

AHIMSA, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka

Ice Breakers in Sri Lanka: How Do Grassroots Workshops Stop a Civil War?

Lisa Kim '06



The morning commute to the AHIMSA office in Nugegoda will wake you up for the day. Why not take the #168 down Stanley Thilakeratne Mawatha? Let loud engines from early-model Japanese cars sing for you. Take in the car exhaust and the cool breeze through the bus windows. Contort your body and try in vain to avoid contact with the 60 other humans packed in with you. Smile and wiggle your head and try to chat with the lady who lives down the road. Admire the women in their carefully pleated saris. See the barefoot Mirihana slum kids on the street, with their clean outfits faded from washing. Make sure your clothes have been ironed properly. Adjust your shirt with your free hand; pay the three rupee fare with the other. Yell out, “Bahinawa!” when you see the small fruit stand. Quickly wiggle your head “thank you” to the fare collector, hop out of the moving bus and jog to a walking pace on the pavement.

You'll be surprised at how hard it can be to find the AHIMSA office. There's nothing to set it apart from the stately houses along Pelawatta Mawatha, aside from a small sign that declares its name and location: “AHIMSA- 18A.” Nugegoda is known as a relatively wealthy part of Colombo, and this part of town always houses a government official or two. Don't be too shocked by the Mercedes Benz or other polished cars parked here and there. Security walls block the beautiful houses from view, but you know from the uniforms on the schoolchildren and the Sri Lankan parents reprimanding them in English that you've entered new territory.

It can seem odd that AHIMSA's official mission is to bring peace education and conflict resolution training to the everyday people of Sri Lanka. You step through the security gate on the first day and feel like you've entered a day spa. Soothing music plays from the speakers of computers recently connected to high-speed internet. All the windows are flung open, letting the breeze play with lace curtains. “I'll take you on a tour,” says Monica, one of the founders and directors. She apologizes for

the plainness of the office, but you can only marvel at the regal architecture of sturdy, clean lines and rich colors.

You see, AHIMSA came about as a brainchild of Monica Alfred, a Tamil female, and Kassapa Diyabedenage and Indika Pushkumara, both Sinhalese males, understanding the need to bridge the gap between university-level peace studies and grassroots peace activity in Sri Lanka. AHIMSA: Centre for Conflict Resolution and Peace places a great emphasis on building relationships with volunteers and peace workers from around the globe and in utilizing fieldwork to promote reconciliation work from the bottom-up.

A Brief History of the Sri Lankan Conflict

It is important to note that AHIMSA's aims as a Sri Lankan conflict resolution NGO are not limited to dealing with the historically tense ethno-religious conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils. “Conflict” in Sri Lanka is not limited to animosity between the two groups, nor to a power struggle between the majority Sinhalese government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a military group fighting for a separate Tamil homeland. Sri Lanka's contemporary problems have their roots in colonial rule, socioeconomic disparities, and clashing political ideologies as well as land rights. It is the fusion of the different factors that have allowed violence and fear to affect so many aspects of Sri Lankan life.

Sri Lanka's long history of Dutch, Portuguese, and British colonial occupation has had an undeniable impact on the societal conflict. It was ultimately through the British method of divide and rule that members of the Tamil minority, highly educated and well qualified, wielded a great amount of political power and were awarded a disproportionate number of government positions. This tactical move was rooted in the assumption that frustration and anger on the part of the disenfranchised majority Sinhalese would rid any possibility of

a Tamil-Sinhalese alliance to oust the exploiting foreign powers. This assumption proved accurate.

Once the British left in 1948, the Sinhalese majority started a highly nationalist campaign to regain proportional power and government representation by marginalizing the Tamil population. In 1956, President SWRD Bandaranaike made Sinhala the sole official language of Sri Lanka, directly against the interest of Tamil-speakers and citizens not fluent in Sinhala. In 1972, the Constitution made Buddhism the official state religion and started to limit Tamil admissions into universities. Parts of the Tamil population mobilized, demanding greater autonomy for Tamil communities concentrated in the north and east. In 1983, an LTTE massacre of a Sri Lanka Army patrol opened the gates to a long and gruesome period of civil war, which included mob violence, looting, and systematic killing on both sides.

Today the mostly Tamil regions in the north and east of the island are still underdeveloped compared to the cities of the Sinhalese-majority populations in the south and west. The power balance favors the Sinhalese, leaving many Tamils frustrated at their social position, and leading some to support the LTTE in fighting for a homeland where Tamils do not have to live as subordinates.

The organizational structure of the once-unified LTTE is starting to be challenged by the formation of the Karuna faction. Based on the eastern part of the island under commander Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan, the Karuna faction broke away from the LTTE in March of 2004. They argued that the LTTE was fighting only for the benefit of Jaffna Tamils and Tamils of the north, who are known to be more socioeconomically powerful and better educated than eastern Tamils. The eastern part of the island continues to lag behind the north in development aid and NGO activity. A disproportionate number of LTTE suicide bombers are from the east, while the military leaders are from the north. Violent clashes have been erupting within the LTTE, resulting in a substantial number of deaths on both sides and great uncertainty over the future of the Tamil Eelam movement. The Hill Country Tamils are barely even addressed in this intra-Tamil tension.

There are vast differences between the “Sri Lankan Tamils,” descendants of Sri Lanka’s first Tamil kingdoms of the 5th century, and the “Hill Country Tamils,” the descendants of Tamils brought to the island in the 1800’s by the British to work the tea plantations. The Sri Lankan Tamils have mostly settled in the northern and eastern parts of the country. Many of the Hill

Country Tamils occupy the central provinces of the island, where they continue working for menial wages on the tea plantations set up by the British. These Tamils are descended from immigrants who trace their roots to lower Indian castes, a social division which sometimes minimizes their involvement in the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict, and also minimizes the extent to which the LTTE desires to address the needs of the Hill Country Tamils.

The widely covered Sinhalese-Tamil conflict also fails to address the needs of the substantial Muslim population, comprised of mostly Tamil descendants of 7th century Arab traders and more recent immigrants from parts of the Muslim Middle East and South Asia.

Furthermore, there are sizeable Christian Sinhalese and Christian Tamil communities, ranging in faith practice from Dutch-influenced Protestantism to the vestiges of Portuguese Catholicism.

Unfortunately, not even the governing power of this diverse country is able to present a united stance on Sri Lanka’s political situation. In 1995, President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) won by a 51% vote against her opponent, Ranil Wickramasinghe of the United National Front (UNF), who eventually became Prime Minister. After elections in April 2004, the president appointed Mahinda Rajapakse, from her own party, to replace Wickramasinghe as Prime Minister in a systematic move to take power away from the majority UNF government. The ousted Wickramasinghe has been vocal in warning that the UNF will be increasingly resistant to the SLFP’s policy agenda regarding the country’s economic situation, peace process, and general government administration. All the while, newly-appointed Rajapakse has been insistent on forming alliances with the UNF to move ahead in the peace process, while Kumaratunga favors coalitions with the highly nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

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Take yet another step back, and one cannot forget the role that India plays in Sri Lankan politics. The Tamil population of Sri Lanka can trace their roots to the Tamil Nadu region of South India (about 20 kilometers from the island), a province that has been involved in its own struggle for increased autonomy. The population of Tamil Nadu is more than the entire population of Sri Lanka. Thus many anti-Tamil/Hindu activists claim that giving more rights and power to the Tamils will inevitably result in Hinduism and Tamil culture overtaking Buddhist Sinhalese culture on the island.

Many Sri Lankans also believe that India has a vested interest in keeping Sri Lanka in conflict. Sri Lanka, as a developing nation with substantial natural resources, has always been an economic threat to India. Furthermore, it is true that any rights won by the Sri Lankan Tamils might encourage resistance movements within Tamil Nadu. In 1987, in the midst of tensions in Tamil Nadu, the Indian and Sri Lankan governments agreed that the Sri Lankan Army would retreat and an Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) would work towards negotiating with the LTTE and restoring order in the north and east. The Sinhalese and Muslim populations rose up against the prospect of foreign Indian forces trying to assert authority in a Sri Lankan conflict.

In response to the island's multi-layered tensions, there has been a successful series of peace talks facilitated by representatives from Norway- most recently renewed in January 2002 and stalled in 2003. Yet many fear that a Colombo suicide bombing in July 2004 has the potential to shut down the peace process and nullify the 2002 ceasefire agreement signed by the government and the LTTE. While President Kumaratunga has said that the government is making a "serious and sustained effort" to engage in peace talks with the LTTE, the LTTE is continuing to recruit child soldiers in increasing numbers. There are also increasing incidents of fatal violence in the universities, where politically-charged student groups resort to fists and weapons to settle disputes.

Thus when understanding the complexity of conflict in Sri Lanka, it becomes clear that NGO activity cannot be limited to work done in tense Sinhalese-Tamil border towns. It is dangerous to equate a conflict resolution organization's validity to how much connection they have with the headline-grabbing ethnic violence that has come to define Sri Lanka. The island's long history of colonialism is directly pertinent to socioeconomic disparities and political tensions that exist today. The tensions between government rule and struggles for autonomy and between ethnic solidarity and political rifts all play a role in what Sri Lanka has come to be today.

AHIMSA: Center for Conflict Resolution and Peace

It is in addressing this need for nuanced conflict resolution work that AHIMSA shines. The organization works with the higher-ups of the National Institute for Education, as well as the residents of the Mirihana slums. Workshops address topics from matters of nationalism within hard-line Sinhalese Buddhist

neighborhoods to economic problems impacting the Muslim community.

The ultimate goal of AHIMSA is to set up Barefoot University in order to make peace education certification available for all people. AHIMSA uses workshops to bring the work of educators, peace professionals, international volunteers, and facilitators to the "masses." These workshops aim to promote a culture of non-violence in the personal lives of Sri Lankans in order to promote change in society. It is only through such efforts that one can sustain the peace agreements that are conducted on governmental and international levels.

The Mirihana alternate dispute resolution project is locally-based. It aims to instill positive leadership values in a group of Nugegoda-area slum children and ultimately steer them away from the militant political groups that feed on the frustration of youth entrenched in poverty to sustain societal divisions. The project facilitates programs dealing with self-awareness, problem solving, and leadership development, in addition to educational tours and youth career guidance.

AHIMSA also utilizes an extensive network of national and international contacts to ensure that its grassroots work is wide-reaching. It is collaborating with the National Institute of Education to create a peace projects research system for A-Level students wishing to study peace processes to fulfill the project component of their exams. Schools in Horana (the home of several hard-line Buddhist politicians) and Rakwana (an ethnically diverse town in the southern part of the Hill Country) have already benefited from AHIMSA's peace projects work. The staff has also worked closely with larger American and European NGOs on economic development projects in Mangalagama (a town in a politically volatile region of the east coast) and Kamburupitiya (a Muslim/Sinhalese region of the south), in addition to conducting youth leadership development workshops at schools and in towns around the island.

But of course, just as disparities exist between sociopolitical realities and NGO activity, a similar gap can be present between an organization's mission and its actual capacity to implement change. Despite AHIMSA's great array of work, it sometimes becomes difficult for visitors, and even the staff itself, to make the connection between its grassroots goals and the somewhat elitist comfort that swathes the office lifestyle.

18 A Pelawatta Mawatha

On any given day, the five housecats gently pad across the polished white tile floor. Sri Lankan staff and international volunteers eat lunch together at the dining table. A Sinhalese woman in western clothes here, a German volunteer in a *shalwar kameez* over there. A plate magically appears in front of me and everyone proceeds to give me portions of rice, curries, vegetables, or *kiri bath* from their lunch packets. Welcome, they say, as they smile and laugh and chat. The white volunteers demonstrate how to mix the food together with my fingers and bring small bunches of food to my mouth.

I look around and see newspapers in English and Sinhala piled neatly on a wicker bookshelf. Towards the kitchen is a display case of souvenirs from around the world, brought by the many international visitors who have walked over these polished tiles. Symbols of peace from Israel, China, Cyprus, and Boston. Mugs. Laminated bills. Knickknacks stamped with names of foreign cities, both wealthy and war-torn.

AHIMSA has definitely come a long way from when it was a start-up NGO without a home. “We didn’t even have a plate to eat on,” says Monica, as she warms up a curry over the stove and bustles around the fully-stocked kitchen.

AHIMSA is very well known now and is quite established in Sri Lankan NGO circles. Kassapa is often so busy participating in forums that work can pile up on his desk and remain untouched for several days. He is a man of big visions now. Establishing Barefoot University. Squaring away the plans for a nation-wide Peace Projects curriculum. Making contacts with more NGOs abroad to diversify the pool of AHIMSA’s volunteers.

In fact, it is possible that Kassapa’s connections have been too fruitful. Western volunteers have become somewhat of an everyday accessory for the staff. These volunteers come and go. Although strong relationships are built and knowledge is exchanged, very rarely do these visitors make a long-lasting impact that can be easily seen. Everyone knows that the volunteers are essentially visitors, while the local staff will always be based in Sri Lanka.

At the lunch table, Sinhala conversations take root on one end of the table while the volunteers start to chatter in English on the other end. Everyone scoops rice and curries from neighboring plates and lunch packets. Indika’s wife has packed some delicious jackfruit curry, so we all take a little bit to taste. Yet as light arms and dark arms cross across the table, it is rare that a single conversation includes everyone.

This is not to say that the international volunteers are of no use at AHIMSA. Jacky, the British volunteer from VSO (Volunteer Services Overseas), has implemented a monthly movement chart by the phones so that all staff members know where anyone is at a given time. As the capacity-building administrator, she has made monthly staff meetings a part of the office schedule and regularly meets with all staff members to make sure that everyone’s work is coordinated and progressing smoothly. All of the western volunteers also help out with daily English lessons to help Sinhalese staff members perfect their language skills. We all bring in our varying degrees of experience with conflict resolution work, in addition to our own office skills.

The nationally recognized Resource Centre on the first floor is immaculately catalogued. I should know, as my German flatmates complain to me that they’ve spent hours cutting out labels and figuring out decimal systems, only to have the books locked behind glass-paned doors or collect dust on the shelves. My flatmates explain how they planned the layout of the room to maximize free space, sunlight, and circulation. There’s even a special children’s section on conflict resolution and a plan to

purchase little lift cushions so that kids may read at the table. Unfortunately, the staff seem to be the only people making use of this space. There’s a phone and computer in here, for those who want to take care of errands in privacy, and a TV/VCR in case that some volunteers want to come on the weekend to watch a few flicks. No children though, and not even adults from outside the organization.

Ask the neighbors what work is done at AHIMSA and you probably won’t receive a satisfactory answer. The security wall that blocks away intruders and potential robbers doesn’t entice curious passers-by to come in and learn about peace. Then again, perhaps the staff prefers it this way. It helps to maintain the sanity level once July comes around and everyone is dispersed throughout the island conducting leadership development programs, dialogue groups, and economic development workshops.

Workshop Preparation

Angie and Monica lead the planning sessions for the US AID workshop in Kamburupitiya, on one of these busy days in early July. We all gather around the dining table (which transforms itself into a planning table every so often) and joke about how the two Christian Tamils would be facilitating a dialogue group between Buddhist Sinhalese and Muslim Tamil women. Once the laughter dies down, Monica makes a point to mention that everyone has to be particularly sensitive to the fact that the dialogue group will be facilitated in Sinhala and translated into Tamil. In what way would we be able to work around this inequality presented from the very beginning? The tall fan clicks away as it slowly oscillates a breeze across our faces. “Any suggestions?” Monica prompts.

After a brief silence, the conversation quickly digresses into a semi-rant session on how AHIMSA’s staff is so limited. There are not nearly enough Tamil staff members. Or men for that matter. We have absolutely no presentation of the Muslim community. How can AHIMSA expect to grow as an NGO, and ultimately become “Barefoot University” if we can’t even get a permanent Tamil translator on the staff?

“Well girls,” announces Angie impatiently, “There’s nothing we can do about that right now.” She has taken over the reigns of the planning session, determined to have a successful workshop mapped out without wasting more time. Angie’s manner of preparing is methodical and exact; one can tell that she is not planning her first workshop. She draws out charts and lists on the large sheets of paper taped to the wall. “We will need to have icebreakers.” Everyone around the table calls out names of familiar activities I’ve completed during freshman orientation at Brandeis and on various retreats. This seems to be a pretty standard process. The structure already seems to be laid out. We basically just need to tailor the order of activities to fit the current community in question. I start to wonder how many different communities have been effectively brought together using this skeleton. Angie turns and asks me for suggestions.

I am surprised. Who knew that the American intern might be able to contribute her two cents? I look at the charts and lists again blindly. Their plan seems foolproof. These are conflict resolution experts we're talking about, after all. I'm just an American undergrad volunteer. But I do see one small area for improvement. "We should wrap up each session with everyone sharing how they can apply the lesson to change their situation. It would be a way to use everything that they have learned thus far." The co-workers approve. Angie smiles. I sigh in relief.

In the kitchen, Wasantha adds heaps of sugar and milk powder to add flavor to the mediocre tea. The best stuff is exported, you see, leaving the natives to make do with the leftover leaves. Even worse, the tea is usually mixed with aggressively marketed, imported milk powder, whose prevalence is damaging the domestic dairy industry. Developing a caffeine addiction is inevitable to anyone who spends an extended period of time at AHIMSA. Wasantha pours the steaming caramel brown beverage into mismatched cups on the tray. They must be brought to the workaholics so they may finish up their proposals in good time before leaving for the workshop in Kamburupitiya later today.

That afternoon, I'm laughing loudly and chatting excitedly in Korean with Suchit, the organization's driver, as everyone brings their bags downstairs. He has been working in Korean textiles for the past few years, and his Korean is as good as my parents' English was by the time I was born in New York. I wonder how he manages to get by. How does he pay the rent? How does he read everything? Can he communicate effectively enough to get through everyday tasks? I veer the conversation away from anything overly emotional and proceed into an informal conversation comparing immigrant life. We discuss racism and prejudice against Sri Lankans in Korea to Koreans in the U.S.

In the end it doesn't really matter what we're discussing. We're too much of a spectacle either way for everyone around us: the girls are peering over the safety rail from the second floor balcony, listening to me babble away in Korean and Suchit following along in Sinhala-accented Korean with some English thrown in. They whisper and giggle and prod us along, but I start to feel a little sick inside. It's because of America's position as a global superpower, in addition to Britain's colonial legacy, that I can get by with communicating in English at AHIMSA. It is because my native country has become powerful enough to exploit immigrants that I can chat away with Suchit in Korean.

But it's now finally time to be off. Suchit has pulled into the driveway. It's the crack of dawn. Frauke and I pile into the van, with Angie and Sureka in their pajama *shalwars*. We pick up Subadra, our Tamil translator, who is staying with a family several minutes away. She greets us by explaining her new hairstyle. Her bangs are the result of her holding a pair scissors to her scalp, threatening to cut everything off while arguing with her mother.

We all settle down again, a little more cramped than before but nonetheless ready for our long journey to Matara. Subadra turns to me and I can feel her eyes staring at me as I try to fall asleep. "It's so nice to meet you, Lisa. I can't stop looking at your skin. You're so lucky to be so fair." Wonderful.

Angie's love song mix CD blasts over the van's sound system. We pass through the empty streets of Colombo, a detached moving entity, a loud bubble of music and chatter navigating past the dogs sleeping under lampposts and the locked-up wooden storefronts of the city.

In Kamburupitya

Our workshop is held at a beautiful community gathering center in Kamburupitiya, built thanks to the wealth of a man whose pseudo-regal picture is framed and hanging next to the Sri Lankan flag.

AHIMSA has been asked to supervise dialogue groups between Sinhalese and Muslim women, in order to improve communication, build relationships, and ultimately decrease the violent Sinhalese/Muslim clashes in the neighborhood. We are working in conjunction with US AID, a U.S. Department of State agency that aids countries in developing their economic, political, and health sectors. Although U.S. sentiment is not exactly warm due to this summer's Operation: Iraqi Freedom, the women do not seem to have strong objections to participating in a workshop funded by the U.S. government and co-facilitated by an American undergrad. It is perhaps the economic development aspect of this workshop that has the power to smooth over any political objections that may exist.

In Kamburupitiya, Muslim neighborhoods tend to be more densely inhabited, while the Sinhalese have larger land allotments. As various sectors have been developing with the help of outside NGOs, the ethnic tensions found on other parts of the island have become compacted with the socioeconomic issues. Whereas it would be most "useful" to conduct dialogue groups with the men of the village, US AID has decided to use an alternative approach to conflict resolution and development work in the south. The women participants range in age from newlyweds to grandmothers.

Sureka goes over the introductions while Angie jokes on the side. While the women are all getting acquainted, their children draw pictures together on straw mats, trading markers and telling jokes despite the ethnic and language barrier. The atmosphere is quite relaxed as the breeze wafts through the open-air gathering place. We were able to benefit from US AID's generous funding to hire a driver and drive all of the women to the community center. Sureka's calm and motherly nature eases the women into the dialogue group environment, while Angie's affectionate personality lightens up the interactions. Subadra weaves through the group, effortlessly translating between Sinhala and Tamil, sitting next to me during her breaks to translate a bit into English.

I am a little nervous about introducing my icebreakers. I fear that they will seem excessively perky and childish, but it is a relief that they are accepted wholeheartedly by the female participants. We are all in a circle, throwing a ball around to our new acquaintances, shouting their names in advance. Icebreaker number two: for ten seconds everyone has to say hello to as many people as possible. We become a flurry of moving bodies, rushing around to say hello, then to give each other hugs, then greeting each other with a Sinhalese “ayubowan” and afterwards a Muslim bow.

The participants form a wonderful patchwork. The Sinhalese women are mostly wearing button-down shirts with long skirts, their beautiful hair tied back. The Muslim women all have intricate fabric draped over their hair. Some are wearing fashionable *shalwar kameez* sets; others are donning more traditional one-piece dresses. Sureka, Angie, and Subadra all have their saris pleated and in place. Yet as we move through the icebreakers, the women do not seem to care too much about keeping up appearances. Tied hair becomes a little loosened, headwraps slide off without readjustment, saris lose their pleats without much concern.

We start an activity where each person selects pictures from those scattered in the middle of the room and explains the ways in which the imagery resonates with them. One of the mothers chooses a picture of an infant being nursed. She explains the pure nature of a baby’s love, and how this is one of the finest emotions a human can experience. Tears start to slowly well up in her eyes and she struggles to formulate her words. She starts to speak rapidly with passion. The mother explains that halfway through her first pregnancy, her brother passed away. She was unable to give love to her unborn child because of the overwhelming sense of loss. The baby received so much sadness in her womb and took in even more through her milk. Today she is convinced that her son is mentally challenged because of the overwhelming negative emotions he absorbed from her. The participants nod sympathetically and murmur comforting words to her. The Muslim and Sinhalese mothers and mothers-in-training all console and reassure each other without having perfectly compatible language skills. The children off to the side weave in and out of the circle of mothers, bringing newly completed pictures or looking for a lap to sit on. One can start to see the ways in which this group’s all-female dynamic will be an incredible asset.

It is now time for the stereotypes activity. The women split into ethno-religious affinity groups and are asked to give presentations on their religion and culture. This straightforward task inevitably leads to more emotionally volatile conversation. The Muslim group in particular is worried about how straightforward their presentation can be, given the history of conflict in the neighborhood.

The two representatives from the Muslim group stand in front of the room, telling a story of how their temple was almost burned to the ground a few months ago because of one family’s wrath. As a result of personal clashes, an entire

community was put in danger. Although a little apprehensive, these women ask the Sinhalese participants, “Will you allow your husbands to do this again? Your sons and your neighbors?”

Whereas before the women were happy to just interact through cooperative activities and fun icebreakers, the participants are now willing to confront painful events of the past and earnestly look towards fixing them in the future. The group breaks into an intense conversation about the temple-burning incident, discussing the ways in which sometimes they have no control over their husbands’ violent actions, but how the mothers all have the power to determine how the next generation will choose to deal with conflict. The women end the day’s activities with a genuine exchange. “When you see me on the street, will you acknowledge me?” “If I invite you to my house, will you come?”

During our nighttime assessment meetings back at the hotel, Sureka mentions that in our series of US AID workshops for Sinhalese and Muslim women, this group is the most socioeconomically comfortable. Compared to the other participants in our series of US AID workshops, these women have the most power to implement change. They help run some of the town’s successful businesses; they are married to men whose words carry a lot of weight in the town. As a result of their relative wealth, the women know more about the bigger picture and cultural restrictions weigh down on them less heavily. This information makes me wonder in what ways money and culture affect women’s ability to be a part of reconciliation processes across the globe.

The AHIMSA staff workers gather around a beautiful dinner of several curries and rice provided by the hotel. It is a beautiful selection, partly thanks to me. Last week’s workshop facilitators had stayed at a more run-down hotel down the road where the food was not nearly as delicious, and where it was necessary to have run-ins with rowdy, drunken men in order to leave or enter the building. However, as I am an international volunteer, and as it is necessary for AHIMSA to keep up good relations with their foreign NGO partners, it’s nothing but the best when I am with them. It’s an awkward dynamic. But I don’t feel much resentment from my co-workers, who seem to be enjoying this perk. And I am too. As Colombo NGO workers, we’ve all become used to a relative level of comfort and luxury no matter where we go.

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Demuwatha Workshop

The Hill Country is incredibly beautiful. Weather in Demuwatha is exquisite. The cool, clean mountain air makes my lungs want to jump for joy, and I can't get over the incredible landscape. On the van ride to the school we pass bright green expanses of rice paddies, with swaying palm trees in the distance, and behind them are these great mountain-like hills that just soar into the sky, lined with neat rows of tea bushes that just reach into the clouds. On our way up the mountain, one can really see a "mountain range" of sorts. These hills just start and end everywhere, like big green canyons crowded with so many beautiful trees... then one suddenly sees flashes of bright dark earth and black rock and parts of a waterfall. Of course, it really mars the landscape to understand the impact of the quaint white signs indicating how to get to the "[Tea] Plantation Overseer's Bungalow," and seeing the Tamil tea pickers carrying sacks (very colorful and picturesque sacks, of course) filled with tea leaves (for which they get paid almost nothing) over to the big tea processing factory.

My flatmate Frauke and I must be quite a sight there in the principal's office in Demuwatha. Frauke is in full Sri Lankan sari regalia, and I am modeling a bright purple and red *shalwar kameez*. Sureka has emphasized that we'd need to be dressed in a more traditional way in visits to the hill country. No western clothes. The people here tend to be a little more traditional, and even the foreign volunteers cannot escape the clothing rule.

The principal of Demuwatha School serves us cups of Coca-Cola and *seeni sambol* buns- a welcome relief from all the milk tea we had been consuming until now. Sureka and the principal of the Demuwatha school discuss the details of the workshop request. The principal has heard about AHIMSA's workshops through the larger and better-equipped Rakwana School, which Monica attended as a child.

It turns out there have been some flare-ups of violence in the area, particularly between Sinhalese and Tamil youth. The tension takes on a special light in the Rakwana context. As a town located right at the base of the Hill Country, many of the Tamils are descendants of more recent Tamil immigrants to Sri Lanka, a community that is often not as intensely tangled in the Sinhalese-Tamil tension.

The principal wants to instill strong conflict resolution and leadership skills in his students to avoid the conflicts that have been sprouting up in the region. He would like to gather the student leaders of various clubs and key positions within the class body: environmental patrol, prefects, scouts. Little children peer into the principal's homely office as they walk by. It must be quite a sight to see Sureka chatting away with Frauke in her sari, Lisa in her *shalwar kameez*, sipping their Coca-Cola deliciously, nibbling at the *seeni sambol* buns politely. Our backs are immaculately straight and our eyes are alert to the conversation, although the extent to which we understand everything that is going on is questionable. But as always we smile and wiggle our heads at the right time, pretending to know what's going on.

One week later, there we are again, smiling and wiggling our heads. About 30 students from different grade levels have gathered in one of the larger classrooms, the type that is usually divided into three smaller classrooms. The Demuwatha School is basically a large, one-room schoolhouse. The children are still in their uniforms. It's striking how school uniforms, such a loaded topic in the U.S., still fail to mask socioeconomic disparities among the students. The boys who cannot afford new shirts have modified their father's large button-down shirts into t-shirt uniform length. Some of the uniforms are noticeably more faded than others. Although everyone has to wear dress shoes, some are new and polished while others are shyly exposing socks and toes. Some students have defiantly sidestepped the social and physical awkwardness by opting to wear sandals.

I find myself in a circle once again, calling out people's names before throwing a ball in their direction. It is great fun, as everyone keeps on throwing the balls to either me or Frauke, and we laugh together as almost all the names are butchered. During breaks the students keep on flocking to us, eager to practice their English and converse with these new international volunteers. I try to keep the conversations as lively as I can; making exaggerated faces to get some words across, using lots of hand motions, laughing a lot, and jumping excitedly. It seems that the Demuwatha students have really warmed up to the AHIMSA volunteers.

Angie is the clear favorite for the more outgoing students. She goes around pinching, teasing, joking, and poking fun. Angie doesn't care that much about what people think about her and is not too worried that her sari is immaculately in place, which helps to put the other students at ease. Himali is teasing in a more gentle way, while Sureka, as always, appeals to the quieter older students.

Once trust is established, the students break into groups to discuss the meaning of leadership. By highlighting role models with strong leadership qualities in their school, community, and families, the students are able to root the lesson in their real-life experiences. They draw charts of effective leadership strategies and list traits that a leader should have. The drawings are fabulous, with colorful demons looking over lists of traits to avoid, while strong and proud Sri Lankans beam over the laudable qualities. The female students of this school are just as outspoken as the boys. Everyone openly (but constructively) reprimands each other for making silly assumptions and inaccurate statements. The ambitious and determined nature of the students is very clear, in addition to their listening ability. While many of the participants are outspoken, they are not overbearing, and the students are able to build on the balanced dynamics that already exist between them.

The students then all take part in fun outside activities designed to encourage the formation of cooperative skills. They compete in a three-legged race, running towards the chain of facilitators that serves as the finish line. Afterwards, they split into two teams, helping each other make their way through

a web of red yarn that has been spun between some king coconut trees. Natural leaders emerge, shouting out directions and supervising how students should be lifted through the openings without touching the edges. In the midst of the close competition, tensions of course arise, as does some negativity from the losing team. However, the group unity is strong enough such that they are able to work beyond the competition rift.

We settle down to have a conversation about how students can maximize their leadership capabilities within the context of the school. What are some of the challenges that these leaders have faced in fulfilling their responsibilities as prefects, scouts, and members of the environmental patrol? As they go around, one boy in particular is vocal about the stresses that student leaders have to face. He says that it is difficult playing the middle-man, being close friends with many classmates but having to discipline them in the absence of the teacher. He feels that it is unfair for teachers to expect prefects to do all of the reprimanding, and it is unfair that other students blame prefects for everything the teacher does wrong. His eyes start to tear up in frustration while telling us a story about an incident last month. As a prefect, he had been blamed for a fight that broke out in the classroom. The students had been frustrated at the teacher but had taken their anger out on each other. The teacher, although realizing that he was the source of anger, conveniently sidestepped further trouble by punishing the whole class for a mistake made during the prefect's watch, effectively turning all of the classmates against the prefect.

The students start agreeing enthusiastically, sharing stories of everyday challenges that can deter one from wanting to become a student leader. The facilitators carefully guide the discussion, making the students think of situations where the leaders might have to overcome these challenges, especially in the context of conflicts that they would have a responsibility to settle. It is incredibly encouraging to see how the students are able to so effectively make connections between their experiences and the topic at hand, between their frustrations with leadership challenges and the necessity to work proactively against negative confrontations.

By the end of the workshop, the ties which were created have become very strong. The students decide to have a campfire celebration for us on the last day, which also happens to be a Poya Day—the monthly Sri Lankan full-moon holidays which are matched to important events in Buddhist history. With what seems to be less than one day of preparation, the students have prepared a full line up of skits, dances, and musical acts. The boys (scouts in particular) have gathered enough wood to create an expert campfire. The surrounding community has also come to see the show and to evaluate the Colombo NGO workers who are now in their midst. It's beautiful how we can all celebrate this "Buddhist" holiday with all sorts of acts that have nothing to do with religion or ethnicity.

The next morning, it is time for us to set off to Colombo. The students are in tears, asking us all to write down our

addresses and contact information in their address books. The kids come to me with paper asking me to write names and phrases for them in Korean. My written Korean is far from perfect, but I gladly oblige. The kids make me promise to write to them. But I look at the vague street addresses and wonder how reliable the mail service is in this region of Sri Lanka. So I make them promise to write to me first, and that I will definitely reply to them from the United States.

In sadness and frustration, I start to wonder how ultimately constructive AHIMSA's work is, if it never really gets the opportunity to build on the great relationships created through workshops. I'm sure that the students have been able to learn a lot about leadership qualities, and that they have learned how to get along, and that leaders work together to come up with alternate ways of resolving disputes. However, how much has AHIMSA actually done by coming in for a few days, going through a formula of icebreakers which lead up to emotional outpouring, just to leave at the end?

The Demuwatha project, in addition to the Kamburupitiya workshop, is a part of AHIMSA's current initiative of implementing at least one workshop a month to develop and strengthen community-based capacities and initiatives for peace building. The project's purpose is to create awareness, to train, to network with and to provide resources to a wide range of people in communities covering all of the island's ethnic and religious groups. In accomplishing such a task, it is only natural that long-lasting relationships cannot really be cultivated between the participants and the AHIMSA workers. Yet to what extent is this approach more effective than that of a more community-oriented organization that is able to affect people (albeit fewer people) in the long term?

Although this question keeps nagging my mind, there is no time to fully ponder it over as we leave the school. "Lisa, we shall take you to the market to buy some jaggery sweets for your family," Himali announces. The timing is perfect. I give myself a quick reality check. After all, my own internship is reaching its end, and I will be flying off to London in two days.

AHIMSA in Sri Lanka

As I sit here in the winter chill that is Waltham, feeling worlds away from the hot, bustling energy of Colombo and the striking beauty of Kamburupitiya and Demuwatha, it is hard not to wonder whether my life-altering experience at AHIMSA also changed the lives of anyone still on the island. What exactly is AHIMSA's current role in the context of Sri Lankan conflict resolution? How does AHIMSA's work fit into what I have learned about coexistence and reconciliation?

A draft of AHIMSA's brochure states, "AHIMSA is a non-political, non-religious and non-profit making organization committed to help people develop their insights, attitudes, values and skills in living peacefully and creatively. We work to develop a peaceful society in which people are able to attain

their highest potential, both individually and collectively.” AHIMSA’s work currently aims to achieve these goals through widespread, short-term work. Workshops and dialogue groups emphasize the importance of the individual and what each person can contribute to a community’s non-violence movement. It is the hope that these individuals who have been impacted by the workshops and dialogue groups will become a nation-wide foundation of people committed to cultivating a nonviolent way of life on the island.

Part of the driving force of AHIMSA’s mission is the belief that a connection needs to be established between the work going on in the classroom and in the field: “We believe that academic peace education often fails to interact with grassroots practice and vice versa. There is a lack of interaction and learning between the two parties. We aim to fill that gap.” AHIMSA has had so many international volunteers because in addition to adding a degree of prestige, they become important liaisons between AHIMSA and various peace/nonviolence/conflict resolution organizations and universities across the globe. The contributions of these volunteers ultimately add to AHIMSA’s resource pool of workshop methods. The books the volunteers bring, the insights they’ve gained from lessons and deliberations in the university, their own interpretations of conflict resolution methods—these all ultimately come to be of great use when applied to AHIMSA’s grassroots-oriented work.

Thus it becomes necessary to explore the extent to which AHIMSA’s peace and conflict resolution work fits into the framework of the coexistence and reconciliation theories that I had studied at Brandeis. It is admittedly hard to find the ways in which some theories are applicable, as AHIMSA’s summer workshops were not geared solely towards participants who held deep-rooted pain or anger towards specific ethnic groups. Furthermore, AHIMSA spends a lot of time on preventative measures (working with “slum” children before they join hard-line political groups and high schoolers before they enter the politically volatile college system), while most of the material we studied focused on dealing with intercommunal conflict that already exists.

Nevertheless, the general ideas behind coexistence and reconciliation methodology are very applicable to AHIMSA’s workshop scenarios. In her piece “Creative Approaches to Reconciliation,” Cynthia Cohen defines coexistence as a state of being “where individuals welcome cooperation, understanding and interdependence. Because inter-group relations can cascade backward in the direction of intolerance and violence, sustainable coexistence requires ongoing work to nourish the attitudes, values and capabilities people need to strengthen respect, understanding, and cooperation over time.” Ultimately all of AHIMSA’s icebreakers and activities emphasize the importance of cooperation and the cultivation of effective communication skills. The organization places emphasis on this sort of grassroots work because it is a necessary first step in sustaining government-

level peace work. Regardless of whether the workshop participants are textbook victims of an ethnic conflict, or citizens of a country with a long history of conflict, the cultivation of these valuable cooperation and communication skills is the essential first step towards creating an alternative to a cycle of violence in everyday life.

Cohen defines reconciliation as “former enemies acknowledging each other’s humanity, empathizing with each other’s suffering, addressing and redressing past injustice, and sometimes expressing remorse, granting forgiveness, and offering reparations. Reconciliation represents a shift in attention from blaming the other to taking responsibility for the attitudes and actions of one’s self and one’s own community.” The Kamburupitiya workshop was one AHIMSA-led workshop where members of different ethnic communities were invited to speak on ethnic clashes. By creating a bond of womanhood and encouraging strong cooperative group dynamics, the participants started to put a human face on a different ethnic group that had been defined only by its difference. In this way, AHIMSA’s workshops all emphasize the importance of an individuals’ effort. By understanding the role that the individual plays in a national conflict, and the responsibility one has to those around them, AHIMSA’s workshop participants are able to embody the first steps towards reconciliation.

In Abu-Nimer’s *Reconciliation, Justice, and Coexistence*, African peace worker Hizkias Assefa writes on the power of peace movements rooted in the efforts of everyday people: “By creating a forum for the grassroots where they are able to understand the conflicts, visualize alternatives, and articulate preferences, leadership can begin to emerge from below, which can influence top leaders’ views and behavior. An active civil society begins to take shape that retrains the official leadership’s commitment to perpetuating the conflict” (Assefa 180). By bringing peace education to local people, AHIMSA is able to cultivate a grassroots movement to make a nonviolent way of life a reality for a country ridden by a history of violence. This goal is realized through a variety of its projects, including the leadership development workshop in Demuwatha. By allowing the students to understand the importance of communication and leadership in handling conflicts, they become equipped to cultivate this “leadership from below” for the new generation.

As a Sri Lankan conflict resolution NGO, AHIMSA’s work is essential because it provides an alternative approach to taking apart the structural violence that has become a fact of everyday life on the island. Abu-Nimer states that the field of coexistence can only be effective in the long-term if it reaches beyond the traditional definitions of adversarial relationships: “the coexistence field increasingly acknowledges that to be sustainable, especially in contexts of power asymmetry, coexistence work cannot be limited to helping adversaries appreciate their common humanity; they must also grapple with questions of justice, inequities and historical grievances.” Ultimately it was my summer-long struggle to make AHIMSA’s mission fit in with my

preconceived idea of international conflict resolution work that taught me the most about coexistence and reconciliation in the real world.

Grassroots activism oftentimes implies the involvement of “common people” and the “masses” to promote change from the bottom-up. However one must also understand how a grassroots model can shape the way student a processes international conflict. It is only by understanding a country’s historical, political, and cultural contexts of conflict that one can start to affect the disagreements and hostilities which headline our newspapers. It is only when we take a more textured approach to studying and resolving conflicts that change can sustain itself in the long term.

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