Context of Denial in the Practice of Local Knowledge during Grassroots Peacebuilding: An Analysis of Grassroots Activists' Experiences in North and East Sri Lanka

Shameera K. Walpita

Lived experiences of conflict-affected locals are an important source of local knowledge that should be incorporated into peacebuilding. However, the national project of peacebuilding in post-war Sri Lanka has failed to consider local knowledge and voices. Utilizing a grassroots perspective, this study examines the experiences of grassroots activists in north and east Sri Lanka to understand the various challenges that have hindered their attempts to share experiences and narratives of war and cultural practices across communities. The findings show that a "context of denial," identified variously as institutional denial, fear-based denial, and community denial, has prevented grassroots activists from engaging in a meaningful dialogue about peace, reconciliation, and justice. This study helps build an understanding of how grassroots activism functions and is challenged.

Keywords   grassroots, local peacebuilding, context of denial, everyday peace, local knowledge

Introduction

The unique characteristics of Asian countries present different issues at the grassroots level of peacebuilding. Even though (predominantly Western) scholars involved in academic discussions on local and bottom-up peacebuilding, such as Julian et al. (2019) and Balcells and Stanton (2021), have highlighted that conflict-affected ordinary people at the grassroots level are an important source of local knowledge that should be incorporated in postwar transformation, in practice, especially in the authoritarian governance structures in Asia, postwar contexts in the region not only fail to include grassroots perspectives but also refuse to acknowledge the past and its impact on grassroots movements.

Sri Lanka presents a distinctive case study for peacebuilding studies. Since

"negative peace" was achieved in 2009 with a one-sided military victory by government forces over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the country has experienced what can be considered a national peacebuilding attempt that has been disconnected from international actors (Höglund and Orjuela 2013). Its national peacebuilding projects have been strongly criticized as confusing and unavailing (Åkebo and Bastian 2020), illiberal (Goodhand, Korf, and Spencer 2011; Höglund and Orjuela 2012; Stokke and Uyangoda 2011), and nationalist (Subedi 2022). Sri Lanka is also a crucial example of the interaction between a complex context and multiple levels of resistance that prevail within local peacebuilding. After the end of a violent, three-decade conflict in 2009, Sri Lanka established neither institutional access to deliver social justice nor a national dialogue on the divided narratives of war, despite the significant attempts made by different stakeholders, especially grassroots activists, to do so. Furthermore, the government institutions aimed at reconciliation, social cohesion, and peacebuilding have largely ignored the local knowledge and ongoing grassroots initiatives. The grassroots activism launched by the Tamil-speaking community in the conflict-affected north and east, including but not limited to the families of disappeared persons, has not been considered in state initiatives and has been repressed by elites for over ten years. Therefore, it is essential to understand the practice of local knowledge at the grassroots level among such challenges and the experiences of grassroots activists in north and east Sri Lanka. Studying their initiatives in the postwar context will enhance our understanding of horizontal inter- and intra-ethnic peace efforts.

At the national peacebuilding level, the Mahinda Rajapaksha administration (2009-2014) and the subsequent *Yahapalana* (good governance, 2015-2019) government missed the window of opportunity for reconciliation in the immediate aftermath of war. Neither did they reach out to the communities and provide for their needs by ensuring their access to justice, nor was the power decentralized or much-needed constitutional amendments put through. The Mahinda Rajapaksa administration adamantly refused to acknowledge any alleged war crimes (McCargo and Senaratne 2020, 103). These successive governments not only failed to acknowledge the past institutionally or by any other means in the aftermath of the war, but they have also been accused of trying to suppress those who sought to bring together stories of the past and the present and of negating demands to acknowledge the past, especially at the grassroots level. Furthermore, the postwar political scene was flooded with acts of violence such as torture, extrajudicial killings, and enforced disappearances across the country (Braithwaite and D'Costa 2016, 17; DeVotta and Ganguly 2019, 140-41). In such a context, it is pivotal to understand how the oppressed communities with limited or no access to an effective peacebuilding institutional framework have handled their claims and grievances.

This research focuses on the multifaceted challenges faced by grassroots

activists in Sri Lanka's post war north and east in their efforts to preserve and understand divergent experiences of local knowledge in different communities. While scholars have given considerable attention to the issue of the exclusion of local knowledge from national peacebuilding endeavors in Sri Lanka, a significant gap remains in our understanding of the challenges faced by Sri Lankan activists at the grassroots level. This study aims to explore the barriers hindering the sharing and recognition of local knowledge by studying experiences of the grassroots activists operating in the areas where discussing the past and addressing war-related grievances are restricted. Those attempting to address these concerns face threats, violence, and repressive/oppressive measures by the state. To this end, this study explores how the grassroots activists in the north and east are challenged and interpret those challenges as they work towards integrating local knowledge into grassroots peacebuilding initiatives.

The paper starts with a review of theoretical debates on the positioning of grassroots actors in local peacebuilding as well as the significance of grassroots actors as wielders of local knowledge. A major focus here is on the interpretation of the grassroots context in current discussions. The section also includes an overview of relevant empirical research on Sri Lanka. Then, upon briefly discussing the limited inclusion of the grassroots in national peacebuilding, the paper turns to its main subject of local knowledge sharing at the grassroots level in Sri Lanka. It explores the context of denial as an extensive challenge for grassroots activism and examines how grassroots activists are struggling to use their experiences in the course of fulfilling their agendas. Having revealed the intricate interplay of contextual challenges and proactive grassroots strategies, in the conclusion, the study posits that the context of denial has hindered the potential of the grassroots activism.

By arguing that structural constraints might limit the capacity of conflict-affected communities as influential actors, this research helps extend the discussions on everyday peacebuilding.

Grassroots Peacebuilding and Local Knowledge in Existing Research

Peacebuilding is a complex and multifaceted process requiring an in-depth understanding of local dynamics, contexts, and actors. The perspective of conflict transformation theorists led by Lederach (1997) initiated an understanding of peace that considers the inclusion, agency, and participation of local and grassroots activists from contexts that had been previously considered illiberal or conflict driven. Lederach's definition of the grassroots level as the level of the masses highlights the multitude of peacebuilding roles undertaken by the community. Subsequently, this understanding has been utilized by critical peacebuilding theorists to problematize the roots of liberal peacebuilding

failures under the "local turn" (De Coning 2018; Lidén, Mac Ginty, and Richmond 2009). According to Mac Ginty (2015, 851), a prominent scholar of critical peacebuilding school, "local is a … system of beliefs and practices that loose communities and networks may adopt." This perception dismisses the geographical contamination of the actors engaged in local peacebuilding and criticizes the total il-liberalisation of everyday (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013).

The term *local* is used to differentiate between international interveners and domestic actors (Donais 2009, 7; Höglund and Orjuela 2012, 99-101). Additionally, it can refer to non-elite and non-state actors, spaces, and activities such as NGOs, civil society organizations, diasporas, local communities, or citizens at large (Mac Ginty 2015, 848; Paffenholz 2010). In contrast, the term *grassroots* emphasizes activities and the agency of ordinary people within a community or society who have a direct stake in peacebuilding. Grassroots initiatives are characterized by the emergence of power and initiatives from ordinary individuals themselves (Donais and Knorr 2013).

The emphasis on grassroots or ordinary people often brings fresh perspectives that may not be readily apparent to external or more established actors (Julian et al. 2019, 216-17). Grassroots actors are positioned, based on the power and resources they possess in these discussions, not as peacebuilders themselves but as supplementary actors who provide local knowledge and resources to further peacebuilding efforts by other, more powerful and skilled supralocal actors (Brewer 2010). However, it is crucial to recognize and respect the autonomy of grassroots actors in determining their priorities and strategies in peacebuilding (Mueller-Hirth 2019, 169-72). Kent (2011, 442-45), discussing the dynamics of justice in post-referendum East Timor, highlights that the survivors are not passive recipients but active participants in shaping, challenging, and transforming the justice discourse.

Discussions about local knowledge production and diffusion in peacebuilding are derived from two interrelated spaces of analysis, namely, actor-based questioning, i.e., "who learns from whom?" (Goetze 2019, 347), and practices of the local actors, i.e., what can be learned. Studies on actor-based presentation identify broad categories of groups, including but not exclusive to ethnic or religious minorities, women, youth, and civil officials, as actors at the grassroots level. On the other hand, the action-based emancipatory approach to building local peace assumes that real local needs can be identified only by listening to voices from below and that the local community knows and has experienced real causes of conflict.

Leonardsson and Rudd (2015) highlighted the significance of including local voices in the peacebuilding agenda, aiming for a better understanding of the real causes of the conflict and the local needs. Local engagement is important since grassroots activity is a breeding ground for conflict (Anderson and Wallace 2013; Odendaal 2013); hence, Paffenholz (2015) emphasized that local actors have

the capacity to prevent, manage, and resolve conflicts. Furthermore, Mac Ginty and Firchow (2016) suggested that identifying local perceptions of peace is a precondition for sustainable peace. However, this argument raises the following question: "Is the knowledge possessed by local actors detached from the negative belief systems in the community?"

Previous research has identified challenges in the postwar context that can have negative effects on grassroots activism. Divisions within society along ethnic or religious lines and security issues associated with political violence are illustrations of such challenges. Mac Ginty's (2014) discussion of everyday peace articulates how intergroup communications promote peaceful conduct in a deeply divided society by avoiding or ignoring contested issues and topics. For example, activists form groups, such as women's networks, to overcome security challenges and build inspiration by contributing to society and obtaining the feeling of being a helper, supporter, and survivor. The group leaders motivate their members to continue working in the field and gain satisfaction from helping others and sharing. However, such efforts of grassroots activists rely on defensive mechanisms rather than actively contributing to widening the national agenda of peacebuilding, even at the grassroots level itself (Bukari, Noagah Bukari, and Ametefe 2021). The context of denial negatively affects their ability to be active rather than passively engaged with defensive strategies.

This survival/resistance strategy is less pronounced than civil society engagement but emerges through the everyday diplomacy discussed by Mac Ginty. The scholar highlights that individuals and groups use everyday survival strategies to navigate social communications in a deeply divided society (Mac Ginty 2014, 555-57). The concept of resistance also suggests that repressive contexts where the truth is denied are a reason for grassroots resistance (Millar 2020). Furthermore, critical peacebuilding research suggests that future scholarship on social, political, and economic networking, relationships, and activities should take into consideration the perceptual construction of the local (Mac Ginty 2015).

While there is a rich body of literature on memory and justice in the context of Sri Lanka, there is limited discussion of the local experiences as a source of grassroots agency. It appears that the focus has primarily been on vertical relations with international and national agencies (De Alwis 2016, 147-61). McCargo and Senaratne argue that the memory of the war is monopolized "by the state and by the victors," which indicates the substantial marginalization of minorities and their lived experiences within the national narrative (McCargo and Senaratne 2020, 103-106). The horizontal dynamics and the role of grassroots agency within communities have received relatively less attention. This limited understanding of the horizontal dimension in the literature on peacebuilding in Sri Lanka overlooks the complexities and nuances of local agency, particularly in relation to lived experiences in war and postwar contexts. Koens and Gunawardana (2021,

492-98), for instance, highlight a range of challenges Tamil women activists face in their political participation. To fully grasp the dynamics of peacebuilding at the grassroots level, it is crucial to study and understand the agency of the grassroots actors within their communities, the power dynamics at play, and the strategies they employ to address challenges and advance their objectives. In other words, in postwar Sri Lanka where vertical interactions among actors are limited, we need to comprehend what local spaces are and in which ways local knowledge is used horizontally at the grassroots level.

Methods

An inductive research design was used to collect and analyze data for the exploratory aims. An in-depth interview analysis was conducted with grassroots level activists covering the northern (Kilinochchi, Mannar, Jaffna, and Mulaitivu) and eastern (Ampara and Batticaloa) provinces of Sri Lanka. Virtual interviews were conducted with the use of Zoom technology in August 2021. The rationale for conducting online interviews was attributed to the travel constraints, both international and local, imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Precautions were taken to establish rapport and trust between the interviewer and participants, including preliminary conversations to mitigate any potential hindrances caused by the lack of face-to-face interactions in the virtual platform. In the areas under scrutiny numerous grassroots initiatives are taking place despite the lack of institutional recognition or circulation of activist knowledge and perspectives. However, this does not imply that these actions or activists are confined to only these two regions. Rather, the two areas account for the bulk of their lobbying efforts.

Twenty grassroots activists who had personal experience with the war and are involved in peacebuilding and reconciliation were selected to take part in this research. They included men and women from 20 to 60 years old. Their ethnic identity was marked as *Tamil* or *Muslim*; both groups speak Tamil as their mother tongue. At the time of interviews for this research, the activists were engaged in the spheres of women and youth empowerment, human rights, law, and advocacy and focused on the community level. All of them were either grassroots-level activists or mid-level activists working closely with the grassroots level. They either worked independently at the grassroots level or worked and trained under civil society organizations operating mainly in the northern and eastern provinces.

The participants were recruited based on two criteria: engagement at the grassroots level in northern and eastern provinces and their role as activists. The researcher used both the assistance of a research coordinator (in the northern provinces) and the snowball method to recruit the participants. They first

provided informed consent to be recorded and to have their data used in this research. A preliminary conversation was conducted to help build rapport between the interviewer and participant on the purpose of the study and provide the interviewees with information on the researcher's affiliation and follow-up contact details.

In-depth interviews were conducted using open-ended questions. The main question posed to the participants asked about their experiences sharing narratives and stories related to war and violence. The subsequent questions covered the topics of challenges in understanding engagement with the grassroots and national levels, daily challenges to activism, experiences with people who speak different languages, interactions with different levels of bureaucracy, and coping mechanisms. The online interviews were transcribed and analyzed by thematic discourse. Recurring themes and significant statements were extracted, organized into groups, and reorganized considering their connections in an iterative and cyclical process.

Inclusion of Grassroots Knowledge in Sri Lankan Peacebuilding

First, let us briefly look at the predicament of integrating grassroots knowledge from the people in the northern and eastern regions of Sri Lanka into the national framework for peacebuilding. On multiple occasions, grassroots peacebuilding activists have communicated their knowledge, perspectives, grievances, and needs to national peacebuilding institutions tasked with addressing the root causes of the conflict, national unity, and reconciliation. Among those numerous attempts, two institutional acknowledgements of grassroots knowledge are notable. In one instance, in 2011, both individuals and organized groups presented their testimonies and written submissions before the Lesson Learned and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC). However, the role assigned to these testimonies in the LLRC report was limited, confined to that of victims or witnesses. Adding to this, the LLRC report remains devoid of any mention of the critical concerns associated with alleged war crimes—an issue of paramount importance to the grassroots. Furthermore, the LLRC report faced substantial critique for being perceived as an effort to strike a balance rather than to establish a comprehensive framework prioritizing grassroots concerns and needs of the nation. In the second instance, the Consultation Task Force on a Reconciliation Mechanism (CTFRM) was established in January 2016 as an endeavor to foster discourse on the establishment of measures for transitional justice and reconciliation in Sri Lanka. Numerous zonal platforms, including town hall meetings, focus group discussions, and sectoral/thematic debates, were attended by local civil society and women's organizations as well as local leaders and victims and survivors. However, for the second time, the Sri Lankan

government overlooked the findings, recommendations, efforts, and testimonies of those involved. While the establishment of the Office of Missing Persons saw considerable involvement of civil society organizations in national peacebuilding, it is important to acknowledge that grassroots activists may have had differing perspectives and priorities regarding their participation in such institutions (Wakkumbura 2021, 368).

In addition to these initiatives at the national government level, civil society organizations working towards advancing truth and reconciliation encourage local people to exchange their experience and knowledge. International and local NGOs have cooperated to conduct truth-seeking initiatives such as the Citizens' Commission on the Expulsion of Muslims from the Northern Province by the LTTE (2010) and experience-sharing initiatives to reconcile ethnic groups such as Tamil-Muslim-Sinhala Sisters Group. These are among some of the rather significant efforts that include opportunities for grassroots members to share their local knowledge and experiences.

It is fair to say that meaningful inclusion of grassroots knowledge into national peacebuilding has not been sufficient. Even though there have been multiple institutional ports of access to postwar peacebuilding institutions, national efforts have not been adamant on meaningfully including locals for the purpose of reconciling at the national or cross-ethnic levels.

The Distinctive Features of Sharing Local Knowledge at the Grassroots Level in Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka

Grassroots activists have been working relentlessly to promote peace and reconciliation in the aftermath of the country's 26-year-long civil war at international, national, and grassroots levels. One way in which these activists have contributed to peacebuilding is through sharing local knowledge. Apart from tiresome engagement with the national institutions discussed above, the horizontal sharing of local knowledge is one focus of this paper as a significant feature of grassroots/ community-level reconciliation.

In-depth interviews conducted for this study involved interviews with grassroots activists who have been actively engaged in peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts. These activists shared their personal experiences which varied greatly but highlighted the profound impacts of war and postwar situation on individuals and communities. The lived experiences of interviewed activists encompass diverse dimensions, including displacement, loss and grief, destruction and infrastructure damage, trauma and mental health impacts, economic disruption, as well as transitional justice and accountability claims.

The activists revealed that local knowledge and experiences are indescribably entangled with the functions and activities of grassroots peacebuilding. The

key areas of local knowledge and experiences shared by these activists can be categorized into five broad themes. First, grassroots activists share local knowledge related to cultural diversity and identity. Traditional cultural practices of music, cuisine, and religious teachings and practices have been used to promote intercultural and interethnic dialogue and understanding. Diverse religious and ethnic groups, including Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, have shared local knowledge related to interfaith dialogue and cooperation and organized interfaith events and activities together.

Second, local knowledge and experiences related to reconciliation and healing practices are exchanged across ethnic groups. Among the most frequent methods employed by grassroots activists in the north and east are participatory methods, storytelling, and the arts. The participatory strategies include, for instance, street protests and memorial ceremonies. Storytelling as well as narrative writing—writing and sharing stories with international NGOs and local civil society organizations—is another powerful tool utilized to share the experiences of community members and highlight the impact of conflict and violence on their lives. For example, Participant 15, with more than 20 years of experience in community peacebuilding, described using art-based narratives as an "individual and collective expression of the issues and voices through illustrations, cartoons, paintings, and sometimes mere colors and lines" (author's virtual interview, female activist of Batticaloa, August 30, 2021). The grassroots activists who convert their experiences into narratives hold a crucial role in peacebuilding since they directly share diverse experiences related to different perpetrators, which reminds peacebuilders that it is difficult to establish a common, complete narrative in a postwar context after a protracted social conflict. Through intra- and inter-community narrative sharing, grassroots activists illuminate conflict complexities and chart a more inclusive approach to peacebuilding, aligning it with the realities of the affected. This effort unveils that peace surpasses interethnic resolution, being grounded in human security, embracing education and "social existence," coexistence, health, food, trauma-healing, and information security, and transcending conventional political paradigms.

Third, local knowledge and experiences are significantly used in empowering individuals, particularly women, in the communities affected by conflict. Grassroots activists strive to establish connections among individuals who have diverse experiences related to the conflict, by creating platforms for sharing their stories. Inspired by their work with international NGOs and local civil society organizations, as well as their wartime experiences, such as helping their neighbors survive and appealing to the government and the LTTE, competent female activists have founded NGOs such as *Maha Shakthi* and *Viluthu*. These organizations have grown into respected institutions providing assistance to community members, especially women and young people, in building their lives and communities. As Participant 3 described, the main objective of her

organization is to "empower individuals at the grassroots level, enabling them to take the initiative within their communities and share their experiences" (author's virtual interview, female activist of Mannar, August 14, 2021). Instead of relying on externally imposed solutions, these initiatives aim to understand and address the real needs and problems faced by the community, which relate not only to war-related grievances and claims but also to extensions of postwar structural violence, such as alcohol consumption and illegal alcohol business, domestic violence and livelihood issues.

Despite differing war-related experiences and contradictory identities, women in the community use these everyday platforms to break through the silence and share their different experiences. For example, collaboration among mothers and women of disappeared family members is marked by their womanhood serving as the common platform for collaboration. Furthermore, shared experiences have served as a source of empowerment for activists, leading them to unite and collaborate. For example, people who experienced the disappearance of family members in Mannar gathered at a citizen committee referred to as *prajai kulu* and subsequently proceeded to establish associations with significant bargaining power.

Fourth, local experiences and knowledge are shared via social media platforms to amplify local voices. Youth engagement and empowerment contribute to overcoming hate speech, stereotypes, and prejudices by sharing experiences related to war and violence. For example, Participant 6, a male youth activist in Jaffna, has taken initiatives that encourage youth activists to engage in digital storytelling as a means to express their concerns about community issues and promote harmony (author's virtual interview, August 15, 2021). With these initiatives, the participant intended to "challenge prevailing narratives and promote open dialogue on hate speech, stereotypes, and prejudices." Similar initiatives utilized various forms of media such as mobile photography, short videos, hashtag campaigns, such as #everydayjaffna and #everydaykillinochchi, and comical videos shared via Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok; on each of these media, participants were encouraged to write and upload digital stories of the experiences they had in their own neighborhoods. Fifth, local experiences are shared at community-based development projects, such as microfinance programs, and *Sharamadhana* (welfare labor) campaigns.

The analysis above points to a similarity between the youth and women in terms of the empowerment they experience by sharing local experiences and knowledge. The self-perceptions of both types of participants have transformed from those of victimized local people to those of grassroots leaders within their communities. They have grown into actors who can elucidate issues arising within the community; they draw attention to possible negative behaviors or conditions such as hate speech or domestic violence. Grassroots activists, both women and youth, have used local stories and narratives, without threatening

the national political dialogue, to highlight the consequences of negative behaviors or conditions within society. Accordingly, horizontal knowledge sharing and experience-sharing facilitated by grassroots activists underscore the empowerment that war and postwar experiences can bring to individuals through the agency and resilience of affected communities. It shifts the narrative both inside and outside from viewing communities solely as victims to recognizing their capacity to actively contribute to peacebuilding.

Results and Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore the challenges grassroots activists face in sharing local knowledge and identify the strategies they have developed to overcome these challenges at the community level. The in-depth interviews with selected activists shed light on the following challenges and coping mechanisms of grassroots peacebuilding activists in north and east Sri Lanka, operating in a context marked by violence, oppression, and denial.

The Context of Denial in Grassroots Peacebuilding
Several settings of denial that impede the operation of a common platform for sharing local knowledge and experiences among grassroots activists have been identified. The fear instilled by government authorities and political elites, the rigidity of peacebuilding institutions, as well as social and cultural limitations emerged in the interviews as recurrent themes, mostly through the language used to express disappointment and describe challenges particularly in relation to participation and foreseeable results. The denial confronted by the activists can be broadly categorized into (1) institutional denial, (2) denial due to fear, and (3) denial at the community level. The first category encompasses the less than welcoming attitudes of government institutions toward the grassroots movement. In the second category are the intimidation tactics used to discourage people from participating in grassroots political activities and the reconciliation process. These can be observed in the government suppression of dissenting voices and the use of force. The third category comprises the ways in which denial is perpetuated through societal norms and values that prioritize conformity over dissent. This includes stigmatizing and marginalizing those who speak out against the status quo or violations related to the war, making it difficult for the grassroots movements to gain traction and effect change. I refer to these situations taken together as the "context of denial."

Institutional Denial: Institutional denial refers to the government's systematic refusal to acknowledge and address the demands of the grassroots movements. In the interviews, activists expressed exhaustion from having to repeatedly

share information with multiple fact-finding commissions and institutions, often without seeing tangible outcomes or results. For example, Participant 11, a female activist in Batticaloa, said, "We have shared information with many commissions—if I'm not mistaken thirteen commissions—throughout the war period and in the post-war period" (author's virtual interview, August 29, 2021). Participant 13, a community activist, expressed her sentiments in a similar way: "We are tired of going and giving information before each and every commission" (author's virtual interview, female activist of Eastern province, August 30, 2021). The repeated engagement has eroded trust among victims, and they are hesitant to participate further. Participant 9, an expert female lawyer in transitional justice and an activist of Mannar, explained, "Most families refuse to go and register [with another institution] again" (author's virtual interview, August 14, 2021).

The government's disregard for recommendations from grassroots and civil society organizations, particularly in the national reconciliation process with the CTF (Consultation Task Force) and the OMP (Office of Missing Persons) act passed by the Yahapalana regime in 2016, has caused frustration and disappointment among activists who feel that their contributions and expertise have been overlooked or ignored. These feelings were expressed as "neglected," "confusing," "very upsetting" and in the choice to say nothing at all. Activists were also concerned about the terminology used in the national reconciliation process. For example, the term "missing" used in the act was not accepted well by the activists, particularly those who were involved in drafting the report of the CTF with recommendations and information for families of the disappeared.

This institutional denial of grassroots efforts and civil society recommendations not only undermines the legitimacy of the national reconciliation process but also highlights the significance of addressing the concerns of grassroots activities in order to move towards a more inclusive and effective peacebuilding mechanism. Consistent official denial of any involvement in or having knowledge of enforced disappearances and human rights abuses can have profound and far-reaching effects on how the public feel about sharing their experiences. As Participant 18, a female disappeared community activist of Northern province, noted, "The denial of enforced disappearances may discourage us from sharing our experiences; our experiences carry weight and deserve to be heard" (author's virtual interview, August 15, 2021). All of the above-mentioned instances exemplify the detrimental implications of failing to include local experiences in peacebuilding, including the potential to diminish the local agency.

Denial Due to Fear: Denial due to fear among grassroots activists mainly occurs because of political repression or violence. The government and political elites instill fear, and their rigid nature constrains free participation in peacebuilding activities at the grassroots level.

Everyday activities of grassroots activists are swayed by the interference

of political elites, government security apparatuses, public officers, diasporas, and local leaders. The government intervenes at the grassroots level to direct the activities according to its own political interests. Threats and challenges are prevalent and aim to hamper activism and outreach. In conversations with the interviewer, the grassroots activists talked about the fear they feel in their encounters with the government, including the bureaucracy and political elites, in the postwar context of pervasive structural violence that hampers activism and community outreach. Constant inquiries about funding, gatherings, associations, and personal details of fellow activists, as well as having pictures of activists taken without their consent are typical examples of threats and harassment against those advocating for disappeared family members. Multiple activists mentioned their experiences of these intimidation tactics during their attempts to share local knowledge. For example, they said the government security apparatus, such as the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and Terrorism Investigation Division (TID), *harass* and *threaten* by making anonymous phone calls asking the people raising their voices about the issue of disappeared individuals for information about the funding sources, names of associates, organizational details, etc.

In this context where political repression and violence are prevalent, the exchange of war-related experiences and lessons cannot but be restricted out of fear for the participants' security. Both personal and systemic fear were evident among the interviewed grassroots activists. The former is related to the direct threat of violence that individuals face as a result of their peacebuilding activities. For example, a youth activist (author's virtual interview with Participant 5, male activist of Mullaitivu on August 15, 2021) often receives comments from others in her community such as, "You are endangering your [activist's] family and children, as well as ours, so it's better to stop talking about those topics." Threats of physical violence, harassment, and intimidation toward activists and their family members can be understood as causing fear for their very existence. Furthermore, personal fear also includes fear of retaliation or prosecution, for example, being removed from the job if one does not adhere to the government's political agenda.

Second, systemic fear is related to living in a society where the state is unable or unwilling to provide protection and justice even after the war has ended. For example, there are insufficient consequences, punishment, or legal redress for individuals responsible not only for mass human rights violations but also for everyday intimidating practices such as sexual harassment. Participant 19, (author's virtual interview, female activist of Jaffna, August 30, 2021) described having a "sense of insecurity and distrust in institutions" as well as a "feeling of powerlessness and hopelessness" when dealing with some government institutions due to this factor. Furthermore, systemic fear of poor protection and injustice is also evident in the issues that activists select to work on. Local participation is strongly supported by NGO functioning at the local level;

however, the security issues involved discourage the participation. Therefore, many of the youth engaged in reconciliation avoid conversations that could result in personal or systemic fear. This leaves most of the middle-aged activists who directly experienced the war struggle by themselves to make headway on the issues, while the youth and other locals choose to discuss less controversial topics and paths toward reconciliation.

Denial at the Community Level: Denial embedded at the community level refers to a situation where communities deny the experiences, interpretations, or impact of the conflict on themselves. The experiences of grassroots activists reveal several ways in which this happens. In postwar Sri Lanka, each ethnicity has its own dominant narrative on who did what in the conflict. Participants, employing a third-person narrative to describe a situation (e.g., "as *one* might need to fit in" (author's virtual interview with Participant 14, female activist of Northern province on August 16, 2021)), shared their experiences of feeling compelled to conform to the dominant narrative. This can be seen in complicated labels used for perpetrators and victims in Sri Lanka. Not only has the government committed war crimes, but different actors, including various para-military groups other than the LTTE, have committed war crimes. However, there are hierarchies at the grassroots level which cause activists to hesitate and choose very carefully what stories they share or whether to demand justice. As a result, only the victims who are proven to have directly suffered from government actions are able to engage in truth-seeking since it is clear that they are victims and the government is the perpetrator. Such selective approach constitutes a denial of the past and truth among grassroots activists themselves.

 Second, individuals are afraid of challenging the dominant narrative or expressing dissenting opinions as they may be stigmatized or marginalized in their own communities, particularly if they are seen as threatening the status quo. The above-cited comment Participant 5 (male activist of Mullaitivu, virtual interview on August 15, 2021) received regarding the endangering of hers and others' families or the reaction another female activist, Participant 2 (female activist of Ampara, virtual interview on August 14, 2021), received ("What is the use of talking about these incidents?") are just some of the examples of criticism the interviewed activists encountered in their own communities when attempting to share war narratives outside. These statements are evidence of the hesitance that prevails socially when individuals are asked to reflect upon the past due to the cost of recalling such memories. Thus, the refusal to recall the past comes from not only the government apparatus but also the activists' own communities. Additionally, within the community, there are stereotypes and prejudices regarding other ethnic groups and certain topics (e.g., reconciliation), and the activists who try to bridge this gap face pushback (such as discrimination) from their communities.

Some other topics that emerged in the interviews as challenges to sharing local knowledge at the grassroots level include gender, expectations of financial compensation for sharing experiences, and doubts in the significance of grassroots knowledge and experience. Since the interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the grassroots activists also mentioned the pandemic situation that impeded face-to-face interactions as an obstacle. However, the activists have developed everyday survival strategies to overcome these challenges. Their protective instincts emerged during the conflict and have persisted as a consequence of enduring disparities in interests. These divergent interests continue to exert influence over interactions between the grassroots activists and other stakeholders involved in the conflict.

Coping Mechanisms

The grassroots activists respond to the denial of local knowledge in a number of ways. The two strategies that they widely employ in order to actively challenge the context of denial are looking for networks and maintaining a low-profile. However, it is difficult to identify which coping mechanism is adopted in response to which context of denial.

The interviewed activists revealed a preference for working in groups, which is referred to in this study as a *networking approach*. They find beneficial to be part of groups, or *networks*, as it provides them with a sense of security. Such networks form through collaboration among several organizations at the grassroots and the district and/or the national level as they develop and implement peacebuilding and reconciliation activities. Community organizations join or collaborate with national or district level civil society organizations and NGOs with an aim of forging a sense of security. (Other goals include procuring financial and technical assistance, for instance, and are a subject of further research.)

The grassroots activists obtain a sense of security in these networks through different means. First, the networks offer a safe space to share local knowledge within and among grassroots communities. They also provide activists with a platform to collaborate and exchange information on resources, knowhow, and experiences. In other words, networking has been helpful as a tool for open, individual and collective expression of the understanding of peace, equity, and human rights. However, these networks mostly rally around an umbrella organization, and this situation brings into question whether independent activists can survive on their own when handling politically sensitive peacebuilding topics. Second, networks make it possible and safe to reach up the vertical power hierarchies. Activists in northern and eastern Sri Lanka have undertaken the task of gradually approaching each level in the vertical power hierarchy, which, for example, may start with government officers in a district secretariat office (*Kachcheri*), extend to police officers in charge of the area, then the provincial political elites, parliament members, ad hoc committee members, institutions,

and so on.

The strategically planned efforts of the grassroots actors are fascinating; they sometimes manage to get to the very top of the power pyramid, such as the United Nations, bypassing the national and local governments. This is usually attained by connecting with nonstate actors such as local and international NGOs and the diaspora. While the phenomenon demonstrates the capacity building at the local level, it also raises questions about the possibility of leveraging grassroots demands to further various hidden agendas, particularly by international and national NGOs, as well as the diaspora. Therefore, the best option is to give appropriate acknowledgment and opportunities to grassroots actors to voice their demands at the national and local levels. Third, the grassroots activists use networks to share practical experiences of countering oppression and other security challenges on the ground.

However, the networking approach brings some disadvantages as well, especially for emerging grassroots activists. Young activists rely on and seek the protection and support of NGOs or larger, more powerful organizations with greater bargaining power, which limits their ability to take independent actions and initiatives. As one activist explained, "I have realized that our voices can only go so far without the support or approval of bigger organizations. It's frustrating because we have new ideas and answers, but we need their help to make a real difference" (author's virtual interview with Participant 14, a young female activist of Northern province on August 16, 2021). Such limitations undermine the influence activists hold as wielders of narrative power and constrain their actions in postwar contexts.

The other strategy frequently adopted by grassroots activists in the context of denial is to maintain a low-profile by avoiding politically sensitive issues. Instead, they prioritize structural issues that affect their daily lives. Their efforts are directed towards topics considered less politically charged, such as domestic violence, livelihood challenges, and access to education, which are the underlying catalysts for conflict and its consequences. The trend is particularly noticeable among young activists, although the activists those aged 50 and above engage in similar behavior as well when they choose to maintain a low-profile on social media regarding their activism. The activists believe that doing so might protect them from being framed for challenging the security and repressed.

Conclusion

Grassroots agents encounter difficulties conveying their experiences in the context of formalized and elitist frameworks of Sri Lanka. From the perspective of grassroots activists, locally shared knowledge is often inadequately recognized and occasionally completely negated in the national reconciliation institutional

framework. Their efforts to circulate or pass along local knowledge within civil society and NGO frameworks have been persistently impeded by intimidation, resistance from elites, and apprehension regarding security, thereby hindering endeavors to foster activism at the grassroots level. Through an analysis of the multifaceted roles of grassroots activists in relation to their experiences and contextual characteristics, this paper aimed to comprehend the postwar context of Sri Lanka at the grassroots level of activism. The findings indicate that the grassroots activists perceive their knowledge sharing experiences in three distinct ways. First, they believe that their knowledge, derived from the exhausting experiences of living through war and the post-war period, has been discredited and invalidated. Second, they encounter challenges in using local knowledge to enhance their agency due to persistent threats and elite resistance. Third, the grassroots activists, especially new and young female activists, are prone to exhibiting reluctance to share local knowledge because of the potential social and cultural criticism directed toward their respective neighborhoods and communities. However, the networking approach provides grassroots activists, especially new activists, with a sense of security and empowerment.

One implication of the above discussion is that local actors likely only partially reveal their knowledge to outside parties due to this context of denial. Denial has an ability to prevent marginalized and vulnerable communities and actors from participating in the main discussion. The inhibition may occur as a response to the fear, direct or indirect, created by the context of denial or the context that has been put forth by the community members as a defensive mechanism against the authority of elites. Furthermore, while sharing, acceptance, acknowledgement, and coexistence of diverse narratives are prerequisites for a sustainable and durable peace and reconciliation, this context of denial makes it difficult to identify even the existing narratives the society has about its past. Therefore, this research posits that the context of denial is a negative system that can dominate over an oppressed community, which necessitates that outside local peacebuilders be aware and cautious of the issue. If one sees oppression in a given postwar society, there is a possibility that the society has already created or is in the process of creating a context of denial. Identifying such context can be demanding. One difficulty is that politics, justice, and other topics of interest to political elites are less popular at the community level. Additionally, symptoms of a context of denial also include a low level of independent community activism, i.e., a concentration of activists under an umbrella organization or a larger network with a fixed agenda.

The prevailing context of denial in the north and east of Sri Lanka has significantly undermined the capacity of grassroots activists to establish long-term, community peace infrastructure and transform the community-level relationships. In response, the activists have adopted networking approaches and maintained low profiles, yet questions arise about their effectiveness in preventing

conflict recurrence. This scenario underscores the intricate interplay of contextual challenges and grassroots strategies. Addressing this, prioritizing local knowledge acknowledgement, narratives and experiences, forms the bedrock for transformative, community-based peace and reconciliation. Sri Lanka's case offers nuanced guidance, emphasizing the balance between context-specific hurdles and proactive approaches in fostering effective local peacebuilding.

References

Åkebo, Malin, and Sunil Bastian. 2020. "Beyond Liberal Peace in Sri Lanka: Victory, Politics, and State Formation." *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* 16: 70-84.

Anderson, Mary B., and Marshall Wallace. 2013. *Opting Out of War: Strategies to Prevent Violent Conflict.* Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

Balcells, Laia, and Jessica A. Stanton. 2021. "Violence against Civilians during Armed Conflict: Moving Beyond the Macro- and Micro-Level Divide." *Annual Review of Political Science* 24: 45-69.

Braithwaite, John, and Bina D'Costa. 2016. "Cascades across an 'Extremely Violent Society': Sri Lanka." *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 10: 10-24.

Brewer, John D. 2010. *Peace Process: A Sociological Approach.* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Bukari, Shaibu, Kaderi Noagah Bukari, and Richard Ametefe. 2021. "Market Women's Informal Peacebuilding Efforts in Ekumfi-Narkwa, Ghana." *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 56: 341-61.

De Alwis, Malathi. 2016. "Trauma, Memory, Forgetting." In *Sri Lanka: The Struggle for Peace in the Aftermath of War*, eds. Amarnath Amarsingam and Daniel Bass, 147-61. London: Hurst.

De Coning, Cedric. 2018. "Adaptive Peacebuilding." *International Affairs* 94 (2): 301-17.

DeVotta, Neil, and Sumit Ganguly. 2019. "Sri Lanka's Post-Civil War Problems." *Current History* 118 (807): 137-42.

Donais, Timothy. 2009. "Empowerment or Imposition? Dilemmas of Local Ownership in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding Processes." *Peace and Change* 34 (1): 3-26.

Donais, Timothy, and Amy C. Knorr. 2013. "Peacebuilding from below vs. the liberal peace: the case of Haiti." *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue canadienne d'études du développement* 34 (1): 54-69, DOI: 10.1080/02255189.2013.761130.

Goetze, Catherine. 2019. "Learning in Peacebuilding—Mission Impossible?" *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 13: 340-56.

Goodhand, Jonathan, Benedikt Korf, and Jonathan Spencer. 2011. *Conflict and Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka: Caught in a Peace Trap?* London: Routledge.

Höglund, Kristine, and Camilla Orjuela. 2012. "Hybrid Peace Governance and Illiberal Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka." *Global Governance* 18: 89-104.

Höglund, Kristine, and Camilla Orjuela. 2013. "Friction and the Pursuit of Justice in Postwar Sri Lanka." *Peacebuilding* 1: 300-316.

Julian, Rachel, Berit Bliesemann De Guevara, and Robin Redhead. 2019. "From Expert to Experiential Knowledge: Exploring the Inclusion of Local Experiences in Understanding Violence in Conflict." *Peacebuilding* 7: 210-25.

Kent, Lia. 2011. "Local Memory Practices in East Timor: Disrupting Transitional Justice Narratives." *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 5 (3): 434-55.

Koens, Celeste, and Samanthi J. Gunawardana. 2021. "A Continuum of Participation: Rethinking Tamil Women's Political Participation and Agency in Post-War Sri Lanka." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 23 (3): 463-84.

Lederach, John Paul. 1997. *Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace Press.

Leonardsson, Hanna, and Gustav Rudd. 2015. "The 'Local Turn' in Peacebuilding: A Literature Review of Effective and Emancipatory Local Peacebuilding." *Third World Quarterly* 36 (5): 825-39.

Lidén, Kristoffer, Roger Mac Ginty, and Oliver P. Richmond. 2009. "Introduction: Beyond Northern Epistemologies of Peace: Peacebuilding Reconstructed?" *International Peacekeeping* 16 (5): 587-98.

Mac Ginty, Roger, and Oliver P. Richmond. 2013. "The Local Turn in Peace Building: A Critical Agenda for Peace." *Third World Quarterly* 34 (5): 763-83.

Mac Ginty, Roger. 2014. "Everyday Peace: Bottom-Up and Local Agency in Conflict-Affected Societies." *Security Dialog* 45: 548-64.

Mac Ginty, Roger. 2015. "Where is the Local? Critical Localism and Peacebuilding." *Third World Quarterly* 36: 840-56.

Mac Ginty, Roger, and Pamina Firchow. 2016. "Top-Down and Bottom-Up Narratives of Peace and Conflict." *Politics* 36: 308-23.

McCargo, Duncan, and Dishani Senaratne. 2020. "Victor's Memory: Sri Lanka's Post-War Memoryscape in Comparative Perspective." *Conflict, Security and Development* 20 (1): 97-113.

Millar, Gearoid. 2020. "Preserving the Everyday: Pre-Political Agency in Peacebuilding Theory." *Cooperation and Conflict* 55: 310-25.

Mueller-Hirth, Natascha. 2019. "Women's Experiences of Peacebuilding in Violence-Affected Communities in Kenya." *Third World Quarterly* 40: 163-79.

Odendaal, Andries. 2013. *A Crucial Link: Local Peace Committees and National Peacebuilding*. Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace Press.

Paffenholz, Tania. 2010. *Civil Society and Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Paffenholz, Tania. 2015. "Unpacking the Local Turn in Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment toward an Agenda for Future Research." *Third World Quarterly* 36: 857-74.

Stokke, Kristian, and Jayadeva Uyangoda. 2011. *Liberal Peace in Question: Politics of State and Market in Sri Lanka*. London: Anthem Press.

Subedi, D. B. 2022. "The Emergence of Populist Nationalism and 'Illiberal' Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka." *Asian Studies Review* 46: 272-92.

Wakkumbura, M. 2021. "Challenges to Peacebuilding Approaches: Analyzing Sri Lanka's Peace Efforts During the First 10 Years Ending the Civil War." *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 16 (3): 366-71.

Shameera K. Walpita is a PhD candidate at the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Hiroshima University, Japan. She completed her Master's at the same department and received her Bachelor's degree from the Department of International Relations, Colombo University, Sri Lanka. Her research interests include grassroots, peacebuilding, international law, international humanitarian law, transitional justice, and conflict transformation. Email: shameerauoc@gmail.com