

FROM CONFLICT TO SECURITY:

A Regional Overview of Community Conversations with Women in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



WOMEN'S REGIONAL NETWORK
AFGHANISTAN • PAKISTAN • INDIA

The confluence of conflict, militarization and corruption with patriarchy uniformly exacerbates the prevalent climate of insecurity and vulnerability created for women by existing structural inequalities. This is the clear message that women participants from the many sites of the Women's Regional Network Community Conversations send us.

Between March 2012 and August 2013, WRN members and their local partners in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India reached out to women in more than forty communities experiencing conflict or militarization to ask about their experiences. Field reports were compiled into Country Reports, and these Country Reports form the basis of this Regional Overview and its Executive Summary.

DIVERGENCES

At first glance, Afghanistan, India and Pakistan present very different conflict contexts.

- a) **The primary context of conflict:** The primary context of conflict in Afghanistan is a consequence of the internal and external factors—from the 1979 Soviet occupation to the decade-long resistance to the Taliban years to the post-2001—in which interplay several other countries have played a role. In Pakistan, the primary context of conflict arguably is nation-building, although outside players have featured. In most of continent-sized India, conflicts are almost entirely internal and inequality lies at their core.
- b) **A spectrum of conflict and militarization experiences:** The fourteen locations across Afghanistan, India and Pakistan where Community Conversations were held thus represent the gamut of conflict and militarized settings, with no two of them being identical.
- c) **The extent of popular mobilization and women's participation:** Whereas women show agency and resilience across the region, it is only in Jagatsinghpur, Odisha that residents have mobilized as systematically and carried out such a sustained and focused protest, and most important, this is a protest in which women have participated from the beginning and in full measure.
- d) **Who can make a difference:** The final difference is what seems to be the most effective entry-point for advocacy and engagement varies in each country. In Afghanistan, the international community, working with civil society, have been effective change agents. In both Pakistan and India, there is great sensitivity about foreign intervention, especially in social and cultural matters, and therefore, working with civil society presents the optimal entry-point.

INTERSECTIONS

The everyday experience of conflict and militarization may happen in different contexts but is uniformly gendered and all-pervasive in its impact.

- a) **Women show agency, creativity and enterprise.**
The Community Conversations unearthed countless examples of women's enterprise and creative agency in the most challenging of situations. Women find ways to continue with their lives and work, as Afghanistan shows, in times where the

simplest things are risky. In Pakistan, women's rights NGOs and community-based organizations working in adverse settings are creating channels of access to justice and to state institutions. In the Indian sites, women are taking advantage of quotas and building their capacity to help their communities, but in Jagatsinghpur, they are key players in the struggle to resist land acquisition and predatory development and this experience has made them fearless. Painting a picture that ignores this women's agency and initiative and dwells on women's vulnerability could preclude their inclusion in reconstruction, development and governance as capable actors and productive beneficiaries.

- b) **Physical (in)security comes first.**
Participants in the research understood security to mean physical security. Universally, women experience increased levels of violence within and outside the homes, framing and circumscribing women's lives and life-chances. Women face violence at the hands of family members, security forces and armed groups, and a culture of impunity prevails. Ethnicity is a common motivator for attacks on women, as does the sight of women leaving their homes to work outside seem to be.
- c) **Fear and the feeling of insecurity limit life-chances.**
Insecurity was also seen to be a state of mind. Women live with the fear of violence, fear for themselves and fear for their family members. The feeling that it was unsafe for women to go out also limited their life-chances on a daily basis. Rumours about "forced disappearances" contributed to this climate of anxiety. Fear of violence has meant that women have lost economic opportunities, access to health and education and mobility, as a result of which they are poorer.
- d) **The presence of security forces is a mixed experience.**
Women were divided on the question of whether the presence of security forces enhanced or endangered their security, and largely their response depended on their social and geographical locations.
 - i) In Afghanistan, participants associated the ill-effects of militarization with illegal armed groups and not with forces that were bound by and followed the law, and with a decline in women's security.
 - ii) In Balochistan, Pakistan, stories about "forced disappearances" by the Frontier Constabulary (FC) fueled existing insecurity. In Swat, the army was welcomed for its relief

work and for its ability to counter the Taliban, but while feelings about the Taliban have remain unchanged, the army is now seen as creating inconvenience and insecurity without delivering a full defeat of the Taliban.

iii) In India too, researchers found that the culture of impunity for sexual and gender-based violence in patriarchal societies is reinforced by the long-term presence of armed forces—state or private—and by militarization. At best, the security forces—military, paramilitary or police—stand by without stopping violence; at worst, they are perpetrators of sexual violence.

e) The experience of militarization is all-pervasive.

Women identified and articulated clearly the impact of militarization on their lives.

i) The entry of security forces into a situation initially improved the security situation, this sooner or later yielded to a deterioration as local residents were caught in the crossfire between the forces and armed groups. Moreover, as the civilian administration loses control over the security apparatus, impunity deepens insecurity.

ii) While some felt that the military-run development projects were more efficiently executed, they were also seen to increase the vulnerability of an area—especially if the troops were not Afghan. Moreover, the effectiveness of hearts-and-minds projects was limited by the disconnect between project design and ground realities. There was broad agreement that the military should not do development work, unless local communities had more ownership over design and execution.

iii) Where commercial areas are the targets for attacks and counter-attacks, families lose their only source of livelihood, in addition to losing earning members to injury or death. Militarization has thus brought poverty and loss of livelihoods in its wake.

iv) Militias use military means to create insecurity in order to increase their leverage with the government. Women cynically speculated about collusion between security forces and the very armed groups they were supposed to be fighting being a reason for the impunity both enjoyed.

v) Militarization affected people's access to news and information about local circumstances.

vi) Militarization breaks trust within the community, and alienates people from the state. The breakdown of the community increases the vulnerability of women.

f) Corruption is so endemic as to be normal.

Across the three countries, women found corruption so insidious that they did not think it could change. When corruption intersects with militarization, insecurity and patriarchy, for women the two most deadly consequences are the culture of impunity for violence they experience and poor access to

justice. Women are disenchanted with state institutions which they find distant and indifferent.

i) Participants spoke about “efficient corruption,” where you pay a bribe and your work is done, and “inefficient corruption,” where you pay a bribe but it does not get done.

ii) Corruption takes many forms—a violation of rights; not doing one's job properly, lack of accountability; and sexual harassment. Lack of accountability facilitates many kinds of gender-based violence—acid attacks, trafficking, sexual violence within the household and sexual exploitation of those in need.

iii) When the military enters the civilian sphere, the opportunity and habits of corruption enter the military and the civilian sphere is securitised.

iv) Participants spoke about the army's growing interest in local business where the army's non-military expenditures spawn a parallel economy.

v) As the military takes on more civilian functions—like development and infrastructure; as it appropriates land and property for its use, and as more governance matters are taken over in the name of security, civilian administration is sidelined. Accountability declines.

vi) Even without a specific law, military encroachment on civilian authority results in a shrinking of civil rights, accountability and transparency.

MOVING FORWARD

Holding peace to be more than the absence of violence, and believing that security lies in freedom from fear and freedom from want, and that justice is inalienable from peace and security,

Members of the Women's Regional Network affirm that:

- Women's rights are a non-negotiable part of the peace agenda in any and every context;
- The full and meaningful participation of women in peace processes and dialogues at all levels is a prerequisite for a just and sustainable peace;
- A peace that does not address the culture of impunity for sexual and gender-based violence and lay the foundation for accountability is a flawed peace.

And drawing on the findings of the Community Conversations, a field-based exploration and documentation of women's experiences in their voices, and the recommendations developed by our country teams for the international community, their national government and civil society, recommend:

TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY THAT IT SHOULD:

- **Ensure** that women are present and have a voice in defining priorities for peace and transition processes overseen by international agencies;
- **Make** support—diplomatic, financial and technical—contingent upon the inclusion, representation and full and meaningful participation of women in peace and transition processes;
- **Promote** women's rights based on existing conventions and resolutions, such as the Convention to Eliminate all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), taking special note of General Recommendation No. 30 on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations, and the UN Security Council Women, Peace and Security Resolutions, namely, UNSCR 1325 and the supporting resolutions;
- **Build** capacity and offer assistance to national governments to comply with international norms and conventions relating to accountability, access to justice, human rights and gender equality.

TO NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS THAT THEY SHOULD:

- **Guarantee** the full and meaningful participation of women in decision-making, especially in peace and transition processes, and the inclusion of their voices and concerns in the determination of national priorities;
- **Comply** fully in letter and spirit with international conventions and resolutions relating to women's rights and gender justice;
- **Repeal** national and local laws and regulations and emergency ordinances that have the effect of restricting human rights, especially women's rights, and security;
- **Create, implement and monitor** mechanisms to ensure accountability and access to justice;
- **End** impunity for sexual and gender-based violence in all situations, especially in conflict and militarized zones;
- **Demilitarize** civilian zones and administration; deweaponize society; and depoliticize the security sector.

TO CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS THAT THEY SHOULD:

- **Affirm** women as important stakeholders in peace, whose participation is critical to the success of peace and conflict resolution processes at every level and to the long-term sustainability of that peace;
- **Intensify** advocacy for the full and meaningful inclusion and participation of women in decision-making processes, especially those relating to peace and transition;

- **Recognize and articulate** the root causes and evolution of conflicts from women's perspectives and amplify their voices in the conflict and peace process;
- **Build** the professional capacity and confidence of women, beyond gender sensitization, and especially in the security sector, mediation, conflict resolution and conflict transformation;
- **Project** women leaders as role models for both women's rights and professional life;
- **Facilitate** the coordination of women's rights work and the protection of women working in the public sphere.

And informed by these recommendations, which also reflect WRN core values, *members of the WRN* have defined their priorities for action across the region, which are without prejudice to and do not rule out other national and local priorities and actions:

- Women's participation in peace and security work will be a priority area for advocacy work in 2014-2016.
- Creating mechanisms for the protection of Women Human Rights Defenders in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, in recognition of the considerable risk faced by women who work in the spheres of public policy and social change in political environments inimical to participation.

Without women, peace is a chimera. "With women" means listening to women talk about their experiences and needs, making and acting on a commitment to gender justice and facilitating and securing active and meaningful participation of women in peace, political and transitional processes. A peace built by everyone in a society, is a peace that truly belongs to everyone.

THE WOMEN'S REGIONAL NETWORK

Founded in 2011, the Women's Regional Network (WRN) is a network of individual women civil society leaders from Afghanistan, India and Pakistan working together to strengthen women's rights to ensure peace and security in the region. WRN is animated by a vision of women working collaboratively within and across borders, to listen to and learn from each other to construct a common agenda towards equitable and sustainable development in building a just peace.

At its launch, members of the Network identified interlinked areas of concern—militarization, extremism, corruption and lack of security—as a priority for all three countries. WRN networks in Afghanistan, India and Pakistan are autonomous but work in close coordination with each other. Network members in each country have invited others to join and establish working relationships with individuals and organizations working for women's rights in their respective countries.



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