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Incremental Transformations: Education for Resiliency in Post-War Sri Lanka

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Abstract: There is growing evidence to support the relationship between levels of gender inequality in a society and its potential for conflict. Positive attitudes to gender equality in and through education strengthen social cohesion; consequently, there is a need for gender-transformative education for peacebuilding. Drawing on the 4Rs (representation, redistribution, recognition, and reconciliation) framework in conjunction with the idea of incremental transformation with a focus on resilience, this study examines how eleven ethnic minority high school girls from Sri Lanka understand the transformative role of education in their lives as it relates to peace and gender equality. Education was a source of hope for the participants of this study and thus contributed to their resilience. However, rather than fostering and capitalizing on this resilience to build social cohesion and peace, education and the school systems are silencing them. This silencing is evident in the acceptance and normalization of militarization in their communities, daily experiences of gender-based violence (GBV), and the message, through the formal and informal curriculum, that gender equality has been achieved in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: education; conflict; transformation; gender equality; Sri Lanka; post-conflict; peace education; conflict education

1. Introduction

This study explores the transformative potential of education in conflict with a focus on gender inequality. It is based on the premise that “gender inequality, in all of its many manifestations, is a form of violence—no matter how invisible or normalized that violence may be” [1] (p. 5). There is growing evidence to support the relationship between levels of gender inequality in a society and its potential for conflict [1–3]. In fact, societies that have and implement strong laws for gender equality are less likely to go to war, use force when conflict does arise, or get entangled in violent crises [1]. Education is one way to transform conflict and gender inequality within a society. However, despite gender equality’s crucial role in education for peace there is a significant gap in both research and practice on gender-transformative education for peacebuilding [4].

This study examines how 11 ethnic minority high school girls from Sri Lanka understand the transformative role of education in their lives, particularly as it relates to peace and gender equality after thirty years of war. This is a timely exploration given the dramatic increase in rates of gender-based violence in Sri Lanka [5,6] and Sri Lanka’s ongoing challenges with implementing a legitimate reconciliation process and addressing human rights violations that took place during and after the war. The main research questions of the study are:

1. What are the girls’ understanding and hopes for peace and social cohesion?
2. What are the girls’ understanding of gender equality and their experiences of it in their day-to-day lives? How does their understanding impact their hopes for the future?

3. How do these minority girls, living in three war-affected regions from the Northern and Eastern Province, perceive the role of education in their lives?

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Education, Conflict, and Gender Interface*

Education has the potential to transform gender relations and consequently contribute to social cohesion by equipping people with the knowledge and skills to empathize across differences, challenge stereotypes, and build new relationships [4]. At the same time, education has also been shown to contribute to gender inequality and exacerbate conflict [7]. For example, military occupation has the potential to transform educational spaces into politicized, gendered, and racialized ones [8]. Schools are impacted by militarization and affect gender roles and change women's lives by turning educational spaces into spheres where political power and control must be carefully negotiated on a day-to-day basis [8]. Similarly, cultural norms around gender roles can have negative impacts on both boys and girls during conflict [9]. Using the example of decreased school enrolment for boys in contexts with increases in labour supply and higher enrolment of boys in contexts where there is a belief of greater economic return for investment in education, Buvinic et al. [9] argue that gender-differentiated responses to education are specific to the country and type of conflict taking place. Armed conflict can also create spaces where there is a need to control women's bodies by their families to "preserve and protect a culture from external threat and possible extinction" [8] p. 195. These messages are transmitted through education, particularly curriculum, both formal and informal. In fact, Ben-Porath [7] argues that schools often vigorously promote societies' tendencies to default to traditional gender roles and division of labour during war and protracted conflict. For example, curricula focused on militarized national narratives sideline debate on other social issues and promote views of war as heroic and patriotic whereby men fight and women support their men [7]. Consequently, there is a need to analyze traditional gender norms and how they intersect with conflict and education within a specific context in order to promote gender-transformative peacebuilding through education. Schools and public education systems have an important role in challenging "undemocratic social tendencies" [7] (p. 82), such as gender inequality, that contribute to the breakdown of social cohesion.

2.2. *Transformative Education*

Education is often championed for its transformative possibilities related to liberation, empowerment, social justice, individual freedoms, and human rights [10]. From this perspective, education is regarded as a means that will enable learners to think critically and have the ability to challenge the status quo, including practices related to gender inequality. In reality, many education reforms focus more on utilitarian goals, such as the transmission of knowledge and skills, to help learners become contributing members of the existing and often hegemonic, political, economic, and social order [11]. As such the nature of education is inherently contradictory. It is both a transformative force that can bring about change as well as a utilitarian instrument to reinforce the status quo [11] and in some cases education also has the potential to exacerbate existing divisions [12].

2.3. *Transforming Conflict*

In post-conflict contexts, education is widely regarded as having the capacity to foster reconciliation and peaceful social renewal [13]. However, it has been well established that education can also be a means to promote war, and, for this reason, has been described by Bush and Saltarelli [12] (2000) as having two faces. The content, structure, process and delivery of schooling can contribute to conflict and erode social cohesion [14]. The structural aspects of schooling—competitive selection, punishments, nationalism, macho-gender cultures and cultures of fear, negative teaching of others through curriculum and textbooks, and the emphasis on obedience to authority—can cumulatively serve to fuel the outbreak of conflict and violence [15]. Post-conflict reconstruction periods can be

opportunities for transformation of education systems which in the past may have contributed to conflict through inequitable practices; however, this transformation is largely dependent on whether a government chooses to reconstruct a pre-conflict education system or transform it by addressing the root causes of conflict [10,12,16,17].

2.4. Transforming Gender Inequality

The time immediately after a conflict has been cited as an opportunity to use education as the vehicle to challenge and transform existing social inequities such as gender inequality [10]. However, recognizing that cultural and institutional constraints often limit the types of reforms needed to curriculum, pedagogy, and school structures to promote values of gender equality, Maclure and Denov [10] argue that post-war education reconstruction often reconstructs pre-existing norms rather than transforming it. Schools are sites for the construction of girls' and women's identities and should ideally contribute to their active role in society [18]. Generally, however, education systems reflect and help to reinforce the prevailing power arrangements of the state and society [19–21]. Accordingly, classrooms and schools are often embedded with gender boundaries that reproduce powerful patriarchal hierarchies. In these circumstances, the curriculum tends to reinforce and transmit conventional gender stereotypes and existing social relations [22]. Education through curriculum and teacher expectations plays a key role in transmitting public-private distinctions, which in turn influence classroom pedagogy and reproduce civic attitudes [23]. In cases where gender equality is part of the formal curriculum, it is often positioned in education as a means for developing the country versus the transformation of patriarchal structures [3,24].

Education also has the potential to exacerbate gender disparities in conflict-affected context through the militarization school spaces [8] and promotion of hegemonic forms of masculinity [25]. In order for education to transform gender inequality, it needs to explicitly acknowledge and challenge patriarchal structures through the formal and informal curriculum.

2.5. Post-War Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is a small island nation in the Indian Ocean. It is comprised of three predominant religious groups: Sinhalese (75%), Tamils (11%), Indian Tamils (4%) and Moors (9%) [26]. The population is comprised of 70.1% Buddhists, 12.6% Hindus, 9.7% Muslims, 6.2% Roman Catholics, and 1.4% practicing other Christian religions [26]. Sri Lanka's 30-year civil war between the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE) and the Sinhalese majority government had its origins in the post-colonial ethnic tensions between these two ethnic groups [27]. The 30-year war ended with the government defeating the LTTE in May 2009, resulting in what has been described as a victor's peace. The end of war continues to be a source of controversy due to allegations of human rights violations and war crimes by government forces as well as the LTTE [28]. Despite various commitments by the government for truth and reconciliation, there has been little progress and in some cases a regression in efforts to address violations committed during the war as result of continued arrests and detention of individuals based on the unrepealed Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), threats against religious and ethnic minorities, and human rights activists, and torture and ill treatment in police custody [29]. To date, Sri Lanka continues in a state of fragile peace with high levels of militarization in minority communities and has yet to meaningfully address current and past human rights violations against minority communities [29]. Additionally, since the end of the war in 2009, there have been growing rates of gender-based violence in the war-affected regions [5,6]. Armed conflict, continued militarization, a culture of sexual exploitation, harassment, intimidation and fear have contributed to higher levels of insecurity for women in the North and East [5]. Education played a key role in fueling 30 years of civil war in Sri Lanka through a divisive curriculum that demonized the ethnic other and inequitable access to education based on ethnicity and class [30]. It is a textbook case for the negative face of education.

2.6. Education and Gender (In)Equality in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has, in some circles, been considered a model of post-colonial gender equality compared to its South Asian counterparts due to high literacy rates for men and women, 93% and 91% respectively [31], universal franchise for both sexes as early as 1931, and two female state leaders. It is important to note that Sri Lanka's high literacy rates are not reflective of the war-affected regions; the 30-year conflict has resulted in significantly lower literacy and school completion rates in the war-affected regions of the Northern and Eastern provinces [32]. Sri Lanka's long history of free and compulsory education for boys and girls which was achieved shortly after independence, and girls' equal access to education and gender parity in all three levels (primary, secondary, and tertiary) of education has been an important contributing factor to this idea of gender equality. Yet women in Sri Lanka continue to grapple with the challenges to achieving of gender equality. In addition to experiencing high levels of gender-based violence, women's labour force participation is half that of men and double their unemployment rates. In 2017, only 36.6 percent of the working population were women [33]. Women continue to be under represented in upper level management and decision-making positions in both the private and public sector. Equal participation, retention, and performance by girls in education has not led to equal representation of women within decision making. Currently, there is only a five percent representation of women in parliament and two percent in local government.

Due to parity in participation, retention, and performance by girls in Sri Lanka, there has been a perception among Sri Lankan policy makers that there is no gender-based inequality within education [34]. According to a UNICEF report [34] this has led to complacency among Sri Lankan officials who fail to consider that the content of education perpetuates negative gender norms and stereotypes that adversely impact the development of girls and women. The report has therefore strongly recommended that this complacency should be addressed to ensure that curriculum, teaching, educational content, and the social climate of the school promote values of gender equality [34]. In response to the UNICEF report, the Sri Lankan government has adopted gender sensitivity training for pre-service teachers [35] and a policy of eliminating gender discrimination and bias in textbooks [36]. What remains to be seen is how these initiatives are have impacted the day-to-day experiences of young girls in Sri Lankan schools, particularly those living in the war-affected regions where conflict has exacerbated gender inequality.

2.7. Conceptual Framework: Gender-Transformative Education for Peacebuilding

Positive attitudes to gender equality in education strengthen social cohesion; consequently, there is a need for gender-transformative education for peacebuilding [4]. Drawing on the key theories from the education, conflict, and peacebuilding research, the following section explicates key components for gender-transformative education for peacebuilding. It draws Galtung's [37] notion of positive peace through the elimination of structural and cultural violence. Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smiths [38,39] 4Rs framework (representation, redistribution, recognition, and reconciliation), and the notion of the violence of omission [40,41]. The following sections explicates the adaption of the 4Rs framework to the context of Sri Lanka and the goal of gender-transformative education for peacebuilding by adding a 5th R, resilience.

2.7.1. Representation and Redistribution

For education to be a transformative force that contributes to peace and gender equality, it must first meaningfully acknowledge existing inequities of all forms, gender, ethnic, etc., in the classroom and foster values of critical thinking, dialogue, and relationship building to challenge and change the status quo on these issues. In order to do this, schools must create spaces that engage in positive peace [37]. Positive peace, also referred to as social justice, is the absence of structural violence and the cultural violence that sustains it. It requires students to engage in critical thinking about their realities and understand and transform the root causes of conflict within a society. The first

two Rs, representation and redistribution, reflect the need to ensure that members of marginalized communities' voices are heard in decision making and given equitable access to resources within education systems [39]. In the context of the three rural communities in the war-affected regions, a key focus will be access to schools, adequate resources and infrastructure, and qualified teachers and if and how access to these resources are gendered. It will also focus on if and how girls are engaged within schools and classrooms to become agents of change for their own futures and for peacebuilding.

2.7.2. Recognition

Recognition, 3rd R, of, respect for and response to diversity, identity and equity related to linguistic, cultural, ethnic, religious, ability and gender through policy and curriculum (formal and informal) are important dimensions of social cohesion [39]. A key indicator for recognition is how violence based on differences is addressed and responded to [39]. This indicator is particularly important for this study given Sri Lanka's complex ethnic conflict that is magnified by equity issues related to urban versus rural communities, caste, religions, poverty, and high levels of gender equity. If and how these equity issues, particularly around gender inequality are recognized, talked about, and addressed in the formal and informal curriculum largely determines how much education can contribute to transforming the status quo. A failure to recognize inequities experienced by a particular group and the normalization of inequity is violence by omission [40,41] and contributes to cultural violence.

2.7.3. Reconciliation

Novelli et al.'s [39] 4th R, reconciliation, stresses the need to deal with injustices, both past and current, that are related to the conflict through education in order to build trust and social cohesion between groups. They suggest that degree to which the first three Rs are addressed in and through education largely reflect the broader process of reconciliation [39]. Novelli et al. [39] argue that a failure to do this weakens state-society relations the legitimacy of the government and thereby has the potential to fuel conflict. How past and current injustices are recognized and addressed in the formal and informal curriculum reflects the states commitment to those most heavily impacted by conflict, in this case, minority women and girls. In order for gender-transformative peacebuilding to take place, there is a need to recognize within and through education the marginalized position of women and girls within a society and how conflict can exacerbate this marginalization. Furthermore, the state's ability to recognize and provide security for the most vulnerable women and girls in conflict-affected contexts largely determines its ability to address security at the country level [1].

2.7.4. Resilience

The 4Rs are lofty goals to achieve through education alone given that education is one part of a larger social agenda. Many studies have challenged the transformative role of education in conflict, particularly as it relates to gender equality [3,10,40]. In fact, Davies [40] (p. 491) argues that education's impact may be less about transformation and more about building resilience, which she defines as "enabling people or groups to survive in or after conflict or to oppose further tension". With respect to gender-transformative peacebuilding, El Bushra and Smith [4] define resilience as "building back better" emphasizing not only the ability to survive conflict but to challenge its contributing factors, particularly as it relates to gender inequality and gendered power relations. They argue that education can contribute to building back better because it "has a wide range of roles to play in influencing gender norms—providing information, generating debate and, importantly, using the power of educational facilities as institutions to bring people together to decide how to change, model different behaviours and thus proactively set trends for transformation" [4] (p. 15). Of note is the emphasis on education setting trends for transformation rather than being the driver of social transformation. Similarly, Maclure [42] (p. 253) argues that social change takes places in a "series of small small-scale successes" that "gradually coalesce and serve as the impetus for broader societal change" (p. 253) when it comes to building agency among children to engage in social justice. As such, a key focus of this

paper will be incremental forms of transformation [42,43] such as fostering resilience to promote gender-transformative education for peacebuilding.

3. Methodology

This is a multiple case study [44] of three school sites. Using qualitative methodology grounded in a pragmatic constructivist approach [44–46], this study reports on the experiences of 11 girls in grades 11 to 12 in three rural high schools in the war-affected regions of Sri Lanka. Case study was employed in order to allow exploration of the three schools, which are in distinct regions in the Northern and Eastern provinces and consequently had differing experiences of the 30-year war. Selection parameters included: schools for which access was given by the Ministry of Education, schools consent to participate, rural community status, and accessibility to school site by local transit for the researcher. All female students over the age of 16 were invited to participate, which amounted to 11 girls across the three schools (Table 1). Approximately 1–2 weeks were spent in each school.

Table 1. Participants.

Identifier	Region	Grade	Ethnicity
A1	North-Island	12	Tamil
A2	North-Island	12	Tamil
A3	North-Island	12	Tamil
A11	North-Island	12	Tamil
E1	Eastern Province	11	Tamil
E2	Eastern Province	11	Tamil
E4	Eastern Province	11	Tamil
E7	Eastern Province	11	Tamil
M3	North-West	12	Tamil
M4	North-West	12	Moor
M5	North-West	12	Tamil

3.1. Researcher Positionality and Ethics

This study is a component of a larger study for a doctoral dissertation. Ethical review and approval were obtained at the Canadian university where I was registered as a doctoral student as well as at the local university in Sri Lanka where I was required to register as a visiting student in order to conduct my data collection. The project was also vetted by the central Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka. In addition to ethics protocols, recommendations by Goodhand [47] on conducting research in conflict-affected environments were incorporated to ensure participants' anonymity and to build trust with the researcher.

My positionality in this research is that I am a Sri Lanka born ethnic Tamil who immigrated to Canada and returned to Sri Lanka to conduct this study. As such, this study is informed by my own experiences as well as ethnic and linguistic affiliation with the communities I was researching. Consequently, although methods of triangulation were used between interviews, school observations, and an extensive literature review for internal validity [44], it is acknowledged that "The researcher brings a construction of reality to the research situation, which interacts with other people's constructions or interpretations of the phenomenon being studied. The final product of this type of study is yet another interpretation by the researcher of others' views filtered through his or her own" [46] (p. 22). And although I share an ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identity with my participants and experienced the war myself, I am a Western-trained researcher who had the privilege to escape the conflict. The ethical implications of this required me to be cognizant of gathering data in such a way as to not necessarily to capture the 'one reality' but rather to ensure that the process was ethical and contributed, even in a small way, to the enhancement of social justice. This is both a strength and limitation for this study as my insider-outsider status privileged me to understandings that may not have been accessible to another researcher but at the same time my interpretation was informed by a particular lens that reflected my construction of reality.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection included semi-structured one-to-one interviews with female students in grades 11–12, classroom observations of civics/citizenship classrooms, and school observations. Interviews were conducted in Tamil by the researcher and lasted about 20–40 min. They were conducted on the school site in a private space, or one chosen by the participant, and were audio recorded. Interviews were translated by the researcher from Tamil to English during transcription. All transcripts and observational notes were analyzed and coded in NVivo 12. Interview questions focused on exploring themes of gender equality, citizenship, and peace/social cohesion. They included: What does gender equality mean to you? Do you feel like there is gender equality in your school and classroom? Do you feel that teachers treat boys and girls equally and fairly? What are your hopes and dreams for your country? Do you think you have a role in building the future of your country? If you could change one thing about your country, what would it be?

Data was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's [48] thematic analysis, which includes six phases. First, the interview transcripts and observational notes were read, noting down initial ideas. Next, initial codes were generated based on key concepts from the theoretical framework (theory-driven) as well as new ideas identified during the coding process and/or initial reading (data-driven). After the data set was coded with the final list of codes, codes were analyzed and organized using thematic mapping. This was followed by a final set of key themes, Appendix A, that was used to analyze the data in relation to the research questions and conceptual framework. The matrix coding feature in NVivo 12 was used to identify intersecting themes among and between the three schools.

3.3. Limitations

Given the qualitative nature of this study, the findings are not generalizable beyond the participants and cases (schools) that were studied. Additionally, there was limited time spent at each school and classrooms in observation for security reasons related to conducting research in a conflict-affected country. Future research would benefit from a more ethnographic approach to further understand the school and classroom cultures at the three sites.

4. Results

The interview results are presented according to the themes of the three key research questions (hope for peace, gender equality, and role of education) organized by school. This section begins with a summary of school and classroom observations.

4.1. Classroom and School Observations

School A is located on a small island village off of the mainland. It has grades 6–12. Most of the teachers at the school travel to the island daily from main town. There are approximately 700 students registered, making this the largest school in the village and a mid-size school overall in the country. The school is a provincial school, which means it is funded and regulated by the provincial government. School E is in the most rural community out of the three and located in a remote area in the Eastern Province. It is about 1.5 h from the largest town. The area is almost exclusively ethnically Tamil (Hindus and Christians). Most of the families were fishermen or farmers. Unemployment among men was quite high, as was alcoholism. School E had grades 6–11. School M is in a small rural village about 1 h away from the largest town in the west coast of the Northern Province, one of the largest Muslim communities in the North. Many of the villages and schools in the area are mixed with ethnic Tamils (Hindus and Christians) as well as Moors (Tamil speaking Muslims). As such, school M has a unique profile in that it is one of the few mixed schools with Tamil and Moor students. It was the smallest school of the three. School M provided grades 6–12. All three schools were within walking distance of a military base. During my daily commute on local transit to the schools, I consistently saw military personnel.

The school infrastructure was adequate at school A, the largest of the three schools, but low in school E and M. School E had bullet holes in on the walls near the playground that both teachers and students mentioned. School E and M had classroom spaces that were exposed to the elements that interfered with learning. In all three cases, there was shortage of qualified teachers, particularly in the STEM subjects. This was most apparent in school M, the smallest of the three schools. Students in grade 12 at school M registered at the school but attended private classes for the subjects they needed for their national exams. Consequently, almost all the girls from the three schools had to take private tutoring classes for these subjects in the closest town which required travel by foot or bus on their own putting them at risk for gender-based violence. School A, which received considerable funding and support from their alumni, had arranged for a tutor to come to the school to prevent children from having to go into town for tutoring for preferred subjects such as math and science.

School routines such as entry, morning prayers, etc., placed a significant emphasis on rules and obedience. In school A, the day often began with a lengthy speech by the male principal on appropriate behavior for students and teachers. The school had a strong exam culture and the principal spent considerable time speaking to achieving targets and goals on national exams. Older students or prefects were given the role of keeping younger students inline. Both teachers and students were called out for infractions in the large assembly. Similarly, school E had students line up outside where significant time was spent on ensuring appropriate behavior; this was done by the female vice principal. In all three schools, students were generally seated in rows facing the teacher and the lesson was very much teacher-directed. In school A and E some classes had student seated in groups; however, there were no observed discussion, interactions in the table groups. The exception to this was school E, where one teacher used drama in the classroom allowing students to explore and share their ideas during their citizenship lesson. In school M, the small group of grade 12 students sat in a U shape where the teacher was not the central focus of the classroom. School E also had a debate program that some of the participants were involved in. School A and E had student parliaments; however, these were one-time occurrences that was supported by non-governmental organizations rather than a practice that was part of the day-to-day culture of the school. Across all the schools, corporal punishment was the norm. Informal conversations with teachers indicated that boys generally received greater punishment, often being hit with whatever was available whereas girls received fewer beatings and if they did, it was often with a stick and below the knees. Corporal punishment was used by school staff during observations in school A but was reported by teachers and students to occur in all three schools.

The citizenship textbooks from grades 6–9, the mandatory years for civic education, were used to understand how gender equality and peace/conflict were represented in the formal curriculum. A close reading of the content found no mention of current inequities experienced by women/girls or ethnic minorities. Although the topic of women's rights is covered in grade 11, an optional course, the focus of the short section is on Sri Lanka's achievements rather than discussing the current realities experienced by women. Furthermore, the 30-year war or any form of conflict as a result of ethnic, linguistic, or religious differences are not included. Gender inequality was also never a topic discussed in classroom on an informal basis.

Gender norms (dress, behavior, perceived academic ability, and corporal punishment) were strictly enforced in all three schools for students and teachers. This included individual behavior as well as interactions with the opposite gender. In school A, both male and teachers mentioned that they often felt uncomfortable being seen talking to colleagues of the opposite sex because of how it would be perceived by other colleagues. School A also had a strong hierarchical structure between principal-teachers and teacher-students, and men-women. Even parents who visited the school had to adhere to strict protocols of dress, female guardians entering the school grounds were required to be wearing a sari, the traditional dress for women in Sri Lanka. There were no dress requirements for men. School E was unique in that it had a very strong and empowered female vice-principal who was viewed as a role model by many of the female students. She was involved in the day-to-day running of the school and this created less hierarchical dynamic between principal-teacher at the school as well

as between teacher-students. School M was unique in that there were Tamil and Moor teachers. Given that it was a very small rural school, there was a greater sense of collegiality between men-women and teachers-students. It appeared that interactions between the opposite sex was easier when the teachers were of different faiths/ethnicity (Hindu and Muslim). Older boys and girls spoke to each other and students from the two ethnic groups ate and played with each other. In all three schools, girls were highly involved in the classroom. Answering teachers' questions and taking on leadership roles. In school E, girls dominated the classroom in all classroom discussions. They also outnumbered the boys with only three boys having made it to grade 11. These findings only reflect civics classrooms and not STEM subjects which may differ given teachers reported expectations that boys were generally better problem solvers and consequently better at math and sciences whereas girls were better in the arts subjects because they were studious and good at memorizing facts.

4.2. Interviews

4.2.1. Hope for Peace

School A

The four students in school A exhibited mixed opinions about the conflict and hopes for peace as well as a difference in their willingness to talk about the topic. At the beginning of the interview, participant A2 responded, *"I don't really know much about that"* (61) when asked about hope for peace in Sri Lanka. As the interview progressed and she became more comfortable with me and realized that I was Tamil, she opened up and responded to the question on what she would change about the country with:

"Between Singhalese and Tamils, it is the Singhalese that there are more of, so people say the Singhalese have more rights, my parents say this but I don't know. So, they give the Singhalese more rights. Like the votes, the differences, the right to vote, because of that people say they are getting more rights, like choosing the country leader. They should give equal rights to Tamils in everything." (122–123)

Unlike her peer, participant A3, who had lost her father in the conflict, was the most vocal right from the start of the interview. All four participants expressed a desire for peace and unity between the different ethnic groups; however, this hope was tempered with the realities they faced in their day-to-day lives. Participant A3 hopes for the country was to, *"get rid of the ethnic division. The exclusion because you are Tamil or Sinhala, we need a place where everyone sees each other as human beings"* (203–204). When asked if it was a possibility, she responded that, *"Human nature/feelings will most likely not allow it to happen"* (206). She did have hope for small change and suggested that, *"We can change the sour faces people make when they hear 'Tamil people' to a smile"* (208–209), speaking to need to change the negative attitudes towards in Tamils in Sri Lanka.

School E

All of the students at school E openly talked about the conflict and the impact it had on their lives as well as their hopes for peace. Student E2 talked about the displacement and family separation she experienced as result of the heavy fighting as well as the imprisonment of her father in the Vavuniya region. She felt that the hardship experienced as a result of the war had left her with mixed emotions on her identity as a Sri Lankan particularly because her education was interrupted, *"because our studies were interrupted, we were forced to leave our home town and displaced to a different place, that was a hardship"* (128–129). She also spoke to how the war prevented her from engaging in school events because of the LTTE blockades that restricted ethnic Tamils' movements living in LTTE governed regions. The conflict also impacted the students' identities as Sri Lankans. Participant E1 expressed the mixed emotions she had about her identity as a Sri Lankan given the violence and loss of rights for Tamils.

“A lot of people were killed during the war period, and in the most gruesome manner. I feel that another war like that will not occur (52–53) because of the war, Tamil people have lost a lot of their rights. So, when I think of that I feel sad.” (143–144)

Despite these difficult feelings, student E1 felt that what took place was horrific enough that it would never happen again. She stated that in the future, *“I believe we will all live peacefully together”* (150). When asked how or what was needed to bring this about, she responded:

“First, we shouldn’t have this ethnic tension. There shouldn’t be this distinction between Tamils, Sinhalese, and Muslims. We should all be Sri Lankans. We should all be seen as people of this country. If people were to understand this, these problems won’t exist, and this country would go to a better place.” (154–156)

Similarly, student E2 also felt that peace was possible but that it would take some time.

School M

The three participants from school M had various degrees of exposure to direct war but had all experienced displacement from their village. Participant M3 felt strongly that the conflict should be included in the formal curriculum (civic textbooks). She attributed the lack of acknowledgement of the war in the text to the lack of progress in the ongoing human rights violations investigations. She stressed the need for what happened during the last days of the war to be written down.

“They should write about it. Like the problem with Mullivaikal has been going on for a long time. People from Human rights organizations come and come and still there is no decision on it. They come and look, and they go. They come and talk and interview but there is still no decision for the Tamil people. Many people were killed in Mullivaikal. The people in the future will not know what happened. Tamils, like generally what happened over here, no one will know. If it is written, it will be known. Like we know what happened before us, because it was written.” (97–100)

Participant M3 also was able to critically reflect on both sides of the conflict. *“It can’t be said that it was caused by them (Sinhala). Tamils also created this situation for Tamils. It was the intention to bring something better for Tamils that caused this war, as a result much of the loss was endured by the Tamils”* (140–142). This conversation is only starting to take place among the Tamil population, but it was not taking place in classrooms or schools. Student M5, who was trapped in the heavy fighting during the last days of the 2009 war, felt that it may be better if the horrifying details she experienced during the war were left unknown. She explained:

“Some things they should know, and some things are better left unknown. Like it is important to know the war happened but not what happened to people, because they might think it might happen again. Even if people talk about another war, like I hear the sound of a helicopter I get so scared. That is how it was, it would spin from above and the strikes, the shells would come and fall and the only thing you see is smoke in the sky and fire in the ground. That fear comes immediately when I hear the sound of a helicopter now. That kind of information will not be good for the future, but it would be important to know the war happened and which places it happened in.” (76–84)

M3 expressed a strong desire for peace despite the displacement and tragedy that she had experienced:

“All the people of this country should be peaceful and happy. There should be no problems. There should be no wars like this again. If we see all people the same way, these kinds of problems would not come to mind.” (208–210)

At the same this desire was tempered with her reality there was little hope for peace given the difficult post-war culture where people only looked out for themselves. Student M4 expressed a similar desire of religious harmony, *“All the religions should be peaceful without any problems”* (41). However, when asked what could be done to bring this about, she was unable to provide an answer.

4.2.2. Gender Equality

School A

Gender equality was almost always associated with work and education. At various points, the four participants felt that Sri Lanka had made strides towards gender equality and that things were changing because girls were coming up in education and more and more women were working outside of the home. In response to whether men and women have equal rights, participant A11 noted:

“Right now there is a difference. But it is changing slowly to become equal. Initially it was boys who were into everything but now little by little girls are coming up. Like politics, education. So slowly, it has become equally. Before, boys were the best, it was that only boys could go to work, but now girls can work too. Anyone can work.” (34–37)

All four participants challenged traditional gender norms related to household work and parenting stating that both men and women had an equal right to work outside of the home; however, in all cases this was always connected with women having to work outside of the home because families could not survive on the single income. Even in the case of both partners working, two of the girls felt that domestic work was still the responsibility of the woman though it would be nice if the husband helped. They recognized that this was not fair, but this was their culture. When asked about gender equality in the school, their immediate response was that they felt that the school treated boys and girls equally in all respects. However, when asked probing questions about the day-to-day practice it became apparent that this was not their reality but more of an ideal. They reported that boys often experienced more corporal punishment and girls were shamed by teachers for talking to male students in the class. This included perceptions of themselves as being better at subjects that required rote memorization versus boys who were better at problem solving, a view that was echoed by teachers. Participant A1 recognized that men and women should have the same rights but acknowledged that this was not their reality. *“It (rights) is not different. But our situations sometimes make a difference in our equality. Like if we go outside, men have security, we don’t.” (83–84)*

Personal safety was prominent theme in all four interviews. All the girls reported experiencing sexual harassment on buses and while walking on roads in the town where they travelled for their tutoring classes. This form of gender-based violence was a direct impediment to their academic success because they could not be competitive in the national exams without these private tutoring classes. The topic that was most prominent in all four interviews was the recent gang rape and murder of a young girl, Vidhya, on her way home from school. The incident and many like it within a short period of time had left a strong impression on the four girls. In talking about situations of a loss of rights, participant A2 reported that lack of justice in the North citing the Vidhya case.

“I can give lots of examples. Like the Vidhya murder. The government, or people with money, prevented the culprits from being prosecuted. Even though the government knew who it did, they used the money to influence people and not give the proper punishment.” (67–69)

The lack of trust in the government, police, and justice system to protect people, particularly women and girls, was a common theme in all four interviews. When asked what she would change about the country participant A11 reported, *“First would be safety for women. Now, we can only control this country through laws. The right kinds of laws for women need to be created. (161–162)”* The “now” is in reference to the post-LTTE rule of the North. Two of the girls explained that during LTTE governance, a woman could walk anywhere and anytime on her own without fear. This was the result of the swift and often fatal punishment for such crimes handed out by the LTTE during their governance.

School E

When asked what they thought about gender equality, two of the participants did not understand the Tamil word for gender equality. The other two explained that it meant equality in all aspects of life

for men and women. When asked if they had gender equality in Sri Lanka and in their own villages, their immediate response was yes. After probing questions on security, household work, engagement in politics, etc., they changed their responses to no. Student E7 felt that men and women had different responsibilities stating that, *“A man’s responsibility is more for the country, while the woman’s responsibility will be more for the family”* (92–93). One place they felt that there was gender equality was school. However, when I asked them why there were only two boys in the grade 11 class, one participant voiced that when teachers yelled at boys for not keeping up in school, they often did not want to come back to school. All of them spoke to the fact that boys did not receive the same encouragement, support, or regulations to stay in school. Many of the older boys in school left for seasonal work opportunities, such as harvesting fruit, or got involved in drugs or alcohol, a growing epidemic in this isolated community. It was also these very same boys that sexually harassed the girls when they traveled alone on the roads.

The four girls felt that girls had less freedom of movement as a result of both cultural values as well as gender-based violence. Two of the participants delineated the gender-based violence that was plaguing the country, such as what happened with Vidhya, with the sexual harassment they experience in public spaces within their community. To them, the violent attack on Vidhya was something that happened in other places compared to their normalized day-to-day experience of gender-based violence (GBV). When asked what needed to be changed in the country, participant E2 responded:

“In this country, first there needs to be restrictions placed on the use of alcohol. Next, the destruction of culture, like the rape that took place in Jaffna, in Vaovuniya, all over the place there are many rapes happening. It is even happening to small children. If all of this was stopped, then the country will be a good country. Like everything, like girls should be able to walk around freely without fear on their own, it should change to a country like that.” (146–150)

The security of girls was a focal theme for the development of the country.

School M

Like their counterparts in other cities, the three participants in school M also attributed gender equality with women working in the public sphere. They all felt that women having the right to go to school and work outside of the home was evidence of gender equality. Participant M3’s rationale for this was that for a household to function and raise children the right way, two incomes are needed. Similarly, participant M3, a Tamil-Hindu, spoke of the shift that had taken place in the Muslim community for women.

“In times before, Muslims would not let their daughters get an education. They would marry them off when they are young but that has changed. But now everyone studies, they study well. And now if you look at who is getting jobs, it is the Muslim girls.” (49–51)

One student was the exception to this perspective; student M5 demonstrated an understanding of gender equality that went beyond access to education and work. She identified inequality at the village level as well as day-to-day practices in her home that was unfair for girls as well a strong frustration to be allowed to talk about these issues.

“In our village there is no such thing as gender equality. Especially because this is rural village. Women are always in a lower position and men are in a higher position. For example, in our house, my mother will serve my father and little brother food first and then ask me to eat. My mother would say “Because they work, they get first priority, you eat last, whether you eat or not, doesn’t matter”. So, I will say to her, I was born from you and he was born from you, why is it that I have to serve him but I have to eat last. She will say, “It is not like that, even if you think that, it should be in the home, what you say is right, but keep it in the house.” You can’t ask outside why boys are getting more food than and that everyone is equal. Because we are not that grown, and no one will listen to what we say.

So, because of that I fight with my mom about it at home but never mention it outside. So, in a rural village it will always be unequal between men and women.” (87–96)

Contrastingly, participant M4, a conservative Muslim student, stated that men and women were not equal. Men were in a higher position than women but that it should not prevent women from engaging in work. She also reported that, *“men are better suited than girls”* (18) for politics.

Gender-based violence and the girls' safety were prominent themes at school M. This was a very small rural community where everyone knew each other so they reported that the level of sexual harassment was low; however, participant M3 reported, *“The people who live in the village don't, because it is small, and we know each other. But the people who come here for work or are staying here will say things to us when we walk on the road”* (257–258). Culture, particularly around appropriate behavior and dress for girls, played an important role in perpetuating GBV. This had been strongly internalized by student M4, who felt that women could also be at fault for the attacks on them as she explained, *“When women dress provocatively, then it incites men. So, the blame is on both”* (71). All three participants referenced the Vidhya case in their interviews. Students M4 and M3 identified putting an end to the rape of girls as the foremost issue that they wanted change about the country and both spoke to the need to end corruption within the police and justice system in order to prevent future assaults. There was a lack of confidence in these systems to bring perpetrators to justice or protect women and girls. In fact, participant M3 spoke of the time when there was justice for these crimes during LTTE governance.

“... under the rules and regulations of the LTTE, there were never issues like this. No matter what time it is during the night, you can send you children anywhere with the confidence that they will be okay. There was safety. But now you cannot send you children out anywhere. But now after 6 pm, there needs to be an escort.” (277–281)

Like their counterparts in school E, ensuring that children, particularly girls, have the right to safety was an issue that they wanted addressed at the country level.

4.2.3. The Role of Education

School A

For all the participants, education was a means to employment and income generation. For some, education was also a source of resilience for overcoming extreme poverty or addressing social injustice. Participant A3 felt that education was her only means to change her circumstances. In response to the question of what she wanted to do with her life in the future, she stated:

“I want to get into politics. I want to help my people. I want to get justice for my father who was killed by the EPDP (a pro government group in the North) but I know I can't do this as a woman. I would make my little brother a politician and I will provide support and advice for him, I would become a lawyer. I will put my brother in front because when I go to another family (marriage) it will become a problem.” (15–23)

She went on to explain that there were many challenges for women to become politicians in Sri Lanka and that this was her way of overcoming this challenge and achieving her goals. One challenge for her was the competing demands on her time to do household chores versus studying.

“Sometimes I yell at my mom and say she could help because I am studying, like a final exam is coming and I must study, but I always feel bad and go and do the work anyway. But what can you do, if you have it in your heart that you want to study, that is enough. Another thing is, I have a confidence because one month after my dad's death I passed my exams.” (220–223)

Student A3's desire for social justice, civic engagement and tenacity stem from the extreme hardships she experienced as a result of the conflict and injustice. Similarly, participant A1 felt that education was the only way out of poverty, *“My parents did not study, and they struggle”* (18). Being the

oldest child, she also felt that it was her responsibility to study, get work, and support her younger brothers' education.

School E

Unlike their male peers, who had options for work prior to finishing school, the four participants viewed education as the only means to better their future, for themselves and their families. All the participants demonstrated a strong sense of social justice and education was their means to achieve these goals. In school E, two out of the four participants wanted to become lawyers and had a strong orientation towards using education to better their local community. Student E4 explained that her goal was to become a lawyer to address the high levels of addiction issues in her community. She explained, "*Corruption and addictions (drugs, alcohol, cigarettes) are rampant in society and I would like to be able to rectify these*" (35–36). Education was a key source of resilience to overcome the struggles of poverty for student E1. When asked what her future would hold, she stated: "*For me, it is must that I become a lawyer. On top of that, my family faces a lot of hardships. Both my parents face a lot of hardships, as a result if I study well and get a job, I can take care of them.*" (28–31) The school was also a means to build relationships and social cohesion between the different ethnic groups. Student E2 reported that, "*Through the school, we have attended many meetings in different places like Batticaloa. There, there are many Muslims and Sinhalese, and they come and talk to us in friendship and we too talk to them*" (140–142). Based on this experience, participant E2 felt there was a need to have more opportunities to interact with other ethnic groups to overcome differences and work towards unity. School was also identified as a place to learn to be tolerant to religious diversity and value multiculturalism.

School M

For the students in school M, education was an important source of hope and protection during the conflict as well as to overcome poverty and traditional gender roles at home. For the Muslim participant, M4, education was an opportunity to work outside of the home with the blessing of her parents despite the gender inequality that was part of her reality. During the conflict, education was as source of protection and resiliency for the girls. Participant M3 noted that her two brothers who did well in school were able to avoid LTTE-conscription because they had gotten into good schools and were able to leave the village. Her third brother did not have this advantage and was one of 25 young men who were forcefully conscripted. For student M5, education was a key source of resiliency and hope for the future during her displacement in the last days of the war. She also identified her mother, a community leader in the village, as an important aspect of her keeping up with her studies.

"I remember the conflict very well. It was the time I was in grade five studying for the grade six scholarship that we had to leave. As a result, my studies got thrown off but the thanks to the tenacity of my mother, no matter where we got displaced my mother always found a school to send me. Just in the last days of the war, two or three months, the shelling was so bad, children could not go to school, we could not come out. But my mother never let us go without school or drop out." (45–49)

Evident here is the impact of conflict on the cohort of children who were displaced during the 2009 conflict as they sat their grade 5 scholarship entrance exams, a test that in many ways determines their future opportunities in and through formal education. Student M5 lamented that she had just missed the cut off mark to get into a good school because she had to write her exams right after the heavy fighting ended that she was caught in the last days of the war. Despite this set back, she displayed a strong sense of optimism for her future as a teacher in her community. The school was also recognized as a space to build social cohesion between the different ethnic groups. School M was the only mixed school of the three with a sizable ethnic Tamil and Moor student body. Participant M3 viewed the school as a place to overcome feelings of segregation, as she stated: "*It is good. Because we are all mixed up here with each other, we learn about the other cultures. If we are isolated, there will be a feeling like "oh they are like that and we are like this"*" (63–64).

5. Discussion

Despite the positive role of education in providing the girls with hope for their future, there was limited evidence in the interviews of the 11 students and observations of the school and classroom environment of gender-transformative education for peacebuilding.

5.1. Representation and Redistribution

There were limited opportunities for representation at the school or community level for the 11 participants; in fact, one participant felt that due to her age and gender, no one would listen to her if she dared challenge the status quo on cultural gender norms. Although schools recognized the importance of the students' voices, this did not change the adult/teacher-centered culture of the three schools. In all three schools, classroom environments (seating, pedagogy, corporal punishment, student-teacher interaction) placed a significant emphasis on developing students to become obedient rule followers rather democratic spaces that promoted positive conflict talk. Smaller class sizes and female school leadership did seem to disrupt this dynamic. With respect to redistribution, interviews with students and observations at the school and district level showed that rural schools in the war-affected regions were severely lacking in qualified teachers, particularly in the STEM subjects. Smaller rural schools also had poor school infrastructure. The lack of equitable redistribution of educational resources and qualified teachers directly impacted the security of the girls who had to access these services outside of the communities, putting them at risk for GBV.

5.2. Recognition and Reconciliation

The formal curriculum, civics textbooks, and informal curriculum, teacher talk, emphasized the value of diversity, particularly Sri Lanka's rich cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. This was echoed in the interview of the participants that took pride in this diversity. What was missing in the curriculum (formal and informal) was the equity that Novelli et al. [39] required for recognition. There was no recognition in the formal and informal curriculum of any types of equity issues related to ethnicity, language and gender. For example, there was a lack of recognition that it was predominantly ethnic Tamil children who experienced high levels of violence and displacement that made it impossible for them to do well on the grade 5 national exams. This is a violence of omission that normalizes inequity and injustice to a generation of children who are now young adults with limited prospects. Small losses in access to quality education during conflict translate to significant losses in children's ability to obtain higher education and lifetime earnings [49]. How violence based on differences is addressed and responded to is a key indicator for peacebuilding [38,39]. Similarly, the 30-year conflict and the loss of rights of marginalized groups was not addressed in a meaningful way through the curriculum or through classroom discussions. This is not a surprising finding as it has been documented that Sri Lankan teachers are generally afraid to discuss controversial topics given the political climate of the country [13].

What was surprising was the complete omission of discussion around gender and gender inequality as well as the GBV experienced by women and girls. It is not uncommon for levels of sexual violence to increase within groups during and after a war due to the breakdown of social norms [4]. Schools and educators have an important role to challenge gender norms that facilitate violence against women and girls (VAWG) [4]. The participants' knee-jerk response that gender equality existed in schools indicates that students have internalized the message that gender equality has been achieved in Sri Lanka due to equal participation in education and because women are now allowed to work. The omission of the structural violence against women and girls, particularly minority women and girls, and the reinforcement of harmful gender norms through education is a form of cultural violence that perpetuates GBV. Additionally, school systems contributed to a toxic form of masculinity. High levels of corporal punishment for an already traumatized generation of young men combined with low expectations to stay in school meant that many boys ended up on the streets and were more prone

to engage in alcohol, drugs and GBV. These findings echo Justino, Leone, and Salardi's [50] findings in Timor Leste, where boys had a substantial loss in human capital due to the long-term impact of violence on education. Toxic masculinity was coupled with the differential treatment of girls in the three schools on how they should dress and behave in order to maintain propriety and prevent sexual attacks against them. Interview results show that girls were frequently shamed by female teachers, who sexualized any interaction with the opposite sex, for talking to their male peers. Under the cloak of preserving culture and propriety [8], schools not only condone GBV they are direct contributors in creating what Breines et al. [25] describe as hegemonic forms of masculinity that lay the ground work for perpetrators of GBV.

Reconciliation requires education to address past and current injustices to build trust and social cohesion between groups [38,39]. The omission of the war and gender inequality within the formal and informal curriculum is a form of violence [41,51] that leaves little space for peacebuilding. Hudson [1] argue that the state's ability to provide security for the most vulnerable women and girls in conflict-affected contexts largely determines its ability to foster peace at the country level. The 11 participants from this study felt that the state had failed (government, laws, justice system, police, and even teachers) to protect women and girls due to the lack of convictions of perpetrators that had committed the most violent acts of sexual assault against school girls. This was in stark contrast to the protection that was afforded to women and girls during LTTE rule in the North and East.

5.3. Resilience

Though there were not many instances where education was a source to transform societal inequities and promote social cohesion and peace, it was a key source of hope and resilience for the girls. It inspired acts of resistance to the status quo and creative solutions to barriers for girls. These moments took place in small micro acts such as travelling to town for tutoring classes in groups as a means of protection from GBV. Sexual harassment on public transportation is a daily threat for women in Sri Lanka. A United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) report found that 90% of women experienced sexual harassment on buses and trains in Sri Lanka [32]. Almost all the participants made daily journeys from their rural village into town to attend their tutoring classes so that they could be competitive in Sri Lanka's ruthless high stakes exam-oriented schooling system to enter university. They attended lower ranking schools, as a result of not being able to do well in their grade 5 scholarship exams due to heavy fighting in 2009 that disrupted their education. Most of these lower ranking rural schools have teacher shortages, particularly for STEM subjects, thus reducing access to quality education for these girls. Despite the setbacks, all the girls spoke about the day when they will be educated enough to support and uplift their families from poverty.

Participants who had been exposed to direct fighting and displacement demonstrated a strong sense of social justice wanting to make changes in their communities. These findings echo Bellows and Miguel's [52] study which found that individuals exposed to violence and displacement during conflict have higher levels of civic engagement and demonstrated remarkable forms of resilience. All the girls who demonstrated resilience had a greater understanding of the conflict and were also more aware of structural and cultural violence in the community and country; this included issues around the conflict, poverty, and gender inequality. They were also more open to talk about the war and acknowledge that their rights had been infringed upon and wanted justice. Rather than fostering and capitalizing on the resilience, demonstrated through interests in civic engagement and social justice of this generation of children that had lost so much due to the war, education and the school systems are silencing them. This silencing is evident in the acceptance and normalization of militarization in their communities, daily experiences of GBV and the message that gender equality has been achieved in Sri Lanka.

The results of this study echo others on post-conflict education; education and school systems often focus more on utilitarian goals, such as the transmission of knowledge and skills, to help learners become contributing members of the existing and often hegemonic, political, economic, and social order rather transform them [3,10,53]. If gender-transformative education for peacebuilding is to

take place in post-war Sri Lanka, school and education systems need to first embrace more critical perspectives of gender equality that go beyond liberal notions focused on parity in education and the economic integration of women. One way to do this is to focus on fostering and building the resilience of young women, such as those from this study. And if the Sri Lankan state wants to build social cohesion and win the trust of war-affected communities, it must address and reconcile the concerns of these 11 girls and many more like them who faced the brunt of this 30-year war and continue to experience its aftermath.

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Appendix A

No.	Codes
1	Citizenship-gendered
2	Conflict—awareness
3	Conflict-limited awareness
4	Conflict-positive (Davies, 2006)
5	Diversity-critical perspective
6	Education as protection
7	Education for mothering
8	Education for Social Justice
9	Education for work
10	Gender empowerment
11	Gender equality—transformation
12	Gender equality—transformation economic
13	Gender equality/equity
14	Gender inequality
15	Gender inequality-recognition
16	Gender roles-fixed-culture
17	Gender shaming
18	Gender-based violence
19	LTTE-oppression
20	LTTE-security
21	Military-GBV
22	Military-helpful
23	Military-surveillance
24	Multiculturalism and tolerance
25	Obedience-family
26	Obedience-school
27	Obedience-state
28	Omission-conflict
29	Omission-gender inequality
30	Peace (possible/hope for/strategy)
31	Peace for development
32	Resilience
33	Rights—awareness
34	Rights-limited awareness
35	War-impact
36	War-recognition
37	Work-job security/government job

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