

‘Women, Human Security and Well-being in South Asia’**Presentation Session 19 ‘Gender Issues’****Wendy Harcourt****Society for International Development****Introduction**

Political conflict and violence in South Asia are rising along with the persisting inequalities and the widespread de-stabilization of the subsistence base of a majority of people, in particular women living in rural areas. Over the past decade, South Asian societies have witnessed an alarming rise in political disruption and social conflict. The continuing inequalities and de-stabilization of the subsistence base of a majority of people, in particular women, 70% of whom live in rural areas, have led to a deepening of gender oppression and violence, women’s insecurity and lack of well-being. Gender oppression and violence is now a notable issue in many of the conflicts. In cultures where honour is tied up with women’s sexuality, women and girls are too often the individual and systematic targets of sexual violence, specifically when rape and sexual assaults are used as weapons of war or tactics to threaten community and family identity and structure.

In this paper I report on the first findings of a joint research project in South Asia that is looking at how women are experiencing this situation. Working with research institutes and women’s information centres in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal, participants in the project are engaged in not only research but also policy advocacy and activism nationally and regionally as part of the Society for International Development network ‘SID-SAN’. My role has been to help coordinate the networking, research and the writing up of the results. Along with other project members, I have introduced some of the ideas of the capability approach – particularly human security and well-being – in our analysis of the impact of violence on women’s well-being and bodily integrity. We have also been interested in how to challenge the mainstream development paradigm’s approach to conflict which sees it as largely political perhaps fuelled by economic greed and cultural unrest. (Sen, 1999; Alkire, 2003) The paper will draw on some of the work that has been discussed in the project to date on women’s response to political conflict in Maoist areas in the Western provinces of Nepal, the conflict in the state of Kashmir (India) and women in peasant land movements in Punjab (Pakistan).

In the paper, I suggest ways in which the capability approach is useful to understand how women are taking up agency in conflict situations, rather than understanding them just as victims of violence and marginal actors in the main political game. The capabilities approach is helpful to bring women's actual concerns into the center of a debate on how conflict disrupts economic, political social and cultural development. As the project shows when you speak to the women economic issues are not the only concerns. In this context capabilities framework (particularly Martha Nussbaum's work on gender (Nussbaum 2000 and as subsequently developed in various papers)) which focuses on well-being, human security, bodily integrity, freedom and empowerment is much more helpful

I need also to mention that the term 'conflict situation' takes a particular meaning in the project. The term is understood to mean not only political conflict such as the insurgency in Nepal or border conflicts, or state conflict such as in Kashmir but also place based conflict over natural resources- land, water, forests and development projects like dams, mines, etc. which lead to displacement and consequently a dissembled impact on women. It also looks at issues of security in a broad sense to include food and human security, as well as bodily, family and communal security. In addition, conflict is understood as not always negative. From the findings of the project it seems that conflict and subsequent political mobilization and resistance can contribute to the creation of women's empowerment and political social transformation. While at the same time the project recognizes there are structural causes of political conflict that can only be addressed by tackling the region's injustice, poverty and gender inequalities that are preventing women's full freedoms, livelihoods and well-being.

Well-being in the paper extends traditional notions of health and rights as used in development to more holistic understanding of women's lives from their capacity to take control of their life and take a place in the community. Many of the studies (though not all) focused on reproductive health as embedded in women's sense of well-being – physical, psychological, emotional – particularly as the long term effects of violence and trauma and displacement are too often dismissed in the services the states or other agents, such as NGOs or health professionals might provide.

The paper follows the methodology addressed by the project – first to understand the narratives of women's lives in conflict situations in order to gain an insight into how they perceive their well-being and what the specific conflict means to their lives. Building from that is an analysis of the responses of women as active agents, looking at their engagement,

interventions and attempts at resolution, examining how women make a space for themselves and even if reluctantly at first, take charge of their lives through a series of coping mechanisms, including political mobilization.

The paper's tentative proposal – largely posed here in order to raise questions and discussions from the conference participants – is that a capabilities framework provides an important insight into how to support women's survival and transformation in conflict situations. I plan to take back the discussions from the conference to the research team who will be meeting in the next months to conclude the research findings and to reflect on what lessons can be drawn for development policy. My suggestion is that a capabilities approach can give weight to the goals of the project and help to underline how development policy and theory must take into account the diverse ways violence in the daily lives of women living in conflict areas in South Asia.

Background to the Studies from South Asia

The studies looked at different conflict situations in South Asia order to examine:

How is violence experienced and perceived by women? In what ways does it alter their lives and their worldview?

What are the facilities available in the hospitals for the treatment of trauma?

Is there any specialized care for women and children?

What are the spaces that the conflict has opened up for women? How has it transformed their roles/lives? What about the relationships between men and women in the family?

What role do women play as negotiators for justice and peace?

Has the conflict outside, entered homes, giving rise to domestic violence?

Are women's rights protected/neglected in the course of the conflict?

How does a community that has experienced violence on a continuous basis re-form itself?

Are there any shifts of perception, interaction in community relationships and within the family?

What is the nature of the social, psychological and geographical disruption and dislocation that has occurred as a result of conflict?

What has been the impact of conflict on health, education and employment opportunities?

What are the role of the Armed Forces in dealing with unarmed civilians and the victims/survivors of violence?

What are the government schemes/policies for the relief and rehabilitation of the victims?

The studies focused on the ordinary, everyday lives of women that are caught in the midst of large-scale violence that has affected them directly or indirectly as a result of the ongoing conflict. The issue of well-being was looked at in relation to the overall impact of conflict on women from their own understanding of its implications in their lives.

The project looked at the issue of women's rights and the concepts of empowerment, freedom and capabilities in this context. The interest was in how women's role assumed great significance in situations of violence precisely when women's rights are likely to be challenged *and* subverted, leading to an enhanced sense of vulnerability and insecurity amongst women. Mobilization in the face of great difficulty has led to women becoming involved in more public activities. The social disruption of conflict forces women to take on new roles and added responsibilities, for survival of their families and themselves. Education, employment opportunities and access to health services are among the major casualties of conflict that also bear directly on women. In the context of the ongoing conflict, livelihood and survival issues also become critical for women in often non-traditional ways.

Kashmir

In Kashmir in the past thirteen years, more than 30,000 people have been killed, more than 6,000 women widowed and 10-15,000 children rendered orphans. There are approximately 8,000 missing persons affecting nearly 200,000 family members the implications for women's well-being are huge. (Husain 2003)

The Kashmir study focused on women's well-being from a holistic perspective. The project ended up looking at long term trauma since majority of women are affected and display symptoms of post traumatic stress (Women's Feature Service: 2004) their health and its neglect formed a significant part of the study. The project looked at how women look after those who are 'ill' in the family, in their role as mothers, wives and daughters, thereby bearing the maximum burden as caregivers, at the cost of their own well-being. The study found that the mental health of Kashmir people was under huge strain with more than forty thousand 'patients' visiting the only mental hospital in Srinagar in a year, many of them suffering from post traumatic stress disorder. More than 85 per cent of the population take anti-depressant medicines and out of 100 cases of acute depression, 70-80 is a woman. A large number of women also turn to shrines for 'faith healing'. Women take on the burden of their own and

their families' suffering and trauma, in fact often not reporting their own mental ill health until it is critical as they put others' concerns ahead of their own.

While noting depression, stress and trauma and a general corrosion of rights, at the same time the study found that the conflict throws open unexpected spaces for women to negotiate if only because they have to hold on to what little they have. Important gender issues of dowry, divorce, desertion, custody of children and other legal rights are brushed aside, as the 'business of survival' is paramount for all.

In Kashmir, where militancy is steeped in a fundamentalist ideology despite the political nature of the conflict, women's concerns and their rights as a result have become a major casualty. For instance, even as survivors of sexual assault and rape (mainly by the Security Forces), women do not have access to safe and legal abortions simply because of the dire threats posed by the militants, in whose worldview abortion is considered a sin.

The situation of women is further challenged due to the fact that Kashmir lacks the tradition of an organized women's movement. The only two local women's organizations, the Dukhtaran-e-Millat and the Muslim Khawateen Markaz (MKM), have some argue had a negative impact on women's rights and well-being. The former follows a single agenda of "militant Islam", imposing on women a code of conduct of which the first requirement is a dress code.

The MKM, which was formerly known as the Women's Welfare Association, did try to take up issues of dowry, custody of children and maintenance. It had managed to mobilize and enroll more than hundred women as its members. As counter insurgency measures gained ground, the struggle against human rights violations became the primary task of the organization and women's specific concerns were sidelined.

The conflict did however push women into mobilization in new ways. The study looked in particular at the response of 'half widows' those women whose sons and husbands are missing. Some of these half widows' led by one woman who had never stepped out of her house before the conflict, became organised and set up the Association of the Parents of the Disappeared Persons (APDP). The founder of the organization began to negotiate with different state agencies, visiting jails, law courts and various government offices, demanding that she be allowed to meet her missing son or at least be told of his whereabouts. And as she state in an

interview '*Ladke ke saath mera dar bhi kho gaya*' (along with my son, I have lost the sense of fear). Nearly 400 families are now mobilized for a collective struggle.

The study concludes that the continuing conflict in Kashmir has imposed new and challenging roles on women, as well as leading to increasing numbers of female-headed households. Responding to grave tragedies and emergencies in the family, community and society, women have had to adapt themselves to these new roles, as first generation workers, heads of households, and once in the public domain, as negotiators for justice and peace. While the urgent necessity to protect their families on a daily basis has often eclipsed the need to protect their own rights as women, they continue to defy the militant's fundamentalist agenda that threatens their secular role in the family and society. These women demonstrate how their sense of agency and freedom to act is part and parcel of their individual and collective development and help determine their well-being even if they are having to deal daily with great deprivation and crisis.

Nepal

Since the Maoist insurgencies in 1996 estimates of up to 10,000 Nepalese have lost their lives (Maskey 2003). This 8 year period has been marked by continual political, economic social and cultural disruption. Women and children have been very vulnerable with a notable increase in rape and domestic violence as well as general decrease in health. A survey carried out in Kailali district in 2002 showed that 73% of 1,502 women respondents suffered from domestic violence – physical, mental, social and sexual. (Maskey 2003) and effects of political conflict have adversely affected people's health. The war zones lack food and essential medicines and the healthcare delivery system is under severe stress. More and more people are being displaced from their villages and are migrating out of the hills and concentrating in large cities leading to a marked deterioration of urban health.

The project's study in Nepal focused on women's well-being and empowerment in the Western provinces largely Maoist controlled areas. In the areas of Maoist insurgencies most of the men have left home either to join the Maoist movement, to make their livelihoods or to escape the area. Women are managing the house, children, and agricultural work. They are also taking on the cares and worries of their home and children's future. Despite the increased responsibility they have very little status, particularly those who are widowed. The remarriage of a widow is not socially permitted or easily accepted and a widow is expected to stay under the guidance of her in-laws (Gurung 2003).

Many of the women interviewed in the project described how they suffered from trauma, particularly over the violence they experienced or saw and the loss of friends and relatives. Search, arrest, interrogation, abduction, torture and intimidation by security forces and guerillas are common practices. They spoke of many incidents of sex abuse and rape as well as harassment (stealing livestock, food etc.) The women clearly suffered from mental ill health and frequently told of their desire for violent revenge. Most of the women are unable to sleep well at night. They dream of meeting their sons and husbands and they sleep walk and suffer from vomiting, headache and stomach pain insecurity and vulnerability. The exposure to violence their sense of vulnerability and insecurity, the loss of family networks and increased exposure to sexual harassment (including trafficking and prostitution) has led to major levels of distress and human rights violations.

The main concern in the Nepal study has been to examine how closely women's well-being, including basic health needs and reproductive health care, is linked to the capability of women to express their rights. The findings suggest that if we speak of overall well-being it is not possible to separate women's health from their rights, empowerment or socio-economic capacity to effect change. (Gibson and Dawadi 2003)

For example in many villages, the practice of child marriage has been reintroduced due to fear of Maoist' abduction of girls for militia recruitment. (Gurung 2003) Displacement resulting from political conflicts has led to the breakdown of family organization and health services. In the Maoist area there is very little basic health or reproductive health care available and traditional support from the family is scattered leaving young women in particular very vulnerable. The project indicates how many more women are being trafficked or turning to prostitution in the last years. UNAIDS estimates the numbers of women trafficked to India range from between 150,000–200,000 in 2002 and as export industries such as the carpet and garment industries are threatened where the majority of workers are women sex work seems to have become an alternative. (Maskey 2003)

In its focus on human rights violations – including rape and sexual harassment – the project chartered the physical and emotional aspects of women's lives under conflict. The researchers found that women had greatly increased ill health in general which manifested as reproductive health problems (problems with menstrual cycles, lack of pre and post natal care etc). Most of all they found that the physical and emotional health as an integral part of well-being was not being dealt with adequately. (Gibson and Dawadi 2002) In one survey, 42 per cent of

respondents said that in their experience medical practitioners were uncooperative or negligent in cases of violence against women or girls (Maskey 2003). Many women interviewed asked that health services dealt not just with physical health but also emotional and mental health.

In looking at the issue of empowerment the study came up against different ideological positions and a range of complex cultural differences. Racially and linguistically, Nepali society is broadly divided into two major ethnic groups; the Indo-Aryan language speaking Caucasoid group and Tibeto-Burman language speaking Mongoloid group. The former group belongs to the Hindu caste communities while the latter group belongs to the indigenous nationalities of Nepal. In 2001 indigenous people are reported to be 37.2% The Hindi culture dominates theocratically, politically and economically. (Gurung 2003).

Overall, Nepali women live oppressed lives with the highest level of maternity mortality in South Asia and long working days of 12-16 hours. One argument is that such miserable conditions have encouraged rural and indigenous women to join the 'peoples' war'. Several women interviewed expressed interest in joining the Maoist groups (the Maoist women's revolutionary front) because they felt that Maoists have a less patriarchal and hierarchical treatment of women and encourage women's equality.

A DFID report states that 30 percent of the Maoists are woman (Gurung, 2003), this is leading to a growing political awareness among women. Maoist women use the language of liberation vocabulary and display a newfound confidence. For example women are rejecting the traditional notion of remaining untouchable during menstruation by systematically subverting the traditional Hindu symbols of subordinate position of women. One *dalit* woman interviewed told how she entered a the temple during her period, sat on the top of a god's statue and challenged the god to harm her if he could. The use of *pote* (necklace of beads) and *sindur* (red vermillion powder) as symbols of marriage have long been discarded. (Gurung, 2003) Research is still going on how women in the Maoist movement look at conflict as a means of transformation for their own well-being and empowerment.

The project suggests that women as they were forced to take greater responsibility in the home, and maintain livelihoods, endure frequent attacks and guide their children's future also started to question their role in family and the society and to seek out support from women's

movements for legal assistance as well as ways to cope with the economic and health problems they faced.

Women are becoming more vocal in community activities and organizing to gain more political voice. Women's NGOs such as Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC) based in Kathmandu works against trafficking of women and children, HIV-AIDS and for the economic and social empowerment of women in rural areas. It works in the Maoist areas to support trafficked women in collaboration with the Alliance Against Traffic in Women and Children in Nepal (AATWIN). WOREC offers direct support and rehabilitation to women being trafficked in its centers, aiming to reintegrate them into society and to build their self esteem and dignity with an emphasis on empowerment and rights.

The Nepali conflict is a complex one but the study shows that it is shaking some of the basic inequalities that women experience – and that the concern for women's rights and well-being is part of the social and cultural shifts the conflict is producing.

Punjab Pakistan

The Punjab provincial government own 68,000 acres of land over 10 administrative districts. In 2000 the military government issued an army decree that changed centry hold arrangements that allowed peasant to be share croppers and small land owners to being lessees tilling the land on contract. This led to widespread discontent and an organization Anjuman Muzairren Punjab (AMP) was founded and became engaged in violent confrontation with the armed apparatus of the state. As the harassment escalated the women became involved in protecting their men –arriving to block advancing police parties who were routinely capturing and torturing the protesting men. (Mumtaz, 2003)

In the last three years the women became part of the leadership participating in the media and at least visually and symbolically they are fully engaged. The study interviewed women in the area and found that many of the women's self-esteem and sense of importance within the community had increased due to their engagement in the resistance movement. Though the women spoke of not being totally privy to all the decision making: 'the original sense of shame in moving out of the home or village has been replaced by a sense of purposes and fearlessness now that they are part of the movement'. (Mumtaz 2003)

The increased mobility is also reflected in shifting roles with women taking up jobs outside the home (farming and harvesting) which were once men's jobs. They take charge of shopping (not a traditional women's role as it involves traveling to a village or city) and it was accepted that movement work can take precedence over women completing their household chores. Women feel they have more say in the household and village life in general.

In this conflict though work has increased for the women, and there is greater uncertainty and anxiety around livelihood issues the political mobilizing has increased their sense of agency and well-being and freedom to act.

Moving to action

The studies of the SID-SAN project illustrate how the impact of political conflict on women is not only about survival, defense of a community's land or culture as such in the face of turmoil but also about a struggle for women's freedom and their right to bodily integrity, autonomy, knowledge and identity that is a mix of modern and traditional discourses. The politics of women's groups defending their families' well-being, their bodies or their right to live free from harassment is about ensuring their capacity to act in order to ensure their economic, social and political rights.

The struggle for valuable freedoms and to enjoy their well-being in what they are and do involves a complex multilevel set of strategies: changing their sense of self, their place in the community, their cultural identity, and opening up new types of public political spaces to negotiate gender, economic and social justice as part of local, national and regional process. These are multiple political activities carried out by women where they are redefining political action to take into account their gender concerns.

Conclusions how the capability approach can be a useful tool for development policy

The project suggests some interesting considerations for capability theory in relation to gender, violence and bodily integrity. It illustrates conflict situations impede development and human security as people live daily with violence and threats to bodily integrity. It shows how violence impacts on women's mental and emotional well-being and is integrally linked to social fractures, displacement and insecurity and therefore their capabilities to act. All impacts that are often invisible in the high level political battle. At the same time it shows how conflict can also led to a change and gains in women's freedom and agency to act and establish (or

restore) their rights and well-being. Through complex coping mechanisms women in these situations while facing grave threats to their bodily integrity are also acting to overcome it and build resistance movements. In this sense we see development not as measured in terms of economic growth but as a means to improving human well-being and agency and valuable freedoms.

The interest of the project in terms of capability theory is how to expand these women's capabilities or valuable freedoms. In analysing the way women understand their well-being and the way they overcome their vulnerabilities the paper suggests there are types of economic, political, legal, and other social arrangements which development policy could work towards if they take into account (as understood by interviews with the women themselves) strategies to enhance women's capacity to find nurture in their family and communities, to live a life free of shame, to learn and to have meaningful work that sustains their livelihoods. And as the research is undertaken within the SID-SAN network it also provides one very modest vehicle through which this can be achieved – not only analysis and understanding but also networking and openly challenging the traditional development paradigms in the process.

The members of SID-SAN while responding and working with local women's needs, are also actively engaged on a political level with government and development agencies. (Harcourt, 2004) In their networking they translate poor women's needs into the sophisticated discourses of rights, health and empowerment, and in the process interact with various actors including government and non government to negotiate space, funding and services for women in the local communities a contribution to the long term struggle for these women to enjoy human security, freedom and well-being.

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