is that neither have attempted to define reconciliation explicitly, but instead loosely define the 'reconciliation process' as an endeavour to (LLRC, 2011, p. 25),

> *"Focus on the causes of conflict, its effect on the people, and promote national unity, so that all citizens of Sri Lanka, irrespective of ethnicity or religion could live in dignity and a sense of freedom and identify mechanisms for restitution to the individuals whose lives have been significantly impacted by the conflict."*

Specifically, the LLRC's (2011) documentation emphasises several key antecedents of reconciliation such as the intentions of addressing root causes of conflict (8.141 p.308), acknowledging the impact of the ethnic conflict on the population (9.184 p.388), promoting national unity across ethnic and religious lines (1.7 p.25), ensuring dignity and freedom for all

[11] Although this word is directly translated to "reconciliation" or "reunification" in English, in popular culture it is now often used in contexts related to bringing people or groups together (especially political parties) after a conflict or disagreement.

[12] good harmony or good agreement.

citizens and identifying mechanisms of restitution for those affected by the civil war (5.6 p.174). Similarly, the CTF report advances this conceptualisation by emphasising the *transformative potential* of reconciliation, as the *"transformation of challenges of violation and impunity into an opportunity for meaningful reconciliation and national unity"* (1.p. I), explicitly recognising that *"unity in diversity, respect for and protection of the multiple identities of all Sri Lankans is fundamental to meaningful reconciliation*" (5. p. X). This progression in policy framing reveals a subtle shift from the LLRC's focus on addressing historical grievances and promoting broad national unity to the CTF's more nuanced approach that explicitly acknowledges the importance of 'preserving' and 'respecting' diverse identities within the reconciliation process. Therefore, it can be concluded that based on the *intentions* of the LLRC (2011) report and the CTF's (2016) reconciliatory mechanisms, reconciliation in Sri Lanka can be expected to break the cycle of violence by preventing the use of past grievances as seeds for renewed conflict, consolidating peace, and encompassing all expectations of peacebuilding including transitional justice and post-war economic development (Tennakoon, 2016).

Grassroots Activist '2' contends that since 2009, the concept of 'national unity' within reconciliation has become a mainstream discourse in Sri Lankan politics. A survey conducted in 2020 by the Sri Lanka Barometer on how Sri Lankans perceive reconciliation reveals that only 38% of respondents identify it as 'some form of national unity' (2021, p. 77). The fragmentation in understanding becomes particularly problematic when examining the broad definition's implementation implications and outcomes, and raises questions about the *meaning* and *implications* of 'national unity' in the current reconciliation process. Academic Researcher '2' critically notes that the overarching emphasis on 'national unity' has effectively "overshadowed the need to address specific grievances" by oversimplifying the diverse needs

and expectations of post-war reconciliation. Academic Researcher '4' offered a personal experience highlighting the varied interpretations:

> *"During a survey that I was a part of [a team] collecting data about the level of needing reconciliation in 2022, many different local citizens [away from the war-affected areas] had different understandings on the ground…many thought reconciliation means developing the North and East, others thought that it means overall peace in Sri Lanka by addressing current political insecurities... some also said that reconciliation is [to become] a developed country".*

A cross-country survey conducted by the CPA (2013, p.9), further illustrates a lack of a proper understanding of reconciliation:

> *"Participants had limited knowledge about reconciliation and its objectives… one respondent from the Killinochchi district in the Northern Province specifically noted that there was inadequate awareness, and most people in the Northern Province did not understand the reconciliation process."*

In war-affected areas such as Killinochchi, having borne the brunt of the conflict, a lack of 'awareness of reconciliation' has led to the perpetuation of feelings of marginalisation and hinders the intended healing process. Moreover, Academic Researcher '3' noted that many ordinary citizens consider reconciliation as a 'political slogan' which has led to 'misconceptions and scepticism' (discussed in Chapter 8). For instance, during ethnographic research conducted by Silva (2018, pp. p.1078-80), one Sinhalese respondent described reconciliation as nothing but an "agenda by the international community to divide the country", whilst a Tamil respondent dismissed reconciliation as consisting of a set of 'bogus promises' on the cultivation of trust between the government and its citizens in post-war Sri Lankan society. Academic Researcher '4'further points out that in nearly fifteen years of discourse on reconciliation, this 'deficit of trust has still not been addressed'. Academic Researcher '1' provides an insight into this fundamental challenge:

> *"We don't have an organic definition of reconciliation. That's a major challenge. Because we can't say that people have really understood the meaning of reconciliation in order to engage in the process. So, it comes [across] as a kind of a parachute concept".*

The lack of an 'organic definition' point to a fundamental void between top-down, externally driven peace initiatives and local realities. My participants claimed that a 'liberal peace model' that international actors and states have systematically imposed failed to account for the local grassroots and civil society peacebuilding practices (Adhira and Triasari, 2024; Subramaniam-Nisanka et al., 2021). Academic Researcher '1' critically views the liberal peacebuilding paradigm, which *"prioritises technocratic solutions [such as setting up formal reconciliation committees and oversight bodies] instead of addressing deep-rooted societal issues in Sri Lanka"*, giving sufficient attention to the understanding and *acceptance* of the reconciliation process at the grassroots level. These confusions in the application of the reconciliation process have led to an abiding dissatisfaction, and many feel that reconciliation is not achieved and that the process has reached a stalemate (Kapur, 2024; Silva, 2018; CPA, 2024).

Civil Society Leader '1' points out that "different understandings [of reconciliation] held by various stakeholders are reflected in the diversity of replication of policies", which negatively contributes to the overall effectiveness of the process. This highlights a pertinent fact that dissonance of understanding has been prevalent at the grassroots levels for nearly a decade (Silva, 2018, p.1078). Academic Researcher '3', Grassroot Activists '1' and '2' all point out that even in 2024, diverse interpretations of reconciliation persist. Public Opinion on Reconciliation in Sri Lanka Survey (CPA 2024 p. 4), claimed that there is a 'renewed grassroots interest in reconciliation' and Sri Lanka Barometer Public Opinion Survey (2021, p. 80) stated that *"Sri Lankans continue to recognise the importance of reconciliation by expressing a consistently strong demand for it"*. These reports, however, do not sufficiently capture the diverse ways in which people *understand* and *interpret* the concept. Instead, they primarily present broad statistical categories reflecting how the majority 'views' reconciliation, thereby overlooking the *nuanced* and varied interpretations that exist across different communities.

This results in significant omissions in both academic literature and policy documents. Academic Researcher '3' further highlights that without a comprehensive understanding of these different interpretations, interventions risk being 'disconnected from local realities', as they may not resonate with the diverse ways in which different communities and individuals approach the current reconciliation process.

One of the most striking deficiencies in the reconciliation process is the unavailability of important reconciliation reports and surveys in both Sinhala and Tamil languages. A survey conducted by the CPA (2013, p.12) noted that,

> "*Only a few respondents were aware that the final LLRC report has been made public. This is to be expected given that the translations of the [LLRC] report in Sinhala and Tamil have not been made available by the Government and official Government copies of the report exist only in English*".

This shortcoming raises a fundamental question: 'Why has a national report of such importance not been made available in the national languages (Sinhala and Tamil) in Sri Lanka, where only 23.8% of the total population is fluent in English (EF, 2024)'? This glaring neglect by the government has led to the exclusion of a large proportion of the population from a meaningful engagement with the reconciliation process and has contributed to a reinforcement of elitism and created a moral discrepancy between policymakers and local citizens. Grassroots Activist '2' contends that these issues collectively point to a 'systemic failure' that affected the government's approach to reconciliation. Based on my empirical data, it becomes clear that the government has failed to 'acculturate' the *concept* of reconciliation and situate it within Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic society in a manner that *preserves* its original intentions. Grassroot Activist '2' and Civil Society Leader '1' further elaborate that instead of promoting a direct dialogue between the government and the war-affected civil society members, "vital aspects of the dialogue have been delegated to external interlocutors such as NGOs" that has led to a misinterpretation of key objectives of reconciliation, confusion of implementational methodologies and processes of delivery at the grassroots level. The lack of a concrete and

systematic approach to disseminating knowledge about reconciliation has compromised the process's greater objectives from the outset, leading to fatigue and scepticism (Kapur, 2024; Perera and Ranasinghe, 2024). Government Official '1', noted that,

> *"We've [participated in] a lot of workshops and seminars, but there's no [consistent] strategy linking these activities to the broader goals of reconciliation…[It's] like we are box ticking [without moving forward]."*

The characterisation of efforts as 'box ticking' suggests that fulfilling formal requirements has taken precedence over achieving substantive reconciliation outcomes on the ground by the State, revealing a perfunctory implementation (Åkebo and Bastian, 2021). Civil Society Leader '2' also adds to this sentiment,

> *"In our area [Jaffna], we've had three different NGOs and some government programs running workshops on reconciliation, but no one seemed to be [aware] of what [exactly] the others are doing. This is a case of filtered truth and failed promises…"*

The broader systemic issues of coordination and communication among various reconciliation actors as well as inefficient use of resources, create confusion and fatigue among target communities (Gunasekara, 2023), and the absence of a systematic strategy and initiatives has contributed to diminishing engagement in reconciliation activities on the ground.

Nevertheless, this void has fostered spaces for community-driven interpretations and approaches to reconciliation through centring the 'everyday' understandings and can therefore be understood as a response to this vacuum of state-led reconciliation initiatives. The 'everyday' here represents the *lived* spaces of routine interactions where reconciliation is experienced, interpreted, and practised through routine interactions and shared practical purposes. This form of 'everyday' reconciliation manifests wherever local communities engages in regular, *repeated* interactions through shared practical purposes into sustained, organic processes of relationship-building that develop their own momentum and meaning. It is where reconciliation is *lived*, *felt*, and *practised*, whether it is complementing, challenging, or even creating alternatives to formal reconciliation frameworks. Grassroots Activist '2' posits

that, *"It has created a perfect environment for local resilience for people to develop their own organic understanding of what reconciliation means to them."* Therefore, the gaps in the 'formal reconciliation programs' have accommodated these open spaces for community resilience and innovation, serving as microcosms of reconciliation where *trust* is built incrementally through these repeated interactions and shared goals (Wickramasinghe, 2021; Perera and Ranasinghe, 2024). For example, in the Northern Province, women's cooperatives have emerged, allowing women of all ethnicities to collaborate on economic projects whilst simultaneously addressing inter-community tensions through regular dialogue. These have redefined reconciliation through practical economic cooperation, demonstrating how local communities interpret reconciliation through the lens of shared economic prosperity and daily interaction (ILO, 2024; Norad, 2017). One notable example is the Mullaitivu Women Development Co-op Society, that produces and markets traditional handicrafts, creating both economic opportunities and spaces for inter-ethnic relationship building (ILO, 2024) representing how communities develop locally-grounded understandings of what reconciliation means in practice through the necessity of working together for mutual benefit (Raheem, 2024; Deane, 2021; Walpita, 2023).

An apparent contradiction that surfaced through discussions with my participants was that the Sri Lankan government's *praxis* of 'reconciliation' differs from its public proclamations. Academic Researcher '3' noted that, instead of addressing the pertinent reconciliatory measures recommended by the LLRC report, the state has mainly focused on *"economic restructuring, particularly in the war-affected North and East",* neglecting crucial requirements of reconciliation such as addressing grievances at the grassroots and fostering inter-ethnic trust (Höglund and Orjuela, 2013). My participant points out that without tackling the substantive and *"challenging tasks of reconciliation, the government has sidestepped from critical aspects such as addressing human rights violations, political rights of minorities, and*

redressing past injustices". The Mahinda Rajapaksa government proposed a strategy centred on constructing modern infrastructure, including highways and expressways, in an attempt to double the national per capita income (Venugopal, 2018, p. 13). Justifying this approach, President Rajapaksa at the inauguration of a new expressway in 2011 said (Daily Mirror, 2011, quoted in Venugopal, 2018, p. 13),

> *"Separatist tendencies will fade away when we have better road connectivity between the North and the South so that people from the North and people from the South are able to move both ways freely, that can cultivate interracial harmony and can also lead to mutual economic benefits".*

This rhetoric was singled out by Academic Researcher '4', to illustrate a 'political strategy to create images of future economic prospects', in the minds of a larger section of the population who have been hard-pressed by financial difficulties as a result of the war, and to downplay the economic and social disintegration and accompanying psychological trauma experienced by the civilian population of the war-ravaged North and the East. Relegation of critical imperatives of the reconciliation process from the government's post-war development agenda resulted in a failure to gain public support for it (Venugopal, 2018). According to Academic Researcher '3', the citizens of Northern Province expected the government to 'address wartime grievances' as the state's top priority, whilst the government's development plan for the region primarily emphasised infrastructure projects. Civil Society Leader '2' points out that since 2019, they have observed a "decrease in government-sponsored reconciliation events in the country compared to the [previous] years after the war," and this has impacted multiple dimensions of community participation and perception (Subramaniam-Nisanka, 2021). Reduction in organised reconciliation events has created a vacuum in formal spaces for inter-community dialogue and engagement, affecting communities that previously relied on government-sponsored platforms for cross-cultural interaction and understanding and contributed to an alienation of citizens from the broader reconciliation process (Subramaniam-

Nisanka, 2021; Sritharan, 2022; Silva et al., 2020; Kanagarathnam, 2019; Millawithanachchi, 2020)

5.2.2 Gaps in Current Reconciliation Processes

Many of my participants have identified the lack of access to witness testimonies from the two recorded public truth hearings, LLRC (2010) and CTF (2016), which created an inability to ascertain the manner in which evidence was gathered and recorded, interpretations made by the officials who conducted the hearings, and specific steps taken to redress grievances. Civil Society Leader '1' notes that these deficiencies led to "substantial gaps in understanding what the local communities truly expected from a reconciliation process".

In 2010, the LLRC received 5,000 written and 1,000 oral statements covering the militarisation of civilian land, missing and disappeared relatives, and other discriminatory offences committed against minorities during the war. These were recorded from a diverse group of individuals and organisations, including public representatives, residents of conflict-affected regions, and non-governmental and international organisations. Field visits and consultations with various national and international bodies were conducted to corroborate many of the claims. The Commission conducted visits to 12 districts outside Colombo, including all the war-torn areas in the Northern and Eastern provinces, and covered some Southern districts where large numbers of Tamil, Muslim, and Sinhalese people came to testify (LLRC, 2011). Some of these witnesses were turned away for unknown reasons, but the testimonies that were heard and documented challenged the notion that the conflict had truly ended. In order to maintain transparency of the proceedings, the commission invited the general public and the media as independent witnesses (Tennakoon, 2016). However, the LLRC's official website, which previously hosted written submissions and English translations of field transcripts, was found to be inactive during my data collection phase. The unavailability of the official website was noted by Höglund (2019), who reported its inactivity since 2019.

Another Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CTF) was established in 2016 to gather public inputs on transitional justice and reconciliation with an updated perspective (CTF, 2016). CTF consisted of an 11-person team representing the ethnic composition of the nation and collaborated with 15 regional commissions to conduct hearings across all provinces. The Commission received 7,000 submissions from victims who shared their experiences in both the violence they endured and the challenges they faced in seeking justice and reconciliation throughout the seven years since the end of the war (CTF, 2016).

Unlike the LLRC, which made available edited testimonials to the public, the CTF made no written testimonials[13] accessible to the public. Academic Researcher '3' noted that 'inaccessibility of transcriptions of the testimonials' and the apparent 'lack of follow-through' in maintaining public access to these records are an obstruction to sustaining the relational aspects of the overall reconciliation process. Commenting on the accuracy and completeness of testimonials in the LLRC, Grassroots Activist '2' posits that:

> *"A lot of important information was missing in the transcribed records… They did not include transcripts in peoples' own words in the reports. We made such a request to the LLRC commission when we gave our testimonies but they didn't care. Years later, we come to learn that the testimonials are missing."*

The absence of testimonies in 'people's own words' in the official reports represents a *specific* form of structural violence that effectively silences voices and experiences. Currently, available evidence representing local grassroots perspectives can be found paraphrased without direct transcripts of testimonials of the affected individuals themselves (LLRC, 2010; CTF, 2016). This *systematic exclusion* of direct testimonies has created a gap in the documentation of the reconciliation process, affecting both the descriptive circumstances of the implementation of reconciliation initiatives and a historical understanding of the post-war

[13] The CTF report's Appendices lists the number of testimonials received without including any actual testimonial text. During my interview with Grassroot Activist '2', they mentioned that written testimonials were accessible in the past, but they were uncertain about current access or who might have a copy.

period of Sri Lanka (Chandrashekar, 2019). Furthermore, I can bring to light the time-based dimension of this issue as discussed by my participant, where the discovery of missing testimonials occurred 'years later', pointing to a lapse in institutional accountability and a lack of transparency in the ongoing reconciliation process (Chandrashekar, 2019; Meegaswatta, 2020).

Many of my participants spoke about the importance of including directly quoted testimonials within an official policy. First-hand accounts are an irreplaceable historical record that prevents denial and revisionism whilst centring the experiences of those most impacted (Kochanski, 2020; Bakiner, 2015). Direct testimonials transform abstract policies into deeply human documents that capture both individual and collective trauma in ways that third-person summaries cannot achieve (Kochanski, 2020). First-hand testimonies serve as *vessels of memory* that allow both perpetrators and the broader society to truly grasp the human impact of past violations, and incorporating direct quotes helps prevent the sanitisation and bureaucratisation of suffering that occur in purely procedural documents (Bakiner, 2015; Posner, 2008). When policies include the actual voices of survivors saying *'This is what happened to me'* and *'This is what I witnessed'*, it creates the ability to envision and feel a more just future by fully acknowledging past harms (Posner, 2008). Academic Researcher '4' posits that when policies exclude direct testimonials, they risk producing the truth without capturing the equally vital 'narrative truth' essential for genuine reconciliation within Sri Lanka. Testimonials within official policies help bridge the gap between top-down and bottom-up approaches to peacebuilding. When policies incorporate the *actual* voices of affected communities, it helps prevent a liberal peace trap where reconciliation becomes a technical exercise divorced from local realities and needs (Mac Ginty, 2015). This 'ignorance', highlighted by Grassroots Activist '2' aligns with another common theme surfacing from my empirical analysis as a manifestation of a marked *disinterest* and *disregard* by the state for

addressing grievances. Institutional dismissal of community voices cannot be condoned, considering the need for the preservation of historical memory in the reconciliation process (Hettiarachchi, 2016; Rambukwella, 2012) as Civil Society Leader '1' highlights:

> *"It is important to record these testimonials... It's more than lending a hearing to people's issues – it's a recording of memory. Memories [are]very important to the whole [reconciliation] process…"*

Public availability of testimonials serves as a cornerstone of truth-seeking efforts, which are integral components of reconciliation (Höglund, 2019). When these become inaccessible, it casts doubts on the authenticity of the records, and creates a significant void in the collective understanding of the conflict's impact on individuals and communities severely hampering the ability of society to grasp the full scope and depth of the suffering endured by people on account of the war (Davis, 2022; Bakiner, 2015). Civil Society Leader '2' speaks about the perceptions of the young who did not experience the conflict first-hand:

> *"Younger generations who did not directly experience the conflict rely on these records to understand their history and the experiences of their [elders]… [Absence of records] creates a gap in understanding that can lead to a disconnect [between generations] and a potential resurgence of unresolved tensions in the future".*

The intergenerational aspect of one's history is crucial for sustaining long-term reconciliation efforts and preventing the recurrence of conflict (Davis, 2022). Grassroot Activist '1' posits that, "*this removal of public access to testimonials can be seen as a form of historical erasure, intentional or not…",* and Civil Society Leader Participants ('1' and '2') state that this can lead to "silencing the voices of victims and survivors, re-traumatising [them by] denying public acknowledgement [of their experiences]". Participants highlighted that many of the official narratives on reconciliation are 'coloured with military victories', and very little space is reserved for people who have suffered and are still suffering. Legitimate questions can be raised about *who has the right to decide which stories are preserved and made accessible*, *and which are not,* leading to broader debates about the politics of memory and the power dynamics inherent in shaping historical narratives within the post-war society (Silva,

2018; Thiranagama, 2013). Reconciliation policies *should* prioritise amelioration of emotional implications and psychological impacts for people in war-affected regions, although the state has mainly identified economic development and provision of infrastructure as the critical areas to be addressed (Hettiarachchi, 2016).

Specific instances of state censorship on the ground are highlighted in masking relevant factual data in transcripts and documents, and limitations imposed on accessibility (un)intentionally impeding the vital processes of collective memory formation that are germane to the success of national reconciliation in shaping social identity and cohesion (Keethaponcalan, 2019; Tissainayagam, 2012; Seoighe, 2017; Höglund and Orjuela, 2013). Academic Researcher '4' points out that issues of state censorship *"raise serious questions about transparency and accountability"* within the officially published reconciliation policies. The lack of transparency can easily lead to suspicions of political manipulation or cover-ups, undermining the credibility of the process and its outcomes and thereby widening the trust deficit between the minority communities and the state, which is an overarching challenge within the current overall reconciliation process (Fernando, 2019). My participants note that due to a lack of transparency, minority community members often downplay the relevance of state commissions with particular reference to their composition, consisting of politicians and scholars chosen by the Sri Lankan authorities. The government facilitates impositions from higher authorities, under the presumption that they know what is best without the need for much dialogue and consultation with those *actually* affected by the war. As a result, findings made and conclusions arrived at by commissions of reconciliations often fall short of fully exposing the severity of the government's actions and shortcomings (Chandrasekar, 2015).

My participants also pointed out inadequate mandates, lack of witness protection, insufficient independence, and failure to meet global standards for domestic commissions of inquiry. Academic Researcher '4' highlighted issues with the testimony collection process

itself: *"many witnesses were not given the opportunity to be heard, while others who did testify found the time allocated for their testimonies insufficient"*. The Commission allowed politicians, army personnel, and government officers living in Colombo a reasonable amount of time (about 45 minutes) for each testimony. Tamils and Muslims in war-affected areas, however, were typically given only about 15 minutes each to testify, bearing witness to the commission's skewed priorities (Venugopal, 2011). As a result, crucial information was often omitted from the official testimonials, compromising the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the LLRC records (Venugopal, 2011; Höglund, 2019). Höglund's (2019) study further revealed substantial gaps in the available LLRC records, with biases in the dataset such as gender disparity (male testimonies outnumbered female testimonies by a ratio of 3:1, despite women being disproportionately affected by certain aspects of the conflict.

Academic Researcher '4' highlighted that there were many occasions where the Commissioners undermined the credibility of witnesses' testimonies. Instead of listening and recording the accounts, they had frequently questioned the validity of the grievances presented, which constituted a tendency to disregard the core of witnesses' statements (Chandrasekar, 2015). The LLRC's approach to recording testimonies of women has been heavily criticised for a lack of concern in maintaining sensitivity and understanding during the delivery of their narratives (Chandrasekar, 2015; Höglund, 2019). Female testimonial witnesses were interrupted and denied the space to share their experiences with discretion or in their own preferred way (Höglund, 2019). For example, during an LLRC testimonial hearing[14] at the District Secretariat in Kilinochchi on September 18, 2010, a mother stepped forward to share her wartime experience and recounted the disappearance of two of her sons and maintained that two other sons had been killed. During the course of her testimony, she also wanted to give

[14]I obtained a copy of the written witness testimonials from Dr. Kristine Höglund (Uppsala University, Sweden), that had been preserved offline by a research assistant in 2014. Other official media reports and audio transcripts can be found on an unofficial archives website at https://llrclk.wordpress.com/ .

an account of how she too sustained bodily injuries, but at this point, one of the commissioners overseeing the testimony stopped her continuing with her story (LLRC, 2010) This encounter illustrates the arbitrarily imposed closure of the flow of a narrative that could have contained factors relevant to the representation of genuine grievances. Part of this narrative is produced below (LLRC, 2010):

> **W1[15]:** *I have 7 children-4 boys. Of the 4 boys 2 boys are missing. 1 is married and has 3 children and those children are also with me. I am the supporting member of the family.*
> **C[16]:** *What happened to your (2) sons?*
> W1. *I am also short of hearing because of shell attack. There are shell pieces still in my …*
> **C:** *No, ask her what happened to her sons?*

The tendency to question the credibility of testimonies and attempts at downplaying the severity of reported incidents suggests a predetermined narrative that the commission sought to abide by. This type of approach compromises the truth-seeking mandate of the reconciliation process and erodes mutual trust among the commission officials, the victims, and their family members (Chandrasekar, 2015; Höglund, 2019). Grassroots Activist '1' commented that empathetic listening to the grievances was an integral part of understanding and demonstrating intentions of genuine reconciliation: *"If the commission cannot do that, then, its core premise as a truth commission is invalid"*. Although the CTF adopted a more democratic approach in gender-specific orientation for recording female witnesses' accounts, with thoughtful consideration to gender-related concerns and participation of women within the truth hearing recordings, (CTF, 2016) Academic Researcher '1' notes that even in 2024 there are persistent gaps in meaningful female participation within reconciliation processes, despite formal establishment of gender-sensitive mechanisms:

> *"I would say that a gender-sensitive approach would pave the way to sustainable peace and reconciliation, I would say, that women can play a very serious role…. it is very important to create spaces for their participation in that way. But in [legal and policy*

[15] W1: "Witness" 1
[16] C: "Commissioner"

entities] we are not meaningfully connecting women… There is a lack of women's participation."

'Lack of women's participation' in the ongoing reconciliation process has been documented extensively in media reports and academic literature since 2015 (Nazeemudeen, 2019; Fonseka and Schulz, 2018; Brounéus et. al., 2024). Although international formal commitments including UN General Assembly Resolution 60/80 and Security Council Resolution 1645 (2005) (which established the Peace Building Commission with the mandate to coordinate resources and develop integrated strategies for post-war recovery), along with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent provisions on Women, Peace and Security to inclusive peacebuilding and reconciliation had been implemented in Sri Lanka in 2015, the practical impact has been limited (Halkes, 2021). As noted by Grassroots Activist '2', women's organisations participating in formal reconciliation consultations have found that despite their contributions regarding psychosocial support and mechanisms to address wartime violence in conflict-affected communities, these are not translated into meaningful policy and legal action. Gender imbalance in official reconciliation policy development and legal decision-making continues to undermine the holistic nature of reconciliation efforts (Sonal et al., 2020).

Sri Lanka's approach to truth hearings was criticised by multiple Grassroots Activist and Civil Society Leader participants, drawing attention to the use of an interrogative structure by the commissioners in conducting hearings. Although each proceeding started with a welcome speech by the Commissioner, there was an absence of empathetic dialogue from the officials to ensure the witnesses were at ease during the proceedings (Chandrasekar, 2015). Comments by Civil Society Leader '1' and Grassroots Activist '1' focus on the 'lack of a human face' to proceedings that had a significant negative impact on the truth accounts by the witnesses:

"I remember that people complained to me that they [the Commission] adopted [a sense of] superiority in the way they questioned and not showing genuine empathy for them [Tamil participants] who had injuries from the war"

The state officials sought to emotionally distance themselves from the witnesses, creating an attitudinal divide between *'unfortunate them'* and *'fortunate us'*. Their inquiries were narrowly focused on taking down complaints or problems rather than encouraging witnesses to freely share their stories that evoke realities on the ground. Witnesses were often interrupted when speaking about their personal experiences and were directed to focus on their '*immediate problem'* (LLRC, 2010). Grassroots Activist '1' claimed that many witnesses didn't feel safe to say everything that really mattered, and resorted to producing a 'filtered version' of their grievances that did not serve well for the reconciliation objectives. The activist further elaborated that:

> *"Our follow-up surveys with testifiers revealed that approximately 40% felt they had to self-censor during their testimonies. This self-censorship is still seen nowadays was [primarily] due to fears of potential repercussions or a lack of trust in the process."*

The prevalence of 'self-censorship' observed above reveals an ongoing climate of intimidation within official reconciliation spaces that have failed to create the necessary psychological safety for full and honest disclosure, perpetuating cycles of silence and unresolved trauma even in 2024. This 'filtration process' undermined the credibility of the official reconciliation findings and recommendations and failed to capture the full spectrum of experiences and perspectives necessary for bringing about a holistic reconciliation (Chandrasekar, 2015). According to Grassroots Activists '1' and '2', this is one of the glaring instances in which the official reconciliation process was perceived as a let-down by the people at the grassroots.

My participants pointed out that these institutional shortcomings have resulted in a widespread perception that reconciliation initiatives as a whole were primarily 'performative exercises', designed to appease international observers rather than to achieve meaningful healing and justice (Seoighe, 2017; Ruwanpura, 2016). Grassroots Activist '4' highlights the acute scepticism among civil society actors and victims' groups:

> *"[They] just came up with this to satisfy international donors. But very little came out of this. [They] met with many of us and asked us what [our problems were], they also said that they will look into it but they only approached this with the end goal of validating the military victory… Most of us felt that they did this[reconciliation] just for the sake of doing something."*

The widely-held belief that these initiatives were primarily manoeuvres to showcase reconciliation efforts to appease external actors (such as the UN, international donors and other regional bodies), further contributed to undermining the credibility of the reconciliation process (Seoighe, 2017; Ruwanpura, 2016; Perera, 2023; Waldorf and Premaratna, 2024). The failure to initiate substantial national outreach programs connecting grassroots and civil society organisations further indicates the domination of a top-down approach that has neglected the importance of broad-based, community-driven reconciliation efforts (Perera, 2023; Kapur, 2024). The use of reconciliation initiatives as a stratagem to satisfy international donors is a tactless prioritisation of international perceptions over local needs (Perera, 2023; Waldorf and Premaratna, 2024; Kapur, 2024). This approach creates a façade of reconciliation that neither reflects the lived experiences of affected communities nor addresses the underlying issues that perpetuated the war (Kapur, 2024).

Academic Researcher 4 points out that the gradual withering of initial enthusiasm highlights missed opportunities in Sri Lanka's reconciliation process. Despite the failures and limitations highlighted in the processual and documentational aspects of the official truth commissions, the official state reconciliation actionables in 2024 are still based on the two public truth inquiries held in 2010 and 2016, respectively (Perera, 2023; Waldorf and Premaratna, 2024; Kapur, 2024). The failure to capitalise on the constitutional reform process initiated by the State demonstrates a lack of sustained political will to bring about a lasting and meaningful change (Kapur, 2024). This has led to a disconnect between the recommendations of reconciliation initiatives and the ground-level implementation, pointing to a fundamental issue of misaligned objectives in Sri Lanka's approach to reconciliation (Kapur, 2024).

5.3 Conclusion

Based on my empirical analysis, significant disparities are revealed in how reconciliation is understood and implemented by different stakeholders in post-war Sri Lanka. The evidence points to a fundamental disconnect between top-down governmental initiatives and grassroots experiences, characterised by inconsistent definitions, inaccessible documentation, and performative approaches to reconciliation The lack of an organic, locally grounded definition of reconciliation has resulted in widespread confusion and scepticism. Critical shortfalls in documentation and preservation of witness testimonies in the LLRC and CTF have undermined the truth-seeking aspects of reconciliation and risked the erasure of important historical memory. The systematic exclusion of direct testimonies, questionable hearing procedures and gender-biased approaches have created notable impediments to achieving genuine reconciliation. Many reconciliation initiatives have been perceived as performative exercises designed primarily to appease international observers rather than achieve meaningful healing and justice. However, these failures in formal reconciliation programs have created spaces for community-driven interpretations and approaches to ‘everyday’ forms of reconciliation, as evidenced by emerging grassroots initiatives such as women’s cooperatives. This suggests that where state-led reconciliation efforts have fallen short, communities have demonstrated resilience in developing their own organic understanding and practice of reconciliation.

CHAPTER 6: MILITARISATION AND SECURITY: "CAUGHT BETWEEN SUSPICION AND SURVIVAL"

6.1 Chapter Introduction

Militarisation in post-conflict Sri Lanka has given rise to unofficial methods of monitoring people, often disregarding official guidelines and thus impeding reconciliation efforts (Thiranagama, 2022; Perera, 2015; Kadirgamar, 2020). This *de facto* situation, explored in detail in Chapter 2, has created many obstacles undermining attempts to build mutual trust between the government and minority communities. This chapter delves into two interrelated narratives of militarisation that emerged during my data collection: firstly, the 'everyday' surveillance of civilian spaces, and secondly, land appropriation by the military purportedly for economic development in the North and East.

The chapter begins by exploring issues arising from the intensified military presence in these regions, uncovering the erosion of civil liberties and the perpetuation of a climate of fear and mistrust. The chapter also examines the role of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations, and grassroots initiatives in addressing these challenges, showcasing their efforts in reconciliation under constant surveillance and haphazardly imposed restrictions, highlighting the drawbacks in top-down security-centric approaches. Next, I explore issues surrounding land appropriation by the military in the North and East, resulting in loss of livelihoods, social status and perpetuation of economic and political exclusion. The interactions between security concerns and reconciliation efforts reveal the embedded structural constraints and ideological determinants that have hindered the achievement of positive peace in a post-war Sri Lanka. Finally, I analyse the implications of military involvement in economic activities in the North and East, exploring the disconnect between government-led economic development initiatives and the expectations of local communities participating in the reconciliation process.

6.2. 'Everyday' Surveillance of Civilian Spaces

One of the recurring narratives that emerged from my discussions with participants was the significant presence of government security forces in the North and East after the war. Participants described an intensification of 'everyday' surveillance of civilian populations, which extends to the present day. Although existing literature suggested a reduction in surveillance and an increase in freedom of expression following the 2016 change in government (Subedi and Bulathsinghala, 2017), my research participants note that the government has substantially expanded its military and naval capabilities in these areas since 2009. This claim is supported by Academic Researcher '3':

> *"I think, even two months ago [April 2024], you could see an extreme level of surveillance in the North and East where young people [youth] were being arrested by the police on suspicion of having connections with the LTTE or other extremist groups... These are the reasons provided by the police and military to justify their actions..."*

This 'everyday' 'extreme level of surveillance' highlights steps taken by the government for a persistent security-centric approach with sustained patterns of control that have become normalised within the post-war period. Official reports and literature indicate that 50,000 additional military personnel were recruited to consolidate the war victory and bolster national security (Mampilly, 2012), in the Northern and Eastern regions (Thiranagama, 2022; Perera, 2015; Kadirgamar, 2013; Keethaponcalan, 2019). A 2017 study focused on Mullaithivu district, where the final phase of the war took place, revealed that eight years after the conflict's end, there was at least one soldier for every two civilian residents (Adayalaam Centre for Policy Research, 2017). Academic Researcher '3' points out that:

> *"Presently there are 20 military [divisions] in this country- out of 20, 16 military [divisions] are located in the North and East…" "continued perception of these areas as potential security threats [by the government]"*.

In situating this data, I note that the authorities leveraged a 'political rhetoric' of 'bolstering national security' to justify an intensified military presence (Subedi and Bulathsinghala, 2018), reinforcing patriarchal power structures and the continuous

perpetuation of a *masculinised logic of protection* (Young, 2003). This heightened military presence has become a major source of discontent (Thiranagama, 2022). Academic Researcher 3 points out that,

> *"There seems to be misunderstanding, distrust and suspicion among different ethnic groups in Sri Lanka, and at the same time, the state has become more and more of a security state. You will understand [that], the level of securitisation has resulted in the [increased] levels of militarisation taking place in this region. Every day we feel that we are caught between suspicion and survival..."*

This 'distrust and suspicion among different ethnic groups' has prompted the government to legitimise increased militarisation supported by surveillance. The impact of surveillance extends beyond the Tamil community, as evidenced by Academic Researcher '4', who comments about increased monitoring of Muslim communities since the Easter bombings in 2019:

> *"After the Easter bombings, we have noticed a lot of surveillance. The authorities are [e]specially focused on Muslim communities… saying that they are worried about extremist groups… While we can understand the need for security, this type of thing will only [lead to] suspicion and fear among our people."*

An increased militarisation affecting the Muslim minority resulted in unsavoury consequences for their community, including arbitrary detentions, torture, and the targeting of their religious and cultural practices (Shaffer, 2024; Jayasundara-Smits and Subedi, 2024). Aggressive campaigns by Sinhalese nationalistic politicians have provided a backdrop for instituting close surveillance and militarisation of the Muslim community (Klem, 2025). For example, Facebook, over any other social media platform, was used by Buddhist nationalists to spread propaganda against the Muslim minority (Shinohara, 2024). This has led to a disproportionate gendered nature of security highlighted by Academic Researcher '1':

> *"The Muslim minorities basically faced a lot of problems …following their religious rituals… for the women, their dress code and everything became a problem…. Most of them were confined to their private spaces especially, I would say, from a feminist perspective. Women, they did not-I mean, have the courage to go out wearing the Muslim attire [hijabs and abhaya] because it was banned by the government… And so that was really a very serious thing for the Muslim community, especially women…"*

Targeting religious and cultural practices of the Muslim minority points to how cultural differences are securitised in the pursuance of national security (Shaffer, 2024; Jayasundara-Smits and Subedi, 2024), leading to a 'politics of unbelonging' (Setijadi and Hur, 2024; Zevnik and Russell, 2025) where the state actively uses cultural differences, *othering* and marginalising certain communities leading to a situation where different communities occupy distinct spaces with limited opportunities for meaningful encounter and dialogue. Therefore, the restriction of Muslim women's religious attire reveals how 'everyday' reconciliation operates through the systematic shrinking of spaces where authentic cultural and religious identity can be safely expressed. When Muslim women cannot appear in public spaces wearing hijabs and abhayas, the possibility for inter-community contact that might facilitate organic, 'everyday' forms of reconciliation is systematically excluded. The public sphere thus becomes monopolised by those whose cultural expressions are deemed 'safe', whilst those marked as culturally 'other' are relegated to private spaces where they remain invisible to the broader reconciliation process.

Interviewees highlighted a shift in the nature of surveillance from an overt military presence to what Academic Researcher '3' terms a 'subtle and covert process of military operations' particularly in the North and East, which reflects a shrewd adaptation of state control mechanisms aimed at harassing and intimidating ethnic minorities. Media reports claim that the military required Tamil civilians in the Northern Province to obtain prior approval for holding gatherings, such as funerals (Human Rights Watch, 2018), which is an important form of 'everyday' reconciliation that operates through the regulation of communal and ritual practices. Academic Researchers '3' and '4' contend that in recent years, the government moved to maintain authority through surveillance operations by unleashing a regime of fear-psychosis and intimidation in these regions. Unannounced visits to homes of former LTTE members and their families by military intelligence officers, often during evening hours for "routine checks" that served no clear security purpose, but created a state of anxiety by families

who never knew if they might be visited, questioned, and potentially detained (Fathurrahman and Kartini, 2021; Buthpitiya, 2022). This type of manipulation causes both intended and unintended consequences, for instance, the surveillance process can be perceived by the communities as a deterrent to future intransigences and displays of anti-government sentiments, and there is also the possibility of sparking off hatred and animosity against the government that can materialise into potential insurgencies (Buthpitiya, 2022).

Media reports since the Easter Sunday bombings in 2019 claimed a heightened level of surveillance against Muslim communities in Kattankudy and other parts of the Eastern Province, resulting in random checks on Muslim youth and close monitoring of activities in mosques (Imtiyaz and Mohamed Saleem, 2023; Ethirajan, 2019; Al Jazeera, 2022). This situation cannot promote actively expressed cooperation and participation in a reconciliation process built upon trust and mutual respect. The consequences of close surveillance are further elaborated by my participants. Civil Society Activist '1' claimed that they are "*[acutely] aware of being monitored, but remain uncertain about the specific methods"* involved. The ambiguity surrounding surveillance tactics adds psychological pressure on the affected communities. Grassroots Activist '2' clarified that the monitoring of civilians is often carried out by undercover agents and *"*Criminal Investigation Department[17] [CID] personnel*",* which can *"[breed] suspicion between [one] community member against the other, destroying the trust and unity within our community".*

Another important factor highlighted by Academic Researcher '1' is that female ex-combatants are subjected to surveillance by using different tactics. Grassroots Activist '1' contends that the military considered female ex-combatants more competent in organising community resistance, given the LTTE's history of prominence given to women's leadership.

[17] Criminal Investigation Department (CID). It's a specialised division of the Sri Lankan police force responsible for handling complex criminal investigations and matters of national security (Sri Lanka Police, 2024)

My participant claimed that female ex-combatants in Vavuniya who had attempted to organise support groups for war widows faced immediate increased surveillance and intimidation visits. On the other hand, Academic Researcher '1' notes that many female ex-combatants became household heads due to war losses, making them vulnerable to pressure tactics. Military officials exploited their situation by threatening to withhold crucial livelihood assistance unless they cooperated with surveillance requirements (Groundviews, 2014; Usoof-Thowfeek and Gunasekera, 2021). Grassroots Activists '1' and '3' claim that on account of frequent monitoring by military personnel, some women's past involvement with the LTTE was revealed, which made them less desirable by potential employers. Another aspect of this situation that was highlighted by the participants concerns some female ex-combatants who were also heads of households, who cooperated with the reconciliation process despite the intensity of militarisation, surveillance and harassment, mainly to obtain gainful employment opportunities (Azmi, 2015). This form of economic coercion transgresses 'everyday' survival strategies into mechanisms of state control.

Civil Society Leader 2 comments that harassment and discrimination of female combatants *"are not limited to employment opportunities, but extend to daily lives in the privacy of their homes"*. Media reports confirm that female ex-combatants are subjected to visits by military officials at 'any time' and under 'any pretext', ostensibly for surveillance purposes (Groundviews, 2012). The psychological consequences are exemplified by Grassroots Activist '2':

> *"There are many cases of young women complaining that regular visits by security personnel have made them very nervous and [culminated in] angry encounters with their family members and neighbours and they had to seek medical assistance [for the treatment of tension and anxiety].*

Participants note that continuous surveillance has profoundly affected their ability to effectively reintegrate into their communities. Current research by Brounéus et al. (2024) and

Meier (2020) supports these observations, bringing into light the difficulties these women face in finding work and marriage partners. Civil Society Leader '2' points out that,

> "[*They] can be ostracised by their own community members for cooperating with the government because there are members of their community who do not wish to participate in the reconciliation process due to apathy and mistrust [of the intentions of the government]"*.

These women are trapped between suspicions cast upon them by community members and the need to secure their own economic survival. Academic Researcher '1' states that this *"presence of the military in the North and East has also significantly altered the social dynamics, often [pitting] women against each other"* based on their perceived loyalty to the state.

Literature has documented the challenges faced by female ex-combatants in Sri Lanka, and efforts directed towards mitigating militarisation-induced surveillance and harassment (Macfarlane, 2024; Jayasundara-Smits and Subedi, 2024; Associated War Affected Women in Sri Lanka, 2020). However, my participants' narratives suggest that the problem persists, has negatively impacted the reconciliation process, and contributed to a disconnect between the existing efforts to ameliorate the ill-effects of militarisation and 'everyday' lived experiences of this vulnerable group. One of the key reasons for this detachment is the lack of a comprehensive and holistic approach that encompasses a bottom-up involvement of the grassroots participants in both the design and implementation of the reconciliation process. Academic Researcher '1' contends that *"needs and concerns such as inclusivity of female ex-combatants are not always adequately reflected in the policies and programs developed to support them"*. The existing efforts have often focused on narrow, piecemeal solutions, without addressing the deeper structural and political issues that underlie the marginalisation of this community. According to my participants, granting of microcredit in poverty alleviation programs and the provision of vocational training sponsored by the government are important, but these are insufficient if not accompanied by systematic efforts to ameliorate social stigma,

removal of intrusive activities by the security forces, and democratise the broader political context that marginalises the lived experiences of these women.

Grassroots Activists and local Civil Society Leaders indicated that various initiatives have been undertaken to create open spaces for women to voice their concerns and advocate for change. For example, the Women's Action Network in the Northern Province created the 'Women's Safe Spaces' program, which established community centres where women, particularly ex-combatants and war widows, could meet safely. Whilst local communities possess agency in creating reconciliation spaces, this agency operates within severe structural constraints. These spaces provided cover for women to discuss issues such as military harassment and organise responses whilst appearing to be craft groups or economic collectives (Saroor, 2017), which represents a form of 'everyday' resistance that maintains the appearance of compliance whilst pursuing substantive reconciliation work. However, this concealment strategy also reveals how 'everyday' reconciliation on the ground is subterfuged instead of maintaining an open dialogue, and the need for such deception illustrates the constraints imposed by intense surveillance. This resourcefulness also cast doubts on well-meaning policy initiatives undertaken by the government such as The National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (of 2018), the 2018 Office of Missing Persons (OMP), and the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation's (ONUR) Livelihood Support Program (2015-2020) that have succumbed to inefficiencies in implementation at the grassroots level. Criticisms have been levelled at inefficiencies and ineffectiveness of the officers in charge of policy implementation (Sonal et al., 2020). Civil Society Leader '1' and Academic Researcher '4' have noted instances of dishonesty and discreditable behaviour, compelling the women to place their trust in the grassroots activists more than the government.

6.3 'Everyday' Surveillance of NGOs, Civil Society and Grassroots Activists

Another theme emerging from my analysis of intensified military surveillance reveals a broader scope than previously acknowledged in existing literature, encompassing NGOs, civil society leaders, and grassroots activists working on reconciliation and human rights issues in the North and East of Sri Lanka. Academic Researcher '3' provided a succinct account of the extent and impact of 'everyday' surveillance:

> *"NGOs are controlled by the government. You can't do peace education or reconciliation-related programs, human rights-related programs in the North and East freely…You should inform the relevant authority that oftentimes [is] the CID [officers of which] will come [and] sit in your workshop and your program, and they will watch what is happening …Sometimes CID comes and stops the programs."*

This testimony highlights the intense nature of surveillance and restrictions faced by NGOs working on issues relevant to reconciliation and the operational environment. The presence of intelligence officers at workshops and programs creates an atmosphere of intimidation and self-censorship, stifling open dialogue and honest engagement on sensitive issues. The heightened level of surveillance goes beyond mere observation: it represents 'soft power' that moderates critical discourse and limits the scope of civil society activities. The Sri Lankan Army's 2013 report in response to the LLRC recommendations emphasise the necessity for monitoring non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for 'security purposes' (Sri Lankan Army Board, 2013, p.24: 18). NGO monitoring reveals a post-conflict hypervigilance on perceived potential threats, undermining effectiveness of organisations working for peace and reconciliation.

The 2013 official report by the army claims that there are no restrictions on the activities of *genuine* organisations. However, my participants reveal that all international organisations, international NGOs, and local NGOs should undergo screening and investigative processes by the Ministry of Defence with the stated aim to prevent 'undesirable elements' from compromising national security (Sri Lankan Army Board, 2013, p.24: 18). Screening these organisations leaves room for subjective evaluations, manipulatory practices and arbitrary

decisions influenced by political considerations. Academic Researcher '3' comments that these control mechanisms can potentially lead to *"self-censorship addressing certain critical issues such as minority political rights to avoid risks to their operational status".*

Screening and controlling NGOs to prevent "undesirable elements" from compromising national security reveals an ingrained mistrust of these organisations and leads to an undermining of their position as competent partners in reconciliation and development efforts (particularly in the North and East) (Amarasiri et al., 2021). This negative labelling can justify extensive interference in NGO activities, decisions on selecting personnel and sources of funding. I contend that this framing is biased and can lead to a critical resource gap in manpower and much-needed expertise. The International Crisis Group (2017) noted that, "*NGOs working on reconciliation, human rights, and governance issues face increasing restrictions and harassment from security forces and intelligence agencies".* According to CPA (2016), 78% of surveyed NGOs reported experiencing some form of government interference, ranging from mandatory reporting requirements to direct obstruction of activities.

The surveillance of NGOs includes program interruptions and visa suspensions for international NGO workers. Academic Researcher 3 described the broader implications of these intrusive mechanisms:

> *"So, these NGOs are under extreme surveillance in the North and East. NGO personnel have been* arrested *by police. The government has suspended visas for some International NGO workers in Sri Lanka....some NGOs have left Sri Lanka because of the Government's [intrusive]surveillance and suspension of visas."*

The interruption of programs and suspension of visas for international NGO workers create a climate of fear and uncertainty, forcing them to constantly weigh the outcomes of their interventions against potential government reprisals. Academic Researcher '3' further comments that the arrest of NGO personnel and forced departure of some international NGOs from Sri Lanka indicate a systematic effort to control and limit the influence of civil society organisations operating in sensitive areas such as reconciliation and human rights. This climate

of fear and uncertainty has thwarted grassroots reconciliation efforts, as evidenced by the testimony of Civil Society Leader '2':

> *"We used to join with INGOs for our peace-building workshops... now, we're scared to even mention topics like federalism or power-sharing… we don't know whether we are breaking some laws…. The risk of being investigated or shut down is too high."*

The lack of motivation to carry out reconciliation efforts by focusing on power-sharing mechanisms illustrates the extent to which self-censorship has become a survival strategy for many NGOs, impeding the healing process that is an essential precursor towards genuine reconciliation. By removing 'sensitive' topics from the realm of public discussion on account of a top-down imposed climate of fear thwarts the development of comprehensive, inclusive solutions to ongoing challenges faced by the reconciliation process. Grassroots Activist '2' explained that:

> *"When NGOs are restricted, it's the local communities that suffer most. These organisations provide crucial support... funding, training, [and] safe spaces for dialogue. Without these, grassroots movements struggle to make any real progress on reconciliation."*

As Grassroots Activist '2' points out, NGOs serve as essential conduits for providing resources, training, and safe spaces for dialogue. Curtailment of NGO activities has a negative impact on the most vulnerable segments of society, who rely on these organisations for support and advocacy. This situation hinders community support and participation in development initiatives, exacerbating marginalisation, economic hardships, and obstructing genuine reconciliation efforts at the grassroots level. My participants also identified a pattern of selective engagement of NGOs by the government, revealing a nuanced strategy of co-optation within civil society. Grassroots Activist '1' observes that:

> *"The government likes NGOs that praise the government's initiatives. If you criticise and [propose genuine] accountability, you are called a threat to national security. This situation does not help a good level of participation by community members on reconciliation [programs]."*

The selective favouritism of NGOs by the government, underplaying critical issues, has created a veneer of cordiality in engaging with non-governmental actors whilst at the same time stifling genuine dissent and critical analysis.

Security-centric approaches identified by my participants have dampened the efforts of organisations focused on women's issues and gender equality. The widening gap between the rhetoric of 'women, peace, and security' and ground-level implementation efforts (as discussed under the previous theme) can be directly linked to the prevalence of a restrictive atmosphere. Academic Researcher '4' comments that women's organisations at the forefront of grassroots reconciliation efforts face both state-manifested and societal challenges: *"they navigate the general restrictions imposed on NGOs, but they also [confront entrenched societal and institutional biases against] women's participation in peace processes"*. Additionally, Grassroots Activist '2' and Civil Society Leader '1' pointed out that the obstacles placed upon women's organisations further marginalise women's voices in the reconciliation process, perpetuating gender inequalities and missing insightful perspectives in peacebuilding efforts. The long-term implications of these restrictions contribute to an erosion of trust between the state and civil society, creating an atmosphere of mutual suspicion that conflicts with effective governance and social progress, a critical theme for effective reconciliation that is dealt within this empirical analysis.

As pointed out by Academic Researcher '3', the trust deficit contributes to a 'distancing of international partners and donors', resulting in reduced support for development initiatives in Sri Lanka. Restrictions forced upon civil society spaces severely limit the country's capacity for innovation in addressing post-conflict challenges. My Grassroots Activist participants contend that NGOs and grassroots organisations often serve as *"[incubators] for new ideas and approaches"*, and their marginalisation suppresses the much-needed critical voices and alternative viewpoints that can promote the quality of public discourse and decision-making processes. Creating an echo chamber circulating state-approved narratives undermines the

foundations of a holistic reconciliation process and sustainable peace in Sri Lanka (Centre for Equality and Justice, 2019; Ariyarathne and Grewal, 2025; p. 131).

According to many of my participants, although community members voiced their grievances to state authorities and non-state actors during multiple reconciliatory COIs, it has not resulted in diminishing the severity of surveillance. Failure to engage in a dialogue grounded in trust building and mutual understanding, and 'everyday' surveillance of minorities by the military in the North and East has led to a distancing between the communities and the reconciliation process (Ariyarathne and Grewal, 2025; p. 131).

6.4. Appropriation of Land in the North and East by the Military

The return of appropriated civilian lands held since the end of the war by the military is one of the key issues of reconciliation that demands to be addressed (Unruh, 2019; Jayathilaka, 2020; Silva et al., 2020). This issue is highlighted in many official reconciliation reports, including the final report of the LLRC (2011,6.6.2 p.221):

> *"Displacement of persons as well as loss of land and homes [are] major conflict related outcomes, and affected all communities.* The LLRC concluded that *"measures and policies ensuring legitimate land rights, especially among the returning Internally Displaced Persons* [*IDP]s, would contribute significantly to restoring normalcy and promoting reconciliation"*.

As highlighted by my participants, despite the official rhetoric supporting land restitution, it is still an ongoing issue. This section extends the previous discussion on 'everyday' surveillance (covered above in 6.2) and examines how land acquisition by the military in the North and East creates a more comprehensive system of militarised control by close observation through physical occupation and holding administrative authority that in turn, adversely affect reconciliation efforts and community well-being. Whilst 'everyday' surveillance enables the military to monitor civilian activities through checkpoints and intelligence gathering, land acquisition physically embeds this surveillance infrastructure into 'everyday' community spaces creating 'a dual system', according to Academic Researcher '4',

when surveillance becomes territorially anchored through land occupation, that in itself facilitates more intensive surveillance of civilians.

6.4.1 Disputes Associated with Military-Acquired Civilian Lands

Grassroots Activist '2' recounted an incident concerning a coconut plantation which was their family property, situated in a coastal town in the Jaffna district. During the war, the LTTE had forcibly appropriated the land, and after the war, it was acquired by the military to promote 'economic development'. The legitimate owners sought legal action that took several years, and they succeeded in reclaiming their property, marking a significant corrective in their struggle for justice.

My analysis raises critical questions about whether such militarised development can genuinely contribute to reconciliation when it perpetuates patterns of control and dispossession that may deepen, rather than heal, community grievances by appropriation of land in the North and East by the military and 'economic development' undertaken by the military. A considerable number of studies describe how thousands of acres of land currently remain under the control of the military, undergoing *"slow but steady return of military-occupied land to Tamil owners"* (International Crisis Group 2017, p.18), which highlights the entrenched nature of this problem.

Some of my participants offer an assessment of challenges prevalent in land returns as recently as 2024. Civil Society Leader '2' points out that holding onto lands by the military not only deprives communities of their ownership of lands, but also is a constant reminder of their subordinate status as a *"landless people in this country"*. My discussions with Civil Society Leader '2' and Grassroots Activist 1 revealed that active participation in the reconciliation process is much hampered by a far greater worry of being landless by displaced people, who do not consider the reconciliation process as a means of getting their lands back.

As noted by Grassroots Activists '1', one of the key challenges faced in reclaiming their lands is the inability of the Provincial Councils to effectively trace the legal ownership of lands,

mainly due to the absence of documentation such as certified deeds, bequests, and evidence of purchases (Wanninayake, 2021). Civil society leader '1' puts this situation into perspective:

> *"One of the hardest things is seeking official documentation of land ownership from the Grama Niladaris[18]. I think that they are hardworking government officers, and they do their best to help their communities but sometimes they also don't have the answers when people go and complain because it's the military who has [occupied] our land. It is very hard... we lost everything in the war... they bombed everything... so tracing back [genuine ownership of ancestral] land is [an] impossible [task]."*

From the above narration, it becomes clear the hopelessness felt by a large majority whose lands have become 'lands to be re-claimed' from the military, and to face the consequences of destruction of documents due to the war, with little help from the central government that has delegated this task to the Local Authorities. Academic Researcher '2' comments that to this date, there is no direct administrative body, such as a 'land reclamation taskforce or authority' mandated by the central government under the purview of the Local Authorities to speed up the process of land returns and bring this humanitarian crisis to a satisfactory conclusion. Although the Ministry of Resettlement and Disaster Relief was designated as the primary agency to bring much-needed relief, overlapping responsibilities across various ministries led to inefficiencies and duplications of effort (Wanninayake, 2021).

Many participants observe that the inability of *Grama Niladaris* to resolve land ownership complaints effectively is not a lapse of individual officials, but due to a priority of interest established within the Sri Lankan state (Saparamadu and Lall, 2014) where military interests supersede civilian concerns, especially in former conflict zones. *Grama Niladaris* are theoretically positioned to address local concerns, but their lack of authority to mediate in disputes involving the military reveals a lacuna in local governance when confronted with issues of importance to national security (Saparamadu and Lall, 2014). My participants further illustrated that failure to resolve land disputes at the local level forces these matters to be taken

[18] A *Grama Niladari* (translated to 'village administrative officer' or 'Village Headmen') is a public official who serves as the lowest-level government representative at the town/village level, which is the smallest administrative unit in the country (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2016).

up the bureaucratic chain, hampered by delays and miscommunications, resulting in a disconnect between policy formulation by the political hierarchy and implementation on the ground.

Academic Researcher '1' comments that the persistence of these issues nearly 15 years after the end of the war suggests a deeper systemic problem, *"where many point to an unwillingness at the political level to fully commit to the processes of demilitarisation."* Academic Researcher '4' points out that unwillingness at the *"political level [stems from entrenched] political interests, a persistent securitisation mindset, and concerns about maintaining [centralised] control over regions in the North and East"*.

The militarisation of land has posed a barrier for amicable coexistence among communities (Thalpawila, 2017; Wanninayake, 2016). Coupled with ongoing military presence, this has created an environment of uncertainty and insecurity, impeding the ability of communities to rebuild their lives and livelihoods (Wanninayake, 2016). As noted by Grassroots Activist 2: *"[The continued] military [presence] reminds us of the hardships we face every day because of the loss of our lands…we feel we are being punished and excluded."* These daily experiences of military presence fundamentally undermine reconciliation by creating three specific barriers to rebuilding inter-community trust. First, the routine visibility of military checkpoints, patrols, and occupied lands serves as a constant reminder of the war's victor-vanquished dichotomy, reinforcing ethnic divisions rather than fostering equality between communities. This prevents a shift in 'mindset' from war to cooperation that genuine reconciliation requires. Second, the restrictions on movement, economic activity, and land use that local communities daily experience create grievances, further fueling resentment. Third, the imposition of military authority in civilian spaces erodes the civic foundations necessary for a holistic reconciliation by demonstrating to communities that power, rather than dialogue and compromise, determines outcomes.

A pall of suspicion and resentment makes some of the well-intentioned government initiatives, such as government relief grants and 'slow but steady' land returns to be treated with scepticism and apathy (Seoighe, 2017). This scepticism matters crucially for reconciliation because it demonstrates how militarisation can mitigate the trust-building process at its foundation. When communities interpret genuine concessions as strategic manipulation rather than gestures of good faith, the reciprocal exchanges of confidence essential in building reconciliation become limited. The 'everyday' experience of living under military authority thus creates suspicion where communities can become confused between sincere reconciliation efforts and continued domination, making them resistant to engagement. Thus, 'everyday' reconciliation on the ground plays out through what can be understood as perfunctory performances of normalisation, where both military and civilian actors engage in routines that create an appearance of normal civilian life whilst maintaining underlying power imbalances.

My discussions with participants highlight the psychological trauma of dislocation and displacement and the challenges of dealing with an ill-equipped bureaucratic system to handle post-war claims on appropriated land (Wickramaratne, 2021). This is particularly burdensome for the elderly, women-headed households, and those who are below the poverty line (ibid., 2020). Academic Researcher '4' notes that local administrative officers face obstacles in addressing these issues:

> *"This militarisation of land administration has [profound] implications for the affected communities, undermining their rights, livelihoods, and sense of belonging and the lack of official documents such as ownership deeds and past records of occupation"*

The above comment reveals that militarised land administration has complicated the establishment of property rights and return of acquired land, and adversely affected the identity, livelihood, and cohesion of community members (Biyanwila, 2023), impacting negatively on the effective implementation of the reconciliation process (Jegathesan, 2019). Civil Society Leader '2' stresses that, "*land is not [merely a] commodity but [a repository of] heritage,*

culture, and [generational] knowledge." For communities whose identities and economic activities are deeply rooted in specific geographical locations, displacement is not just a physical relocation, but a disruption of their existence. This is particularly true for farming and fishing communities, whose skills and livelihoods are irrevocably tied to specific lands and water bodies. Civil Society Leader '1' comments that:

> *"This has not only restricted the land return and distribution process to already displaced communities, but has also resulted in restrictions imposed on access to pasture lands, forests, lagoons and beaches, causing severe economic impacts on the livelihoods of communities whose members are primarily farmers and fishermen"*

The loss of access to these resources amounts to a loss of economic independence, social and cultural identity, and community structures that have evolved over many generations, and a reconciliation process that cannot provide immediate answers to some of these problems does not attract support and commitment. Civil Society Leader '1' and '2' and Academic Researcher '1' commented that in response to the government's investment promotion policy, an upsurge of prospective investors wishing to acquire large blocks of land has competed for arable land in the North and East since 2018 (Buthpitiya, 2013). This issue was echoed by many aggrieved participants in interviews concerning the reconciliation process, emphasising their deep cultural connections to the land, particularly for rural communities engaged in fishing and agriculture. The deep-rooted connection between communities and their land makes relocation and financial recompense inadequate to address these issues (Ibrahim, 2020; Weerathunga, 2020). My participants also highlighted that land returns by the military as a *"gift"* was perceived as an insulting gesture: a fact that is not extensively discussed in existing literature. It is also noteworthy that the return of the lands did not accompany apologies, compensation for displacements and loss of earnings, damages, and trauma caused by the occupation. This experience of receiving back one's own land as a military favour creates a warped relationship where rightful ownership is reframed as military benevolence, effectively delegitimising local

community claims and undermining the foundation of reconciliation based on an acknowledgement of wrongdoing.

According to my participants, political influence is curried by rich and powerful individuals and private companies eager to exploit the economic potential of land that was forcibly acquired by the military, without any regard for the rightful owners or community-centred development (Ruwanpura et al., 2020; Kelegama and Korf, 2023). Furthermore, the military is engaged in managing many of the development projects and commercial establishments in the North and East. Community Members have been told that their lands are required for 'public purposes', a sacrifice for the greater good, denying them Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) (Wickramaratne, 2021). Civil Society Leader '1' shared the following sentiment:

> *"It's not just about security anymore. The army is everywhere - running farms, shops, and even tourist resorts. They have taken over land that belonged to our people and turned [those] into businesses. It's like they're trying to control every aspect of our lives."*

This observation makes it clear that the army has expanded its influence and encroachment into civil administration and civilian business sectors. In the Northern and North-Eastern provinces, the military now operates businesses, restaurants, tourist resorts, and domestic airlines (Thiranagama, 2022). This 'expansion', as noted by my participants, goes beyond hitherto accepted military roles. A substantial portion of the budget allocated to the Urban Development Authority has been incorporated into the defence ministry (Keethaponcalan, 2019). This shift indicates a blurring of the demarcation lines between military and civilian governance structures that subvert the democratic principles of managing the country's economy, and signals a not-too-distant possibility of a substantial militarisation of Sri Lanka as a whole (Keethaponcalan, 2019). This situation underscores a recurring theme that appeared in my interviews: the link between the economic security of the communities in the North and East and willing and meaningful participation in the reconciliation process.

A present-day evaluation of the depth of the military involvement in the North and East is provided by my participants, referring to 'military fiscalism' and 'military corporatism', processes by which the military becomes gradually incorporated into the economy. For instance, the military has taken over agricultural lands from the owners and is involved in vegetable farming (Subedi and Bulathsinghala, 2018). This involves the utilisation of state expenditure through security apparatuses to provide economic support for impoverished and neglected rural areas acquired by the military (Venugopal, 2011). Economic support from the military extends to many poor villages, where every household has at least one member receiving a salary, pension, or other financial benefit, giving rise to 'military corporatism' (Venugopal, 2011; Subedi and Bulathsinghala, 2018). This becomes entangled with economic dependency that provides material support and reinforces political subordination, making 'everyday' reconciliation an arena of community tension as opposed to a *unified* approach. However, the interviews also revealed a critical insight into this narrative. Civil Society Leader '1' notes that:

> *"Things have changed a bit since 2015. The military is still involved in farming and local businesses, but not as much as before. We're seeing more civilian authorities making decisions about local development now."*

Although a reduction in direct military involvement in local economic activities since 2015 suggests a gradual shift towards normalising civilian governance which can be interpreted as a positive step, the prevalence of military-owned businesses and continued occupation of local lands complicates this narrative, revealing a nuanced reality where the military's economic influence, perhaps less overt, remains a significant factor in local power dynamics.

According to Academic Researcher '2', there is a glimmer of hope for the communities that have suffered much. "*From the point of the government, a boom in military-owned businesses in these areas [presents a favourable] economic outlook on the communities who have suffered many hardships,"* because these enterprises contribute to local economic activity, creating jobs and stimulating market growth. Economic stimulus is a *form* of post-war

reconciliation to jumpstart the local economy and provide much-needed employment opportunities in war-torn areas. However, this approach begs the question, 'Why is it that economic revitalisation cannot be pursued through civilian initiatives?' Even if well-intentioned, this approach has prolonged marginalisation among local communities.

6.5 Conclusion

Drawing from my empirical analysis of militarisation in post-war Sri Lanka, I conclude that the dual impacts of 'everyday' surveillance and land appropriation by the military present significant obstacles to genuine reconciliation. Persistence of military surveillance of civilian spaces, NGOs, and civil society organisations creates a climate of fear and mistrust that undermines efforts to build mutual understanding among communities. Surveillance activities disproportionately affect women, particularly female ex-combatants, who face unique challenges in reintegrating into society, navigating persistent monitoring and social stigma. The appropriation of land by the military, justified through economic development narratives, erodes trust between minority communities and the central government. Some military-led economic initiatives have brought limited economic benefits, but failed to address deeper issues of cultural identity, autonomy, and community empowerment that can promote meaningful reconciliation.

My findings reveal a fundamental disconnect between the government's security-centric approach to post-war governance and the needs of affected communities for genuine healing and reconciliation. This is exacerbated by bureaucratic hurdles in land restitution and the expansion of military involvement in civilian economic activities, which often benefit external interests rather than local communities. The resulting trust deficit between the state and minority populations creates a cycle of suspicion and resentment that continues to obstruct reconciliation efforts.

CHAPTER 7: MINORITY RIGHTS AND RECOGNITION: "WE FEEL LOST IN OUR OWN LAND"

7.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter examines the critical role of minority rights in Sri Lanka's post-war reconciliation process needed to build a holistic reconciliation framework. It delves into two interrelated dimensions identified during data collection as imperatives for fostering an inclusive and equitable society toward a holistic reconciliation: political autonomy and language rights. The chapter begins by exploring the narratives surrounding the 13th Amendment to Sri Lanka's constitution (see Chapter 2). Successive governments have positioned this amendment as a vital policy framework for reconciliation, asserting that its complete implementation would tackle minority grievances through devolved governance and equal political and cultural rights. However, my empirical analysis focuses upon three key challenges facing its implementation: declining political aspirations among minority communities, strong opposition to devolution by Sinhalese nationalist politicians, and persistent structural and socio-political barriers to effective implementation.

Next, I explore key issues of minority language rights and reveal the dominance of the Sinhala language that perpetuates a systematic marginalisation among minority communities. My analysis examines the practical implications of the linguistic divide, from barriers to accessing public services to the perpetuation of cultural and political exclusion. Juxtaposing these two interrelated dimensions, I explore the interplay between political and language rights, dominance of the Sinhala language in state institutions that impacts the ability to participate in political processes, access to public services, and government institutions, creating a system of linguistic marginalisation and political disempowerment that undermines reconciliation efforts.

7.2 Minority Political Rights: Political Autonomy and Power Sharing

7.2.1 Erosion of Political Aspirations and Trust Deficit

One of the narratives that emerged from my discussions with participants regarding the 13th Amendment of the Sri Lankan Constitution (13A, 1987) is that those to whom it means the most have become its vociferous opponents. Key elements of the 13th Amendment applied to post-war reconciliation centres on the devolution of political power and language rights (13A, 1987; Pullé and Ratnapala, 2019). The amendment established provincial councils in the North and East with devolved powers over land, law enforcement, and local development, to exercise regional autonomy and self-governance (ibid., 13A). In practice, the government has retained significant control through various mechanisms, including the appointment of a Governor (appointed by the President) with the powers of oversight (Pullé and Ratnapala, 2019; Sahadevan, 2024; Junik, 2023). The 13th Amendment to the Constitution in 1987 formally recognised Tamil as an official language alongside Sinhala and recognised English as a link language, aiming to redress linguistic discrimination since 1952 (13A, 1987) (Pullé and Ratnapala, 2019; Junik, 2023). Until 2019, existing literature (Manoharan, 2019; Sultana, 2015) took a positive outlook on the amendment as a viable path towards devolution and reconciliation.

Grassroots Activist '1' and Academic Researchers '3' and '4' conveyed scepticism over a comprehensive implementation of the 13th Amendment to Sri Lanka's Constitution in the post-war context of 2024, because it did not represent a genuine shift in perspective, but continued to function as a political instrument (Pullé and Ratnapala, 2019). I draw the observation from these responses that political, cultural and social power dynamics have remained unchanged both before and after 2019, and the 13th Amendment has mainly served as a diplomatic tool for successive Sri Lankan governments to project an image of progress in post-war reconciliation to international observers (Pullé and Ratnapala, 2019; Junik, 2023).

This insight supports my participants' deep scepticism on the promised potential of the 13th Amendment and systematic erosion of minority political aspirations during the post-war reconciliation period. (Wickramaratne, 2021; Pullé and Ratnapala, 2019; Junik, 2023).

Another anomaly discussed during my interviews was the regular postponement of provincial council elections (Pushparajah and Balamayuran, 2024; Pullé and Ratnapala, 2019; Junik, 2023), which is an infringement of the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution of Sri Lanka. (13A, 1987) Academic Researcher '2' points out that:

> *"Tamil political parties have this grievance that no government will give them equal status [through the democratisation] of provincial councils. There have been no Provincial Council elections for nearly 4 years now...but no government, including the present [one] wants to hold elections. They are [impervious to the fact] that this is a denial of fundamental political rights of the Tamil people to have some degree of self-rule."*

This observation highlights a 'trust deficit' in the government's commitment towards the process of a genuine reconciliation because there is an abiding unwillingness to promote political participation of minority communities despite the constitutional mandate (Pushparajah and Balamayuran, 2024; Pullé and Ratnapala, 2019; Junik, 2023). Academic Researcher '2' emphasises that this pattern of postponement reveals a deliberate strategy adopted by successive governments, insensitive to minority rights. Denial of provincial elections affects the right to self-governance through democratically elected local institutions (Pullé and Ratnapala, 2019) and effectively prevents minority communities from making decisions affecting their communities, contributing to political marginalisation in the post-war context (Pullé and Ratnapala, 2019; Junik, 2023).

Actions taken in 2024 compared with those in 2019 revolve around a hardening of resolutions for circumventing the implementation of a transparent reconciliation process, especially in the light of changing governments and policy perspectives (Junik, 2023). Shifts in policies and administrative actions weakened implementation mechanisms in the North and East, due to the appointment of military officers to key civilian administrative positions. (Aliff,

2015). The Constitutional Council, which had the authority to approve appointments to independent commissions, was replaced with a Parliamentary Council where the President held unilateral power to appoint members to key positions in independent bodies such as the Human Rights Commission (Perera, 2021). Withdrawal from previous commitments to Resolution 30/1 (of 2015) made at the UN Human Rights Council on transitional justice and reconciliation mechanisms such as establishment of a domestic commission of inquiry instead of an international hybrid court to investigate war crimes allegations, in addition to security sector reforms and de-militarisation of the North and East (Weerasekera, 2023; Kalanadan, 2020) amounted to a strengthening of obstacles in the path to reconciliation (Jayakody, 2024). These questions are better answered in the following section.

7.2.2 Sinhalese Nationalism and Resistance to Devolution

Grassroots Activist '1' pointed out the tenacious resistance to devolution by Sinhalese nationalist groups. The government's reluctance to hold Provincial Council elections is an outcome of Sinhala nationalistic resistance that collectively has a substantial voting power within Sri Lanka (Sahadevan, 2024). Ideological opposition promoted by the Sinhalese nationalistic political parties continues to decry power-sharing as a threat to Sinhalese cultural heritage and identity (Pullé and Ratnapala, 2019) and are fearful of altering the political balance of power within the unitary structure of the state and risking their influence within the Sinhalese majority (Pullé and Ratnapala, 2019). For example, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government of 2015, despite promising constitutional reforms, watered down devolution proposals in the face of opposition from Sinhalese nationalist groups (Leone, 2019; Sahadevan, 2024) and backtracked on proposals to grant provincial Councils to the North and East (Leone, 2019). The partisan attitudes of nationalist politicians are exemplified by Academic Researcher '3':

> *"[Name retracted], who is a racist and Nationalist political leader in this country, always says that he will abolish the 13th Amendment and that it is not good for Sri Lanka and will lead to a separate state in the North and East. So, this kind of mentality is there in the Parliament... they do it for their political gains because they know the fact that*

unleashing racist ethno-religious ideas and Sinhalese extremism will help them to get elected in the upcoming elections. So that is their firm feeling. That's why they do it."

This perception focuses on fearmongering by Sinhalese nationalism, claiming that Tamil separatists will use Provincial Council powers to demand secession and establish a 'Tamil homeland' in the North and East (Wijekoon et. al., 2023). Moreover, Academic Researcher '4' notes that the rhetoric of 'separate state' has been used for mobilising nationalist political ideology, creating destructive divisions and downplaying Tamil minority rights and reconciliation. Systematic suppression of rights created new grievances and deepened ethnic divisions within communities (Peiris, 2024; Liaw et al., 2021) and were subsequently cited by mainstream nationalist politicians as evidence of separatist threats, which in turn were used to justify further restrictions on minority rights (Kadirgamar, 2020). Academic Researcher '4' highlights that when Tamil communities protested against land occupation by the military, their protests were labelled as 'separatist resurgence'. Military intelligence monitored Tamil civil society meetings, obtained detailed participant lists of community gatherings, demanded mandatory reporting of all NGO activities to military coordination offices, and detained civilians under the PTA (see Chapter 6) intensifying the cycle of suppression, leading to the alienation of minority communities (Castle, 2022; Ranjan and Chattoraj, 2022). In recent years, ultra-nationalistic groups have employed social media disinformation and misinformation tactics that mirror historical suppression patterns (Hasangani, 2019). These groups exploit social media algorithms to amplify hate speech and divisive content, manipulating community voices in the process. For example, extremists create fake Facebook posts and manipulated screenshots to stoke fear and justify the oppression of minorities. This represents an evolution of the nationalist strategy of exploiting minority grievances to legitimise further suppression. Social media enables real-time distortion of reconciliation efforts by framing them as threats to national security, allowing authorities to justify shutting down genuine dialogue and bottom-up reconciliation initiatives (Shinohara, 2024; Hasangani, 2022).

Civil Society Leader '1' commented that in March of 2024, President Wickremesinghe initiated a new path away from mainstream political narratives by 'pledging to revitalise the existing reconciliation process'. However, this pledge produced no policy directive and amounted to a 'peace rhetoric'. Other participants (Academic Researcher '4', Grassroots Activist '1' and '2') claimed that this 'empty promise' was designed to appease and attract the minority votes for the upcoming 2024 presidential election. This promise immediately sparked off stiff opposition from Sinhalese nationalist factions against reconciling diverse political interests and ethnic aspirations (Sahadevan, 2024; Pushparajah and Balamayuran, 2024; Dassanayake and Gamage, 2024). Academic Researcher '1' drew attention to the performative nature of commitment to devolution:

> *"If you pay close attention, you'll see that these politicians only bring up the 13th Amendment when visiting the North or East or at publicity events where international media and diplomats are present. They do this to appear as progressive. I think Tamil people have realised by now that this is insincere. Even the Sinhalese community are laughing at how fake this behaviour is."*

The selective timing and context *chosen* to discuss the 13th amendment, as illustrated above, reveal a calculated approach to image management of the government aimed at UN aid agencies and other foreign state interests rather than a commitment to substantive implementation of devolution. The prevalence of political manoeuvring renders the reconciliation process ineffective and meaningless to minority communities (Sahadevan, 2024). The political strategy adopted here can be best termed as a securitisation of peace (Mac Ginty, 2012) with the implication that peace can only be achieved through maintaining centralisation and not by a meaningful process of decentralisation (Sahadevan, 2024). This is a paradoxical situation, where peace is pursued whilst simultaneously resisting the changes that can lead to meaningful reconciliation and amity. Academic Researcher '4' explains that by positioning centralisation as an imperative for maintaining peace and security, *"nationalistic politicians create a narrative where implementation of the 13th Amendment or any other*

genuine devolution of power through structural changes and power sharing will lead to a destabilisation" (Fonseka and Ganeshathasan, 2025, p. 83; Sahadevan, 2024).

Civil Society participants revealed a nuanced understanding of the broader *political culture* that perpetuates the ambivalence of politicians. Civil Society Leader '1' observed that:

> *"Even leaders who might privately support such measures are hesitant to do so publicly, fearing a political backlash from some Sinhalese [citizens] ... This [ambivalence] leads to a cycle of unfulfilled promises and [token] changes that fail to address the [root] causes at the heart of [Sri Lanka's] ethnic tensions."*

The aspiration to claim power over Sri Lanka by Sinhalese extremists is deeply ingrained in the country's political discourse, with the Sinhala language as its core (DeVotta, 2021) and the ambition to maintain an undivided country (De Alwis, 2020). This political culture of performative commitment extends unfulfilled promises and token changes that fail to address the root causes of ethnic tensions. The result is a fragmented reconciliation landscape where meaningful progress occurs primarily at the grassroots level.

However, according to Grassroots Activist '2', genuine reconciliation efforts cannot be established at the ground level because those who were directly affected by the war are *"aware that their [insightful] proposals and commitments are downgraded by the political leadership and administrators"*. Local NGOs such as the National Peace Council (2025) have documented how communities in the North and East have developed their own informal reconciliation mechanisms, but the repeated experience of having community proposals publicly acknowledged yet privately discarded shows affected populations that their voices are valued only for legitimating political rhetoric and not genuine policy change. This instrumentalisation of community input transforms reconciliation from a process of mutual recognition into a performance that leaves power structures unchanged. When local communities witness their carefully developed proposals being systematically excluded from implementation, it reinforces the ethnic hierarchies that reconciliation seeks to overcome by demonstrating that Sinhalese political authorities consider minority perspectives can be largely ignored, thereby

sidestepping genuine reconciliation (North East Coordinating Committee, 2023). This leads to policies designed without community input that fall short of addressing actual grievances and needs that drive inter-ethnic tensions. I argue that a disconnect between grassroots realities and top-down political intervention is a key challenge to effective implementation of the reconciliation process (Nair and Sudevan, 2024). The CTF's final report highlighted mechanisms proposed by the community for local governance that were cited frequently in political speeches, but were systematically excluded from policy formation and implementation (CTF, 2016, p. 137). In the National Peace Council 2020 annual report, community leaders have reported that their proposals were publicly referenced by political leaders but excluded from actual policy implementation (pg. 15), leading to growing disillusionment with formal reconciliation processes. When communities lose faith in formal reconciliation mechanisms, they withdraw their participation from inter-ethnic dialogue initiatives, viewing them as pointless exercises rather than meaningful opportunities for productive engagement and change (Mohammed and Hampton, 2024). This withdrawal makes it easier for political leaders to sideline minority concerns, further deepening the disconnect.

7.2.3 Minority Political Rights within the 13th Amendment

The next narrative that emerged from the interviews on political rights revealed a deep-seated frustration among participants regarding the actual functionality of the 13th Amendment. This observation comes following the first narrative concerning the overall scepticism on the implementation of the 13th Amendment.

Interviews with Grassroot Activist participants revealed that the devolution of land and police powers under Sri Lanka's 13th Amendment (13A,1987, pp.15-16) empowers specific administrative authorities and operational mechanisms to establish a provincial police force under the purview of Provincial Councils (13A,1987, p. 15). Grassroots Activist '1' argues that the devolution of police powers faced *"substantial challenges and no provincial police force*

was established". The government offered various security-related justifications and maintained exclusive control over police, nullifying the devolution (Ramasamy, 2024).

The amendment on land powers granted significant authority to Provincial Councils, including the right to manage state land within their territories, control land settlement schemes, and regulate land use for agricultural and development purposes (13A,1987, p. 15). However, Grassroots Activist '1' highlights that the central government retained ultimate authority over 'state land', although provincial authority exists in principle. This contravenes the 13th Amendment stipulation that *"the land shall be a Provincial Council Subject"* (The Sri Lankan Constitution: Appendix II: p18) that was especially intended to address long-standing grievances of Tamils in the North and Muslims in the East, who have experienced marginalisation in decisions regarding land allocation and utilisation (Yusoff et. al., 2018). This negligence mainly arises from a racial bias perpetuated by the notion of a unitary state governed by the political hegemony of the Sinhalese majority. Academic Researcher '3' highlighted how the combination of devolution with separatism in the Southern political imagination has created a persistent barrier to meaningful constitutional reform in the North and East:

> *"If peace can only be achieved by giving a separate State to North and East, then that is a very negative aspect largely [entrenched] in the minds of those living in Southern Sri Lanka, and that is why, when there are discussions about constitutional reform, they oppose it. When there are discussions about federalism, power sharing, and devolution, they oppose it, and when there are discussions about land powers to the Provincial Councils and police powers to the Provincial Council, they always oppose it ..."*

This observation illuminates a fear-based opposition to federalism and policy proposals on provincial powers by the Sinhalese majority. Resistance about specific powers or administrative arrangements reflects a more fundamental anxiety about national unity deeply embedded in Southern Sri Lankan political consciousness (Abeyrathne and Walakuluge, 2024; Sahadevan, 2024). This contentious issue has become a 'no man's land' in the discourse of the reconciliation process in the North and East, according to Academic Researcher '4'. I argue

that this ‘paradox of state reform’ in Sri Lanka is a common theme running through the post-war political streams consisting of the nationalist mood, elected officials in state decision-making and interest groups across all ethnic divides (Subedi, 2021; Sahadevan, 2024).

Academic Researcher ‘4’, commented that *“deep-seated frustration among minority communities on the structural limitations of Sri Lanka’s devolution framework”* has been continually distorted by centralist interpretations and practices, leading to the ‘territorial imperative in Sinhalese nationalism’. Despite provisions for devolution, the government has maintained control through various caveats and exceptions (Agashe, 2023), for instance, the Land Development Ordinance (No. 19 of 1939), contains specific clauses that require central government approval for any provincial land use decisions affecting more than 50 acres. In 2013, the Northern Provincial Council was prevented by the government from implementing its land distribution program for internally displaced war victims. Retention of state authority over land and police powers has been viewed by many participants as a reluctance to genuinely devolve power (Mudalige and Abeysinghe, 2021). These longstanding grievances have led to a ‘frozen conflict’ situation, where formal peace exists but underlying tensions remain unresolved, potentially setting the stage for future conflicts (Klosek et al., 2020). Minor adjustments to the reconciliation process are treated as superficial and lack a depth of concern for their grievances. The provisions for establishing provincial police forces under the control of Provincial Councils have never been fully implemented, justified by the state to curb extremist riots and attacks since 2009 (Mudalige and Abeysinghe, 2021).

A counter-argument to the lack of political commitment was presented by Government Administrator ‘1’ who claimed that the government was *“facing a severe shortage of necessary funds and human resources to adequately support the operation of the provincial councils,”* hence, the effectiveness of reconciliation efforts was adversely affected. This can be supported by two main reasons found in existing literature (Mudalige and Abeysinghe, 2021): firstly, some of those who are qualified to work in local government positions in the North and East

regions have left the country as refugees, and secondly, some others might have perished during the war (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004).

A significant limitation I encountered during data collection was the lack of documentary evidence regarding the government's role in providing qualified personnel to these regions through funding and skill training, suggesting a failure to prioritise capacity-building of personnel to be deployed in these areas (Silva, et al., 2018; Jayatilaka and Amirthalingam, 2023; Rameez, 2020) contributing to the widening gap in public trust in the reconciliation process (Weeratunge and Dewasiri, 2021; Silva, et al., 2018). The National Police Commission's internal assessments since 2019 document that only 22% of Tamil-speaking officers were deployed in areas where Tamil speakers constitute the majority. According to a quantitative survey taken between 2018-2022, the trust deficit was reflected in a decline of confidence in police services from 42% to 27% among Tamil-speaking communities in the North and East (Weeratunge and Dewasiri, 2021). Failure to provide linguistically competent police personnel has resulted in cases where victims of gender-based violence and land disputes were unable to communicate grievances in their native language, leading to errors in recording statements and investigations, which severely eroded community trust in law enforcement institutions undermining trust in state interventions in the reconciliation process (Subedi and Bulathsinghala, 2018). However, a counterpoint to the above narrative is offered by Civil Society Leader '1':

> *"You can't say that this issue is just simply a lack of resources or expertise, but what I believe is a [deliberate] strategy by the central government to maintain control [over] political dynamics rather than just administrative [shortcomings]".*

A broader implication arising from the above argument is that control mechanisms by the Government aim to maintain administrative structures that supersede Provincial Council functions, with stringent financial controls and limits set on funding requirements. (Abeysinghe, 2020). As a result, there is a continued reliance on the Government for funding and provision of expertise, perpetuating dependency that undermines the autonomous

development of a robust local governance. The tension between genuine resource constraints and political strategies of control creates administrative challenges that serve as both real obstacles and convenient justifications for maintaining centralised authority with profound implications for the reconciliation process. (Mallempati, 2019; Abeysinghe, 2020; Pullé, and Ratnapala, 2019). Additionally, what might be temporary administrative challenges can transform into permanent structural obstacles to meaningful devolution and illustrate why technical solutions alone (such as increased funding and training) cannot address the fundamental challenges to reconciliation.

Civil Society Leader '2' pointed out another contentious issue between Tamil and Muslim communities over the proposed merging of Northern and Eastern Provincial Councils, a problem largely overlooked in existing literature. Originally, the 13th Amendment provided for a temporary merger of these provinces, which was implemented in 1988, but in 2006 were de-merged following a Supreme Court ruling. Academic Researcher '3' emphasised the demographic reality that shapes the current power dynamics between the two minority communities:

> *"[Tamil] political leaders still demand a merged North and East Provincial Council, which the Muslims do not like. They oppose it. They say we can't be with Tamil Political leaders... this merger is impossible because Muslims form the majority in the Eastern Province. Therefore, they should have a say in the Eastern Provincial Council...Since the beginning, the Eastern Provincial Council was largely dominated by Muslims [and thereby] they have a stronghold in the Eastern Province"*

Disagreement with the above view was voiced by Civil Society Leader '1' who claimed that Tamil political leaders continued to advocate for a merged North-East because it would lead to political autonomy for the Tamils who form the majority there:

> *"A unified North-Eastern province is essential to protect Tamil interests in our traditional homelands. Without it, our community risks being further fragmented and disempowered."*

This points to an ideological and political polarity based on administrative boundaries and power-sharing (Abeyrathne and Walakuluge, 2024). For Tamil communities, the merger

represents a mechanism to consolidate political influence and protect collective rights through unified administrative control, whilst for Muslim communities, the same arrangement can threaten their distinct political identity and representation rights within local governance structures (Goodhand, Klem and Walton, 2020; Abeyrathne and Walakuluge, 2024). The question of merger challenges how reconciliation aims can be achieved whilst balancing competing minority political interests within the same geographical space (Abeyrathne and Walakuluge, 2024). According to media reports, numerous attempts to revive merger discussions faced resistance, not only from the government but also from within minority communities themselves (Colombo Telegraph, 2016; The Island, 2022). The 13th Amendment, although intended to devolve power, turned out to be a flashpoint for intercommunal tensions. This crisis highlighted a fundamental divergence in political aspirations between the two communities (Wickramaratne, 2021).

Academic Researcher '4' highlights that *"when the institutional framework for protecting minority political rights becomes a source of inter-communal tension, it undermines the very purpose of devolution as a mechanism for reconciliation"*. Between 2016 and 2021, both Tamil and Muslim political representatives raised concerns about administrative arrangements that dilute political power, affecting their communities' ability to effectively advocate for their interests (Abeyrathne and Walakuluge, 2024; Yusoff, Sarjoon, and Zain, 2019). The rise of radical Muslim political parties, such as the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), resulted in a convoluted political landscape as Government Administrator '1' observed:

> *"The SLMC has given Muslims a stronger political voice, but it's also been accused by some Tamil leaders of fragmenting minority unity. There's a constant balancing act between advocating for specific Muslim concerns and cooperating on broader minority rights issues."*

Tamil politicians generally advocated for greater autonomy or separation, whilst Muslim political leaders favoured a more integrationist approach, similar to the sentiments of the

Sinhalese majority (Goodhand et al., 2020), seeking to secure their rights and interests within the framework of a unitary Sri Lankan state. My empirical analysis suggests that this divergence has led to suspicions between the Muslim and Tamil communities. Some Tamil politicians have accused Muslim leaders of aligning with Sinhalese-dominated governments at the expense of broader minority rights (Goodhand et al., 2020). Ethnically rooted standpoints of Tamil and Muslim political parties have reached a stalemate because neither minority is willing to change their political stance (Rameez and Fowsar, 2024).

This ideological impasse has broader implications for both communities' ability to build effective political institutions to protect their interests, because it allows the government to maintain centralised control, citing inter-communal tensions for rejecting political autonomy (Abeyrathne and Walakuluge, 2024). As a result, Tamil and Muslim communities find their collective political rights compromised (Rameez and Fowsar, 2024). I argue that these conflicting political aspirations and entrenched ideological standpoints stand as severe obstacles to promoting concerted efforts for a holistic reconciliation.

7.3 Minority Language Rights

7.3.1 Language as a Marker of Identity and Power

One of the challenges in the existing reconciliation process discussed by Academic Researcher '4', Civil Society Leaders '1' and '2' is the absence of comprehensive language rights. Lack of opportunity to effectively communicate in one's language when engaging with state institutions undermines a fundamental right. The Official Languages Act of 1956 and subsequent provisions, including the 13th and 16th Amendments to the Constitution, established Tamil as an official national language alongside Sinhala, with English designated as a link language (Article 12(2) embodied in Chapter III). This constitutional framework established a more inclusive linguistic policy, requiring public services to be available in all three languages and mandating trilingual administration capability across government

institutions. Post-war reconciliation policies have acknowledged bilingual language rights through the National Policy Framework for Social Integration (NPFSI) (2012), which emphasised the importance of the Tamil language in public administration. However, documented evidence shows significant gaps between legal stipulations and practical implementation. Academic Researcher '4', Civil Society Leaders '1' and '2' ascribed this to a 'linguistic identity' adopted by communities to establish rigid linguistic demarcations between themselves and their perceived 'other' in post-war Sri Lanka. Academic Researcher '4' offers an explanation:

> *"The matter of language rights is a big problem. Even though Sinhala and Tamil are national languages with equal importance, people prefer to speak in their "mother tongue" ...Because they sense that engaging with the 'other' language might diminish their cultural identity and erode the sense of linguistic superiority they have cultivated."*

This highlights two important aspects: firstly, language rights occupy a central position in social and individual identity, preserving one's ethnic identity and particularly the 'mother tongue'. The protection of mother tongue usage has become a crucial mechanism for all communities to maintain their cultural identity and transmit their heritage (Wyss, 2020; Perera and Khodos, 2024). Secondly, language reinforces existing power structures where one linguistic group is dominant, and inclusion of the minority language by members of the dominant group might be seen as conceding power (Jayathilaka et al., 2022; Wyss, 2020; Jayawickrama and Ekanayake, 2024). Civil Society Leader '1' emphasised that both Sinhala and Tamil languages are *"deeply intertwined with ethnic, cultural, and political identities"*, playing a decisive role in shaping individual and collective self-perceptions and inter-group dynamics (Jayathilaka et al., 2022).

The roots of this linguistic divide can be traced back to an elevation of the British coloniser's language over the two main native Sri Lankan languages, Sinhala and Tamil (See Chapter 2) (Jayathilaka et al., 2022; Wyss, 2020). The policy of English as an official language aligns with what Pennycook (2006, p.26) terms a 'colonial celebratory' position, which led to

a disproportionately favourable position for the Tamil population because rapid English education was made accessible to the Tamils during British rule. According to Academic Researcher '4', this led to a disadvantageous position for the Sinhalese who were not conversant with English and contributed to a strong belief that both their language and identity were being rendered 'unworthy', thereby fueling a deep-seated animosity between them and the Tamils. The notion of *linguistic separatism* (Herath, 2015; DeVotta, 2004) was entrenched in the post-independence socio-political fabric with the advent of the Sinhala-only policy, which in turn led to the alienation of the Tamil population. Academic Researcher '2' elaborates on this issue:

> *"One must not forget that the lasting effects of British rule still [loom] large. Generations born into a newly independent Sri Lanka carried [forward] their parents' anger, and this cannot be ignored. We must acknowledge that this is also a trauma we went through if we are to move forward with any type of reconciliation. Families lost a great deal during those days and continued to lose more in subsequent years due to civil war and political instability. Because nearly [40 years] after independence, we had the civil war. We feel lost in our own land…generations grew up [within a climate of] hatred and trauma".*

The role of collective emotions is important in critically analysing the 'everyday' reconciliation process present on the ground. When communities experience severe trauma, language often transforms into a shared medium for preserving cultural identity (Leese, Crouthamel, and Köhne, 2021). Academic Researcher '2' and Grassroot Activist '1'also noted this emotional dimension that creates a binary opposition between 'us' and 'them' polarised during the conflict, reasserting cultural distinctiveness and group solidarity in both Sinhalese and Tamil communities. This dynamic, as highlighted by Academic Researcher '2', operated at *"both conscious and unconscious levels, influencing how Sinhalese and Tamils perceived and interacted with each other".* Deep-seated emotional responses to the historical violence and oppression permeated intersections of identity, power, and survival in the post-war reconciliation era (Divakaran, 2023).

However, this argument is challenged by other participants. Grassroot Activist '2' and Academic Researcher '4' point out that in the post-war context, a complicated dynamic has

emerged in the 'everyday' reconciliationary interactions between Tamils and Sinhalese: on the surface, there appears to be *"a façade of tolerance and acceptance by members of both communities engaging in routine social and economic interactions"* - what Academic Researcher '4' terms as 'impression management', where individuals and groups present an amicable front in public although harbouring deeper, conflicting emotions privately. Grassroots Activist '2' observes that underlying emotions on unresolved trauma and lingering mistrust created tensions that were triggered by perceived threats to cultural dominance, disrupting the fragile balance of coexistence and adversely affecting positive participation in reconciliation efforts. Within this dichotomy of understanding by my participants, I argue that emotional attachments to language and associated cultural identities remain potent, albeit at the latent level, rather than at the manifest level. At the manifest level, people may participate in reconciliation initiatives and engage in cross-cultural dialogue, appearing to have moved beyond linguistic divisions. However, Academic Researcher '4' highlights that unresolved trauma and deep-seated emotional connections to language continue at the latent level, influencing their identity and worldview, and lead to a perfunctory performance that does not support [a holistic] reconciliation. This public 'performance' of harmony can be interpreted as *emotional labour (*Hochschild, 2003), where individuals regulate and manage their emotions and conform to social expectations of peace and cooperation. I contend that the post-war context seems to have established 'feeling rules' (socially shared guidelines that inform how we *ought to* feel in given situations), that dictate the suppression of negative emotions in public interactions for the sake of social stability (Hochschild, 2003). This relationship between 'feeling rules' and 'emotional labour' thus reveals a contradiction observed within the Sri Lankan reconciliation process. Whilst some literature (Gunatilleke, 2020; Rajapakse, 2024; Mallawaarachchi, 2020) points out that in the Sri Lankan context, these social guidelines are a necessary foundation for daily coexistence, Academic Researcher '4' highlights that by

projecting a false sense of 'progress' in reconciliation, underlying emotional tensions can easily fracture small but important gains reached.

Another narrative emerges from a discussion with Academic Researcher '1', that there is a collective unwillingness to learn the other language, stemming from attitudes of linguistic and cultural *otherness*, and is evident in local political governance and administration spaces. Noted by Academic Researcher '3', this situation is prevalent across all districts, leading to a *"diminished public trust in political and administrative institutions"*. Unilingual Tamil women are disproportionately affected in service provision encounters due to language discrimination, and they are hesitant to bring forward complaints against public institutions (Ramasamy, 2018). The general lack of respect and recognition (Fraser, 2000) amounts to a failure of the state to adequately recognise linguistic diversity. Grassroots Activist '1', Civil Leaders '1' and '2' reported similar "embodied experiences of discrimination and exclusion" when engaging with Sinhalese officers employed within government services despite the provision of formal Tamil language training. Grassroots Activist '3' reflects how this discrimination becomes incorporated into their daily lived experience by 'carrying it along with them as a *constant'* undergoing visceral stress reactions when accessing essential government services, highlighting how reconciliation failure becomes inscribed on minority bodies through repeated encounters with exclusion. Each encounter with monolingual Sinhala service delivery convinces Tamil speakers that their linguistic equity is incompatible with full citizenship, preventing the promotion of mutual recognition. Routine experiences of linguistic exclusion by minorities indicate a source of disadvantage, reinforcing zero-sum thinking where one group's linguistic comfort necessarily comes at the expense of another's access to services. This conditioning creates barriers to reconciliation that persist even when individuals consciously desire ethnic harmony, making trust-building across communities difficult to achieve.

This very humanistic aspect of 'everyday' reconciliation further illustrates how language discrimination operates as a form of symbolic violence that assaults minority citizens' sense of belonging and citizenship rights, undermining possibilities of genuine reconciliation. Academic Researcher '4' notes:

> "*Even though government officers are given formal training to speak and write Tamil [language], many of them don't care to. They would only address you in Sinhala when you talk to them."*

As pointed out by my participant, the phrase *'they would only address you in Sinhala'* suggests a form of passive resistance to linguistic inclusion. This represents a power dynamic for asserting dominance and maintaining the majority Sinhala language in social hierarchies that can perpetuate the systemic discrimination faced by Tamil minorities (Wyss, 2020; Lekamlage, 2022). However, I note that the reluctance to achieve bilingual proficiency is prevalent among both Sinhalese and Tamil government officers, which has become increasingly apparent during my data collection.

Government Administrator '1' provided 'political reasons' behind the reluctance to become proficient in both languages, such as concerns about job security, cultural identity, and fears due to changing power dynamics within government administration. The existing literature recognises cultural identity as a crucial political factor, where language proficiency becomes intertwined with loyalty to one's linguistic and cultural group (Wyss, 2020; Lekamlage, 2022). Ultra-nationalistic Sinhalese officers view Tamil language proficiency as an acknowledgement of declining Sinhala linguistic dominance within government institutions (Amarasinghe, 2021). This stems from anxieties about shifting power dynamics and cultural preservation within the majority Sinhalese bureaucratic structure, which can negatively affect reconciliation initiatives at the local level (Wyss, 2020).

Civil Society Leader '1', notes that whilst some ultra-nationalistic Sinhalese officers resist using the Tamil language, many others fear losing career advancement, resulting in self-censorship, compromising their ability to serve the communities (Hoole and Hoole, 2019).

Despite the government's mandate on language proficiency in both Tamil and Sinhala, a factor in determining promotions, Government Administrator '1' points out that many officers have circumvented this requirement, revealing a significant gap between policy intent and practical implementation. However, I draw attention to an anomaly noted by my participant, who stated that *"very few government officers genuinely decided to do so"* to emphasise how exceptional it is for officials to fulfil language obligations guaranteed by the Constitution.

Civil Society Leader '1' highlighted that many police officers use political allegiances to avoid learning Tamil, thus contributing to nullifying constitutional guarantees of language rights. This does not necessarily represent individual recalcitrance, but a systematic pattern where administrative structures meant to implement language rights have become tools for their circumvention. I emphasise that this 'non-performativity of antiracism' (Ahmed, 2006, p.104) - the formal acknowledgement of language rights through policy, followed by their systematic neutralisation through political patronage networks, represents why official reconciliation policies serve as perfunctory gestures instead of effecting genuine change (Jayathilaka et al., 2022). Hence, I reason that failure of language rights implementation is not necessarily a matter of insufficient resources and political will, but an inherent systematic process where policies are transformed into perfunctory gestures (Ratnayake, 2024; Jayathilaka et al., 2022). 'Political exclusion through language' has become a symbolic and practical barrier to inclusive governance that promotes reinforcement of marginalisation of minorities (Jayathilaka et al., 2022p. 105; Ratnayake, 2024) and also creates a trickle-down effect where state officials are less inclined to follow official language policy, constituting a form of *symbolic violence*, strengthening language hierarchies powered by exclusion.

7.3.2 Language Barriers in 'Everyday' Spaces

A key narrative that emerged from the discussions on language barriers is the power dynamics inherent in linguistic practices within post-war Sri Lanka. Discrimination of

language manifests at different levels of governance and in social interactions, creating a multi-layered obstacle to genuine reconciliation. Academic Researcher '2' uses the term 'linguistic capital' to highlight how language proficiency serves as a form of social and cultural capital that determines access to resources and opportunities. Proficiency in multiple languages can serve as a facilitator tool in ethnic power struggles exposed to the international community, and a corrective to the Sinhalese nationalists who perceive linguistic rights as a threat to their political dominance.

A recent experience of Grassroot Activist '3' at the Registrar General's Department in Colombo, the Capital of Sri Lanka, illustrates the prevalence of language discrimination:

> *"One of the most problematic issues is the lack of bilingual staff, even in Colombo. I once went to the Colombo Registrar General's office to get a copy of my birth certificate. The lady at the counter couldn't understand my broken Sinhala, so I tried speaking in Tamil. But she didn't understand that either. She told me to wait and turned around to ask one of her colleagues, with a very annoyed look, if the [officer] who spoke Tamil was there. Apparently, that person had gone out, and I had to wait almost an hour before he came to help me. This whole process was an embarrassing and annoying [ordeal] for me, and it seemed that having bilingual employees in one of Colombo's busiest government offices was considered an 'accommodation' rather than a necessity."*

My participant's narrative reveals that a lack of adequate bilingual staff can transform routine civil administration tasks into experiences of marginalisation and limit the commitment to linguistic inclusion, a basic requirement of the reconciliation process. (Jayathilaka et al., 2022).

Another critical issue noted by multiple participants concerns a scarcity of Tamil and Muslim female police officers in the national police force, especially in areas where Tamil is the majority language, which negatively affects ongoing reconciliation efforts. Academic Researcher '3' highlighted how this has hampered reporting on crimes, accessing emergency services, and complying with routine administrative matters:

> *"If you go to the police station in Jaffna or Kilinochchi, or Mullaitivu, or Vavuniya- the entire police personnel is comprised of Sinhalese and if you go to Eastern Province - the same thing… because of the language barrier they have been encountering [difficulties] for many, many decades in the North and East."*

Linguistic discrimination prevalent in the police force presents a significant obstacle for Tamil-speaking citizens, especially for women, when seeking assistance at police stations. According to current estimates, 634 Tamil and 12 Muslim female police officers are employed in the police force throughout the country, in comparison with 17,110 Sinhalese female police officers (UNDP, 2020). The minority gender disparity among Tamil female police officers can be attributed to recruitment policies that established severe limitations during the Civil War, especially in the Northern and Eastern provinces, due to concerns of espionage undertakings for the LTTE. The small number of Muslim female police officers in the police force stems mainly from religious and cultural constraints. Despite media reports that former Tamil ex-combatants would be eligible to apply for positions in the police force, there has been no official confirmation on the implementation of this policy (Haviland, 2012). In any case, many female ex-combatants whose education was severely disrupted by the war face barriers to entering the police force due to gaps in their formal education.

The reluctance of women to visit a police station to file a complaint revealed deep-rooted cultural norms and gender stereotypes prevalent in Sri Lanka (Höglund, 2019). Civil Society Leader '1' pointed out that a conservative social norm exists, especially in the rural areas, where it is *"unfitting for a woman to visit a police station"* to file a complaint. In the North and East, the absence of Tamil-speaking female police officers creates a barrier for unilingual Tamil women seeking assistance, resulting in misunderstandings, improper recording of complaints on sexual harassment and abuse, and miscarriages of justice (Höglund, 2019; Brounéus et al., 2024; Deane, 2022). The resulting trust deficit undermines confidence in law enforcement, hindering effective police-community cooperation, which is a crucial element in post-conflict reconciliation. This highlights how discrimination operates in many invisible ways (Brounéus et al., 2024; Deane, 2022), and creates a lived experience of exclusion and marginalisation for Tamil-speaking citizens, reinforcing their 'subaltern' status (Spivak, 2023, p.3).

This systemic bias is also present in government education sectors, especially in universities. Academic Researcher '3' elaborated that,

> *"In the [universities south of the Northern Province] we don't have this 2-language policy. Information is circulated mostly in the Sinhala language…even for Tamil university staff …. We sometimes get Ministry letters and circulars in the Sinhala language, and we [have to] confront [the university authorities] and then only we get it translated… They [university officials] say 'we don't have translators to do this but we will try our best to address this problem in the future'. In some instances, they translate the Sinhala notices and circulars into English and put them on the notice board. That's it… That is not an excuse… That is the problem of the institution."*

Marginalisation of the Tamil language in Sri Lankan universities reflects how racism is deeply embedded in societal structures and institutions. Academic Researcher '3' argues that the failure of senior officials in the Higher Education Ministry to promote a representative academic workforce in universities is not an administrative oversight, but a *"reflection of deeper institutional racism operating in [subtle] ways"*. According to my participants from the universities, this manifests through recruitment practices favouring Sinhala speakers, promotion criteria disadvantaged Tamil-speaking academics, and resource allocation prioritising academic programs conducted in the Sinhala medium (Jayathilaka et al., 2022). Shortage of Tamil-speaking academics has resulted in a dearth of research projects conducted in Tamil, reduced availability of academic supervision for Tamil-speaking students, and limited capacity to develop Tamil-language academic resources (Jayathilaka et al., 2022; Selvaratnam et al., 2024; Perera and Khodos, 2024).

Another key sector affected by language disparity is healthcare, especially through government-owned hospitals and dispensaries (Selvaratnam et al., 2024). Multiple Grassroots Activists state that this has adversely affected unilingual Tamil women with health-related issues, largely due to a lack of knowledge of the Tamil language by healthcare personnel. This situation is illustrated by Grassroots Activist '1' through observations made during a field visit:

> *"Back in 2015, I did research in Putlam about the women heads of the household... So they had a problem where a lot of IDPs who hardly speak any Sinhala. So when they initially had to go to hospitals to get the basic services they had a big problem …Sinhala*

speaking doctors on call couldn't understand their complaints [made in Tamil language]."

In the context of the current reconciliation process, unequal access to the provision of healthcare due to language barriers has posed a barrier to building trust and amounts to a form of structural and epistemic violence (Selvaratnam et al., 2024). Grassroots Activist '2' contends that due to language disparities in healthcare, minority language speakers in Sri Lanka are unable to communicate their health concerns and obtain medical advice. This amounts to *"compromising on their health outcomes, and a reinforcement of marginalisation and perceptions of second-class citizenship."*

7.3.3 The Concept of "Mother Tongue"

The discussion hitherto centres upon the concept of 'mother tongue' in Sri Lanka, which existing literature on the reconciliation process fails to take into account. Many participants observed that the notion of a *national* mother tongue in Sri Lanka aligns closely with the majority's language, Sinhala, as a site of 'everyday' reconciliation struggle in how linguistic identity becomes weaponised through nationalist narratives. This perspective is problematic in a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual society and has far-reaching implications for national unity and reconciliation (Jayathilaka et al., 2022). The term 'mother tongue' itself is gendered, often associating language with maternal transmission and thus situating linguistic identity with notions of family and cultural continuity (Waldorf and Premaratna, 2024). This is exemplified by Grassroots Activist '2' who commented that,

"*Most mothers tell wartime stories to their young ones... The blood and the killings...but I must tell you that many of them did not blame the Sinhalese people...mostly politicians." The blame is placed on the politicians ..."*

The rise of post-war Sinhalese extremist nationalistic groups, such as the BBS (Bodu Bala Sena), promoting the concept of *'Sinha-lé'* (meaning Sinhala blood), along with ultra-nationalistic rhetoric by politicians, has embedded the mother tongue as a sacrosanct concept in Sri Lankan society. The concept of a unilingual mother tongue, tied to the Sinhalese ideology

of being the rightful owners of the homeland, promotes land-based political power as discussed in Chapter 6. Academic Researcher '4' has noted that this has surfaced in the 'public domain' in the post-reconciliation phase, where the tensions between reconciliation promises and nationalist resistance compete. This is particularly evident in national events, as highlighted by Academic Researcher '3':

> *"The national anthem is only sung in Sinhalese language in the Independence Day celebrations, right? Once we had it in both languages when Sirisena was President in 2015 as a monumental step in reconciliation. However due to extremist nationalistic agendas they [successive governments] stopped [it]."*

This observation points to a noteworthy issue: the politicisation of language in national ceremonies works against inclusive principles of the reconciliation process. Rendering the national anthem only in the Sinhala language sends a strong message of conscious and intentional political choice, and illustrates how nationalist agendas work to undo established reconciliation measures of granting political and language rights to minorities. An overemphasis on the Sinhala language, perpetuating ethnic nationalism, and silencing subaltern voices has created anxieties among already polarised communities (Subedi, 2022).

7.4 Bottom-Up Activism: Meaningful Dialogue

7.4.1 Storytelling and Community-Led Peacebuilding

Following the two previous sections, minority rights are considered fundamental to the current reconciliation process, and as such,-the role of grassroots and civil society initiatives in addressing minority rights warrants careful attention. Grassroots Activist '1' highlights that despite limited state-led initiatives for genuine reconciliation, small-scale grassroots organisations have undertaken an important role with limited resources to address anomalies in the ongoing reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts and developed local programs that can contribute towards some degree of reconciliation at the community level. Grassroots Activist '1' spoke about political rights awareness programs conducted daily within small communities:

> *"In the North, grassroots communities have organically formed to conduct political rights awareness sessions. I worked with one [initiative] where local Tamil women*

> *received financial educational grants to study politics and civic rights, which successfully increased [interest] in local governance participation among women [in the Northern region]. However, [the] success and community engagement in these programs, securing continued funding from local government, remains a big challenge, making it difficult to sustain these sessions."*

The sustainability and scalability of these initiatives face impediments, creating a significant barrier to the broader reconciliation process of inclusivity. Bottom-up political rights awareness initiatives are valuable vehicles for fostering 'everyday' reconciliation activities, but their effectiveness in addressing systematic challenges in post-war reconciliation is hampered by insufficient support from the government (Scholtens and Bavinck, 2018; Spring, 2025). Commenting on grassroots initiatives that help minimise language disparity, Civil Society Leader '1' observes that a grassroots-based program has helped Tamil women from the North to learn Sinhala and English languages to communicate with local and foreign tourists in promoting and selling their produce:

> *"We have language programs [conducted at the micro level] – sometimes these are funded by NGOs, sometimes [these are] locally funded through grassroots organisations – [held]especially for women heads of households who want to sell their produce or other handmade items to foreigners..."*

As highlighted, these programs demonstrate how bottom-up community-led initiatives can address practical needs and also tackle reconciliation challenges such as marginalisation through language barriers. Grassroots Activist '2' points to the 'questionable role' adopted by the state, highlighting a disconnect between official reconciliation rhetoric and practical support for integration initiatives such as language education to be undertaken by the local authorities in the North and East. The burden of fostering genuine reconciliation is left largely to community-level actors, who navigate both resource constraints and structural barriers whilst attempting to bridge linguistic and political divides (Scholtens and Bavinck, 2018; Perera, 2018). When asked if the state offers *any* free language programs for citizens, the activists replied that there were none in operation. However, existing literature points to a new government initiative for the establishment of a national language project aimed at fostering

"respect for linguistic diversity and trilingualism, thus enhancing relationships between different communities" (Herath, 2015, p. 245). Commenting on the inconsistencies in granting minority community rights, Government Administrator '1' contends that an unspoken bias exists where the government does not actively initiate programs to facilitate both Sinhala and Tamil languages that would create a cultural bridge between these two communities.

In spite of the merits, I have come across a notable weakness in bottom-up programs: these are only limited attempts to foster a productive dialogue between different communities on the 'basic technicalities' involved in reconciliation efforts (Scholtens and Bavinck, 2018). The focus is primarily on enabling minorities to learn the majority language. Whilst providing some benefits, these do not create opportunities for *meaningful* reconciliation efforts among different communities (Scholtens and Bavinck, 2018) because a deeper understanding of inter-community relations is not dealt with. In addition to peacebuilding programs conducted by civil society and grassroots organisations, NGOs have also taken an active role in addressing language barriers. Academic Researcher '1' further illustrated this point:

> *"In the North, one NGO worked voluntarily in hospitals. They identified patients' language preferences and raised awareness among hospital staff. At the admission office, a volunteer from the NGO would ask, 'What is your preferred language?' If the patient said Tamil, they would be given a card with a specific colour, like yellow or green, and then assigned to a Tamil-speaking doctor. These are simple measures that can create a more inclusive approach which is not really present in other government hospitals."*

This is an example where NGOs are active in implementing practical solutions to language barriers in healthcare, promoting inclusivity and better access for minorities. The assistance provided by NGOs was appreciated by some participants (Academic Researchers), whilst others, such as Grassroots Activist '1', offered contrasting perspectives:

> *"Although I think NGOs do a lot of important work in terms of reconciliation and [provide] funding for small grassroots organisations, I believe some [NGOs] simply don't have a genuine interest in the people. [Name Retracted] International NGO is famous for conducting day-to-day programs and when their allocated budget is over, they go back. When they go back there is no one to take up this work and we are left with where we started."*

This critique raises important observations about the long-term sustainability of reconciliation initiatives on the ground by external NGOs. Civil Society Leader '2' highlights how local micro-level collectives represent a more enduring peacebuilding model. These manifest in the formation of collective entities, such as mutual aid and community service initiatives, language skills training workshops, and social assistance to vulnerable community members (AWWA, 2020). These micro-level collectives operate through regular group meetings, collaborative project planning, and the collective experience of positive changes (AWWA, 2018). The structure of these associations encourages members to transition from victims of conflict to active participants in the reconciliation process. Civil Society Leader '2' alluded to a language program for IDPs funded by a local church that they have been conducting for the past five years, demonstrating a lasting impact: *"This program has been very successful because we've helped many IDPs from Mullaitivu to have a basic comprehension of Sinhala."* Unlike the short-term NGO approach, my participant exemplifies how this locally rooted initiative centres on 'everyday' peace mechanisms that can provide 'consistent support'. This is noteworthy, as bottom-up reconciliation initiatives can be considered as projects with specific 'structural arrangements' rooted within the community to reap benefits over a period of time.

Although bottom-up peacebuilding and grassroots activism for language rights were especially highlighted during my participant discussions, Grassroots Activist '2' pointed out small-scale, *inter-ethnic* peacebuilding programs that they conducted, foregrounding inter-community dialogue advocating language rights and participating in larger reconciliation processes with other ethnic groups.

> *"We have this program where many young women [from different ethnic backgrounds] get together to engage in different activities. They tell stories to each other through various mediums: some women share stories in their own way about their childhood experiences during the war. Others, who were ex-combatants and have lost their families because of the war, cook foods that they have a connection with – dishes they remember preparing with their mothers, which takes them back in time. Some women draw, while others sew. This is a beautiful thing to witness because, in this group, everyone is creating genuine, supportive connections."*

This further illustrates the dimensions of 'everyday' peace that emerge through ordinary activities, from cooking to sharing stories, *weaving* reconciliation directly into routine 'everyday' practices and creating a different entry point for sharing experiences and building trust. These decolonial participatory methodologies, particularly storytelling and narrative composition, serve as potent mechanisms for disseminating the lived experiences of community members, articulating the ramifications of conflict and violence on their 'everyday' existence (Premachandra, 2023; Ware et al., 2025; Deane, 2021).

The significance of storytelling practices lies in the ability to create 'alternative' historical records that challenge dominant state narratives, formal state testimonies, and official documentation (see Chapter 5). Grassroots storytelling allows women to articulate their *own* experiences in ways that preserve their memories of a traumatic period (Premachandra, 2023). For instance, in the Northern Province, women's groups have established 'storytelling circles' where mothers who lost children during the conflict share their traumatic experiences on not just of loss, but how they rebuilt their lives by interweaving 'everyday' challenges including accessing government services in a non-native language, and articulating deeper trauma from the conflict that official reconciliation processes typically overlook (Premachandra, 2023; Deane, 2021). Grassroots Activist '2' highlights that the experiences of the marginalised women play a pivotal role in the reconciliation process, as they directly convey a diverse array of experiences related to structural forms of violence, such as systematic language-based discrimination in accessing public services. By facilitating local communities, grassroots actors surface the multifaceted nature of conflict and delineate an inclusive approach to reconciliation consonant with the lived realities of affected populations. In doing so, this approach transcends conventional political archetypes of top-down liberal peacebuilding by offering a *holistic* conceptualisation of reconciliation.

7.4.3 Youth-Led Initiatives

Another positive trend observed is youth mobilisation in reconciliation efforts. As noted by Civil Society Leader '2', there is a propensity for young people to break down barriers of ethnic polarisation and form multi-ethnic friendships. Civil Society Leader '2' provides an insightful observation:

> *"Children are now more interested in sharing their similar traditions through various new ways. They have found a new appreciation for music and dramas that go viral in both languages. When they go to university, they are open to learning their friends' languages."*

This trend is a positive development in inter-community relations, representing a spontaneous form of 'everyday' reconciliation that emerges from lived experience, suggesting that when freed from the institutional constraints and historical baggage that shape adult interactions, younger generations naturally gravitate toward inclusion and cross-cultural engagement. This 'organic' process demonstrates how 'everyday' reconciliation can occur through shared contemporary interests, curiosity about cultural differences, and the natural social bonds that form when young people interact in spaces relatively insulated from the ethnic polarisation that dominates formal political discourse. Civil Society Leader '2' further posits:

> *"The youth have also taken this peacebuilding on their own terms. My son has this set of friends who are a mixed group – there are also many Sinhalese and Muslims in that group. What I find nice is that through TikTok and YouTube, they are creating videos of themselves cooking different foods and showcasing various traditions from their own [ethnic] cultures. For example, one of these videos was about how weddings look [across different] communities, like Tamil, Sinhalese, or Muslim. When I see this, I get emotional…Because we didn't get to have this experience – we were taught to hate each other[other nationalities] inside our own homes.."*

This generational divide highlights how 'everyday' reconciliation efforts continue to struggle against decades of socialisation that portrayed ethnic differences as inherently threatening. For younger generations, organic multiculturalism has become a revolutionary act that challenges these inherited prejudices. Dissemination of local lived experiences and decolonial knowledge through social media platforms also serves as a mechanism for amplifying marginalised voices. Youth engagement and empowerment initiatives thereby plays

a crucial role in mitigating hate speech, stereotypes, and prejudices by sharing narratives related to war and violence (Lokumannage, 2019; Hirblinger et al., 2024). Grassroots Activist '1' and '2' spoke about digital storytelling as a useful medium for young individuals to articulate their concerns over community issues and promote social cohesion by showcasing content that humanises ethnic 'others'.

However, youth digital spaces also risk amplifying hate speech, disinformation, and ethnic antagonisms when left unmoderated to serve political manipulation. These risks are heightened under regulatory frameworks such as the 2024 Online Safety Act, which, whilst intended to curb misinformation, has raised concerns about surveillance, censorship, and selective enforcement, stifling dissent and restricting grassroots creativity (Hirblinger, 2025; Hattotuwa and Wickremesinhe, 2022). This means that youth peacebuilders are operating in contested and sometimes hostile digital environments, where their messages of coexistence compete with algorithmically amplified hate narratives. Moreover, many youth initiatives remain isolated and under-resourced, lacking long-term support and integration into national reconciliation strategies, and as a result, bottom-up digital reconciliation projects are vulnerable to marginalisation on the ground (Hirblinger, 2025; K.C. and Whetstone, 2024).

Therefore, holistic reconciliation requires both interpersonal understanding and fundamental structural transformation of political and language rights within state institutions. Younger generations are more open to cross-cultural engagement, and can help break cycles of *taught* hatred and intergenerational trauma to build interpersonal connections, although this openness alone cannot overcome the institutional resistance to implementing constitutional guarantees of broader minority rights. (Lokumannage, 2019). However, Civil Society Leader '1' notes that this positive trend is primarily, "*observed among younger people and that older [generations are slow] to appreciate the positive outcome of multiculturalism, [whilst doggedly] hanging onto age-old divisive norms of nationalism".*

The generational divide highlights the need to address disparities in attitudes and engagement between generations to promote comprehensive reconciliation efforts and emerging narratives that are far-reaching for the ongoing reconciliation process. This organic form of integration and mutual understanding could lay the groundwork for a more cohesive society in the future. As the youth grow into occupying leadership roles, their multicultural perspectives and experiences may inform more inclusive policies and practices. However, the persistence of divisive narratives held by older generations could impede progress and create tensions between age groups that can lead to conflicts within families and communities.

7.5 Conclusion

I conclude that minority political autonomy and language rights remain critical and unfulfilled dimensions of Sri Lanka's post-war reconciliation process. The implementation of the 13th Amendment has been hampered by three key factors: declining political aspirations among minority communities due to repeated disappointments, strong opposition for reconciliation driven by Sinhalese nationalist sentiments, and persistent structural barriers creating a situation where devolution exists more as a political tool for international diplomacy than a genuine mechanism for power-sharing. The inter-communal tensions between Tamil and Muslim communities over the proposed merger of Northern and Eastern provinces further complicate this landscape, with competing minority interests reinforcing centralised control.

These findings lead me to conclude that Sri Lanka's reconciliation process remains compromised by the gap between formal policy commitments and ground-level implementation. The interplay between political and language rights reveals that institutional inertia, nationalist resistance, and systematic discrimination continue to perpetuate inequalities that undermine reconciliation efforts. In the absence of meaningful state-led initiatives, grassroots organisations and civil society actors have begun facilitating reconciliation through innovative bottom-up approaches. One of the promising developments is the emergence of

youth-led digital initiatives that are organically fostering inter-ethnic understanding and cultural appreciation through digital storytelling. However, a detailed engagement with the impacts of social media, including the circulation of mis, dis and and malinformation, algorithmic biases, surveillance risks of digital platforms is beyond the scope of this study. This is an area that warrants further research, especially given the increasing relevance of online spaces in shaping post-war identity within Sri Lanka.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

8.1 Chapter Introduction

In my thesis, I have explored with a critical outlook the challenges and opportunities in addressing the grievances of minorities in Sri Lanka since the conflict ended in 2009. The central aim of my findings is to investigate pathways for a 'holistic reconciliation' that bridges reflections of 'everyday' experiences with broader reconciliation processes and examines how reconciliation is experienced, interpreted, and reshaped on the ground. My analysis draws on critical feminist and post-colonial theoretical frameworks that emphasise the significance of lived realities. This approach has enabled me to uncover how formal reconciliation mechanisms often limit in addressing challenges faced by minority communities, whilst revealing the innovative ways communities create their own reconciliation practices. This thesis makes a significant contribution to post-war reconciliation academic discourse by developing and applying the concept of 'everyday' reconciliation to Sri Lanka's post-2009 context, bridging the critical gap between formal reconciliation policies and the lived experiences of minority communities. The key contributions are: it advances existing understandings of 'everyday' reconciliation by demonstrating how grassroots practices differ from state-led processes; it provides an up-to-date empirical analysis of *how* minorities in the North and East experience reconciliation, and, it offers a critical feminist and post-colonial perspective on the gendered and intersectional dimensions of post-war recovery that remain largely invisible in mainstream reconciliation discourse. In this concluding chapter, I review my empirical findings and provide directions for a holistic reconciliation process that emerged from my empirical analysis.

8.2 Reviewing the Empirical Findings and its Overall Implications

My empirical findings are organised into three chapters: Reconciliation Policies (see Chapter 5), Militarisation and Security (see Chapter 6) and Minority Rights and Recognition (see Chapter 7). The narratives discussed therein are further analysed to reveal a broader

interconnected theme that focuses on the challenges associated with the ways that people navigate the everyday dynamics of reconciliation on the ground.

In order to understand and deconstruct the existing reconciliation process, I focused on two official reconciliation policies of critical importance: the LLRC (2011) and the CTF (2016), examining the notable differences in how state and non-state actors understand and approach post-war reconciliation. My findings in Chapter 5 challenge the existing assumptions about the efficacy of these two state-led reconciliation bodies, revealing gaps in their implementation, lack of accessibility, and erosion of public trust. One of the key empirical findings was the *concept* of 'reconciliation' in the Sri Lankan context, which became challenging to define conclusively because it connotes multiple meanings to the different actors involved in the process. The government interpreted reconciliation as mainly achievable through infrastructural development and economic restructuring to double the national per capita income, and accordingly, policy guidelines were written down in contrast to the aspirations of those communities affected by the war.

The government's standpoint on reconciliation stood in contrast to the expectations of minority groups in war-affected areas of the North and East, who prioritised tangible reparations, including land returns and the reinstatement of political rights. My analysis highlights that the failure to comprehend reconciliation as a broadly consensual understanding has resulted in a misalignment of efforts and expectations. The divergence of perspectives has raised important questions about the meaning of 'national unity' in the ongoing reconciliation process. This has overshadowed addressing specific grievances that require *positive discriminatory* measures for minority groups in Sri Lanka. Although existing literature has briefly acknowledged this state of affairs (for example, CPA, 2013, p.9; Silva, 2018, p.1078), my data offers a re-examination of this confusion. The resultant alienation experienced was substantiated by my empirical findings, particularly with regard to the delegation of vital aspects of the reconciliation dialogue to external actors, creating the perception that the

reconciliation is an externally driven agenda and therefore, disconnected from 'everyday' local realities compromising the sustainability of a 'home-grown reconciliation process'.

My empirical findings from Chapter 5 reveal the failure to assimilate the concept of reconciliation, which is exacerbated by the inaccessibility and unavailability of testimonials that impede truth-seeking and the formation of collective memory. These obstacles prevent the establishment of a shared historical narrative, essential for developing mutual understanding and empathy among different communities. My analysis uncovers that many reconciliation initiatives are perfunctory actions, intended primarily to satisfy the expectations of international observers instead of fostering genuine healing and lasting peace. These findings confirm earlier research on the performative nature of such processes and their limited effectiveness (Silva, 2018; Kapur, 2024). My research adds to the empirical gap where 'everyday' reconciliation in Sri Lanka is underexplored, under-theorised, and under-integrated into formal reconciliation frameworks. The shortcomings of these formal reconciliation efforts have given rise to opportunities for community-led ventures and strategies, illustrated by women's cooperatives. This indicates that in instances where state-sponsored reconciliation efforts have fallen short of expectations, community resilience has demonstrated that people can create authentic understandings and practices of reconciliation. Moreover, these findings build on the concept of 'everyday' reconciliation' by showcasing how grassroots women's collectives innovate in response to state neglect.

Inability to cultivate trust for genuine reconciliation caused by the prolongation of unfulfilled promises and unimplemented recommendations have diminished public expectations and eroded goodwill in the continuation of a reconciliation process. According to my empirical findings, the lack of trust between the government and minority communities in the North and East is made worse by the intense military presence, justified by the government as a necessity for national security and economic development. In Chapter 6, I elaborate on this situation that has created a climate of fear and mistrust. Although some existing literature

suggested a decrease in surveillance and an improvement in freedom of expression with the change of government in 2016 (Subedi and Bulathsinghala, 2017), my empirical findings reveal that the government has significantly enhanced its military capabilities to regularly conduct covert monitoring of neighbourhoods, including unannounced visits by military intelligence officers to the homes of former LTTE members and their relatives, and Muslim families since the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks.

These manoeuvres brought an atmosphere of oppression and fear to individuals and communities, limiting social, economic, and political activities. Implications of surveillance extended beyond immediate personal discomfort by altering the social fabric of Tamil and Muslim communities, creating barriers to open dialogue, free association, and the expression of grievances, aspects not fully addressed in existing reconciliation literature. My findings highlight the disproportionate impact of surveillance on vulnerable groups such as female ex-combatants, revealing negligence of gendered concerns that impede their reintegration into society, and perpetuating the cycle of poverty and social exclusion, hindering reconciliation efforts. These findings extend prior literature of the specific struggles faced by female ex-combatants, such as surveillance, stigma, and reintegration challenges, that remain underexplored in existing studies (Azmi, 2021; Höglund, 2019). This exemplifies the intersectionality of gender, conflict, and reconciliation, where prioritising immediate needs often comes at the expense of fundamental rights of women ex-combatants to fully participate and shape the reconciliation narrative on the ground. My empirical findings highlight and add to the existing implications of comprehensive surveillance adopted by the government on civil society organisations, NGOs, and grassroots initiatives active in reconciliation and human rights programs, which represent a gap in the current academic discourse.

Land appropriation in the North and East by the military for purposes of economic development represents another significant factor obstructing the development of an inclusive and equitable society. Empirical findings in Chapter 6 lay out local perspectives on the

occupation and exploitation of civilian lands, perpetuating systematic marginalisation of minority communities through the loss of livelihoods, social status, and the erosion of economic well-being and political rights. The inability of local government institutions to effectively trace ownership of ancestral lands due to the destruction of legal documentation during the war has alienated those seeking to reclaim their properties.

My empirical analysis draws attention to a governance model that supersedes civilian concerns and prioritises security over reconciliation, leading to a lowering of legitimacy and effectiveness of local government institutions powerless to take civilian administrative decisions over military interests. Hassles of navigating an unresponsive administrative system create additional barriers to reconciliation, particularly for vulnerable groups such as women-headed households. Furthermore, my findings provide novel insights into how militarisation alters social dynamics within communities, especially among women, by fostering divisions based on perceived loyalty to the state. I have also focused on the expansion of military influence over civil administration and various civilian business sectors in the Northern and North-Eastern provinces, which has contributed to the marginalisation of these communities.

The overarching theme of lack of trust leads to the onset of pervasive scepticism among participants on the implementation of the 13th Amendment (discussed in Chapter 7). This scepticism can be juxtaposed with a more optimistic outlook on the amendment as a viable path towards devolution and reconciliation encountered in earlier literature. The disparity between these perspectives can be attributed to the implementation of the amendment by successive Sri Lankan governments to maintain the existing power dynamics and appease international observers at the cost of a systemic erosion in the political aspirations of minority communities, illustrated by the regular postponement of provincial council elections. In my empirical analysis, I have raised broader questions on the persistence to circumvent the implementation of a transparent reconciliation process, especially amidst changing governments and shifting policy perspectives between 2019 and 2024. I have pointed out that the reluctance to hold

elections is an outcome of Sinhalese nationalistic resistance, which collectively holds a vote-changing power base within Sri Lanka, and fears among the main political parties of altering the internal political balance of power and risking their political futures at the expense of minority rights and reconciliation. By highlighting tensions between Tamil and Muslim communities over the proposed merger of the Northern and Eastern provinces, my findings draw attention to competing minority claims that complicate simplistic binaries of victimhood and reconciliation, which are often overlooked in mainstream academic debates.

In Chapter 7, I have identified the absence of comprehensive language rights as a key challenge for the ongoing reconciliation process. In alignment with Herath (2015) and Wyss (2020), my empirical findings confirm that the marginalisation of Tamil language rights and the dominance of Sinhala in public administration continue to hinder access to services and reinforce exclusion. Many participants ascribed this to a *linguistic identity* adopted by communities to establish rigid demarcations between themselves and their perceived "other" in post-war Sri Lanka. In this context, I focused on the concept of *mother tongue* that occupies a central position in preserving individual, ethnic and social identity, in which the dominant linguistic group considers inclusion of minority languages as a dilution of power. This dynamic has played a decisive role in shaping individual and collective self-perceptions and inter-group dynamics of both Sinhalese and Tamils.

I have identified that unilingual Tamil women who are disproportionately treated during service provision encounters are hesitant to bring complaints on language discrimination against public institutions. My empirical evidence contributes to the existing literature on political exclusion via language. The current linguistic divide hinders effective communication, perpetuates misunderstanding, frustration, and animosity between the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese majority.

The concept of 'everyday' peace points towards intergroup interactions that can foster peaceful coexistence by reaching a consensus on reconciliation in deeply fractured societies,

for instance, through the formation of collective entities, such as supporters, victims and survivors in women's associations. My empirical findings contribute to the limited existing literature on youth engagement and empowerment initiatives, highlighting their role in 'everyday' reconciliation by mitigating hate speech, stereotypes, and prejudices through the sharing of narratives related to war and violence. Digital storytelling has emerged as a useful medium for young individuals to articulate their concerns regarding community issues and promote social cohesion, and represents a bottom-up strategy for peacebuilding that creates spaces for counter-narratives and intercommunal understanding. Achieving holistic reconciliation in Sri Lanka requires a delicate balance between addressing historical grievances, promoting linguistic and cultural rights, and fostering genuine dialogue across all segments of society. It necessitates a commitment from all political parties and civil society members to put behind the rhetoric and engage in substantive action to eradicate the root causes of the conflict and build a truly inclusive 'national identity'.

8.3 Directions for the Future

Revitalisation of the ongoing reconciliation process in post-war Sri Lanka needs to incorporate a meaningful dialogue for overcoming linguistic divides. A civil society leader suggested promoting youth-driven cross-cultural initiatives, and creating spaces for intergenerational dialogue involving older citizens and survivors who experienced first-hand the trauma and violence of the war. Central to this is a deepening of 'everyday' reconciliation, which is critical to bridging fractured relationships and fostering a sense of shared belonging by incorporating dialogue mechanisms that emerge organically from within communities. I can emphasise intra-community discussions as an essential foundation for inter-community engagement because internally generated dialogue can reframe perceptions of diversity within groups before facilitating conversations among formerly hostile parties. Productive cross-community dialogue may be problematic in the immediate post-conflict context, but carefully orchestrated discussions as part of a long-term process can reshape relationships among

communities. A critical factor for implementing dialogue involves determining the appropriate stage of reconciliation because not all conflicts are immediately ready for reconciliatory dialogue, and communities require time before entrenched attitudes become more flexible and meaningful discussions about minority rights can occur.

As grassroots reconciliation efforts increasingly turn to digital platforms for storytelling and community engagement, it becomes important to examine the role of social media in shaping narratives and perceptions across ethnic divides. Looking ahead, an important question remains as to *how the growing influence of social media, in its capacity to spread mis, dis and malinformation, impacts trust-building, inter-communal dialogue, and the sustainability of grassroots reconciliation efforts.*

The shift towards grassroots-led reconciliation is challenging and needs to avoid romanticising "the local" or assuming a unified civil society (Mohanty, 2006). The role of grassroots activism is important, but should not be seen as a replacement for state responsibility. Bottom-up initiatives should be supported and amplified by state structures, creating a synergy between local knowledge and resources, augmented with national-level implementation of policies. Grassroots actors should be positioned in local initiatives based on the legitimate power and resources they possess, including local knowledge and resources, to enhance peacebuilding efforts by the state (Brewer, 2010). A Grassroots Activist participant highlighted that, *"the Sri Lankan state's role within this process must be [that] of a 'facilitator' that must be actively led by the participants' needs and rights identified in the reconciliation process".*

Despite the political rhetoric surrounding wartime grievances, feelings of marginalisation by minority communities, ongoing militarisation, and the lack of trust in state actions, I have observed an organically developing reconciliation at the grassroots level. It is fostered by genuine understanding, respect, and a commitment to face painful historical realities shared among ethnic groups and those engaged in community services and grassroots initiatives.

To conclude, the journey towards reconciliation in Sri Lanka necessitates a profound change in attitudes in the commitment to human rights, recognition of cultural and historical wounds and victimisation of the minority communities. Until all sectors of the Sri Lankan community are truly heard, respected, and empowered, the reconciliation process will remain deficient in its implementation and risk slipping through the collective memory of its citizens.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Participant Information Sheet

Information Sheet

Project title: Reconciliation in Sri Lanka: Opportunities, Challenges, and Pathways for a Holistic Reconciliation Process

Researcher: Viduri Dediyagala
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The Purpose of the Research

The Sri Lankan civil war between the Sri Lankan government and Tamil separatist groups lasted for nearly 30 years before ending in 2009. The post-war period witnessed various state efforts aimed at reconciliation and addressing the grievances of different communities. However, the outcomes of these efforts and their impact on inter-ethnic relations and social cohesion have been the subject of ongoing debates and assessments by different stakeholders. The dynamics between communities, including Tamil, Sinhalese, and Muslim, as well as their interactions with state institutions, continue to evolve and shape the broader sociopolitical landscape.

Therefore, this research aims to investigate opportunities and challenges in existing reconciliation processes and the dynamics of ongoing conflict. It intends to examine pathways for holistic reconciliation centered on minorities' self-articulated visions to foster sustainable positive peace in Sri Lanka.

You are invited to participate due to your professional engagement and knowledge related to the reconciliation process, either through inter-ethnic mediation programs and advocacy, analysis of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, or policy recommendation/creation.

Details about your participation

Your participation in this research is completely **voluntary**: you have the freedom to decide whether or not to take part. I respect your right to refuse participation in this research. If you decide to participate, you can still choose to end your participation at any time, without giving a reason. You can also refuse to answer, without giving a reason, any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. If you withdraw from the study, any information that you have provided up to that point will also be withdrawn and securely destroyed.

I will ask you to provide **verbal consent** to take part in this research at the beginning of the interview.

If you agree to participate in this research, I will ask you to participate in a one-on-one interview that will take place virtually through Zoom between April– June 2024, depending on your preference. The interview will last for approximately 90 minutes and can take place on a day and time of your choosing (including after regular working hours).

I will also ask if you consent to be contacted a second time for an optional brief follow-up conversation if I have additional questions or require clarification of certain points and to review quotes that might be included in my final thesis project. This would take approximately 45 minutes and would take place between June- August 2024. If you have not received an invitation for a follow-up interview within 3 months of your initial interview, you can assume that no further participation will be requested from you for this study.

The interview will include questions about:

a. Reflections on conflict dynamics in post-war Sri Lanka,
b. Existing reconciliation approaches,
c. Directions for strengthening reconciliation processes,
d. Any other areas that will come to the surface during the discussion relevant to the above inquiry

You will not be asked to share any personal experiences or political/ government views. You will also not be asked to speak on behalf of your organisation. Interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed only if you provide consent.

Anonymity and confidentiality

You have the right to remain anonymous (meaning it won't be linked to your identity in any form) in any document based on this research. Your name and any other personal information that could lead to your identification will not be included. Any data included in my research will be identified only by a general descriptor (e.g., 'grassroots activist,' 'government administrator').

Only I (Viduri Dediyagala) will have access to the information that you provide, and I will not inform anyone of your participation in this research. All research files (including typed notes and transcripts and recordings) will be encrypted and stored on the University of Northern British Columbia's (UNBC) secure server. All paper documents (e.g., handwritten notes) will be immediately scanned, encrypted and uploaded to a secure cloud server after which all handwritten documents will be shredded and destroyed. No identifying information will be included in files containing information from interviews, and files will be identified only by code numbers. Audio recordings will be retained for 5 years and other files will be retained for 10 years before being securely destroyed (electronic files will be deleted and paper files will be shredded).

Recognising that there may be limits to confidentiality associated with organisational email accounts, if you would prefer to use a different email address for communication regarding this research, please indicate your preferred address in your response to the invitation email.

How your data will be used

The data collected for this study will primarily be used for the development of my graduate thesis and potential future publication outputs (such as academic journal articles or research/policy briefs) focussing on opportunities and limitations in the existing reconciliation processes, since the end of the civil war in 2009. You will have the option to review any of your quotes or statements that might be included in this article or any other research reports, and you can identify any points that you wish to be clarified, reworded, or removed.

A PDF copy of the final graduate thesis will be shared with you (with your consent) once it has been published in the University's Theses Repository.

The Anonymous data collected through these current interviews may also be used to inform analysis for potential future publication outputs (an academic journal article or a research/policy brief).

Risks and benefits of the research

Questions about the impacts of marginalisation may potentially lead to psychological risk through recalling distressing memories. To mitigate these risks the interview questions will focus on responses on broader reflections of ethnic marginalisation and reconciliation within Sri Lanka and I will not ask about your personal experiences or political views. You can also refuse to answer any of the questions and/or can end your participation at any time, without giving a reason.

There are free psychological support resources located within Sri Lanka available for you to consult whenever you feel you need assistance. Some of these resources are listed below:

a) National Mental Health Helpline (1333) - This 24/7 helpline is operated by the Ministry of Health: https://nimh.health.gov.lk/en/tag/helpline/
b) Sumithrayo - This is a national program that offers free counseling and psychotherapy services: https://srilankasumithrayo.lk/
c) Shanthi Maargam - This NGO provides free counseling, support groups, and psychotherapy for individuals affected by trauma: https://shanthimaargam.org/
d) Family Rehabilitation Centre (FRC) - They offer free counseling and therapy services, particularly for individuals affected by the civil war: https://www.hhri.org/organisation/family-rehabilitation-centre-frc/
e) University Counseling Centers - Several universities in Sri Lanka, such as the University of Colombo (https://cmb.ac.lk/sco) and the University of Peradeniya (https://site.pdn.ac.lk/centers/capsu/index.php), offering free counseling services.

While there are no direct benefits from participating in this research, your insights will inform the broader understanding of opportunities and challenges in existing reconciliation processes and the dynamics of ongoing conflict since the end of the civil war. This will also help me to develop a graduate thesis research and to inform broader policy recommendations regarding transitional justice, power-sharing reforms, minority protections, ameliorating hate speech, and holistic reconciliation measures to build an inclusive and peaceful post-war society in Sri Lanka.

You will also be reimbursed for any internet data costs incurred during this interview to ensure there are no additional expenses associated with your participation.
This research is supported by funding from the University of Northern British Columbia's Research Strategic Initiatives Grant (RSIG).

Questions or concerns about the research
If you have any questions about the purpose, processes, and participation in this research, please contact me (Viduri Dediyagala) by email at dediyagal@unbc.ca or by telephone at +94 76 913 2519 (Sri Lanka).

If you wish to contact the research supervisor of this project please reach out to
Dr. Gabrielle Daoust, Assistant Professor from the Department of Global and International Studies by email at Gabrielle.Daoust@unbc.ca .

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this research, please contact the **UNBC Office of Research** by email at reb@unbc.ca or by telephone (Canada) at +001 250 960 6735.

Appendix 2. Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank you again for making time for this interview today! Before we begin, I'd like to go over a few important points.

As mentioned earlier, the aim of this research project is to investigate the challenges and opportunities in Sri Lanka's current reconciliation efforts. The overarching goal is to explore potential avenues for a more holistic reconciliation approach - ultimately fostering sustainable positive peace in post-war Sri Lanka.

Our discussion today should last approximately 90 minutes.

I want to confirm that you had a chance to review the information sheet I provided earlier? Please let me know if you need me to go over any details again. Do you have any other questions about the research before we proceed?

For our conversation today, I want to ensure you are in a private setting where you feel comfortable speaking openly. Are you in a sufficiently private location to proceed comfortably?

With your permission, I will be taking some written notes during our interview. Is that alright with you?

To ensure I accurately capture all the details of our discussion, I would also like to audio record our conversation so I can transcribe it later. Let me reiterate that I will be the only person with access to the recording and transcript. However, I will only record if you are comfortable with that. Also, I can share any transcribed quotes or statements that may be included in my analysis, so you can review them beforehand. **I will make every attempt to limit the records containing your personally identifiable information, keeping it anonymous from any documents and files containing the interview data. This includes your name or any other connection to your personal or professional affiliations. In the event of a data breach, I will follow proper incident response protocols available through my affiliated university, the University of Northern British Columbia.**

Do I have your consent to audio record this interview?
[With participants' consent, interviews will be audio- using Zoom's recording function]

Oral consent

Before we begin, as noted in the Information Sheet your participation in this research interview is entirely voluntary. You have the freedom to choose whether or not to take part. Even if you initially agree to participate, you can change your mind at any point and withdraw from the interview without providing any explanation. You also have the right to refuse to answer any specific questions that may make you uncomfortable, again without needing to give a reason. With that understanding, do you consent to participate in this research interview today? Do you have any other questions before providing your consent?

Interview Questions

1. How would you describe the current state of relations between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil/Muslim minority communities in Sri Lanka?
2. From your perspective, what have been some of the main factors influencing the processes and outcomes of reconciliation efforts since 2009?
3. To what extent have existing reconciliation processes effectively addressed the concerns and issues of minority communities such as language rights, regional autonomy, and political representation?
4. How have the existing reconciliation processes addressed the gendered aspects roles, relations, and experiences of women?
    4.1. Have the existing reconciliation processes considered the unique perspectives and challenges, particularly for women from minority communities?
    4.2. What do you think are the potential benefits of adopting a gender-sensitive approach to peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts in post-war Sri Lanka?
5. What institutional reforms or policy changes would you recommend to strengthen inclusive reconciliation processes?
6. Beyond government-led programs, what roles can civil society, grassroots activists, and local peacebuilding initiatives play in fostering reconciliation?
7. Looking ahead, what do you see as the main challenges to sustainable peace in Sri Lanka?
8. What is your vision for a holistic and sustainable reconciliation process that could lead to positive peace in Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic society?
9. Is there anything that we haven't discussed today but you think is important to this topic?

Since we discussed several complex issues today, are there any relevant policy documents, reports, or other informational materials you could provide that would help me gain a deeper understanding?
Finally, is there anyone else that you know who might have insight to share on this topic? If so, would you be willing to ask this person for their explicit permission to share their name and contact information with me? If they wish to see a copy of the information sheet first, please share this with them.

Conclusion

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today and for sharing your valuable knowledge and insights on this important topic.
I would like to inform you that there is an opportunity for an optional brief follow-up conversation if I have any additional questions or require clarification on certain points.

Additionally, during this follow-up conversation, I would also like to review any quotes or statements from our initial interview that might be included in my final thesis project. This follow-up conversation would take approximately 45 minutes and would take place between June - August 2024.

I would like to invite you to participate in this optional follow-up conversation, but please note that it is entirely up to you to decide if you would like to do so, and you are under no obligation to accept this invitation.

So, would you be willing for me to contact you for this optional follow-up conversation?
Please remember that if you change your mind regarding this follow-up option at any point, that is absolutely fine. You can simply contact me by email to let me know, and I will respect your decision. **If you have not received an invitation for a follow-up interview within 3 months of your initial interview, you can assume that no further participation will be requested from you for this study.**

Thank you again for your time and valuable contribution to this research!