

Women As Agents Of Movements: A Study On The Role Of Women Groups In Assam

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Abstract: Women and girls are not merely victims of war. They are active agents. They make choices, possess critical perspectives on their situations and organize collectively in response to those situations. Women and girls can support the peace process and can ward off violence perpetrated by others. They become active members of during conflicts because they are committed to the political, religious or economic goals of those involved in violence. This can mean, and has meant, taking up arms in liberation struggles, resistance to occupation or participation in struggles against inequality on race, ethnic, religious or class or caste lines. This paper tries to interrogate the role and functions of various women organizations of Assam so as to see how their roles have impacted upon the mainstream social movements for peace in the Northeastern state of India.

Key Words: War, Women, Victims, Organization, Political Process

Introduction

Women and girls often are active in peace processes before, during and after conflicts. Many women know the importance of peace processes and join a variety of grass-roots peace-building efforts aimed at rebuilding the economic, political, social and cultural fabric of their societies. In 1991, as the war in the Balkans was gaining momentum, Women in Black launched an antiwar campaign in the Balkans. In Fiji, as the tensions between Indo-Fijians and indigenous peoples were getting worse, leading to the coup d'état that occurred in 2000, women from both ethnic groups created the Blue Ribbon Campaign peace movement. However, formalized processes of peace, including negotiations, accords and reconstruction plans, frequently exclude women's and girls' meaningful participation. Too often, women and girls, actively involved in rebuilding local economies and civil society, are pushed into the background when formal peace processes begin.

In the post-conflict phase women play a particularly important role both during the peace process and also in the rehabilitation and reintegration phase. Of particular significance here is that pre-conflict and post-conflict phases above all share marked parallels. The requisite measures are often similar, since peace building and conflict prevention are essential before and after a conflict

•Women can play a significant role in decision-making functions through their full participation in conflict settlement and peace processes. Women can also act in this phase as negotiators and mediators to encourage dialogue between the parties.

- By highlighting the needs of women in the demobilisation and reconstruction phase, women's groups and networks can make an important contribution to a sustainable peace process.

- Former women soldiers, survivors and refugees can foster reconciliation through their experiences.

- The support of women by other women in psychosocial care, trauma management and reintegration of widows and combatants helps to prevent social and economic isolation.

- During the return or resettlement of internally displaced Persons or refugees, the women affected can be given support in the choice of settlement by activists or women's groups.

- During the reconstruction of the justice and administrative systems qualified women can help in the formulation of laws and regulations to ensure gender equality in public life and fair access to economic resources (e.g. land and property rights).

- Particular attention must be paid to decisions regarding compensation for suffering caused by (sexual) violence. Special account needs to be taken of the predicament of rape victims, women sex slaves and returning, perhaps pregnant, so-called bush wives. Renewed stigmatisation in the community can thwart their successful reintegration.

The United Nations Millennium Declaration (2000) clearly stated that peace and stability are the prerequisites for development and prosperity and vice versa. A decrease in armed conflicts, poverty reduction and peaceful co-existence are essential if the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are to be achieved. Only if women have equal access to political, social and economic institutions and if there is a change in cultural attitudes away from violent confrontation to nonviolent conflict resolution, sustained peace will be possible. To ensure lasting peace, not only the direct causes of conflicts but also and above all the root causes must be addressed.

- Absence of human security and security in the country or region

- Poor governance, disregard for human rights, absence of democratisation, corruption, abuse of power, etc.

- unequal access to resources, systematic exploitation of natural resources, marginalisation of disadvantaged groups and increasing socioeconomic disparities and the resultant poverty

- These structural causes, which are related both to security and to political, economic and social aspects, make it more difficult for women to participate in social, political and economic life because of gender inequality and discrimination.

Among the structural causes are gender-specific role attributions. If because of poverty or unemployment men can no longer play their traditional role as providers and protectors of the family, they often have no alternative but to earn their living in the military, in paramilitary groups or in the armed security sector. Access to arms combined with a traditional attitude to masculinity can easily express itself in violence against women.

The role of women in the three conflict phases. Women and men play different roles as social actors and also have different needs and interests. In the three phases of conflict (before, during and after) women can play different roles and work proactively to secure peace. The various conflict phases often overlap, which makes peacemaking measures very complex. Very often too, the activities of women span various phases. Conflicts and wars do not proceed in a clear linear direction. In the pre-conflict phase the latent and structural causes of conflicts already exist: they include lack of participation in political life, suppression, discrimination and exclusion of all kinds, violation of human rights, little access to land and resources, and the absence of security.

Women can encourage societies and political groups to take early preventive measures:

By strengthening and promoting activities, local women's organisations and initiatives and by supporting the formation of networks (peace alliances) women can promote cooperation and trust.

- By strengthening women (empowerment) they can work actively to ward off conflicts by undertaking measures to prevent exclusion and discrimination and can draw attention to other preventive measures through peace-building awareness campaigns (particularly among endangered groups such as potential women soldiers).

- Through their various individual contacts and observations women can be important informers to provide early warning of potential conflict.

- By encouraging advanced training in public life and by providing access to knowledge, e.g. on human and women's rights, women can play an important role in local politics and government and hence also in conflict prevention.

- Through their improved economic status, women can free their families from poverty and with their larger say make a contribution to stemming militarisation and radicalisation.

During an armed conflict the threat of violence is extremely high: fear and insecurity, the destruction of livelihoods, expulsion, loss of family and death are just some examples of the problems to be confronted. The proactive role of women to ensure survival and settlement of the conflict could not be more challenging:

Role of Women's Groups

Women's groups in Assam have been at the forefront in protesting violence, gender inequalities and social injustice. Hence, women here can play important roles in initiating, facilitating and sustaining peace dialogues. Sustainable peace cannot be achieved until and unless women are included in all peace efforts equally with men. The danger of non-inclusion of women from the beginning lies in further marginalisation of already marginalised issues in a society as it gets caught up in nation building. Reports from across the world show that different categories of women face a whole host of discriminations when a conflict draws to an end and peace negotiations begin.

North East Network

North East Network (NEN) was set up as part of the preparatory process for the Beijing World Conference on Women in 1995. Since its establishment, NEN has become a platform to address

women's human rights and has emerged as women's rights organisation linking with women irrespective of their diversity and regardless of ethnicity, sexual or gender identity disability, culture and space. NEN is enriched by its access to different civil society organisations working on development and social justice issues within North East India.

Bodoland Territorial Council area is one of the regions of Assam where I have observed not only numerous conflicts but also strong organisational foundation of women's organisations. There are a number of women's organisations in the region like, Nari Adhikari Suraksha Samiti, Koch Rajbangshi Mahila Samiti, Bodoland Deha Raikhati Hanza Samiti, Gossaingaon Zila Unnayan Mahila Samiti, Bodo Women's Justice Forum, All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation, Bodoland People's Front Women Wing etc which are contributing significantly towards the empowerment of women, creating awareness about health problems like HIV/AIDS, infanticide etc, infrastructure development and protecting the rights of the people in the region. For the present study three women's organisations have been taken i.e. All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF), Bodoland Women's Justice Forum (BWJF), and Bodoland People's Front Women's Wing (BPFWW).

All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation

ABWWF is the oldest organisation for women in the region. In the long struggle for Bodoland Movement ABWWF has played a very significant role. BWJF as women's organisation is most important one which is engaged in protecting and promoting human rights of the people in the region. BPFWW is the first women's organisation in the region which is associated with the political party, and it is playing a significant role in the empowerment of women. Besides, these women's organisations are also working towards bringing peace in the region.

The All Bodo Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF) was formed on July 14 1986, with the objective of establishing equality between men and women while addressing the problems concerning women, and empowerment of women. The genesis of the organisation can be traced back to the period when the demand for political autonomy for the Bodos mooted by ABSU began in 1980. During this period it was felt that the Bodo women should not be sidelined in the process as they could play an important role to the overall welfare of the Bodo society. As a result the All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) was formed under the direct initiative of the leaders like Upendra Nath Brahman, Sansuma Khungur Basumatary, Subhas Basumatary, and Daorao Dekhreb Narzary of ABSU. At the time of its formation, the organisation encompassed all tribal groups such as Bodo, Garo-Mising, Tiwa, Karbi, Naga etc. However as the movement for Bodoland intensified. The organisation increasingly came to be seen as one specifically set up for the Bodo community and their movement for an autonomous Bodoland, owing to which the womenfolk from other tribes began to feel alienated and started distancing themselves from the organization. Women from other tribes were also prevented from participating in the meetings of the committee by their respective tribal leaders. As a result

therefore the name of the organisation was subsequently changed from All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (ABWWF) in the third annual conference of the federation held at Tamulpur in 1993. After the rechristening of the name the member of other tribal groups left the organisation.

With the launching of ABWWF, the Bodo women embarked upon the struggle for a Bodo homeland fighting shoulder to shoulder with the men under the overall guidance of ABSU. On the one hand the Bodo women under the ABWWF agitated to secure political rights for the Bodo community; on the other hand they tried to eradicate various ill practices from the society such as polygamy, alcoholism, etc.

At present the organisation has set up many weaving centres at Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon and various other parts of BTC region with the aim of empowering the women. ABWWF has also established some of Self-Help groups like Jwanglaguri Mahila Samiti, Orchid etc. The federation also organise seminars, conference, on the issue of health such as HIV-AIDS, evil practices, witch hunting etc. ABWWF observes 4th April of every year as anti-liquor day. ABWWF has also undertaken a mission for adult education for each girl in every household. In the literary field, ABWWF has brought out souvenirs like Songdan, Raikhmuthi etc annually. Many renowned Bodo intellectuals, poets, write on women related issues in these magazines. The articles mainly discuss the contribution of women to the upliftment of the Bodos, involvement of the Bodo women in politics etc. ABWWF members are running an orphanage named Alayaran at Kokrajhar since August 14, 2003, to look after the victims of the violence. Children who have lost their parents at the hands of security forces or due to fractional killing between the rebel groups are taken in the orphanage. The inmates of the orphanage belong to the Bodo community only. However this ethnic bias even during critical moment shows their narrowness.

Bodo Women's Justice Forum

The Bodo Women's Justice Forum(BWJF) is another women's organisation which is working in BTC region. The organisation was established in the year 1993 by Anjali Daimary. The organisation focuss on the upliftment of the Bodo women. The organisation was mainly formed to bring about awareness among women about their rights. It has been also launching movement against the Armed Forces Special Power Act which is in operation in the North-Eastern states. According to the president Anjali Daimary in a conflict situation it is the women who suffered the most. Women are being violated by both security personnel and the military organisation and in BTC region Bodo women faced the brunt of raids by the security personnel due to conflict nature of this region. Thus BWJF is playing an active role not only in protecting the rights of women

but also in bringing peace in the region. However like ABWWF, BWJF is also conflict to Bodo community only which can also be identified as the limitation of the organisation.

Bodoland People's Front Women Wing

Bodoland People's Front Women Wing (BPFWW) is another women's organisation in BTC region. This organisation was established in the year 2006. The organisation is a sub organisation of BPF political party. Regarding the objectives of this organisation Mrs. Malati Narzary, the founder president of this organisation has said that the organisation mainly focused on the social development of women. Its main aim is to empower politically as well as socially and economically. Its aim is to raise the status of women in BTC region irrespective of their class, caste, religion etc.

Any women of 18 years of age and above having allegiance to the Constitution of BPF may apply for the membership of the women wing with the payment of prescribed fee as may be determined from time to time. If a member of women wing committee BPF is found indulging in anti-organisational activities she may be expelled for 6 years from the primary membership of the women wing committee of BPF.

The main function of BPFWW is to raise the political status of the women in the region. They encourage the women to participate in politics. According to the members of the organisation political participation of women is necessary to raise the status of women in the region. Another important function is to empower the women economically. It also provides financial help to self help groups for the empowerment of women. For example Mainao Agro Multipurpose Society, a women self help group is financially assisted by BPFWW. They also put pressure on the Government for the infrastructure development of the region. They are also playing an active role towards protection of the women's rights during conflict situation. The organisation strongly condemns every illegal activity against women. They take care of the fact that culprits get punishment. They also provide shelter to the victims. According to the interviewers during the time of various ethnic conflicts in the region the representatives from organisation visited the affected areas and submitted a memorandum to the District and State administration and tried to secure compensation to the victims. The organisation also maintains contact with other women's organisations through meetings, seminars etc. their unity with the other women's organisations also helps them in meeting various challenges posed by evils in society.

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