# GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN PEACE INITIATIVES:
## *OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES*

Satbeer Chhabra
Faculty, Women Development Division
NIPCCD, New Delhi

The global campaign for the acceptance of women's rights as human rights and of violence against women as a violation of their human rights, captured centre stage in the 1993 Vienna Conference on Human Rights and this led to the introduction of 'mainstreaming gender' into the international human rights system. While considerable progress has been made on this approach and for women's equality at the conceptual level, the question still remains as to how these concepts are realized practically and a great deal of work remains to be done in surfacing the manifestations of the gendered features of the violations of fundamental freedoms. This task is particularly difficult in situations of conflict which in today's context are invariably violent in nature and armed.

There are numerous provisions and standards that mandate the integration of gender into human rights instruments and mechanisms. The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) applies to both state and private actors, as well as all peacekeepers operating in United Nations Operations. The CEDAW prohibits discrimination against women, supports increasing the presence of women in peacekeeping bodies and mainstreaming gender perspectives throughout peace- keeping operations, thus helping to prevent discrimination against women within the host nation by peacekeeping operations. Women's equal participation in all aspects of peace processes has also been an important focus in the Beijing Platform for Action. The Platform, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, defined the need to "increase the participation of women in conflict resolution at decision-making levels" under Strategic Objective E.1, and urged Governments, as well as international and regional international institutions, to integrate gender perspectives in the resolution of armed or other conflicts and foreign occupation.

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 passed on the 31st October 2000, recognised that women world-wide are playing an active and positive role in conflict resolution and peace building. It acknowledged that peace can not be sustained unless women have an equal and active role in formulating political, economic and social policy and that without women's full participation in peace processes, there can be no justice or sustainable development in the reconstruction of societies.

The Commonwealth is an association of 53 countries worldwide. The **Commonwealth Secretariat** is the main agency, facilitating interactions and consultation among member states and governments. The Secretariat has a **Plan of Action (PoA) for Gender Equality 2005–15**. The PoA works towards the attainment of the **Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)** and gender equality as expressed in the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 2000 Beijing+5 Political Declaration and Outcome Document. In its PoA, the Commonwealth prioritised four critical areas including "gender, democracy, peace and conflict as one of the priority area". The G-8 comprises the governments of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom. . In particular, the G-8:   emphasises the importance of the systemic inclusion of women; encourages the participation of all actors of civil society, including women's organisations in conflict prevention and conflict resolution; calls for special attention to the needs of female ex-combatants; urges gender sensitivity in training materials for peace support operations, including military, civilian police and humanitarian personnel. In 1997, the Organisation For Economic Cooperation And Development  issued Guidelines on Conflict, Peace and Development Cooperation. The Guidelines explicitly recognise that women "play special roles as bridging partners in dialogue, peace negotiations, reconstruction and rehabilitation strategies and contribute their special experience and perceptions to peace building and reconciliation efforts." The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has 55 member states from Europe, Central Asia and North America. It is active in early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management and post conflict rehabilitation. The OSCE participating states officially "recognise that equality of women and men and the protection and promotion of the human rights of women are essential to sustainable democracy and to security and stability in the OSCE region.

It is important to improve understanding of how women's and men's perspectives on peace and violence vary and whether or not there are policy and programmatic implications for these differences. The role of women in peace building needs to be investigated and highlighted as part of gender analysis of peace support operations. The perception of women as victims of violence as also actors during war and conflict situations could provide an improved basis to develop effective strategies for incorporating gender perspectives in peace initiatives.

## Gender perspectives in conflict and peace

The term 'gender' began to be used in research in women's studies at the end of the 1970s as a result of these researchers' realization that concepts of female and male are largely social constructions and far from being solely a biologically given phenomena. While the sex as male or female is a biological fact, the concept of gender refers to the social

construction of the biological categories  Gender describes the characteristics that a society or culture delineates as masculine or feminine. The gender concept has been used in research as an analytical tool to draw attention to the way in which gender differences are constructed and conveyed in social groups, institutions, the media and law, etc.

The gender perspective means that various questions are analysed and elucidated from the perspective of *both* women and men. This means that analyses such as this must focus on the perspective of both genders, not just one of them. A central dimension of the gender perspective is the question of the distribution of power between women and men. Drawing attention to and taking action to rectify the uneven, gender-based distribution of power and influence in society is thus one of the most important aspects of the gender perspective.

The Beijing Platform for Action highlights the special impact of armed conflict on women pointing out that although all sections of society are affected…..."women and girls are particularly affected because of their status in society and their sex". While it is true that in situations of conflict the entire community, whether they are directly or indirectly involved in the conflict are greatly affected, the impact on women is especially complex. Women everywhere face unacceptable and disproportionate levels of violence. Women from marginalized groups are particularly at risk, however Violence Against Women (VAW) is especially exacerbated in times of conflict. Of the many different conflicts continuing through out the world, VAW is a prominent and disturbing feature. In the recent history of the Asia-Pacific region low level and sometimes full scale conflicts have occurred in Afghanistan, Nepal, Indonesia, Philippines, Solomon Islands, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and India. All of which have been characterized by the disproportionate victimization of women and children. Magnifying existing gender inequalities in the region.

As long as the power imbalance and the unequal distribution of resources between the genders remain unaddressed, there can be no lasting peace.

## Gendered Experiences of War and Conflict Situations

A full understanding of the role of women as actors during war and conflict and as victims of war is essential to ensure full participation of women at all levels of decision making and implementation in peace processes.

### *Women as victims in war and conflict situation*

Irrespective of the kind of conflict being waged, the traditional image of men on the way to the front while women stay at home (which is considered so-called safe zone) with

the children and elderly, is nothing but a myth. Attacks against women are in fact becoming an increasingly common war strategy. Sexually raping women, preferably in front of their husbands, is a strategy of war that is often used in order to break down families and cause social instability. The contempt (an expression of a forceful projection directed at female victims, who remind their men of their failure by their mere presence) and the social exclusion confronting these female victims of sexualized violence by "their own people" frequently forces them to flee.

In extreme cases, women may even be vulnerable to abuse by aid workers. The UNHCR in Nepal reported at least 18 cases of Bhutanese refugees in camps who had been victims of sexual abuse and exploitation by aid workers. Victims included a seven year old girl and a woman with disabilities. By far the most pervasive cause of suffering for refugees however is the lack of basic economic, social and cultural rights. Refugees may live for years with out proper access to education, medical facilities, or even water.

Moreover, the presence of peace-keeping troops contributes to increasing the incidence of prostitution and sexual slavery. The girls and women are sometimes treated as sexual possessions. They are often required to perform sexual services, in return for food and protection which also drastically increase the risk of HIV infection and forced pregnancies.

Twenty-three years of conflict in Afghanistan during the successive governments of the Communist, Mujahadeen and Taliban eras has almost completely destroyed the country's infrastructure. In large parts of the country, normal judicial structures are non-existent or function at a very basic level. The result is a complete lack of the rule of law and a climate in which armed groups and government soldiers can perpetrate acts of VAW with impunity. The raping of women by soldiers has been extremely common. Although not known to be a systematic policy sanctioned by those with command responsibility, the frequency of this crime shows commanders must have been aware of the issue and possibly acquiescent as a means of rewarding troops or traumatizing enemy communities. Even today, despite the work over the past two years to rebuild Afghanistan's legal systems, the rule of law holds little sway beyond Kabul. The prevalence of armed groups and absence of formal justice mechanisms leave women almost completely unprotected. Women who suffer abuses do not have sufficient recourse to justice within the formal sector.

Since the declaration of the "People's War" by the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Maoist) in 1996 a pattern of serious human rights violations on both sides in the conflict has emerged. Insurgent forces have been responsible for assassinations, abductions and indiscriminate terror attacks, while women suspected of supporting armed opposition groups have been killed, torture or raped by security forces. Even women related to male activists are at risk.

South Asia is often referred internationally as the most 'dangerous' place in the world,

with two antagonistic neighbours - India and Pakistan in confrontation with each other over the issue of Kashmir.. Kashmir is not the cause but rather the symptom of the tensed Indo-Pak relation. Far from being a dispute over territory, Kashmir is a 'space of desire' over which Pakistani and Indian nationalism collide with each other - both claiming it to be an *integral part* of their territory. It has resulted in 3 wars and numerable proxy wars along the line of control (LOC). Women in Kashmir, women living along the Indo- Pak border suffer direct/indirect physical and psychological violence of dislocation, fragmentation of family, loss of the men folk, double burden of survival and care of the family. Besides, war and militarism have reinforced macho culture and sexist roles with severe consequence for women in both the countries. The diversion of scarce economic resources away from the social sector has further contributed in impoverishing poor women and increasing their burden.

For instance within India, in situations of ongoing conflict, such as the one prevailing in the North East region of India, the gross violations of civil and political rights that prevail in general, because of the political situation are often used as justification to disregard the violations of women's rights. These are either consequent upon discrimination against women that is sanctioned by the community or not addressed by the state. For the last three decades or so the region has witnessed various forms of unrest, conflict and violence. The conflicts in the various constituent units of the NER have different origins and goals, though rooted in the general lack of development. Instances of rape and domestic violence on women are on the rise and women have very little choice in the area of reproductive health.

Forced displacement from the repeated threats and attacks on local communities of armed conflict and political violence is also a gendered experience. Women find the process of displacement itself more traumatic than men, they show greater flexibility in their adaptation to new environments and in the development of survival strategies. Men tend to expect assistance from formal institutions, and their skills are often not transferable.

Women have special medical needs in war and conflict situations, such as extra nutritional requirements and food during pregnancy and breast-feeding. What happens to the girls/women victims of sexual violence during war is that it naturally increases the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, particularly HIV. Similarly, the risk increases of unwanted pregnancies.

The economic impact of armed conflict manifests itself in gender-specific ways. Women's burdens in times of war are especially heavy, largely because their usual functions within the household become more difficult to carry out, often due to the absence of male relatives. If women are forced to become the sole provider for their families, the absence of an adequate infrastructure often leaves women unable to feed

their children or find paid work.

Thus women face several problems during war and conflicts like rape, sexual exploitation, physical violence, trafficking, displacement, economic hardship and health problems.

### *Women as actors in war and conflict situations*

Women are at the forefront of peace efforts around the world. This is also the case in India and Pakistan where involvement of women in peace processes has been crucial. Women have been prominent in the peace building process although their role has not always been based on gender. Women NGOs many of them started by feminists had become politically active with the Women's Action Forum(WAF) that started in 1981, have also been active in building bridges that contribute to greater understanding and push for peace. Women appear to have more holistic approach towards peace. Post Kargil tensions also galvanized women into action providing a crucial boost to the peace movement. A "Women's Peace Bus" involving several women's groups under the umbrella of the newly formed Women's Initiatives for Peace in South Asia(WIPSA) came to Pakistan Spearheaded by the veteran Gandhian Nirmala Deshpande. Pakistani women lead by Asma Jahangir, greeted the bus load of women when it reached in Lahore. A number of resources, links and networks have emerged such as South Asian Network of Gender Activists and Trainers(SANGAT) which concerns itself with globalization, militarisation, old and new forms of patriarchies which impact women of the region. The Pakistan India Forum for Peace and Democracy(PIFPD), is an innovative effort that involves activists, women's groups, Trade Unions, artists, journalists, intellectuals etc.

Similarly in Balochistan, Pakistan, women, men and children marched against the Kargil war. Women activist took the lead in protesting against the nuclear tests in Changai hills of the province, linking it with regional discrimination and denial of democratic rights. Organisations like SAFAR, AMAN, INSAF, Fishworkers Forum in India, Pakistan, their umbrella organisation like World Fishworkers Forum, SANGAT, South Asia Labour Forum take up the issue of arrest, detention and killing of Indian and Pakistani fishworkers in the Sea.

One very crucial point is that women's participation in the peace process should not be seen only in the context of women as victims of war and conflict, but as women playing a proactive role in the process of peace negotiations, peace building and post conflict activities following the peace agreement. Women, individually and collectively, have made very important contributions in resolving conflict. Their contributions are often overlooked because they are non- traditional or outside the formal issues of the

conflict. When women participate in peace negotiations and in structuring and crafting a peace agreement, they keep the future of their societies, their communities, in mind. They think of how their children and grandchildren will live in their country, how they will benefit from the peace agreement. They have the greatest interest of society in mind. Whereas, historically in post-conflict situations, men are interested in ensuring that, following the peace agreement, they will retain authority and power in the government or the cabinet.

Women have much to contribute to resolving conflict and peace building. They hold communities together in times of conflict as care-takers/providers, counselors and negotiators. Therefore, the inclusion of women's perspectives in peace efforts is critical to ensuring that the needs of local populations are understood in planning of peace operations and met in implementation.

One of the most invisible groups to date in interventions in conflict and peace are women ex-combatants. Increasing numbers of women are joining armed groups as combatants and supporters. On returning to their communities they were stripped of the autonomy, political role, and leadership they had gained as combatants. Precise numbers of women combatants therefore need to be established to make visible their needs and demands in peace negotiations and reconstruction processes.

## Gender Aspects at Various Stages of Peace Support Efforts

At all stages of peace support efforts, there are important gender aspects such as *prior to the conflict, during the conflict, after the conflict.*

### Prior to the conflict
Peace and conflict research discusses early warning signals, which are comprised of the risk factors indicating the imminent break out of armed conflicts. One of these may be extreme oppression of the female section of the population and also other sections of the population. A significantly uneven distribution of power resources increases the risk of a struggle for control over resources. Control over resources, like the exercise of power, are gendered, where women generally have considerably less power and influence than men. Conflicts that flare up tend to worsen the balance of power resources existing between women and men.

### During the conflict.
Although conflict situations tend to reinforce existing gender stereotypes, new gender roles also emerge. Women, for example, often take over the main responsibility for the household so that men are free to fight. This means that they have to struggle on their own to obtain resources that are often inaccessible while conflicts are going on. This increases women's vulnerability and the risk of falling victim to blackmail, or trafficking.

Some research has also shown more positive effects of this re-structuring of society, where women frequently obtain more power in the civilian sphere during the conflict. The outcome seems to depend on the type of conflict and the way in which society was organised prior to it. Because of these differences between conflict areas, it is essential that an expert gender analysis be conducted so that peace-keeping personnel can be properly prepared. Another aspects are the roles played by women during a conflict. With the emergence of an armed conflict, access to weapons increases, often throughout the entire population. Women are made use of, or participate on their own initiative, in smuggling weapons, using, for example, pregnancy as a cover. The presence of weapons among the civilian population and the difficulties of detecting weapons smuggled by women hamper peace support efforts and increase the risk of new violent conflicts flaring up. Women can also be more vulnerable since the roles they play are often not among those protected by international law.

*After the conflict.*
One effect of war is greater criminality and acts of violence among the civilian population as a result of increased access to weapons and the lack of traditional institutions to maintain law and order. Studies have shown both an increase in domestic violence at the post-conflict stage and also an increase in domestic violence involving weapons. The needs and rights of widows to dead husbands' land and property, etc. are not, as a rule, regulated by law, which is why women often lose all their property to the deceased husband's relatives. This leads to particular hardship for women, since it reduces their ability to gain access to the necessities required to maintain a household. It also often leads to social expulsion and poverty for these women and their children.
Forced displacement of women leads to a change in roles and relations, which can be both empowering and challenging. It is important to provide accompaniment to returning and resettling populations to support the continuation of positive social change and to include both men and women.

The numerous new roles shouldered by women in conflict situations, entailing both reproductive, productive and social responsibility, are a heavy burden and often delegated to daughters who are therefore not able to continue at school. This naturally increases the imbalance between the genders, even after the end of the conflict. What is defined as peace from a gender perspective can differ from a traditional definition. For women, peace is not only the cessation of armed conflict, since gender discrimination is still going on.
Women and girls are exploited as sexual slaves in almost all dimensions of war and conflict situations, in refugee camps, by the police, the armed forces, etc. All forms of gender-related violence must therefore be criminalized and the reporting of rape and sexual exploitation of women associated with peace support personnel must be improved and the perpetrators sentenced. It should therefore be analyzed on the basis of the social and economic changes brought about by the conflict.

## *Opportunities & Challenges*

The Platform for Action, adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, identified the effects of armed conflict on women as one of 12 critical areas of concern requiring action by governments and the international community, and stressed the need to promote the equal participation of women in conflict resolution at decision-making levels.

Although various initiatives of Governments and civil society have focused on supporting and increasing the representation of women in peace negotiations and in peacekeeping operations, much needs to be done to broaden the focus from women's presence at the peace table to consistent and systematic attention to gender issues in all aspects of peace processes, including in post-conflict reconstruction.

## Challenges Encountered In Incorporating Gender Perspectives In Peace Operations

• There is no/lack of gender sensitive diagnosis that explains the differential impacts of violence and conflict on women and men. The peace process is mostly seen only in the context of women as victims of war and conflict, but not as women playing a proactive role in the process of peace negotiations, peace building and post conflict activities. It needs a thorough analysis of participation of women in conflict and peace.

• Women lack the organizational force  to have strategic plans to address the current situation of the country as also to present their plans in peace process.

• A gender perspective recognizes that men's and women's experiences and actions during conflict are determined by gender roles and identities assigned by society.  It is important to recognize the multifaceted relationship between men, women, violence, and peace. Since these have been seen predominantly as male domains, women and gender issues have generally been excluded from discussions and interventions for conflict and peace.

• The contributions of women are often overlooked because they are non-traditional or outside the formal issues of the conflict. While women and women's groups undertake many informal activities that are supportive of peace processes, these efforts remain less well known, are not well publicized, and are rarely integrated or reflected in formal peace processes.  Women continue to be largely absent from formal processes. Support for women's efforts, and for capacity building towards their effective engagement in formal peace is lacking. The absence of women from the peace tables cause insufficient attention to and reflection of the concerns of women in peace agreements.

• The number of women who participate in formal peace processes remains very small. Even when women participate or are included in formal peace negotiations, their role can be limited to a formal presence without having the capacity, or mandate to contribute to setting or shaping the agenda of such negotiations. Male negotiators may also simply be unwilling to consider gender issues and women's concerns due to customs and traditions, as well as stereotypes that limit or narrowly define the role of women in public life and decision-making.

• Even when peace agreements contain issues of concern to women or gender-related aspects or provisions, these are sometimes phrased in such general terms so as to provide insufficient opportunity and basis for action in the implementation phase.

• Lack of a common voice or agenda with regard to peace negotiations due to the  lack of time or resources, the particular geographical constraints of a country, language constraints which make communications among women and women's groups difficult, women's diversity, with regard to ethnic, racial or religious affiliations, or their particular experiences during conflict, can also be an obstacle in developing a common agenda.

• Lack of gender awareness in peace negotiations further marginalises women's needs and contributions to peace. Gender, social exclusion, and human rights are all too often relegated as secondary issues to be dealt with once peace accords are signed. Senior personnel in key decision-making positions in peace support operations should be gender aware. The nature of leadership is key to the implementation of a gender aware approach. It is fundamental to whether gender-informed policies are carried out and whether gender equality is strengthened in the operation.

• Gender-awareness training for all involved in peace-keeping operations is core to the mainstreaming of a gender aware approach. Gender mainstreaming requires gender aware norms, standards mechanisms for implementation and resources, the selection of appropriate leadership and decision-making structures; the recruitment of gender-balanced peacekeeping teams; gender-awareness training and capacity building for all peace-keepers and the regular monitoring and evaluation of gender mainstreaming at all phases of peace operations.

• No peace-keeping operation could be sustainable and successful without the full respect of women and girls' rights. The military, police force and the judiciary need to be made gender sensitive, i.e. fully aware of the human rights of  women and girls to be respected.

• Women's participation is crucial from the outset of negotiations if there is to be a gender perspective at the negotiating table. Women are under-represented in conflict and post-conflict decision-making positions, peacekeeping bodies, defence and foreign affairs organisations. Mainstreaming gender into peacekeeping calls for **gender** balanced

representation within all levels of peacekeeping operations.

## Opportunities To Reflect Gender Concerns In Peace Operations

Women experience armed conflict in diverse ways as victims, survivors, leaders and peacemakers. Violence against women in conflict zones is often an extension of the gender discrimination that already exists in peacetime. Because of their lack of status within society women are systematically excluded from decision-making opportunities, they are often stereotyped as victims and their experiences and contributions are virtually ignored in conflict zones and in nations emerging from war. Despite this women can also play a significant part in peacemaking if they are properly supported and genuinely included as:

• Women's peace initiatives are marked by a number of distinct characteristics. Women's peace activism encompasses concerns for food security, access to their land, forest, water and other resources. As women negotiate survival strategies the issue of livelihood, health care and education is given utmost priority grounded in the notion of justice and human security.

• Once the political, economic and social impact of wars on men, women, girls and boys i. e. gender analysis of conflict/war situation is undertaken, the needs of a post -conflict society. This is a very important phase that gives an opportunity to promote reconstruction efforts with a gender perspective and enable women to partici-pate actively in this process.

• Numerous studies have noted that gender roles change in various ways during armed conflicts and that this can entail positive potential for social changes in gender relations. It is important to call attention to and support these processes. Women are often active in local peace activities and women's movements.

• In many regions today, military forces are on the spot to secure or maintain peace by force. The presence of women and the incorporation of a gender perspective in these efforts have a favourable effect on the peace process. This is vital, particularly in light of the fact that women increasingly make up the majority of the local population and able to function as role models for both women and men. The presence of women in areas affected by conflict would significantly help to create confidence-building and stable relations with local populations.

• The process of violence has created new "unfeminine" roles for women within the household, community and other levels, such as Women who lead and command over

men; Women who are publicly and politically engage; who can put forth an unconventional political, military, economic and cultural viewpoint and who can organize; Women who head households; Women who owns means of production which previously used to be male's authority; Women who are principal income earners in family; Women who perform death rites due to the death, injury and displacement of male members of the family.

• Women peace negotiators understand and articulate the implications of peace processes for women better than male negotiators.

Women have made and will continue to make significant contributions towards the culture of peace. Women are largely known to be responsible for nurturing positive cultural practices and they offer non-violence to violence and strife. Women, although less visible than men, have to be integrally involved in seeking solutions to issues intrinsic to building peace, and sustainable economic, environmental, and political development. Women's fullest potential can be realized and it is primarily the women who can usher in an era of peace in 21st century. There is a need to discuss their image of a culture of peace as well as the strategies for removal of social, political and other hindrances in mandating gender in peace efforts. Women's role as resource managers, advocates for others in emergency and crisis situations, leaders in political processes, and influential, as advisors needs to be valued.

# References

Chinkin, C. (2001). Gender mainstreaming in legal and constitutional affairs: A reference manual for government and other stakeholders. Stylus Publishing LLC.

Goswami, R., Sreekala, M. G. & Goswami M. Women in armed conflict situation in India: Baseline Report, North East Network.

Singh, R. Role of women in India-Pakistan peace process.

Caroline, O. N. Moser & Fiona C. Clark. Gender conflict and building sustainable peace: recent lessons from Latin America.

Delphy, C. (1980). A materialist feminism is possible. Feminist Review no. 4, 1980.

International Alert. (2002). Gender mainstreaming in peace support operations:moving beyond rhetoric to practice. London International Alert.

Peace agreement as a means for promoting gender equality and ensuring participation of women- A framework of model provisions.(2003). Report of the Expert Group Meeting, Ottawa, Canada

Olsson, L. (2001). Gender mainstreaming in practice: The United Nations transitional assistance group in Namibia. In L. Olsson & T.

Rehn, E. & Johnson Sirleaf, E. (2002). Women, war, peace. New York: UNIFEM.