

Gendered Discourse on Human Security: Women's contribution towards Peace Building in South Asia

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Abstract

The UN Nairobi Forward Looking Strategy defined peace as not only the absence of war, violence and hostilities; it means the enjoyment of economic welfare, social justice, human rights and fundamental freedom within the society (United Nations, 1986). South Asia is plagued with conflicts and contradictions in its political, social and economic spheres and falls short of employing democratic ways by engaging different stakeholders of the society to cultivate peace. History is evident to the fact that women have been placed at the margins and excluded from the peace building initiatives; however, women still find spaces either within or outside religious and state institutions and pursue peace actively. Women Peace Activists and Peace Organizations employ creative ways to get their voices heard and contribute towards positive measures in the peace building processes both in inter or intra States discords and disputes. Employing 5 in-depth interviews of Women Peace Activists and analyzing the academic literature, the paper deliberates and discusses the human security discourse from a gendered perspective and bring into light the contribution of women peace builders in South Asia and their strategies used for upholding democratic values in order to make peace a lived experience and reality.

Keywords: Women, Peace Building, Gender, Human Security, South Asia

Introduction

Peace is a process, it has to be built, cultivated and maintained. Peace' is like 'happiness', 'justice', 'health' and other human ideals, something every person and culture claims to wish for and venerate. Peace is a pre-condition for our emotional well-being (Webel, 2007). Peace is not somewhere at the global or higher levels to look for, rather it values the ordinary women, such as teachers, doctors, social workers, mothers, politicians and community workers, who are making efforts in their every daily life situations to bring peace in their surroundings. The Peace works should not be confined to post conflict situations, instead, peace is a prerequisite for progress and development, therefore, peace approaches need to be included at all levels.

South Asia is fraught with ethnic, sectarian, religious and communal violence witnessing identity conflicts and armed struggles. Amid conflicts such as, militancy in the North-Eastern part of India, the Naxal movement in various districts of India, political turmoil in Nepal and Sri Lanka despite the conclusion of the armed conflicts, peace disruption in Afghanistan, there is a visible dearth of positive peace (Karthika, et al., 2012). With regard to India and Pakistan, the region has never been stable and

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peaceful, despite the fact that both India and Pakistan inherit common geopolitical and cultural heritage (Chari, Cheema, & P.Cohen, 2007).

The data for the present study is drawn from primary and secondary sources. Primary data is collected from the interviews with 5 Women Peace Activists based in Lahore, who have been engaged in various South Asia Peace Forums and civil society organizations mandated to work for conflict resolution and peace building. Open ended questions were asked to the interviewees to elicit their responses on the contribution of women of South Asian in peacemaking efforts. Informed insights from the interviewees helped in locating the work of a few Women Peace Organizations in Pakistan, who have contributed towards peace in South Asia specially strengthening peace ties between India and Pakistan in a particular time frame. The secondary data is mainly derived from books, published articles in journals, national dailies/newspapers, reports of women peace organizations and internet sources detailing the work of women peace builders through non-government organizations and peace networks, people forums in South Asia. The paper is divided into two parts, the first part explored the gendered dimension of peace and security arguing that patriarchal and paternalistic State discourses on human security and peace shrink democratic spaces and disable women's agency towards peace building. The second part highlighted the contribution of Women Organizations and their strategies employed for peace work in South Asia strengthening democratic discourse on peace and security. The study has included examples of peace work by women in Pakistan and other countries of South Asia.

Gendered Discourse on Peace and Security

The conventional thinking about war and peace tends to regard women as victims and ignores their contribution to peace making, contrary to this, the concept of inclusive security stressed more on women's agency not on their vulnerability (Hunt & Posa, 2001). Security discourse with gender blindness and its singular focus on the protection of territories is inherently flawed as it fails to protect people from their everyday problems such as illiteracy, unemployment, hunger, poverty, homelessness and other politico-legal and social discrimination. The Centre for Women's Global Leadership calls United Nations to stress that peace does not exist where women fear for their physical security and receive education clandestinely fearing consequences (Bunch, 1996).

There are various threads of arguments about women's relation to peace building. While contemplating on peace building, feminists seek to address the question of structural violence that emphasized not only class relations but also patriarchy. Some say that women are inherently peaceful due to their biological identities as they reproduce and nurture. With this motivation, various motherhood movements were built on women's emotive rhetoric. A few social constructionists posited that women's psychological development prepares them to be care givers and nurturers and their maternalistic instincts are opposite to violence. However, this dichotomized

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thinking that women are for peace and men are for war has been refuted by feminist theorists in peace studies. The concept, which equates women as naturally peaceful is contested because it gives a deterministic account of human nature, put women in fixed positions and narrows our understanding about global security, therefore, the argument about engaging women in peace building is premised on their historical exclusion from decision about conflicts and peace (Charlesworth, 2008). Some feminists stressed that women's presence in peace building is not due to nurturing skill rather it has more to do with knowing oppression (Cockburn, 1998). It is also viewed that since women are confronted with violence as their firsthand experience more at home and in public spheres that make them more sympathetic towards woes of victims and therefore they make use of their agency for justice. This lens proved to be significant in understanding use of women's agency in peacebuilding as it revisits the gendered nature of violence in war and everyday violence (Coomaraswamy & Fonseca, 2007). It implies that the more we know oppression the more we urge for peace. The combined experience of oppression and violence and the responsibility for survival and sustenance provided strong impetus to women for peace making (Ritu, 2004). The traditional gender stereotyping of women role in peacebuilding as carer, nurturer, healer and reconciler limits and reduces their public role which is disparaging and exclusionary. It assists women's political marginalization by confining them to home and hearth, leaving the business of peace to men only, as well as, erasing their immense contribution in the time of war and peace (Brewer, 2010).

The societies in South Asia are less democratic, paternalistic and patriarchal, and terms, such as brotherhood signifies exclusion of women and nation is named as *dhartimatta* (motherland) that needs protection by males, are frequently used in the nationalist discourse and conflicts. Conflicts have manifold and particular effects on women. Apart from sexually motivated violence against women in war time situations, as was witnessed in Partition violence in 1947, civil war between East and West Pakistan in 1971, internal war in Sri Lanka and Maoist insurgency in Nepal, the displacement from homes brought multiple responsibilities on women to look after the children, dying soldiers and elderly and sick members of the family (Khan, 2003). In wartime and conflicting situations, women bodies become battle ground as they are considered to be the symbols/carrier of national honour. Deliberate violence, intimidation, sexual assaults, rape, mutilation, abductions and many other forms of physical abuses are inflicted upon women. Post conflicts situations in various interstate and intra state wars have proven that conflicts pushed women to beggary, prostitution, and exploitative work conditions. Women were dislocated and displaced and absence of their bread earners placed economic and social burden on them too. In the resolution of conflicts and peace building process, women have a greater stake than men because it is women who become widowed, reduced to beggary, raped, sexually attacked, forced into unwilling marriages, compelled to work in exploitative conditions amid constant threat. A deeper look at the conflicts inform that women are

utilized as tools of war, they suffer emotionally, mentally and physically but unfortunately their perceptions are rarely taken into consideration at peace tables for negotiations and settlements and their exclusion leads to ineffective and even distortive solutions (Sattar, 2019). Rita Manchandra conducted a comprehensive analysis of the feminist scholarship on peace and security issues and applies a gender lens to everyday societal interactions with conflict and thereby the point of applying a feminist standpoint giving a new meaning, alternative understanding of security and a different direction to view conflict studies and resolution (Babar, 2001).

Informed by gender stereotypes, women are considered as weaker sex in conflicts that needs protection and deemed to compromise in exchange of peace and submit to oppression unquestionably. Women, who act like pacifists or healers in building peace processes are respected, however, questions are made when women perform a significant or decisive role in decision making bodies, they are often branded as non-state agents/actors and are often kept silent (Menon, 2004). The meaning of cultural notions such as shame, stigma and silence are linked with women bodies as women are told to keep silent in order to have peace even at the expense of violence, molestation and repression. Elshtain stressed that biological determinism is not the reason that made women to behave differently than men in war and militarization, instead the gender hierarchy has placed women differently than men, therefore, women bear different consequences than men (Elshtain, 1987). Given the crisis of conflicts in South Asia relating to politics, religion and ethnicity, there is a need to develop an alternative perspective on human security in the region that needs to privilege women experiences and include their voices in order to form an important part of a revised discourse on human security that needs a different lens to ensure that specific disadvantages associated with being a women should not be swept away under the carpet (Khattak, Habib, & Khan, 2008).

Women's Exclusion from the Peace Process

Women perspectives are hardly figured in peace negotiations. To substantiate this, many examples can be drawn from Afghanistan, Nepal, Srilanka and Kashmir. In the history of 20 years of Nepal's Maoist insurgency for the restoration of democracy against the autocratic era of King, thousands of women became part of the politics and were quite visible at every level (Dutta, 2018). However, following the political arrangements for ceasefire and peace building in Nepal, women were pushed back to their domestic domain. Describing the immense participation of women in the Pakistan's movement for independence, Mumtaz and Shaheed argued that women are called upon in times of crisis and they participate in the national struggles, however, when the crisis gets over, women are again asked to take a back seat and to return to their kitchens and children and revert to the constricted roles (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). The significant work carried out by women peace activists is shrouded in silence and could not be continued due to shrinking spaces for women peace workers, lack of resources and financial constraints (Diep, 2018).

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Analyzing the effects of militarization on women in Afghan war in 1992, Khattak argued that economic hardship, displacements and heightened sense of insecurity negatively affected women mobility, independence and the right to work, and parallel to this, as the male honour gets under threat in war situation, men exercised more control over their women that provided them with a sense of masculinity and manliness (Khattak, 1995). The freedom of Afghan women was robbed by Taliban and women issues are hardly figured in the negotiations with Talibans (Shendurnikar, 2014). In the wake of recent Afghan Peace Process started this year, Afghan Women Peace Network categorically demanded a seat at the country's Peace table because the activists fear that the gains they have achieved since 2001 after the fall of Talibans will be bargained away in negotiations, amid pressures for a deal as the United States wants to end its military involvement in the country (Associated Press, 2019). Having women on the peace table signifies a metaphor in order to re-envisage a society where women are needed to participate in all decision making structures for assurances of the protection of their interests in the re-constitution of the state and articulation of the personal laws in the name of community rights (Manchanda, 2005).

In Kashmir, women narratives and their contribution towards peace building are largely missed out from the conflicts, whereas, having a higher stake in the conflict, women are the targets of both security forces and militants. In Sri Lanka, women, who were claimed as freedom birds in LTTE cadres but were idealized as sacrificial traditional type and their bodies become a site for contesting in the ethnic crises.

Women's Cultivating Spaces for Peace Work

History is evident to the fact that women have been placed at the margins and excluded from the peacebuilding initiatives, however, women still find spaces either within or outside religious and state institutions and pursue peace actively. In spite of excuses given for women's absence from the peace process, women organizations employed creative ways to get their voices heard (Porter, 2008). Women created separate networks for peace initiatives such as Global Initiative for Peace at 2000 Millennium Summit of Religious Leaders and Women Mobilization Network of Peace was created in 1998 by World Religions of Peace (Susan, 2015).

Creative and non-conventional approaches for peace-building were applied by women that include affirming differences, acknowledgement of injustices, inclusion of unheard voices, dialogue and networking strategies, peace education for social change, non-closure of identity, reducing polarization by being open to pluralistic identities, defining agenda and group process (Cynthia, 1998). Women performed as nurses, soldiers, warriors, and mothers participated in arms manufacturers as well as led rallies/protests and labour strikes to prevent manufacturers (Bunch, 2004). Women have taken leading roles in preventing the occurrence of conflicts and contributed towards creating congenial atmosphere for peace building. Strategies for creating sisterhood solidarity in order to support women in distress and advocating inclusion of

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women in decision making process are applied by women in several pre and post conflict situations across South Asia. Women writers have also contributed towards the spread of peace narratives. The unequal structures of power, be it in political, social or economic realms, are questioned and challenged by Women Peace Networks. Dialogue and networking have been among the most effective strategies employed by global women's movements towards social change and raising awareness, which are based upon accommodating differences more than expressing solidarity as well as focused on building the politics of understanding (Menon, 2004).

In Nagaland, the conflict ridden North East region of India, the Naga Mother Association launched a campaign of peace with a slogan "Shed no more blood" in 1984 and led peace negotiations and the Tamil Hindu women of LTTE in Sri Lanka organized themselves in various peace campaigns (Butalua, 2002). In Karachi, women have made commendable contribution in Mahajir Quami Movement by politically mobilizing women and enlisted 7500 women political workers in a single city, which is described as a historical feat to break the barriers that confined women to home. Unfortunately this movement had taken a shape of a political cult and women were not given equal opportunity to participate in a democratic process on an equal level rather they were engaged to play subordinate roles (Farrukh, 1994).

ASR Resource Centre is a socialist/feminist non-government organization based in Lahore working for intra/inters peace issues and has organized several peace conferences, seminars and training programs and initiated national peace alliances and produced literature, films, and documentaries on peace studies (Baloch, 2018).

South Asian Women for Peace was established in 1996 with the objective to establish a teaching environment on issues of peace and conflict in the region in order to promote the conceptual and political understanding of issues. This Women's Network of Peace has conducted various study courses on peace building and conflict resolution, organized Women Peace Conferences in South Asia and its membership is extended to Nepal, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh (Naz, 2018).

Women for Peace in South Asia were established in 1998 by a group of civil society organizations from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Srilanka. Promoting people to people contact and nurturing friendly relations in South Asia was their strategy, this network had organized many good will tours of South Asian Women and played important role in downplaying the conflict ridden situation emerging between India and Pakistan after Kargil conflict (Jahan, 2018). These peace networks conducted seminars on denuclearization, conflict and peacebuilding, human rights, violence against women and labour laws. In the decades of 1980s and 1990s, women peace activists on both sides of the borders along with civil society members were actively involved in leading initiatives for peace through creative arts, people to people contacts, peace visits between India and Pakistan. However, with the passage of time such efforts were minimized reasoned to the increasing emergence of antagonistic nationalists identity discourse taken roots in both India and Pakistan that shrunk the

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space for such peace work (Naz, 2019). The significant work, carried out by women peace activists in the last few decades, is shrouded in silence and could not be continued due to shrinking spaces for women peace workers, lack of resources and financial constraints (Diep, 2018).

Tehrik-e-Niswan, a cultural action group was established in 1980 in Karachi by women and has been engaged in delivering the message of peace, democracy, women rights and antiwar propaganda through films, documentaries, dance, teleplays, music videos and festivals. It has organized various theatre training workshops on community development (Tehrik-e-Niswan, 1980).

Sindhiani Tehreek, a rural women movement in Sindh emerged in reaction to the repressive policy of the military dictator in 1982 and waged struggles against martial law, social injustices, class oppression, and employed creative strategies and campaigns for mass mobilization for the restoration of democracy (Khan & Saigol, 2004).

All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation and Bodo Women Justice Forum were founded by Women Peace Activists in the armed conflict ridden BTC region of Assam Northeast India towards building a bond of unity among Bodo community through collective thoughts and actions, and these women were engaged in promoting equal rights, justice, socio-economic freedoms and social reforms (Dutta, 2018). These women organizations launched campaigns for the release of innocent youth from security personnel and organized silent protest marches, encircled offices of law enforcing agencies, called for peace strikes against human rights violations without resorting to any criminal act. They have played the role of mediators between the militant groups and between the political leaders with the sole objective to bring peace in the region.

Mothers' Front, the parents of disappeared persons, formed in 1990s, was engaged in women peace activism in Sri Lanka with the demands to investigate the disappearance of thousands of people and allocate compensation for the victims (Research Directorate, 1994). Women groups like Suriya advocated for peace and human rights in Sri Lanka. Hill Women Federation in Chittagong, emerged in 1980s, championed women's causes and was instrumental in reaching to an accord between parties of various conflicts (Singh, 2010)

Jalila Haider, the first woman lawyer from Hazara Community based in Quetta observed hunger strike against the killing of hundreds of members of the Hazara community in targeted terrorist attacks in Baluchistan and demanded concrete steps by the government to do more for the protection of Hazara community and bring killers to justice (Dawn, 2018). She highlighted the sectarian strife and identity crisis the Hazara community due to non-availability of provisions by the State to acquire identity cards, and spoke against the patriarchal cultural domination and chauvinist

male attitudes that discourage women from taking active part in politics (Jalil, 2018). Her four days hunger strike has drawn the attention of the country's Army Chief, who met her and the representatives of the Hazara community and assured them the redressal of their grievances (Hashim, 2018).

Amid skirmishes on the line of control and the threat of military action between India and Pakistan started in February 2019, a renowned Pakistani TV actresses Bushra Ansari and her sister Asma Abbas rap to the peace verses written by a female poetess Neelum Ahmad Bashir expressing the desire of peace by common people on both sides of the border and discouraging war mongering notions that create distance and fear between neighboring countries (Samma Digital, 2019). This peace anthem has received positive response from the social media and was well appreciated across the borders of both countries.

Women Organizations for Peace on both sides of border between India and Pakistan made efforts to bridge the seemingly insurmountable barriers by conducting huge rallies, annual conventions to unite citizens from both countries, develop networks (Hunt & Posa, 2009).

Neither institutions nor civil society groups without incorporation of democratic values in their structures, policy frames and programs can attain peace. The unequal structures sanction exploitation and further shrink spaces for women and therefore a lot needs to be done for the practical realization of the existence of peace. In this scenario, women need to organize themselves beyond institutional structures to cultivate their own spaces in order to exercise the politics of peace building.

Maintaining that conflict and peace are gendered activities, the feminist perspectives calls for democratization and feminization of security and peace agenda. Feminists call the attention towards the inclusion of gender perspectives in the discourse of human security (Hagen, 2016). Therefore, women need not to be seen as victims only but also that they possess an agency for social and cultural transformation implying that women peace activism should not be undermined, subordinated or sacrificed in the name of national security. Several studies from diverse areas such as Burundi, Cambodia, Guatemala and South Africa, have substantiated that women while participating in peace process appeared to be less hierarchical and more inclusive to bring more people in the peace process (Charlotte, 2004).

Our political processes, socio-economic realities and cultural conditions are interwoven with deep seated patriarchy that needs to be into account for understanding the nexus of peace and security. A question arises that what women can do to confront the multilayered socio-cultural impediments that obstruct their entry into public life to work as equal citizens towards restoring and rebuilding the conflict affected areas? The ensured women quota in the political parties will not automatically transfer them into power and authority in the absence of the true spirits of democracy (Manchanda, 2017). However, the conceptual framing of Women,

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Peace and Security agenda (WPSA) is a fundamental challenge to contemporary global order because tension exists between the promotion of WPSA and its implementation as each is contingent upon the conception of what counts gender equality and how it can be reflected/manifested (Kirby & Shepherd, 2016). United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 adopted in 2000 calls all member states to reaffirm the full involvement of women by increasing their participation in the prevention, resolution of conflicts, negotiations, post conflict reconstruction towards maintenance and promotion of peace and security (UNSCR, 2000). Women experiences through their voices need to be involved at all stages of designing and implementing peace initiatives. Paying no attention to gender dynamics can result into neglect of the fundamental causes of conflicts, which generates lack of understanding of the gendered impact of conflicts (Sanam, 2007).

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