NARRATOR
Singing for peace in a country divided by war - this Sri Lankan drama group tries to share the horrors that they've experienced

Women's Voices
I didn't know if he was captured or... you sit the whole day in gaol with your baby next to you... there was shooting and burning and fighting... my mother who was left home completely alone... when I was in detention... I was hit by a shell and I lost both my legs...

NARRATOR
War devastates the lives of thousands of women around the world - leaving them widowed, displaced, detained, separated from husbands, children and other loved ones - victims of injury and violence. In some countries women take up weapons to protect themselves and their families. More usually, they are civilians trying to survive as their families and communities are being swept away.

Women's Voices
I was raped openly in the town square... be able to go and put a flower on his grave...

Kalmawalathi
My husband was a very kind man - he did everything he could possibly do for me and for our family. I was seven months pregnant.

Saraswathi Ramendra
I am even afraid of going out alone.

I just don't know what will happen. We have lost everything and we were forced to suffer without any

Patricia Jothey
My son was left behind at school in the North when we had to leave him behind. I have not seen him for the last seven years.

Druki Martenstyne
Cedric went missing in January '96.

'Til this war ends and till there's a solution - I don’t think I can give up.

NARRATOR
In most wars – as here in Sri Lanka - women are the often innocent civilians caught in the cross-fire.

Dr Gaya Gamhewage, Save the Children
There’s death, there’s injury there’s loss of loved ones.

There is rape - rape goes hand in hand with conflict we know that. Less obvious is the fact that in a conflict area there is presence of armed personnel, usually armed men, whichever side, and this has a bearing on the type of violence that is propagated on women. Conflict
breaks up communities and families and this lack of family support - community support - really hurts children and women.

**NARRATOR**

Sri Lanka - holiday paradise in the Indian Ocean, with a population of eighteen million from a variety of ethnic groups.

But away from the tourist beaches, to the North and East of the country, Sri Lanka is being torn apart by a bloody civil war between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan government forces. It’s gone on now for seventeen years. Our film was made here - but it could have been made in any number of war-torn countries where conflicts destroy women’s lives.

A bomb in the heart of Colombo.

**Shanti Arulampalam, Survivors Associated**

It is a way of life for us - I mean a bomb bursting in the top of my lane - I wouldn’t even go and see what happened. It’s just a huge noise I hear in the middle of the night.

I just cover up my ears and go to sleep. So it, it has now become a way of life for us. And that’s what’s sad about it: people are beginning to take it as a part of their lives.

**NARRATOR**

Shanti Arulampalam runs Survivors Associated which gives psychological counselling to women and children.

Around the world, counselling is now recognised as a way to overcome the traumas of war.

**Shanti Arulampalam**

What we try to do in this is to explain to these women the psychological impact of grief and bereavement on their mental processes and how they can actually empower themselves to get over the grief and get on with their lives.

**NARRATOR**

Worst hit by the war, are the people in the North and East of the country and the villages bordering those provinces. Bomb attacks have been targeting the capital city, Colombo. But it’s here in the villages that people suffer the most.

**Shanti Arulampalam**

You live in a rural community, it’s very pleasant generally (even if you are poor you’ve got a fair amount of food on your table, you have a nice environment and for the women they have got an extended family to talk with. If they have a problem they have a group of friends), but the moment war goes into the community that entire structure is destroyed.

**NARRATOR**

This was all that was left of Kalmalawathi’s home when she returned to the village a couple of months after the attack.

**Manel Kulathunga**

The kitchen is there - this side - was where the veranda and other rooms in the house.
She is very sad because her husband also died

**Shanti Arulampalam**
The moment conflict comes in and her husband is no longer here she is left totally alone. And so loneliness, fear, hunger, not really knowing where to turn for emotional support, for economic support, that makes her go into herself and generally ends up in depression or a lot of times in suicide. Because of the culture or the traditions that we have in our country if you have lost your husband you are more or less looked down upon and people think that you are a very unlucky woman. A lot of people are scared to get involved with you because they think: OK, your husband was killed because he belonged to either one or other of the groups and if they get involved their husband will also get killed because you get tarred with the same brush.

**NARRATOR**
Every day in Sri Lanka more women become widowed because of the fighting. Worldwide, women widowed by conflict have to take on roles they are ill prepared for, often becoming the only breadwinners to support and care for their families.

Some women take up arms - Anoja is a home guard, a post she’s held for several years.

**NARRATOR**
All ‘round the world, women are choosing or being forced to play more active roles in the military.

**Anoja Hemamali**
I decided to join the forces as I thought that it would be really good if I do this for my village - there was also no work for me at home and so I thought it would be a good thing to do.

**NARRATOR**
Anoja’s father was out farming in the fields when he lost his foot after treading on a land mine.

**Anoja’s father**
First I was against her joining the Home Guard.

But then I thought about it again after she was trained - our people are being killed here and it is important that she is able to protect our community.

**NARRATOR**
War stretches existing health services to the limit - treating casualties means less resources to go into everyday health care. This adds to women’s suffering, as they don't just need health care when they’re ill - they need antenatal and maternity care and clinics for their children.

For the last few years Dr. Bandara has been risking his life to counsel women and deliver basic reproductive health services to the border villages and camps.

We could not film them, but along this stretch of the road there were bunkers every fifty metres.
In wars throughout the world military check-points restrict the movement of civilians. For women these may cause anxiety with every journey and the risk of humiliating ID checks and body searches. En route there was ample evidence of previous offensives and the impact on civilian lives.

With a potential ambush around every corner - each trip that Dr Bandara takes along this road has its risk.

Dr Palitha Bandara
This area is the conflict area. Most of the groups are coming and killing the innocent people.

Because of that they are in a frightened state.

We have to organise a mobile facility to these places and we have to provide treatment and resources and come to their doorstep

NARRATOR
Most of the people left in the villages are women - the men are either ill, dead, missing or away fighting in the war. Poor access to health services, lack of security, and an increasing number of rapes has led to a sharp rise in maternal mortality and unwanted pregnancies.

Dr Palitha Bandara
Even though they come to this place they are a little bit shy - they have heard that some of the rebel groups are hanging around in the jungle.

Most of these people are in a difficult situation many of them are widows so they are alone - they are insecure and so in the night there will be a threat of sexual harassment if the husband is not there.

NARRATOR
These photographs shows the aftermath of a recent attack. This woman was killed - her unborn child torn from her womb. Men, women and children were massacred. The remaining villagers were forced to flee for their lives.

Samanthi was the only one of her family to survive an attack on her village. She still finds it impossible to talk about what happened - her family were slaughtered in front of her, she was shot in the stomach and lay unconscious under their bodies until she was found.

Reluctant to abandon their homes, villages and livelihoods, it's often women who are the last to leave. They move from place to place, and end up in makeshift camps like this.

Today Dr Bandara is visiting to counsel the most recently displaced people. This camp was set up only three months ago the people finally fled their village 20 kilometres away after they'd suffered over a dozen attacks. They’ve lost their loved ones, their homes, their land and their livelihoods. With no way to earn a living, all they can do is wait for the war to end.

Dr Palitha Bandara
This environment is a very difficult environment to live in harmony. Life is monotonous, so they are not really satisfied with their day to day activities. They have changed their environment, they can’t get work; they have lost their infrastructures so they have to adapt. That is one aspect of psychological problems.

**NARRATOR**

Women, as carers, have to shoulder other burdens. Soma used to be a primary school teacher. Now she has to look after her husband and her children.

**Soma Dissanayaka**

This is a picture of the inside of my house, you can see that we used to live comfortably - we had all this furniture, TV, videos. We left it all behind - and now we are living here.

**Dr Palitha Bandara**

Some of them they are them they are having psychosomatic symptoms – headaches, er chest pains.

They can’t sleep well, they can’t concentrate; they might go to depression and some er schizophrenic disorders. Women, they don’t have er proper security and sometimes they might face too some sexual problems - sexual assault.

**Renuka Gunapalage**

If my husband is away I will never stay here on my own - it is not safe here. I’ll stay with a neighbour.

**Dr Palitha Bandara**

Personally, I think that between ten and twenty percent of young girls have been sexually abused because of this war.

There is no fear of tomorrow because they don’t know if tomorrow will come - so under those circumstances the same rules that apply to you and me they just don’t apply. This is another reason for increased incest: we have many reports of incest – we have mothers who are missing and fathers forcing their daughters to er have sex with them.

In certain villages bordering conflict young girls have admitted that armed men come in at night - these girls are used as sex workers. They are not allowed to protest, they are not allowed to lock their doors and the whole community tolerates this because these armed men protect the community. So it’s a trade-off; these are the very subtle things - nobody would even think of reporting it.

**NARRATOR**

In war the number of unwanted pregnancies soar - some pregnancies maybe a result of rape. Survivors of rape may be forced to give birth - often with tragic implications for themselves, the children they have - and their communities.

New Year in Sri Lanka - a time for reflection, a time to move forward. But for many women around the world the passing of time is no cause for celebration.

**Druki Martenstyne, Association for Families of Servicemen Missing in Action**
Jason died on September ’95 and Cedric went missing in January ’96 - so it’s four years.

NARRATOR
There are hundreds of soldiers missing in action in Sri Lanka and thousands more world-wide.

Druki Martenstein
I know the pain - I’ve suffered both. I’ve suffered my son dying, er, that is - you can accept, you can get on and you can go back to your memories – but not knowing is something very, very difficult.

You get various stories – I mean, some people say they’ve seen him in chains er, but I don’t know how far it’s true. I, I like to prefer just not to think about that side of the whole thing.

I mean, I get on with life and people say oh, you are strong.

But it’s there all the time – I’ve got two sons, so I’ve got to be strong for them.

‘Til this war ends and ‘till there’s a solution I don’t think that I can give up.

NARRATOR
In contrast to displaced camps, the inhabitants of this village have been resettled in a safe area for the last two years. Houses have been built and a sense of community restored. Today the village is preparing for traditional New Year celebrations, traditions that have taken place for centuries. The villagers are praying for a peaceful and prosperous future.

In another resettled villages to the Northwest, Wickrama and Patricia Jothey have an inter-ethnic marriage - she’s Tamil, he’s Singalese. The family was forced to flee their home in the North seven years ago. They left at night and were separated en route. Now they’ve been reunited - everyone, that is, except for their eldest son.

Patricia Jothey
Where we used to live - it was better. When we came here life became very difficult. Things are looking up a bit now. My eldest son was studying - he was a bright boy and the school near us was not that good - we wanted him to have a good education. And when we were finally forced to leave, my brother took my son to Jaffna and put him in school there for his education - that was er, about seven years ago we have not seen him since. If I could I would go and find him - but there is no-one here to look after my children

Wickrama Jothy
There are many families like ours where Singala and Tamils lived in harmony - they have been destroyed by people who don’t know the value of family love.

Dr Gaya Gamhewage
Conflict affects all of us negatively but there are a lot of positive reactions as well. Women are rebuilding their lives they are going on - not just coping but actually in some cases doing even better. It has broadened their horizons in that they are taking on things and doing things which they couldn’t do before. Children and women are not just victims
they are agents for change - they want a country in peace - they can think of positive things to promote that peace. They want to respond to violence with non-violence.

**NARRATOR**
In a lodge in Colombo fifty five-year-old Saraswathi is enjoying her first few days of freedom after finally being released from four years’ detention.

Around the world, the International Committee of the Red Cross visits almost seven thousand women and girls detained for reasons related to armed conflict. For some women detention can mean separation from their children, isolation from family support, and ill treatment. The social psychological trauma and health problems felt by Saraswathi - and other women like her - are all too familiar to Shanti Arulampalam.

**Shanti Arulampalam**
I can tell you very personal stories about detention because I was detained – without any questions asked, without any recourse to legal processes.

It had a very great impact on me, because I realised that something had to be done for us women of all ethnic groups who are going through this kind of trauma and we basically didn’t have the strength or the knowledge on how to get over that.

This is a picture of a programme we did – an empowerment programme for widows. The target group is mostly widows and their families but we actually use young people from the community with secondary education to help us mobilise communities.

**NARRATOR**
Premalatha is twenty four. Several of her relatives have been killed in the war. Now she helps to bring together women from across the region who’ve begun to set up support groups - they use drama as a tool for rehabilitation.

**Premalatha Geethanjahn**
Some of the women here are widows of men killed in the war. They have a very difficult life. They work in the fields, and some of them have two or three children to bring up on their own.

In the experience of these women - they might for example, face sexual harassment from officials when they try to get compensation for their husbands who are killed in the war. If they don’t give into their demands, the women might be frustrated in her efforts.

**Performer**
My son died in the war and I know - like other mothers - the pain that we feel for our dead sons - the pain in the deepest of our hearts.

My idea was to show through this drama what I feel - to share the pain in my heart with the people watching this play - When people saw me acting they might have understood how I felt - and felt the same way.

I really just want to tell everyone that peace is the only way.
NARRATOR
But peace isn't going to come easily in Sri Lanka or many of the thirty or so armed conflicts taking place in the world today.

And there are internationally agreed rules on the treatment of civilians in war, laid down in the Geneva conventions and their additional protocols. If only these were better observed, the suffering of women in conflicts around the world would be far less.