

CY, O'NER

comics as eyewitness

October 2020

Sri Lanka

Armenia

Iraq

Mauritania

Colombia

front line defenders



cypher

/ˈsaɪfər/

The dictionary definition of cypher is ‘a secret or disguised way of writing’. In many ways, this is the essence of comics storytelling – the image, rather than the word, is a disguise for many words, that can convey meaning, emotion, and can re/frame an entire narrative.

Rap and hip hop culture has taken the word and ascribed a new meaning: ‘an informal gathering of rappers, beatboxers and/or breakdancers in a circle, in order to jam musically together.’ This, too, we find relevant to this project, in that we are bringing together artists and HRDs in freestyle collaboration of activism and art with the aim of informing, elevating and inspiring.

For us, this captures the spirit of why we are working in comics and guides how we facilitate the process of creative production.

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Cover art by Isuri

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Sri Lanka

Juwairiya Mohideen

Following the August parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka, resulting in a super majority for the party of Mahinda Rajapaksa, human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, minority rights defenders and those working in war affected fear new levels of intimidation, harassment and possibly worse.

This year's award winner for the Asia-Pacific region, Juwairiya Mohideen, has already survived being forcibly displaced in her youth and becoming an internally displaced person (IDP) in her own country. Without formal education beyond grade school, Juwairiya has gone on to lead an important women's rights organization, Muslim Women's Development Trust (MWDT) and become a pillar in her community, even as she faces intimidation, threats and harassment.

Juwairiya is at the front line of calls for reform in Muslim personal laws which deny Muslim women and girls the basic rights enjoyed by their non-Muslim sisters in Sri Lanka. Juwairiya has been undeterred by threats against her and her family, blatant misinformation and attacks on her character and being labelled as a traitor and shunned by parts of her close knit community.

Artist: Isuri


Isuri is an artist based in Colombo, Sri Lanka. They graduated from Columbus College of Art & Design with a BFA in Illustration. These days, they're working on two adventure comic books; Podi (Oni Press), a shrink-fiction story about two sisters trying to find their baby brother and escape a tropical garden full of enormous beasts; and Aarthi & The Land of Salt (Scholastic), a story of twelve-year-old Aarthi, her new friend and her younger siblings, who discover the secret world of an abandoned saltern.

[Portfolio](#)

[Instagram](#)


**MY
NAME IS
JUWAIRIYA
MOHIDEEN**






I was born on
15th January 1968, in
Erukkalampitti village in
Mannar district. My parents
had 9 children, seven
daughters and two sons. In the
year 1990 when LTTE* told the
Muslims to leave within two
hours, we were forcibly evicted
from Mannar to live in a
settlement for Internally
Displaced Persons (IDP)
in Puttalam.

Thirty
years later,
we are still
living here.

An illustration of a bullock cart being pulled by a white bull. Three people are in the cart: one in the front holding the reins, and two others sitting behind. The scene is set against a sunset sky with orange and purple clouds. Two large, light-colored speech bubbles are positioned above the cart, containing text.


Back then
there was no
Muslim, Tamil
problem, we all
lived together.

It is very
painful for me to think
about, even after 30
years, leaving my native
place in two hours. I had
very close relationships
with the Tamils there and
that disconnection still
lingers on.



I have two children now,
a son and a daughter. My
daughter is in
grade 10 and my
son is in grade 7.
My husband Uwais
has his own
business.






Shortly after the expulsion, I started working as an aid worker, helping the IDP community in Puttalam with their basic needs.

I have been working for 25 years now.

While I was working, I realised that there was no organization working to support and protect women, who were the most vulnerable.

That is why I started the Muslim Women's Development Trust, which addresses violence against women and discrimination starting from their homes to within their communities.



An illustration of a family scene. A man in an orange shirt and green shorts stands holding a young boy in a pink shirt and green shorts. To their right, a woman in a pink sari and another woman in a blue sari are sitting on the ground. A young girl in a pink shirt and green shorts is sitting on the ground next to a brown bundle. The background is a dark, textured grey. Three speech bubbles are connected to the scene. The top bubble is connected to the man and boy. The middle bubble is connected to the woman in the pink sari. The bottom bubble is connected to the woman in the blue sari. The overall color palette is muted, with oranges, greens, pinks, and blues against a dark grey background.

Back home in Mannar we lived peacefully, and Tamils were like part of our family.

In our village we called everybody as Annan¹, Appa², Amma³, Mama⁴, Mami⁵.

The driver in my house was a Christian and the worker was a Hindu.

¹ elder brother ² father ³ mother ⁴ uncle ⁵ aunty

When old relatives from Mannar came to visit, I used to tell my husband Jayabalan mama and mami are coming to see us.

Then only I realized she was born here, in Puttalam, born without relatives and surrounding societies, unaware of other communities.

My 8 year old daughter asked me why I call Tamils as mama and mami.

I told her how we used to relate to each other and that calling someone 'Annan' and 'Thangachi' can make our relationships stronger, more nurturing.

So I encourage my children and their friends to call each other 'brother' and 'sister'.

I felt by doing this, I can contribute something that is dear to me to the next generation.





I am Juwairiya Mohideen.

I am a Muslim Women Human Rights Defender based in Puttalam, in the North West of Sri Lanka. Me and my family were displaced to Puttalam from the North during the mass expulsion of Muslims by the LTTE in October 1990, and we still live as IDPs in Puttalam. For over 25 years, I have been a vocal advocate for the rights of IDPs and women's rights, especially Muslim women's rights to equality, non-discrimination and against systemic violence and abuse against women and girls. I am the founder and executive director of the Muslim Women's Development Trust (MWDT) based in Puttalam – which provides practical support including legal advice to women and girls. I am the chairperson of a women's collective from the Northern and Eastern provinces, working to reform discriminatory laws and practices. Over the past five years, I have been at the forefront of campaigns for reform of Muslim personal law.





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