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## **Gender and Conflict Transformation: Focus on South Asia**

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### **Background**

Today South Asia remains one of the most volatile regions of the world. Various internal security problems in India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh compromise the regional security environment. Most of the internal security crises that plague South Asian states are both cross-border and inter-related. At the same time various bilateral and multilateral attempts at peacemaking in South Asia have coexisted with the conflict process itself, but their success is limited in most cases. Dr. Anjoo S. Upadhyaya has for 25 years worked on conflict management from a gender perspective in South Asia. Previous posts include Director of Research for the United Nations University Initiative on Conflict Resolution and Ethnicity, visiting scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center of International Scholars and the London School of Economics. She has worked with grassroots organizations in the former Soviet Union, Northern Ireland and in India.

Introduced by Richard Harmston, Executive Director of SAP Canada, Dr. Upadhyaya shared her experience and observations from her works on conflict management from a gender perspective in South Asia. The following report is based on her presentation.

### **The evolution of studying conflict**

Conflict transformation has evolved from its previous term “conflict resolution” and “conflict management”. The latter two definitions do not address peace and justice but rather “manage” the conflict so that the system in place could function. However, conflict transformation looks at the root causes of injustice to find ways to accommodate differences and provide tools to negotiate to somehow reach a mutual agreement.

The study of gender and conflict transformation has attracted activists and scholars from around the world to research the situation on the ground and decipher the long-term impact and implications that these events are likely to have. When speaking about conflict and South Asia it is worth highlighting that South Asia has experienced intra and interstate wars, two partitions and ongoing structural conflicts in all states. The region has experienced unprecedented violence that has entered the homes and families of South Asia. From the Maoist insurgences of Nepal to the ongoing violence in Sri Lanka, to the increasing female feticide in India, violence has entered the community in many forms.

Conflict transformation unlike conflict management, must begin with the rights of the individual. The United Nations Charter focuses on states rather than the people in the states and therefore does not focus on rights such as the right to self-determination. It was only when other organizations within the UN developed, such as the right to food security, that basic rights were addressed. However, no amount of international resolution can bring about change without addressing the issues of gender discrimination, hierarchy and patriarchal regimes. Conflict has naturally emerged from the inherent nature of these societies that is on the one hand is still very traditional and on the other is trying to modernize in today's world.

Dr. Upadhyaya pointed out that the notion of 'peace' can be viewed as an 'obscene notion' as it often brings with it the perpetuation of injustice. When people are subjected to forced peace a society is created where the community is not allowed to question the status quo. These societies are left to try and control the instruments and outcomes of war rather than identifying the roots of conflict.

### **Women as combatants and peacebuilders**

Peace is not sustainable unless and until women are at the peace table. So often women are viewed as victims rather than agents of peace. Dr. Upadhyaya discussed the changed situation that is brought on ground due to the conflict. In Bangladesh, the Chittagong Hill Tracts the traditional norms do not allowed women to hold land rights. It is these laws, domestic laws that require women's presence at the peace table to provide change. Still simply having female faces present will not promote change. Women must have a space to provide their own contributions and interventions. Their voices must be heard. Women bring with them, their own experiences from the field. Dr. Upadhyaya illustrated the Naga Mothers Association movement as an example of on-the-ground experience that changed the outlook of the peace process.

It is not always that women act as pacifists and nurturers. At one time more than 50 per cent of the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) recruits were women. Women do work as suicide bombers and terrorists but their voices also need to be heard because evidence has shown that these women were victims of violence and the failed reentry into society has pushed them to the periphery where they have no other options but to take up a gun.

Conscious of the fact that simply having female faces may not bring the end result that was expected, denying their contributions would definitely bring a disadvantage to the peace process. Women have been presented with tremendous challenges when being invited to participate in peace processes. In some parliamentary institutions, women have faced tremendous resistance. In some cases female politicians were told to "sit down and be quiet". Many women find it intimidating to enter into a formal institution and participate in a process that was geared to men and often foreign to them.

In many cases a peacebuilder's role can be limited by their own views of ethnicity, caste, religion, culture, gender etc. This offers support for gender studies to be inclusive to men so that they may change their behavior to see value of the inclusion and participation of women. There needs to be training for those that contribute to the peace process to respect the cultural diversity so that they may empower these individuals with the methods of conflict transformation.

### **The state's involvement in conflict transformation**

In India, when the idea of a Center of Conflict Resolution is suggested to government the response is negative. The government does not wish to discuss conflict but would rather engage in discussions of harmony since it doesn't want to project the reality of their country's conflict internationally.

In this state centric view it is worth noting that people are often not affected by their own domestic policies but of their neighbors. Such is the case with refugees, regardless of the increasing rights for displaced persons in their native country. Those forced out of their home state will be subjected to the policies and entitlement of their host country. There are institutions in Bangladesh that have written extensively about women workers that have been pushed in to neighboring countries due to the legal situation in Bangladesh.

Patriarchal structures within the communities are still very firm in these societies. So how do women become movers of conflict transformation when a society such as is against it? In Sri Lanka there aren't many women who would be empowered enough, to make a meaningful intervention due to societal pressure and prejudice that their society has against them.

While India should be applauded for bringing more women into central parliament, female feticide is increasing on the ground. This brings the gender balance to further disfavor females. Feticide has dramatically increased but the paradox is that the more advanced and educated the community, the higher the rate of female feticide. Further, dowry deaths and kidnappings remain a challenge. All that has gone to making the statement that there are institutions in place to support women in conflict transformation; the situation on the ground is far from satisfactory. Women who are empowered by their own source of income are able to increase their security. Dr. Upadhyaya discussed various initiatives such as the Grameen Bank that have emerged as success stories for women.

Finally Dr. Upadhyaya concluded with one experience of listening to a woman who stated that incest in Eastern Uttar Pradesh was still quite common. Her response was a stunned silence from the women that were present but also a big challenge from the male students accusing her of maligning her country's image. The woman continued to receive hate mail and threatening phone calls. Dr. Upadhyaya said it is another sobering example of society's resistance to opening up and examining its own drawbacks.

### **Discussion**

After the conclusion of Dr. Upadhyaya's presentation, the table was opened for discussion. A number of issues were addressed. She discussed the role of Canadian NGOs in supporting gender and conflict transformation. She also illustrated that while women are becoming more visible in South Asia but this should not be seen as a progression. In many cases women are tried to a political or religious event to give it legitimacy. Such was the case in Ayodhya during

the dispute after the destruction of the mosque and planned construction of a temple. Women's visibility was used in that movement that benefited a political party rather than furthering the cause.

Dr. Upadhyaya also described the change that had occurred in University Women's Centres. Originally created in the late eighties, these centres were created to ensure research for women and intervention in society to benefit women through various networks of NGOs. Through research and active intervention the centres raised a generation of gender conscious women. However the centres have since become "Women and Family Centres" implying that the goal is now to educate women on the traditional roles of society and what "women should be".

The discussion also covered Dr. Upadhyaya's work in studying the implications of policy on community relations and increasing the dialogue within and between communities to release pressure. Finally, she spoke about the participation of women in local government. Once elected many women on the council were seen as the daughters and wives of influential members of the community and would simply sign what they were told to sign. However by the second term these women have become empowered and had a greater impact on the community than their predecessors.