REPORT ON WOMEN'S ROLE AND INVOLVEMENT IN PEACEBUILDING AND PEACEKEEPING: THE ROAD TO TRANSFORMATION IN SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract

This paper aims to look at two important post-conflict strategies i.e. peacekeeping and peacebuilding and the role women have to play in it. Their role also brings up concerns about their historic lack of involvement due to economic, social and political structure and institutions. With this report, we will aim to highlight the positive impact of their possible or increased involvement in the process. Peacebuilding which has been defined by Johan Galtung as a promotion of sustainable peace by addressing the root causes of conflict and supporting, understanding and building on local conflict resolution techniques and structures for carrying it out (Cheng, 2010). So, the United Nations largely sees it as a way of building peace in the aftermath of a conflict by addressing the very root causes of the conflict to prevent a relapse of the same (Cheng, 2010). Since the organisation and the international community as a whole have recognised the importance of their overlapping nature for sustaining peace in the aftermath of a conflict, this paper will be looking at both of them (Cheng, 2010). The report will focus on the areas in South Asia as it is a region plagued by repetitive conflict which might be interstate, intra state or transnational in nature. It is also the region with a predominantly patriarchal backdrop limiting the access that women have to these institutions. It is in this background that we aim to address the challenges of their involvement, ways to remove them and the same leading to transformation in South Asia.

Introduction

It has largely been established and well known to the international society for a couple of years now, that women and children are disproportionately affected by conflict. However, this narrative limits them to simply affected and vulnerable population, reliant on external help to save them and ignores their presence and possible enrollments as agents of change. The international community has started a dialogue towards it and given its current state of relevance in a world marked by major violent conflicts leading to humanitarian disasters like the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Palestine conflict to name a few. This discussion and recognition led to the adoption of resolution 1325 on women, peace and security by the United Nations Security Council, this resolution highlights the involvement of women in the post-conflict process (UN Peacekeeping). Post the adoption of this landmark resolution, there have been nine more focusing on their involvement as peacekeeping personnel, building their capacity to allow female leadership and participation in the process (UN Peacekeeping). While these resolutions should have naturally translated into National Action Plans by the states, the process has been slow both in the creation of NAPs and then in their subsequent implementation. This is also largely disproportionate in this sense, while countries like Sweden are being praised for the strong NAPs, not all in South Asia have made the plans and those who have remain largely unimplemented and have not been translated into domestic government policies and law and order (Manio, 2021). These include Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, the case of Afghanistan in particular is important to note as the women in the region have been subjected to losing autonomy especially since 2019 with the control of Taliban over the state (UN Women, n.d.). This is why their NAP is also said to be in phase two now since 2019 as the original document was drafted in the pre-Taliban takeover period (UN Women, n.d.).

This raises questions about the importance or relevance of the involvement of women in the two sectors, while we will be building more on that throughout the paper along with case studies from both South Asia and countries outside of the region, it is important to look at some data and evidence collected in regard to this. The most obvious reason here is that since women are disproportionately affected by conflicts, the aftermath of it requires strategies to address their issues differently, this is facilitated and improved with the involvement of women in the justice system, policing as well as the decision-making system. Here, the emphasis has to be on not just their participation but their meaningful participation as not just caregivers but also in positions of leadership and command which can only be possible with capacity building and training (Rudberg, 2023). Research has found that the involvement of women in the negotiation process makes the agreement more likely to succeed by 64% and last by at least 15 more years (Rudberg, 2023). This becomes all the more relevant for the South Asian regions where conflict has a history of recurring failed peace negotiations. While we focus on South Asia, it is also important to note that the non-inclusion of women in the peacekeeping and peacebuilding process is by no means limited to this region, it is a global exclusion visible in conflicts from Yemen to Ethiopia. In fact, a 2022 study reveals that of all the peacekeeping agreements signed in 2022, there was

only one female signatory (Council of Foreign Relations, n.d.). It is this disparity that we aim to address through this research paper.

Findings

Overview of the South Asian Conflict Situation

Before we delve into discussing the conflicts in the region and the gender dynamics, it is important to define the region first. As the countries included and excluded in this region vary among scholars and think tanks, for the purpose of this paper, we will refer only to eight countries that are a part of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation. So our focus will be on Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (SAARC, 2020). While the region has seen a decline in interstate wars with the Kargil war between India and Pakistan in 1999 being the latest, border skirmishes and civil conflicts coupled with political upheaval have left the region unstable and conflict-prone. The civil conflicts and rise of militancy and insurgency are of particular concern here, these include the conflict in Jammu and Kashmir, North Eastern region and Naxalite movement in India, the political upheaval and economic ruin in Sri Lanka and Nepal leading to a civil war in case of Sri Lanka and a backward trend in women's development and security in Afghanistan since 2019 (Atchaya, 2023). These conflicts involve violence directed towards women in the form of kidnapping, sexual abuse and murder as they are seen as easy attacks and an attack on a woman is symbolic of the attack on the community in these regions (Atchaya, 2023). It is also important to note that the countries in South Asia have been among the lowest ranks in Human Security indicators with high cases of rapes, physical assault, acid attacks, honour killings and dowry-related murders plaguing the region (The World Bank, n.d.).

Barriers to their involvement

Taking a deeper look into the conflicts of South Asia reveals to us the barriers that exist in the involvement and meaningful participation of women in the process. In the case of the Nepal Maoist insurgency, we witness that during the struggle against the regime, women were actively involved as they composed 30-40% of the combatant forces but their work went largely unrecognised after the negotiation agreements were signed (Atchaya, 2023). Even the Disarmament, demobilisation and regulation mission carried out in the aftermath of the conflict by the UN did not address female combatants This switch back to the domestic household stems from the **traditional barriers** in most South Asian countries that even after waves of feminism (important to note here that feminist in South Asia has largely been in different phases than in the West), women are still viewed as belonging to the private sphere and not in public sphere (Jenkins, 2020). This also signals towards a **lack of recognition in formal structures,** we see their involvement in the unorganised, informal structures of the peace process but they fail to gain political or decision-making recognition during the negotiation agreements and in the political structure established afterwards.

The case of militarisation in Afghanistan is another case in point, where the Taliban's takeover has had disproportionate effects on women's freedom and independence and made them demand representation in the Afghan Peace Process (Indrias, 2020). This scenario of ignorance echoes in almost every country in the region as we see even in India and Sri Lanka that women's bodies are viewed as battlegrounds for contestation and they face atrocities at the hands of both security forces and militants (Atchaya, 2023). Their involvement is still undermined, this is largely due to the **patriarchal norms** which limit women as inherently soft, caring, peaceful beings. These barriers coupled with a serious gap in terms of **capacity building and lack of political measures** serve as logistical barriers to their participation (Shivdasan, 2023). These barriers are not just reflected in their domestic engagement but in their international engagement too, for example, India is the second largest contributor of troops to the UNPK (United Nations Peacekeeping) mission but only 0.9% of them are women.

However, these can be overcome with efforts as we have witnessed in the case of Somali Peace Negotiations back in 2001, where even in a security crisis and lack of funds available to women, efforts by international organisations to provide them with resources, access to public lobbies and key decision makers, childcare and the internet allowed for their voices to be heard in the peacebuilding negotiations as well as paved way for their involvement in the process (Reily & Paffenholz, 2016).

Efforts by South Asia

While we have noted the multiple barriers that exist in their participation in the region, it is not to say that the nations have not witnessed a change in their involvement in their process. Even in the face of a lack of actual implementation, the development of NAPs by the four countries is a positive step. At an informal, non-institutional level, we have seen their involvement in various movements. This ranges from the action group in Karachi dating back to 1980 called Tehrik-e-Niswan to Sindhiani Tehreek in Sindh also around that time using campaigns and creativity to work towards a restoration of democracy (K.C. & Whetstone, 2022). Their involvement in the process also needs to be seen as a way of reducing the militancy as can be witnessed in the case of the Bodo Women Justice Forum where women in the conflict-torn part of Assam called for peace to be restored and even served as mediators between the forces, state agents and the rebels (K.C. & Whetstone, 2022). The role played by Bodo Women Justice Forum is similar to the one played by the Hill Women Federation in Chittagong, Suriya and Mother's Front in Sri Lanka (K.C. & Whetstone, 2022), which have all taken an approach rooted in human rights to not just raise women and local concerns but facilitate negotiation processes in civil conflicts.

Benefits of their Meaningful Participation

At this stage, it is important to show the positive correlation between women and their participation in peacebuilding and peacekeeping processes to elicit resources, and political will and remove the multiple barriers discussed above. Women in various parts of the world including Ireland and Liberia among others have already established

themselves as a driver of social justice and change (Reily & Paffenholz, 2016). While we have been considering their importance in social changes for a while now, the benefits of their involvement in bringing forth positive establishments in terms of efficiency and the conclusion of peace agreements and negotiations have largely been ignored (Reily & Paffenholz, 2016). So, in this section we will aim to highlight the multiple benefits of their involvement with case study examples:

- **Addressing challenges faced by women**: Women's involvement serves as the most effective way to address women as has been established by the study carried out in 40 nations whose data showcases that their involvement in police forces reduced the sexual assault cases by 40% (Reily & Paffenholz, 2016).
- **Improving the efficacy of peacekeeping missions:** These are multiple options to enhance the efficacy of peacekeeping missions some of which are as under:
  - Studies done on the unit showcase that the local population and the women found themselves to be less alienated from a force and allowed for easier trust building in the region which allowed them to gather intelligence and evidence that would have largely been inaccessible to the male members of the troop (UN Press, 2019).
  - It also allowed for a consideration of various viewpoints while carrying out the decision-making process
  - A similar theme in the deployment of women force here and in the case of Afghanistan was the efficiency of physical checking as it gives them access not to half the population but to the complete population and this becomes important in smuggling networks where women are involved or in cases like LTTE where it was common to have female combatants (Rudberg, 2023).
  - **Setting a stage of empowerment:** this female unit encouraged others like Bangladesh to also send two female-operated police units, giving actual implementation to the vision of the UNSC Women, Peace and Security Forum.

A Positive Transformation: Lessons from Columbia

Columbia is one nation that despite its initial exclusion of women from the peace negotiations and talks, managed to overcome the barriers and include them actively in the process making way for a positive shift in the society dynamic. Hence, we will explore and analyse its case study in this section and look at some possible lessons South Asia can learn from it.

The barriers in the region at its very core were stemming from societal and cultural norms as we have discussed even in the section above. This along with the absence of a system in place to offer them protection and a situation of security threats (Mantz, 2021) led to their exclusion in the first peace talks which were held in Norway (United Nations Association of Australia, 2020). But their failure paved the way for the inclusion of women in the process with sustained efforts from NGOs and Women-focused civil

society groups which organised public rallies and campaigns to highlight the involvement of women in meditation efforts and providing humanitarian relief (Ruiz, 2019). Their efforts and involvement were backed by the international community and resulted in them securing a one-third representation in the negotiation and peace agreement process (Ruiz, 2019). They even went on to create a special subcommission to focus on issues of gendered violence and injustices (Mantz, 2021).

This not only made the 2016 negotiations a success but also ensured that half the resolutions signed under the agreement addressed women, paved the way for them to become political leaders and be actively involved in decision-making processes in the country in the future as well (Mantz, 2021). It also allowed the peace agenda to address issues of physical and sexual violence with focus. The case study highlights, **sustained efforts from civil society organisations, the creation of special gendered commissions and representation/engagement in decision-making processes** as possible lessons that South Asia can learn from.

Recommendations

Having seen the barriers as well as the importance of their involvement and participation in the process, it becomes important to look at the recommendations to facilitate the same:

1. Establishing National Action Plans

All the countries need to enshrine the UNSC provisions in the resolutions and create national action plans in accordance with the same, these should engage in their involvement in military, political leadership and justice mechanisms. To ensure that the same gets implemented, the creation of these NAPs needs to be accompanied by a National-level policy framework. This has been established by some nations in the form of special measures to allow women in the national army, establishing the Mahila Samakhya programme, and reservations in local and now national level political bodies by India. Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan also have a similar reservation system at at least the grassroots levels.

2. Sustained Role of Civil Society Organisations

This will be through campaigns, active advocacy, mass mobilisations and peace protests. The governments also need to facilitate an active partnership with women's rights organisations and civil society groups to understand the needs of women and the emphasis on such a partnership has also been created in the UNSC resolution 2467. We have already noted the positive effects of these partnerships above in the case of India, Sri Lanka and Nepal. The same should formally be facilitated and increased.

3. Training and Capacity Building Programmes

These could be done in collaboration with international organisations like the UN Courses and training offered for military observation, and bystander training in cohesion with countries like UAE and Finland which have been pioneering these courses. They could also be done at a national level to enhance capacity for local forces, justice systems and advocacy. These should also include political engagement courses to encourage political engagement and representation as reservation policies alone will only create proxy seats.

4. Addressing Human Rights Violations and Gender Stigma

At the roots of women's disengagement lies strong patriarchal norms and cultural barriers that require to be addressed. These will facilitate an active engagement and create an equal platform for women to engage in the process alongside men instead of only being seen as caregivers and confined to private household spaces. This needs to be coupled with a strong human rights approach framework and an active mechanism in places which addresses all gender-based violence and security issues allowing women to engage in the process without a threat to their honour or life.

5. Removal of observer status

Lastly, this recommendation focuses on the part mentioned in the introduction about the **meaningful participation** of women in the process. This involves giving them an active role in the process and not putting them on the sidelines as an observer. It requires looking at them as not mere victims in the conflict but acknowledging their role as drivers of reconstruction and change. Hence, giving them an important role in negotiations and decision-making (K.C. & Whetstone, 2022).

Conclusion

The findings above establish the importance of meaningful participation of women in peacekeeping and peacebuilding processes not just through examples and collected numerical data but also with the support of existing case studies with positive change and sustained peace efforts through their involvement, in peace processes of Somalia, Columbia and in cases of female-led UNPK units.

Bangladesh and India both today contribute to female police UNPK troops but the involvement of the group in their own domestic conflicts remains questionably low.

The paper analyses the need for the involvement of women in South Asia's conflict resolution, peacebuilding and peacekeeping process while addressing the barriers that are stopping this inclusion. The paper tried to showcase how their participation will lead to a lasting and sustained peace in the place of these recurring conflicts along with proposals to incorporate women into formal institutions.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

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