

Between Exclusion and Political Engagement: Voices of youth from post-war Sri Lanka

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*Since the civil war ended in 2009, political spaces in eastern Sri Lanka have remained restricted. In a recent study, **Fazeeha Azmi, Cathrine Brun and Ragnhild Lund** looked at how young people from Tamil and Muslim communities in eastern Sri Lanka experience, are affected by, and strategise upon displacement and recovery. Here they discuss their findings, and write that “youth voice” still remains on the margin in an increasingly ethnically polarised environment*



This article presents findings from a research project titled *Mobilising youth for recovery and reconstruction in situations of displacement – spaces and places of social inclusion*. The project studied how different groups of young people in different situations experience, are affected by, and strategise upon displacement and recovery in eastern Sri Lanka. The research team was composed of geographers from Sri Lanka and Norway. We had all worked in Sri Lanka for a number of years, doing gender and children geographies and researching displacement and recovery after disaster and war. The primary participants of our research included war affected female and male youths from Tamil and Muslim communities in eastern Sri Lanka. The methods used in the research were life histories, focus group discussions and formal and informal follow up interviews that enabled youth to actively engage with problems affecting their lives. Interviews and discussions took place in safe spaces such as universities, homes of respondents and places identified by youth in their villages, which enabled them to discuss their issues freely and in their mother tongue. By doing this we were able to obtain shared knowledge in a highly sensitive research context.



The fieldwork for this study took place during several stages starting from the immediate post-war year 2009, 2011 and continued up to 2014. Through the process of analysing data and sharing our insights with research participants, other stakeholders and researchers, we developed a framework for understanding young people's everyday engagements with politics in the context of the transitions that a post-war setting where the state was moving quickly from conflict to development.



In a [paper published in 2013](#), we examined the axis between voiceless and vocal politics (derived from Kallio and Häkli, 2011), which focuses on how much voice youth have in politics and how they engage with politics in different ways and in different spaces. We also examined the axis between political presence and involvement which indicates to what extent young people voice their politics in public, which highlighted the spatial aspects of social exclusion.

Our research unraveled the particular ways in which young people relate to, identify with, and dissociate themselves from the state. In particular, we analysed the official discourses of the state and president after the war and how young people felt it difficult to accept or forge a one nation identity. Due to the long standing tension between majority and minority groups and the impact of war on different ethnicities, the interrelated identities of ethnicity and minority continue shape their political awareness and agency.

We found that youth's political spaces are located at the interfaces of the axis between political presence and political involvement and the axis between voiceless and vocal politics. We also found that young peoples' exclusion in economic, political and social spaces influenced their engagement in politics as the violent war history and the politicised and militarised postwar setting continued to have an impact on the life of youth and constrained their engagement in politics throughout the whole period of the project. Unemployment and lack of opportunities to participate in state sponsored development initiatives have excluded Tamil and Muslim youths from political spaces

and have resulted in lack of political voice at the national level.

The young people talked about formal politics more independently in their homes or in the university among friends. Their political presence and involvement in public space took place in a more concealed way. Interviewed youth expressed their concern about ethnic and minority identities over their youth identity as a constraint to political engagement. The minority status provided a strong sense of disillusionment, fear and social exclusion. Apart from these factors youth also identified that the military presence conditioned their political participation.

Our research findings highlighted that the aspirations of interviewed youths were linked to freedom to move, access to better education, employment and various important facilities and political participation. Youths were caught up in a political space where their voices were muted and marginalised. It is important to acknowledge that this situation does not mean that young people are not interested in politics because their experiences of exclusion were expressed through anger, resignation, fear and frustration. Sri Lanka should not ignore the fact that it was under similar conditions youth from poor, marginalised and excluded communities resorted to political violence in the past.

Reflections on the continued relevance of our findings

The young people excluded from post war recovery and politics were among the poorer part of the population living in the more marginal areas of the former conflict zone. Six years after the official end of the war, the Sri Lankan electorate overturned the Sri Lankan president in the elections of January 2015. Dissatisfied with the post war regime, the majority of the war affected people in the north and east of the country, including the youth overwhelmingly voted to oust the President. Young people were dissatisfied with the Sinhala Buddhist nationalism patronage, largely enabled by a victor's peace and an increasing [nationalist discourse developing among the majority](#). Youth from the minority communities are satisfied with the political changes that took place in 2015, but we cannot expect that this satisfaction would last long. The "youth voice" in politics and their political participation still remains on the margin in an increasingly ethnically polarised environment with tensions developing between hardline groups both in the north and east. If elements and actions that threaten the peace in the country are not curtailed, there is still the danger that young people may resort to militancy.

This article is based on Azmi, F., C. Brun, R. Lund. (2013) Young people's everyday politics in post-conflict Sri Lanka. Space and Polity 17(1): 106–122. Access the full article [here](#).

Cover image: Jami-Us-Salam Jumma Masjid Mosque in Batticaloa town, Eastern Province, Sri Lanka. Credit: AntanO [Wikimedia Commons](#)

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About the Authors

Fazeeha Azmi is a post-doctoral research fellow attached to the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Department of Geography, Norway. Her research interests include post war youth, poverty and livelihood changes, women and migration, internal displacement and post war development in Sri Lanka.



Cathrine Brun, is the Director of Centre for Development and Emergency Practice (CENDEP) at Oxford Brookes University. Her research is mainly in the field of forced migration and humanitarian work as a result of conflicts and disasters. She has conducted research in Sri Lanka, South Caucasus, India, UK, and Norway.

Ragnhild Lund is Professor of Geography/Development Studies at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, NTNU, since 1994. Her research interests are theories of development and geography, gendered

mobilities, development induced displacement, post-crisis recovery, children and youth, feminist geography and women's activism. She has conducted research in Sri Lanka, India, Malaysia, China, and Ghana.



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