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COLOMBO, May 11, 2012 (IPS) - On May 18, some 800 women in Sri Lanka's northern region will hold Hindu religious ceremonies for the welfare of their husbands who disappeared or surrendered to the military as it moved in to mop up nearly three decades of armed Tamil separatism.

"These women continue to live in hope even though many of those Tamil men may have died in the last days of the fighting," says Shreen Abdul Saroor, a prominent rights activist working with conflict-affected women in northern Sri Lanka.

"On the other hand, even if they do acknowledge that their men have died, they don't want to be known as widows as that could result in them being seen in a negative light in the community," Saroor explained to IPS. "They prefer to be known as single women or as women heading households."

Traditionally, Hindus consider widows to be inauspicious and the religion does not favour remarriage. Tamils, who form 12 percent of Sri Lanka's 20 million population, mostly follow Hinduism while Sinhalese, who make up 74 percent of the population, are predominantly Buddhist.

According to government estimates, the ethnic conflict has widowed 59,000 women, the bulk of them in the Tamil-dominated north and east.

With rehabilitation tardy and options to earn money few, many women have been compelled to resort to sex work to earn a livelihood and provide for their families.

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