

# **Dangerous Obscurity: A Study of the Female Suicide Combatants of Sri Lanka**

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*Abstract: Since 1991 the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam have used female suicide operatives in their civil war with the Sri Lankan government. Gaps in research about these phenomena suggest that it's not seen as a gender specific problem and that female suicide bombers can be compared toe to toe with their male counterparts. I contend that the situation surrounding female suicide terrorism is unique and that certain discernable socioeconomic indicators can explain the reasons behind why some women of Sri Lanka become more active in suicide terrorism. I have compiled a suicide terrorism dataset out of terrorist acts perpetrated by the LTTE, between 1987-2009. I analyze the amount of suicide terrorism, by gender in a given year, by many different statistics. I also use interviews to compare cases of female combatants of the LTTE in similarities dealing with recruitment and motivation. My findings indicate gender specific ways suicide cadres are recruited, as well as an increased effectiveness in using female suicide bombers versus men.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In May of 1991, the first female suicide bomber of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) got through the crowd in Madras which was surrounding Indian president Rajiv Ghandi, and detonated herself. She killed her target and 11 others (Rabasa et al 2006). Since then many of the Black and Sea Tigers (suicide bombers of land and sea, respectively) have been women. Stereotypes of women render such attacks more potent in the sense of the attention that it garners from the international media. Due in part to the apparent obscurity surrounding the lives of the suicide bomber, and the fairly new trend of using female cadres in this way, there are gaps in the research profiling potential suicide bombers and the different ways that men and women are called to this fate. The argument presented here is that men and women participate differently in this violent phenomenon. Women in traditionalist cultures deal with more inhibiting factors in the pursuit of a suitable life, and that female suicide terrorism will increase due to its strategic value and effectiveness over their male equivalents, particularly in traditional societies.

## **HISTORY**

In order to understand the apparent prevalence of female Sea/Black Tigers in operation, it is important to understand the context of the Sri Lankan conflict. Until 1948 Sri Lanka was a colony of the U.K. and during the colonial period preferential treatment was given to the Tamils. When Sri Lanka was given independence the Tamil minority was left in a precarious position politically, with the dominant Sinhala society. Adding to an already tenuous political climate, northern Sri Lanka's primary exports at the time of tea, rubber, and coconut began to fall as many commodities did during the late 1950's (Jayaweera 2002). This being a more Tamil dense region, the Tamil people were hit the

hardest. The women suffrage movement took place in 1931, and Ceylon was one of the first colonies to give its women political rights. In 1960 Ceylon (Sri Lanka) made history by electing the first female Prime Minister, Siramavo Bandaranaike (Jayaweera 2002). At least at the surface, Sri Lanka appeared to be fairly progressive with regard to women's rights and empowerment.

Instances of policy like the Sinhala only act of 1956, which made Sinhala the only official language, and the Educational Standardization policy of 1972, which gave Sinhala applicants placement in medical school with scores lower than Tamil applicants, are just two examples of the state adopted policies that are explicitly discriminatory. These policies weakened the political presence of the Tamils and led to bouts of ethnic cleansing and riots against Tamils during the 1960's and 1970's. These protests were directed particularly against middle-class urban Tamils, with some of them having received preferential treatment from the colonists. After national riots which were allegedly staged by Sinhalese leaders that culminated in July of 1983, approximately 2,000 Tamils were killed, and nearly 100,000 displaced (Imtiyaz and Stavis 2008). In an interview after the 1983 riots, Sri Lankan president Jaywardene was quoted to say:

*"I am not worried about the opinion of the Jaffna (Tamil) people now. Now we cannot think of them. Not about their lives or of their opinion about us. The more you put pressure in the north, the happier the Sinhala people will be here... really, if I starve the Tamils, Sinhala people will be happy...(Imtiyaz and Stavis 2008). "*

The riots were followed by extensive shelling by Sri Lankan forces in the Tamil north, which furthered feelings of desperation among the Tamil civilians, dislocated them, and drove them to solidify behind, and seek protection from the LTTE.

## **THEORIES ON SUICIDE TERRORISM**

The assumption that these types of suicide terror attacks will increase, is consistent with the trends of terrorism itself. According to Pape, (2003) the strategic use of coercive terrorism is driven greatly by concessions made by the opposing state. In the case of Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese dominated government has been forced to the negotiating table a few times, but not much substance has come from it because the LTTE has not been allowed to secede. The Sri Lankan government has submitted to negotiations in 1995-96 and 2002-04. These bouts of negotiation and cease-fire are seen as a weakening of the resolve of the Sri-Lankan forces, and thus a sort of mini victory which only perpetuates continued suicide terrorism. As Pape notes, suicide terrorism is often seen as the weapon of the desperate because it could ultimately cost the group support in its own community. This may be true but it can also attract those who are more extremist in their views, as well as their financial support domestic and international, while simultaneously polarizing civilians. Included in this context related to female suicide terrorism, another recruiting tactic is to shame the male population into joining the fight (Eager 2008).

Rational Choice Theorists, like explained in Eager (2008), put forth that the actors of suicide terrorism elect to do so after a logically dictated cost-benefit analysis. Whenever a person is confronted by a system of government that they see as discriminative, they have two choices: join the armed struggle or remain inactive and supportive. It is easy to see from the Rational Choice Theory perspective, how people who have been excluded politically, socially etc., could be more apt to see the positives of such a seemingly irrational act. Others, like Attran (2003) assert that it is the organizations who are operating under rationale choice, and that organizations like the LTTE will seek out the vulnerable,

stigmatized and weak-minded in the group. Whether or not the suicide combatant is rational or subjugated, is likely to be a case by case scenario that is not black and white but very complex.

Assumptions about terrorism center around it being a byproduct of poverty and that the typical perpetrators of terrorism are uneducated, poor, and young men. However those who support terrorism (as per the polling of 1,357 respondents from the Gaza Strip in December of 2001 by Krueger and Maleckova) are in higher numbers when they have a secondary education (39.4%) versus illiterate (32.3%). Also, when broken down categorically, the rate of housewives favoring violent terrorism (36%) is higher than the labor/ craftsman/ farmer respondents with 34.6% of them favoring terrorism as a legitimate form of political violence (Krueger & Maleckova 2003). The vast majority of respondents who agreed with the use of terrorism had at least a high school education. Although not a study from Sri Lanka, the use of female suicide bombers and the nationalist struggles of Palestine and Sri Lanka are similar. Also, if higher levels of education can more easily justify the use of terrorism, then women in Sri Lanka, with 83% of the female population educated to the secondary level, can be assumed to garner just as much support for terrorism, if not more than the un-and under-educated. The following figure shows education levels among female Palestinian suicide bombers, which is relatively comparable to the Sri Lanka situation.

**(Figure 1)**

## **GENDER ROLES**

For the female Black tiger, the reasoning for why she would choose to be a suicide

bomber is intertwined in the complex socio-economic conditions which surround her, the sexualized nature of the conflict and the constraints on gender roles. One of the ways that women are controlled and isolated is through the use of domestic abuse. In the study done by Sivayogan and Subramanian in 2001, discussing the prevalence of wife beating in the Trincomalee district of eastern Sri Lanka three key factors significantly increased the likelihood of abuse: being a mother of many children, being a young bride and being poor. Of the 417 women surveyed 92 of them responded that they had been abused by their husbands. This constitutes about 30% of the women questioned but it is important to keep in mind that these women are still married, and that the range of respondents from similar studies in Sri Lanka who admitted to domestic abuse is between 30-60%. Of the 30% reporting abuse the mean age was 31.1 years, while the mean age at time of marriage was 19.1. Women who were married before 18 were twice as likely to suffer abuse, and of these women 79% believed men to be superior to women. What this tells us is that women in Sri Lanka are deeply entrenched in patriarchal ideology and even exhibit self denigrating beliefs.

The findings of this study by Molhotra & Mather (1997) were that while a wife who has two to six years more education over her husband will have more input on certain matters, like financial and organizational input was mostly unchanged. The percentage of women having input on financial matters levels off with women who are educated up to the secondary level, 83%. Of these women, only 11.5% who are married are in paid employment. This is in contrast to opinion polling on the matter which reflects that 42% of women favor employment during marriage. The authors of this article conclude that measuring levels of education and employment among women is not sufficient in

signifying levels of empowerment. Also this study does not specifically take into account Tamil women, who in most cases are less likely to have access to education and employment due to the isolation of the Tamil-controlled territory. The inference here is that many women may have extensive education, but it is not put to use in the form of employment. Regardless of a woman's level of education, input on social/organizational matters in the household continue to remain male dominated.

## **WOMEN AND THE WAR IN SRI LANKA**

According to Tambiah (2005), there are four ways that women specifically, are victimized in a violent conflict. First, women are victimized directly by rape, injury or death. Secondly they are dislocated within their own country. Thirdly, in a way which is unique to women, is the loss of male relatives, which is an emotional and social, economic loss, and finally they are victimized by being recruited into the ranks of the LTTE as female combatants (Jayaweera 2002). Focusing on the first aspect of victimization, not only are women and girls often raped during intense conflicts, the penal code in Sri Lanka did not, until 1995, have a provision specifically dealing with statutory/custodial rape or sexual assault within the construct of marriage. Further, in the Tamil tradition, rape dishonors women, rendering them unfit for marriage.

Another of those ways in which Tamil women are victimized by the war, is by the death of their male relatives. As stated earlier, only 11.5% of married women have paid employment and thus the loss of husbands, brothers and fathers can mean the loss of financial support for the remaining 88.5%. Coupled with this is the necessity for protection in travel and in the displacement camps themselves. This problem of socio-economic dependence on male relatives is unique to the female situation and can lead to the fourth



way Tambiah asserts that women are victimized. This happens when a woman is recruited by the LTTE during a time when the woman is vulnerable both emotionally and economically. Thousands of displaced Tamils are placed into refugee-type camps. A study of health trends in Sri Lanka found that in 2002, while in the general population suicide rates were 37.5 per 10,000; in the camps it was nearly triple that with 103.5 suicides per 10,000 people (Jayasekara 2007). Beyond the gender specific sphere, in the open air shrine and relief center at Madhu, a striking paradox is found in the struggle for survival in these camps:

*“The economic and political implications for displaced people living in Madhu vary depending on which side of the ‘line’ the shrine is located. When living in LTTE-controlled territory, access to goods is very difficult due to the embargo from the South. However, mobility within the LTTE-controlled area is quite free, and many households in Madhu have one or more family members who participate in fishing, agriculture, or day labour for wages, creating some degree of self-sufficiency. In contrast, when Madhu was taken over by the Sri Lankan Army for a spell in March of 1999, scarcity of goods disappeared and all kinds of banned products became available. Ironically, however, the jobs that people in Madhu had accessed in LTTE-controlled areas were now off limits, separating them from the livelihoods they had established, and making the purchase of the now widely available goods difficult.” (Hyndman & de Alwis, 2004)*

Joining the LTTE means work, food, money, and a sense of independence from the cycle of male dependency. Trends of unemployment and dependency are only exacerbated by the fact that 56% of all jobs in Sri Lanka are government jobs, meaning that in Tamil controlled areas, these jobs are almost completely missing (Bloom, 2005).

### *WOMEN’S RIGHTS OR NATIONALISM?*

We have in the nationalist cause for Tamil Eelam a curious paradox in which the struggle for female emancipation is inextricably connected to the struggle for a Tamil state which uses chastity, and tightly controlled ideals of gender to control women. Where the control exerted for nationalist self-determination is really the politics of controlling female

bodies. While women may join the LTTE because of resentment toward norms (Alison, 2003), their actions uphold the reactionary regime of the LTTE. Despite the official sanctioning of wide-spread change in practices like casteism and dowries, Miranda Alison found that most women she spoke to who were not cadres replied that female Tamil fighters were unsuitable for marriage. Controlling female sexuality is both a matter of tradition and a nationalist response to building identity and in 2002, the women's wing of the LTTE circulated a handbill calling for Tamil women to protect their culture through the way that they dressed:

*"True women's rights and women's freedom are based on your education and awareness. Therefore love your land, think of its people, think of its future and make your decision!" In the handbill, therefore, sexual expression and desire are intimately implicated in the nationalist project and mapped out predominantly on the bodies of women. Not only does women's dressing appropriately "signif[y] the collectivity's bound-aries" but the admonition to dress according to one's age and civil and familial status signals other hierarchies that will be retained in the LTTE's nationalist project. Dress is a means to contain female sexuality-married women must signal their sexuality as sublimated into wifehood and motherhood, while girls must dress so as to preserve Tamil culture. Culture is made coterminous with female sexual chastity. "*  
(Tambiah, 2005)

Tambiah cites this is an effort to contain female sexuality. Female combatants are expected to simultaneously protect their culture from demoralizing dress, while the female cadre must also tolerate advances made by male cadres. When out of fatigues, the female soldier is ordered to the same dress code of female Tamil civilians. It seems an odd supposition that the preservation of culture is synonymous with the chastity and modesty of women. Women in the Tamil controlled areas are thus in a precarious position with regard to their sexuality, especially female combatants, who, if intolerant of advances may be dishonored by male cadres, being labeled as a lesbian (Tambiah 2008).

## FEMALE SUICIDE TERRORISTS

There are two kinds of people who become suicide bombers, those who are socialized through a subculture, and educated people who volunteer due to a personal grievance. Bloom (2005) writes that “women appear more often motivated by personal reasons.” With the use of suicide bombers, the effect is strategically greater than the cost. While suicide terrorism knocks out one supporter, it:

*“enables the organization to recruit many more people. The perpetrator is dead and so can never recant their decision. Besides, any potential negative costs associated with an attack (like the death of civilians) are mitigated by the logic which argues that the brutal state is so horrendous, its victims (the perpetrators of violence) have no other means of expressing their anger and no other avenues to channel their grievances than this ultimate sacrifice (Bloom 2005).”*

The apparent benefits to a terrorist organization in using suicide bombers coincide neatly with the use of female combatants. Socialization is key however, which depends heavily on the organizations ability to create infrastructure and hone in on peoples vulnerabilities.

O’Rourke (2009) argues that female terrorists respond to recruitment primarily out of an idealistic desire toward their homeland’s cause. She also finds that there is a significant relationship between the effectiveness of, and the gender of the suicide bomber, as seen in the following table.

### (Table 1.2)

The strategic use of the element of surprise can be more easily achieved when using a woman, who, in most instances is less likely to be seen as a threat. A woman is more likely to get through large crowds, useful when the target is a specific political agent.

Perhaps one of the reasons why an educated women is favored due to her ability to communicate bilingually and ability to carry herself confidently and without being suspect, “women were able to gain access to areas where men had greater difficulty because the other side assumed that the women were second-class citizens in their own society-dumb, illiterate perhaps, and incapable of planning an operation (Bloom, 2005).” Lastly, the use of women in martyrdom adds emphasis to the prediction of more violence to come (Pape 2003):

*“Organizations that sponsor suicide attacks can also deliberately orchestrate the circumstances around the death of a suicide attacker to increase further expectations of future attacks.”*

Therefore using a woman, especially if she has a family, education or a seemingly adequate future, is more effective for creating a hero to the nationalist community and demonstrating the ambiguity of who they will use for a suicide terrorist.

## **METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS**

I compiled a data-base using the individual attacks as my Unit of Analysis, with the Dependent Variable being the amount of female suicide attacks within a year compared with several different economic indicators. The data range is from 1991-2009, with Independent level Variables across 12 categories, including GDP, unemployment, education, crime statistics, and reports of rape. Of the variables I gathered one of the most comprehensive was unemployment rates, which I compared here to the ratio of female suicide incidents to incidents as a whole.

**(Figure 2.1)**

Upon visual inspection of this graph, there doesn't appear to be relationship

between these variables. In order to determine whether there is statistical significance, I ran a correlation test. This seemed to be appropriate to determine whether these variables are significantly correlated to the ratio of female incidences of suicide terror. However there was no statistical significance. I also used GDP per capita scaled down by divided by 100 to determine if there appeared to be any relationship between amount of economic activity per individual and the number of suicide attacks.

**(Figure 2.2)**

Once again it was found that there was not a statistically significant relationship between these variables.

I decided to take a different approach, looking at the more micro-level biographies of the failed and successful female suicide bombers, comparing similarities in disposition at the time of recruitment and possible motivation, as seen in this table.

**(Table 2)**

Although these are all Palestinian woman (with the exception of Menake), the separatist struggles of Palestine and Sri Lanka are similar.

Consistent with the literature, I found that these women, mostly Palestinian, were either single or divorced, with the majority having some high school education. Just as O'Rourke (2009) found, the women involved in suicide terror are more likely to be motivated by the death of a loved one than their male counterparts. Of the women she interviewed versus the men, she found that about 30% of women cited this as a reason for joining suicide squads, while men mentioned it as motivation only 2.8% of the time. Even

O'Rourke, who tries to disprove differing motivations between men and women, admits that in the case of Sri Lanka rape is a notable factor. During the interviewing of 14 female LTTE members, 7 cited rape as a reason for other women they know to have joined, while 4 mentioned it as a personal reason. With regard to my own data I tracked 100 incidents of suicide terror in Sri Lanka. 24 out these were female incidents, killing 263 people. This brings the average amount of casualties per incident to 10.96. Assassination attempts were also dominated by women. This is incomplete data however in that not all incidents were distinguished by gender. However it is worth noting that all five of the incidents of suicide terror that I tracked in 2009 were female. This supports O'Rourke's hypothesis that the phenomena is on the rise, which can be seen here in a scatter plot graph that determines the linear direction of anticipated incidents of suicide terror by gender.

**(Figure 3)**

## **CONCLUSION**

Arguably women are more easily recruited for suicide terrorism, because they are limited in scope for what they can do in hand to hand combat, compared to men. Because the training that goes toward the suicide terrorist is not general, but very narrow, perhaps a woman who is not formidable in any other way can find honor by giving her body as a gift to further the cause of her people. "[B]y operating under such archaic notions of patriarchy-assumptions that they are less warlike or the stereotypes about motherhood- all reinforce the inequalities of their societies, rather than confront them (Bloom, 2005)." Self sacrifice and the desire for equality are twisted into fulfilling patriarchal ideals. Regardless of the fact that women represent roughly 30% of suicide bombings there are a very few

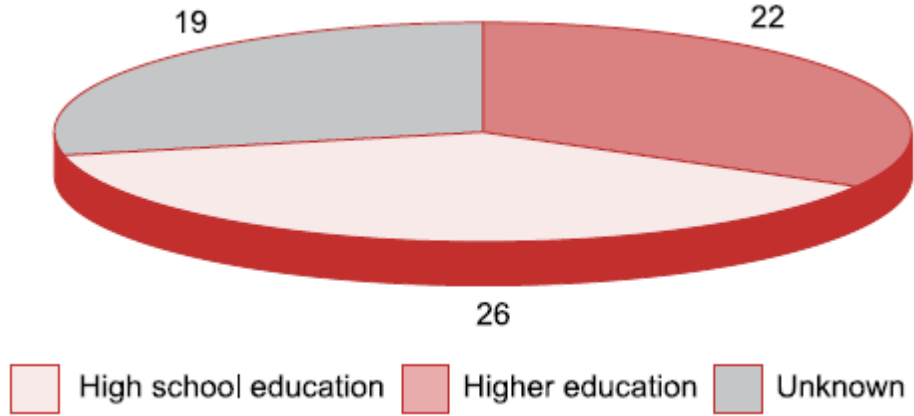
women in leadership roles, within the LTTE, or any terrorist organization for that matter.

Secrecy hides the identity of martyrs even from their families. Only attending officers and trainers know of her plan (De Mel 2004). Once the plan is acted on, often the identity of the woman in question is not revealed, however there does appear to be years where women in Sri Lanka participate more than others.

My research suggests three main conclusions: 1. There are specific motivating factors which affect female participation differently than men; for example rape, the death of male family members, and resentment of social norms. 2. That female suicide terrorism is more effective than male suicide terrorism and strategically superior. 3. That due to these reasons, female suicide terrorism will likely increase over time.

If it can be proven that the prevalence of female suicide bombers, on a year to year basis, are related to the nature of empowerment, or lack thereof, solutions for such trends may include channeling funds toward NGO's who deal with women's issues, to organize women's centers for education and health, as well as women only shelters for displacement and domestic abuse. Since they are drawn to it for different reasons (personal vs. fanatical), it stands to reason that there would be different indicators for how male and female cadres participate.

**Figure 1. Level of Education of Female Suicide Bombers-Palestine-2002-2006 by Frequency.**



Source: Schweitzer, Yoram (2006)

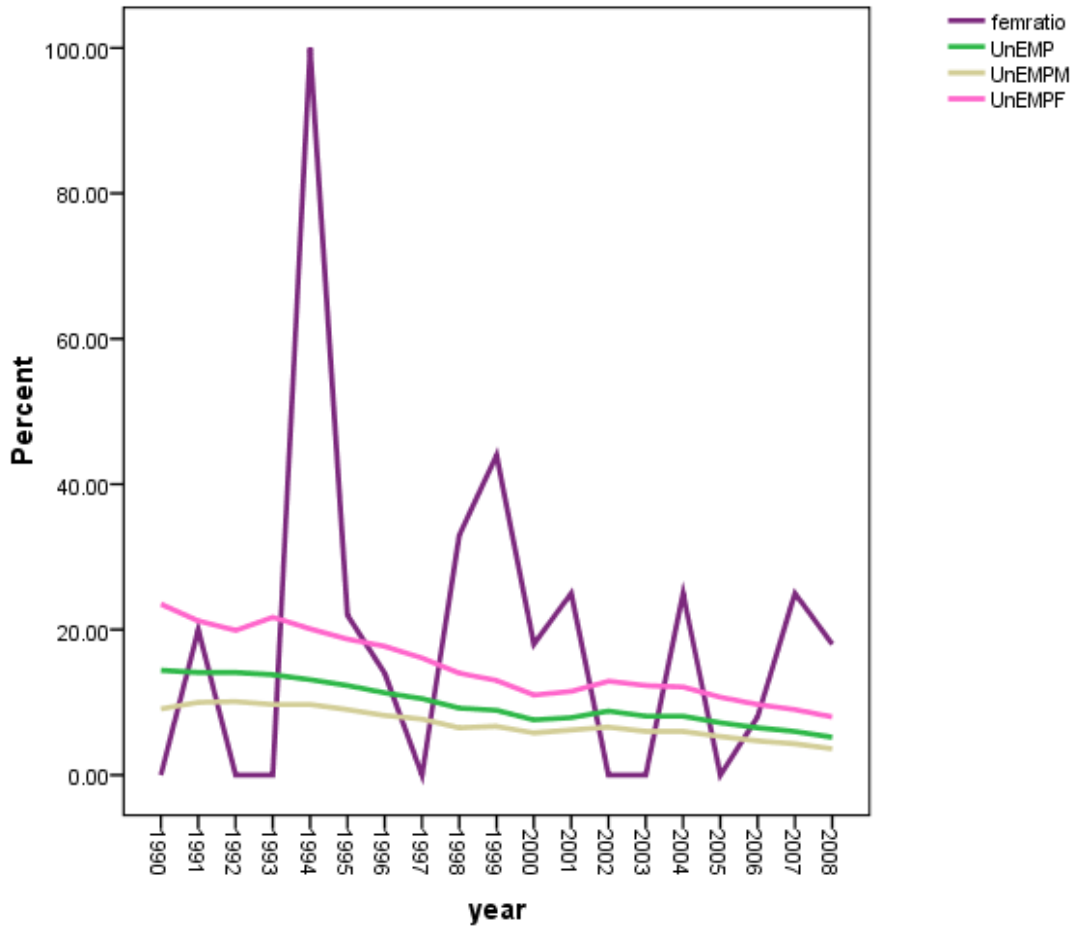
**Table 1. Average Number of Casualties per Attack.**

	Lebanese	PKK	LTTE	Chechen	Palestinian	Total
Female	2.3	2.3	12.1	20.9	3.4	8.4
Male	3.3	1.4	10.4	13.3	4.0	5.3
Percentage (Female: Male)	70%	164%	116%	157%	85%	158%

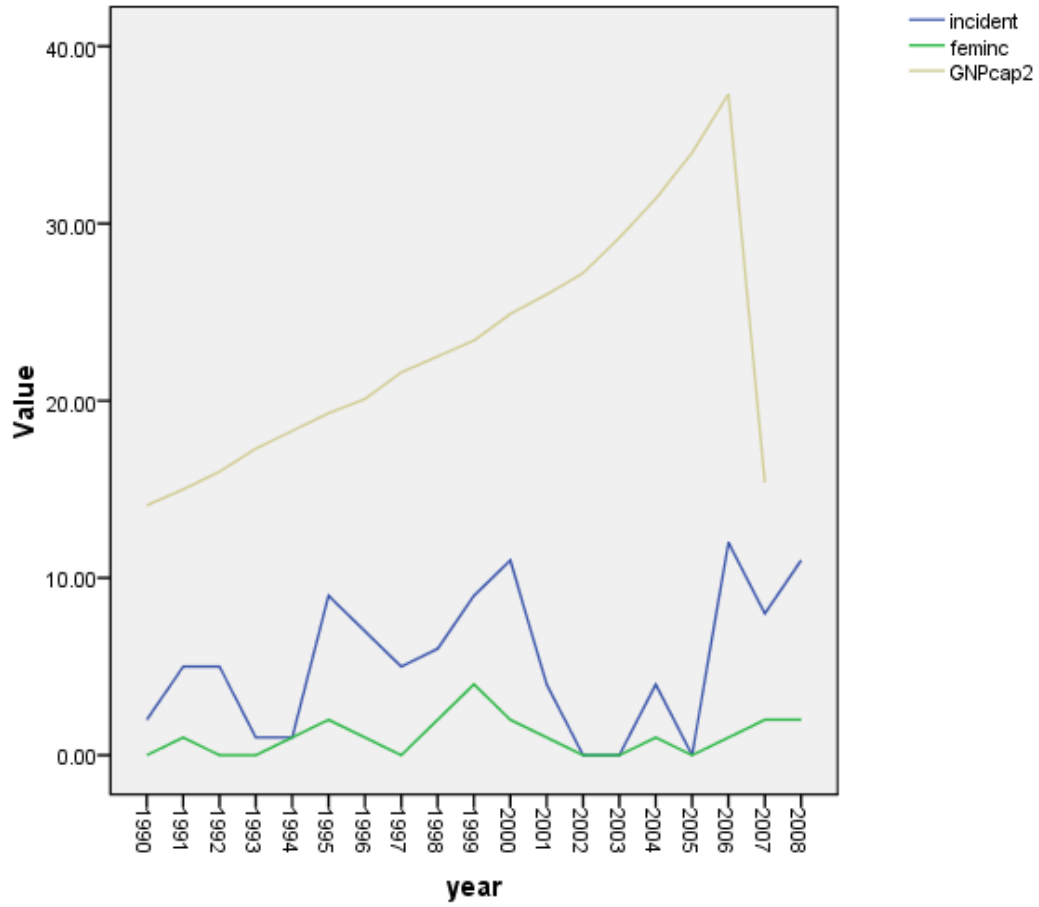
Source: O'Rourke, Lindsey (2009)



**Figure 2.1 Unemployment Rates by Gender Compared to Ratio of Female Attacks to Total Attacks**



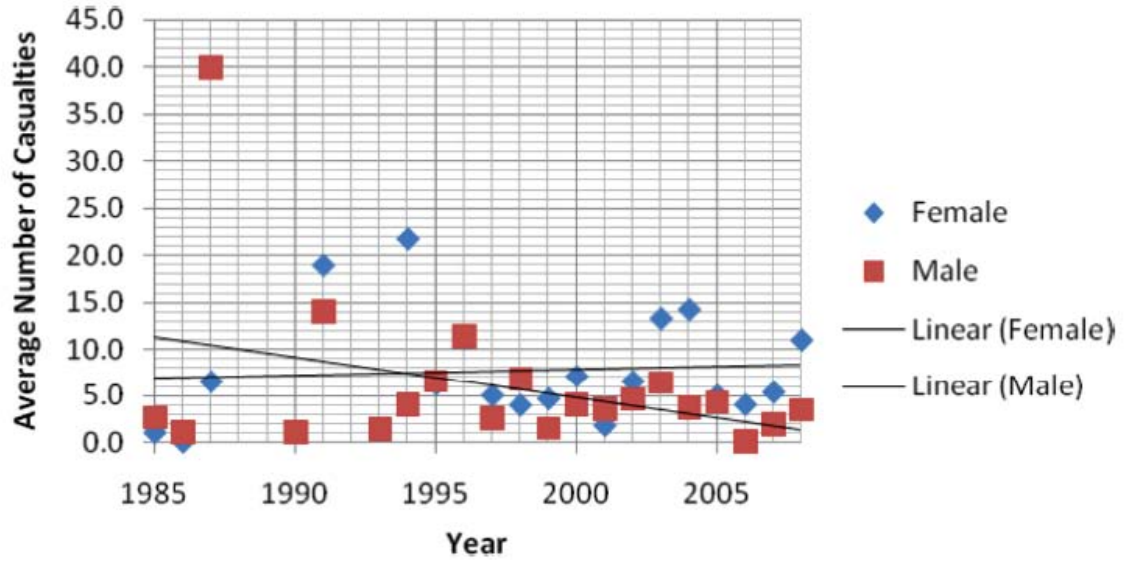
**Figure 2.2 GDP per capita Divided by 100 Compared to ST in Sri Lanka over Time**



**Table 2. Micro-Level Analysis by Biographical Resources**

Column1	Column2	Column3	Column4	Column5	Column6	Column7	Column8
Name	age	marital	economic	motivate	sexual assault	death of loved one	education
Abu-Aisha, Darine	25un	D	priv	R	N	Y	Secondary
Abu-Salem, Zeinab	25un	S	n/a	R	N	N	primary
Ahmed, Arin	25un	S	n/a	R	N	Y	University
Akhras, Ayat	25un	E	poor	R	N	Y	Secondary
Al-Bas, Wafa	25un	S	poor	R/N	N	N	primary
Daraghmen, Hiba	25un	S	n/a	R	Y	Y	n/a
Idris, Wafa	ov25	D	poor	R	N	Y	Primary
Jaradat, Hanadi	ov25	S	priv	R	N	Y	University
Khamour, Thouria	25un	S	n/a	R	N	N	primary
Takafka, Andaleeb	25un	S	n/a	R	N	N	n/a
Menake	ov25	S	poor	N	Y	Y	primary

**Figure 3. Scatterplot of Average Casualties, Controlling for Time, by Gender**



Source: O'Rourke, Lindsey (2009)

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