

# research

## evidence for policy



Women from North-East Network protesting against the suppression of women in north-east India. Photo: L. Basanti Devi, Momonleima, Sharmila Kanba Lup (SAKL)

## Women in peace-building in South Asia

- **Women are among those who suffer most from violence and armed conflict. They thus have a major stake in prevention of conflict and violence and in peace-building. Experience from various war-torn countries has shown that women can play a crucial role in the peace process. However, their potential contributions to peace-building have not yet been fully realised in South Asia mainly because of the patriarchal, top-down, and male-dominated mindset of political decision-makers.**
- **This brief explores ways in which the women in the region can be given the opportunity to contribute more fully to peace-building.**

- **UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820: Women, peace, and security**
- United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 was unanimously passed by the Security Council on 31 October 2000. It addresses not only the inordinate impact of war on women, but also the pivotal role women should and do play in conflict management, conflict resolution, and sustainable peace. It thus provides a holistic framework for mainstreaming a gender perspective in the peace process and provision of security.
- Similarly, the Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1820 on 19 June 2008. The resolution addresses the issue of widespread sexual

violence in conflict. It identifies sexual violence as a factor that can exacerbate situations of armed conflict and can impede the restoration of peace and security.

Implementing the provisions of these resolutions depends on the willingness of the member states and requires a supportive legal framework, responsive institutional arrangements, and political commitment of the government, which are often lacking in conflict-affected countries. As a result, the impact of these resolutions has been generally weak.

### Women as actors in armed conflict

Increasingly, women are actively involved in armed conflicts in South



Case studies featured here were conducted in South Asia.

### Policy message

- Women are strongly affected by armed conflict in South Asia and therefore their stake in promoting peace is high.
- United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820 are important but not sufficient to promote the role of women in the peace process. To be effective, they require national commitment and favourable policies, institutional arrangements, and operational strategies. This will require concerted efforts from governments, civil society, media, academics, the private sector, researchers, and the international community.
- Women's actual and potential contribution to preventing conflict, facilitating reconciliation, promoting harmony and coexistence, and exerting pressure for peace on warring parties should be recognised by the state and society.

## Featured case studies

### Shantimalika: A network for promoting peace in Nepal

Shantimalika is a network of non-governmental organisations established in Nepal in March 2003 to contribute to peace-building and protection of human rights in Nepal. Shantimalika is working to (a) establish non-discriminatory and just policies; (b) build the capacity of women to contribute to peace-building; (c) increase participation of women in state mechanisms, policy formulation, and the peace process; and (d) develop the organisational strength of Shantimalika for sustainable peace.

### North-East India: North-East Network (NEN)

The North-East Network is a women's rights organisation established in 1995. NEN is documenting the negative impacts of conflict on women. Its reports, including reports to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 2000 and 2007 and a report on displacement of people in north-east India, have exerted tremendous pressure on the Indian government to address the issues raised.

### Association of War Affected Women of Sri Lanka

Association of War Affected Women (AWAW) of Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic, non-partisan association campaigning for a just and lasting peace in Sri Lanka. It is composed of more than 2000 women affected by the war. The association, founded in 2000, successfully brought together women from both sides of the conflict to work for peace.

Figure 1: Women's participation in possible peace structures.



Asia, as members of rebel forces and state security forces, and as informers, opponents, and political leaders. For example, during the armed conflict in Nepal (1996–2006) almost 40 percent of the fighters in what the Communist Party (Maoist) called the People's Liberation Army were women. Similarly, many women participated in the armed conflict in Sri Lanka and the insurgencies waged by the radical communist groups in India.

### Impacts of armed conflict on women

During armed conflicts, women are often threatened, abused physically and verbally, killed, raped, or are subject to other forms of sexual violence. Their husbands, children, and family members are also often killed. Rape victims and widows are commonly discriminated against by their family and community, losing their livelihoods and social, physical, economic, and psychological securities. As a result, many are directly or indirectly forced into prostitution to support themselves and their children. Women who join armed rebellions are labelled as immoral by traditional South Asian societies.

In contrast, in some cases (such as Nepal), conflict may empower women. For example, in changing existing social relations and roles in society, armed conflicts have facilitated women's access to decision-making spaces, such as parliament.

### Women in peace-building

Experiences of conflict-affected countries around the world demonstrate that women can play important roles in: (a) negotiation and facilitating peace talks and agreements; (b) post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation; (c) reconciliation and rehabilitation of ex-combatants and displaced people; and (d) promoting post-conflict transitional security and transitional justice. To do so, however, political decision-makers must recognise women's abilities, interests, and strengths, and engage them in the peace process.

Although such political recognition is limited in South Asia, women in the region are contributing to preventing conflict and promoting peace by working in pressure groups, as civil society members, through peace-oriented networks of women's organisations, and as facilitators and enablers.

## Key challenges for women in peace promotion

**Patriarchal, top-down, and masculine mindset:** Successful peace-building depends upon using the right process and adequate representation of women (Upreti 2009). In South Asia, women are largely seen as subordinate in society, and they are poorly represented in political decision-making. South Asian leaders fail to acknowledge the pivotal role of women in peace-building. The masculine mindset, a reflection of feudal, patriarchal society, restricts opportunities for women to participate in peace structures (see Figure 1).

**Limited recognition for women's role in peace-building:** South Asian political decision-makers, states, and societies have yet to properly acknowledge the crucial contribution of women to peace and stability in the region. As a result, women's role in peace-building in the region is limited.

**Limited implementation of the UNSCRs 1325 and 1820:** There has been limited implementation of UNSCRs 1325 and 1820 in the countries suffering from armed conflicts in South Asia, mainly because of the two factors outlined above combined with lack of awareness about these resolutions at the political decision-making level and among the general public.



Members of Shantimalika organising a peaceful rally demanding peace. Photo: Shantimalika

## Definitions

**Armed conflict:** An armed conflict is a contested incompatibility which concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths.

**Peace:** Peace refers to the state of social, psychological, physical, and spiritual well-being of an individual. However, in the context of armed conflict and instability, peace refers to the restoration of normal relations between people and between institutions directly and or indirectly affected by armed conflict.

**Reconciliation:** Reconciliation is a continuous and long-term voluntary process of addressing conflict-induced injustice, promoting healing, acknowledging and learning from the past, and finding ways to live in future with rebuilding relations and expanding hope. It demands change in beliefs, attitudes, aspirations, emotions, and feelings of the protagonists, sufferers, and even community members.



Women protesting for peace in Manipur, India. Photo: L. Basanti Devi, Momonleima, Sharmila Kanba Lup (SAKL)



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**Policy implications of NCCR North-South research**

**Women as key contributors in peace-building**

Where social and political environments have allowed, women have contributed greatly to peace-building. Women must be engaged in the broader political processes in South Asia if they are to contribute to peace-building in the region.

**Changing the masculine mindset**

The patriarchal, top-down, and masculine mindset of political decision-makers in South Asia must be changed if women are to contribute fully to peace-building in the region. This will require constant and proactive engagement of women in the peace process, regular discussion and debate, and involvement of the media.

**Frameworks for women's engagement in the peace process**

There are a number of key actions that must be taken to facilitate women's engagement in the peace process, including the following:

- Document available female human resources and their areas of specialisation, competency, and willingness to participate in the peace process. This helps identify how women can best participate in specific peace-related structures.
- Promote engagement of young female professionals in peace-related activities, in particular by providing support from established female peace activists and politicians.
- Assess the gender balance of government and international investment in the peace process to determine whether women are getting the resources they need to participate in the peace process.
- Monitor and evaluate the peace process using gender-specific indicators and recommend corrective measures as necessary.
- Raise awareness among politicians, bureaucrats, and women professionals of the provisions of UNSCR 1325 and 1820.
- Collaborate with men (starting with gender-sensitive male members of society) to widen the effects of women's work on the peace process.

**Further reading**

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**This issue**

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