Gender, Empowerment and Conflict: Experiences from Northeast India

Workshop on
GENDER, EMPOWERMENT AND CONFLICT

3rd & 4th August 2012
Pinewood Hotel
Shillong
Meghalaya
India

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THE RESEARCH PROJECT: ‘MAKING WOMEN COUNT FOR PEACE’

The project ‘Making Women Count for Peace: Gender, Empowerment and Conflict in South Asia’ is a collaborative effort by the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) together with six partner institutions in India and Nepal. These are the Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research (NCCR), Malaviya Centre for Peace Research (MCPR) at Banaras Hindu University, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group (CRG), Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP) in New Delhi, North Eastern Social Research Centre (NESRC) in Assam, and Nambol L. Sanoi College in Manipur. With a focus on contemporary Northeast India and post-conflict Nepal, the project addresses the role of women in local governance and politics, particularly within the context of peace and security processes. The primary aim is to generate new knowledge on what empowerment means to women in situations of conflict. The project will produce both academic and policy-relevant output, including recommendations to policymakers on how women can play a more prominent role in peacebuilding, and how such a role may be linked to the goal of women’s empowerment.

THE WORKSHOP: ‘GENDER, EMPOWERMENT AND CONFLICT’

In connection with the project launch, PRIO organised a two-day workshop on ‘Gender, Empowerment and Conflict’ on the 3rd and 4th of August 2012 at Pinewood Hotel, Shillong, India. Those invited to the workshop were scholars from the partner institutions, other academics from Northeast India, writers, teachers, activists, politicians, members of social movements, and representatives of key organisations working on women’s issues and gender, peace and security in the region and nationally in India. The aim of the workshop was to provide a forum to discuss and share information about the efforts of women in Northeast India to promote peace and women’s empowerment. The objective was to gain a better understanding of the efforts and challenges as seen by women themselves, and to learn from the experiences of women in conflict settings.

WORKSHOP: DAY ONE

The workshop began with a welcome speech and introduction of the project and the workshop by the project leader, Åshild Kolås. This was followed by the participants’ round of introduction. There were altogether twenty six participants attending the workshop. In addition to researchers from the partner institutions, the participants were scholars, writers, teachers, activists, members of social movements and representatives of various organisations from within and outside of Northeast India (see the participant list in the Annexures). The participants’ introduction was followed by a roundtable discussion on the topic of ‘Women’s Empowerment and Conflict’.
Session I: Key issues for women and how they are being addressed

The first session comprised a roundtable discussion to identify the key issues that have inspired women in Northeast India to work together, and how these issues have been addressed. Participants listed a range of issues that had brought women together, including violence against women, substance abuse, the spread of HIV/AIDS and income generation through self-employment. Participants explained that in Nagaland the women’s movement associated with the church had worked to organise women towards putting an end to substance abuse, initially to arrest alcohol abuse in the 1970s, and later the abuse of narcotics from the 1990s, despite doubts about the effectiveness of prohibition. Since 2006, women have also come together for the implementation of reservation (quotas) for women in the town councils as enacted by the Nagaland Municipal (First Amendment) Act, 2006. After years of delayed implementation, a case was eventually filed in Gauhati High Court by women activists of Nagaland demanding reservation as granted by the 2006 act. Participants from the state of Manipur described how women there have come together since the 1980s to oppose violence against women by the security forces, including rape, death in custody and disappearances. A key complaint of Manipuri activists is the lack of culpability offered to offenders by the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958. As for the state of Assam, participants recalled a long history of
informal cooperative organisations engaged in weaving and other activities, called ‘mahila mandals’. Since the early 1950s, women were brought together by the formation of self-help groups for income generation initiated by community development programmes. Thanks to the initiatives of UN agencies, augmented by academic concern, the integration of women’s issue into development was incorporated into the Indian government’s 6th five-year plan. As a result, the government initiated a scheme for women in rural areas, DWCRA (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas). As a part of this scheme, a manual was developed, entitled ‘Integrated Rural Development Programme and allied programmes of Training of Rural Youth for Self-Employment (Trysem) and Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (Dwcr): a manual’. Having started with knitting and stitching, the scheme also included dairy farming and poultry, etc. This was followed by initiatives of the Global Fund for Women. WING (Women in Governance) was started up in Assam in 2009, and fact-finding was carried out. Since 2010 there has been increased collaboration between women’s organisations in Northeast India and national women’s organisations.

Participants also identified challenges facing women in Northeast India that are not currently being addressed by organisations, as well as a number of factors that have discouraged women from working together. Among the challenges are the lack of inclusion of women in the legislature, the absence of women in elected local governance bodies in areas governed under the Sixth Schedule or otherwise exempt from reservation, the inability of women to reach the core committees of peace talks, issues of justice and its dissemination, and the ‘welfare approach’ taken by governmental agencies set up to address women’s needs and protect their interests. With regard to the factors that discourage women from working together, many participants agreed that ethnic divisions represent a major impediment. Other divisions among women may also create obstacles, such as gaps between the educated and uneducated, and between different classes.

Session II: Women’s empowerment and causes of disempowerment

The following roundtable session focused on sources of women’s empowerment and causes of disempowerment. The participants discussed gender equality and its relation to empowerment. According to one participant, gender equality does not merely mean having the same opportunities as men as a ‘counterbalance’ to the historical imbalances that are the by-products of discrimination against women. Rather, gender equality means the ability of women to produce the same results as their male counterparts. Some participants expressed the view that gender equality leads to women’s empowerment, while others explained that although women in their community participate equally in social life, they are still not politically empowered. The relationship between globalisation and women’s empowerment was also debated. Some participants viewed globalisation as a cause of women’s
disempowerment, citing the case of Manipur as an example. With globalisation the traditional Manipuri women's markets are at a loss, as there is less scope for women to sell vegetables in the market when they have to compete with traders of imported fruits and vegetables that have more or less taken over the market-place. Globalisation has an adverse impact on 'small economies' and this has damaged the economic networks of women. According to one participant, globalisation has had a negative impact on the customary laws of indigenous communities, which used to provide spaces for women's inclusion and afford equal value to men and women. As described by this participant, new power structures were created by the entry of global capital, and the new generation lost its connections with the past. Structural changes have thus completely marginalized indigenous communities, and new forms of injustice have emerged. Several participants agreed that there is a need for a deeper engagement with issues of justice.

Participants discussing during a roundtable session

Session III: The impact of conflict on women and women's organizations

Conflict was brought to the centre of the debate in the following session, emphasizing the challenges faced by women working for peace, and the impact of conflict on the work of women’s organisations. Participants shared the view that divisive politics should be transcended. Some felt that women’s activism could be
considered insignificant due to severe obstacles such as harassment from men, domestic violence, and religious prohibitions concerning women’s participation in social and political arenas. Strategies to deal with powerful conflict actors and stakeholders were also discussed. As an example, one participant explained that the Naga Mothers Association and the Naga Women’s Union Manipur both used context-specific strategies to deal with more powerful actors while working for peace. While the Naga Mothers Association has used motherhood as strategy to appeal to armed actors, the Naga Women’s Union Manipur has used the assertion of rights as a strategy. There are several traditional models that Nagas can draw on in their efforts to build peace, but as this participant explained, the traditional models are for men only, whereas women can participate only with the blessing of men. Another participant described the Tangkhul Naga tradition of women’s intervention in conflict when bloodshed had reached a certain limit, associated with practices of self-regulation, and practices to avoid escalation and build trust, noting that this requires specific rituals to be carried out. Participants called for more attention to the cultural contexts of peacebuilding.

Session IV: Group discussions

The final session of the day was devoted to group work on questions related to women’s empowerment. The first group discussed how women’s empowerment is being pursued in Northeast India, and the key issues that are being raised. The group identified a number of strategies used by women to negotiate within public and private spaces. In the public space, women in some communities have played a crucial role in negotiating with militant groups, acting among other as mediators during so-called ‘ethnic clashes’. Similarly the Naga Mothers Association has played a key role in the peace process between the Government of India and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). Women’s organisations such as the Watsu Mundang, the apex women’s organization of the Ao Nagas, have also provided invaluable support to women who have filed their nominations for office in the state legislature. With regard to the private sphere, some group members suggested that women who are able to contribute towards the household economy tend to receive more acceptance, encouragement and support from their husband. In this way, self-help groups have been of vital importance for the promotion of women’s empowerment. With regard to the key issues at stake, the debate centred on the existing gender structures and expectations that women conform to gender stereotypes. The group discussed women’s ‘proxy representation’ in political fora, pointing out that if women candidates were nominated by men simply to fill a quota, the result might be proxy representation rather than the active political participation of women. The group also debated the need to evaluate state-sponsored women’s empowerment schemes such as the Village Development Board Scheme (VDB), which some viewed as steeped in gender hierarchies. The case of the VDB in one district of Nagaland was discussed. In this district, 25 percent of funds are allocated
for women’s programmes, managed by a committee created by the village council, and led by a woman. This seems to be a management of funds ‘by women for women’, but viewed critically, it may as well serve as a way to recreate gender-specific roles within the community. Similarly, if we take a closer look at the genesis of women’s organisations (whether “womens’ welfare” organisations or “mothers associations”) we can see that several of them were actually created by male members of society. In some communities the president of the women’s association is a member of the village council, but we should take care not to assume that this means they have equal decision-making power in the council. Finally, members of the group identified the withdrawal of women from agriculture and their increasing dependence on the family for food as a source of disempowerment. The group discussed several factors that might propel this shift: firstly, the political climate; secondly, changing gender dynamics within the family; and thirdly, the extent to which women are economically (in)dependent.

The second group debated how activists and other stakeholders in women’s empowerment relate to more powerful actors in the local community, and how their agenda is affected by these relations. Village chiefs and church leaders were recognized as key actors in the local community. Some members of the group described a history of solidarity between female activists and these key actors. Others spoke of the relations between female ex-combatants of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and Assamese civil society organisations who helped these women in their struggle to return to a normal life. The group also discussed violence against women, and how this issue has become secondary to the demand for the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Power Act, 1958 (AFSPA). Some members of the group felt that the issue of sexual violence committed against women in Manipur has been marginalised by the people’s movement for the repeal of AFSPA, which takes the repeal of the act to be the ‘larger’ political issue. Others felt that the people’s movement and civil society actors are rightfully addressing the larger political issues, such as the nature of the state in the region, and the laws that provide immunity to state forces allowing them to violate human rights. The group reached the conclusion that the conflict has become more complex because of the decades-long low-intensity war between state forces and armed groups, and that the need of the hour is to identify the actors who are actually concerned with women’s empowerment.

The third group debated capacity-building measures to help women to assert their voice, and tried to assess which measures are the most appropriate and effective. The group proposed a number of suggestions, highlighting the generation of networks among women within and beyond the community, building of resources and sharing of knowledge and experiences. Some members of the group described cases of ineffective capacity-building, where funds allocated by foreign donors and non-governmental organisations for capacity-building of women were distributed through channels that did not work to the satisfaction of the target group. The group
agreed that if capacity-building is not properly planned, it may give rise to further problems. Some felt that the government in its activities is alienating women in the region. The group further discussed the need to understand local culture while planning and implementing capacity-building measures. Some suggested that emphasis should be given to gender-sensitive education, development of negotiating skills within public and private spaces, and development of gender-neutral monitoring systems in conflict-affected areas. Regarding the need for substantive representation of women in local governance, members of the group felt that local political parties are sensitive towards the non-party women's organisations only during elections. Some suggested that training in human rights and politics are the most effective capacity-building measures for women. There was consensus on the need to help women develop negotiating skills and self-awareness for capacity-building, and that internationally recognised instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) should be applied more actively to help women in conflict-affected areas to assert their voice. However, the group concluded that there is no blanket formula, and that all measures must be context-specific and culturally sensitive.

Participants engaging in group discussions

The first day of the workshop concluded with group-work presentations by each of the group moderators, followed by a summing up by Åshild Kolås.

WORKSHOP: DAY TWO

The second day of the workshop began with a presentation on the projects and perspectives of UN Women by Roshmi Goswami, head of the Women, Peace and Security Unit at UN Women South Asia. Roshmi spoke of the history behind the formation of UN Women, set up by the United Nations General Assembly on 2 July 2010. UN Women seeks to sharpen the focus and impact of gender equality activities of the entire United Nations system rather than relieving other parts of the United Nations system of their responsibility for contributing to the promotion of
gender equality and women’s empowerment. When UN Women was established it was headed by the former President of Chile, Michelle Bachelet. The participants further learnt that UN Women focuses on five priority areas: increasing women’s leadership and participation, ending violence against women, engaging women in all aspects of peace and security processes, enhancing women’s economic empowerment, and making gender equality central to national development planning and budgeting. Roshmi then introduced the participants to the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in the year 2000 as a formal and legal document that requires parties in conflict to respect women’s rights and support their participation in peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction. She described the purpose of National Action Plans on UNSC Resolution 1325, and explained the four pillars of the resolution: i) protection of women, ii) prevention of conflict, iii) participation of women in conflict and iv) relief, recovery and rehabilitation.

Roshmi Goswami presenting on the projects and perspectives of UN Women

The presentation also covered the organization of South Asia Open Day and the establishment of an expert group of women from different countries in South Asia to devise strategies for advancing the agenda of women and peace. The expert group meets for consultations on what should be prioritized. Current initiatives include:

- building a roster of women negotiators to create opportunities for women peacebuilders at the post-conflict moment,
- working on gender sensitization of UN peacekeepers (at present just a 45-minute slot in the training program for UN peacekeeping missions),
- working through the SAARC mechanism to establish a peace charter for South Asia,
- investigating economics of war and militarization, and
- supporting multi-country comparative research (Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh) on transitional justice, accountability and impunity.
Roshmi explained the process of country reporting on UNSC Resolution 1325 within the framework of the Universal Periodic Review of Human Rights, and the importance of civil society shadow reports as a tool of grassroots organizations. She further informed the participants about the work within the UN system to formulate “General Recommendation on the human rights protection of women in conflict and post conflict situations”, to be submitted in 2013. Finally, the presentation gave a brief overview of UN Women work on justice (as a global program), focusing on accountability and impunity of perpetrators, victim’s access to justice, justice mechanisms, normative standards and reparations. Following the presentation there was a discussion on how UN organisations were able to reach the grassroots. Some participants felt that this was a challenge, while others maintained that the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is the UN convention that has had the most impact at the grassroots level.

Sessions I and II

In the interest of time, sessions I and II on the programme were referred to the group discussions, leaving session III as the next point on the agenda.
Session III: Peacemaking: A challenge or window of opportunity for women’s participation?

The first question raised in this session was: What is and should be the role of civil society in peace processes? Taking the Naga peace process as a case in point, one participant explained how the Forum for Naga Reconciliation\(^1\) facilitated a greater ‘middle space’ that has empowered Naga civil society. Participants spoke of initiatives taken by the Forum for Naga Reconciliation to get the three factions of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) to work together for peace. As described by one participant, despite tensions between the colonial middle class and the current middle class elite (linked to the Indian state), strong women who are educated and vocal have played a very important role in this initiative, which established a Joint Mechanism for Ceasefire Monitoring. However, NSCN (IM) leaders blocked these and other efforts, including those of the committee for an Alternate Arrangement. Some participants brought up their frustrations concerning the lack of any support system to turn to, having experienced extremist violence for the past 15-20 years. They stated that during all these years of suffering, no one had come to their rescue. As expressed by one participant: “We need some kind of strategy, some kind of encouragement so that we can also participate. Most of the police officers who are transferred to our district have a bad record. Why are they posting officers with criminal records in our district? We are suffering from extortion by several armed groups, outside forces enter, there is harassment and sexual molestation is going on by the armed forces, but women don’t know their rights, and they don’t know how to voice their concerns. Small incidents are always going on, but we don’t know what to do. People are branded as terrorists for no obvious reason, and then beaten up”. In response to these pleas, participants discussed the need for long-term commitments by regional organisations in support of grassroots women’s groups in conflict-affected areas, and the importance of connections and networking for the protection of women who start claiming their rights. Participants agreed that civil society can play a more proactive role in peace processes by adopting a more approachable stance, although we still need to address questions regarding the kinds of alliances that civil society should be making.

The second question raised in this session was whether the peace process is the best window of opportunity for promoting women’s participation, or whether this issue should be left aside until a settlement has been reached? Taking the case of Nepal as an example, one participant described how male ex-combatants were demanding to be integrated into the armed forces at the same level and rank as they held during the civil war, whereas women were offered training in kitchen gardening and stitching. This illustrates the gender blindness in the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process, and the top-down militaristic approach. A participant from Manipur explained that the surrender of armed actors

\(^1\) Forum for Naga Reconciliation is comprised of members of the Naga churches, the Naga Hocho (tribal assembly) and civil society organisations, and was formed in 2008.
there has become a theatrical drama, and yet rehabilitation or reintegration is unheard of. Another participant stated that: “Although more than 20 percent of Maoist combatants in Nepal were women, now they are all gone from the cantonments. This shows that we can’t leave the issue of women’s empowerment until after the settlement. If we do, then peace will mean a return to the pre-conflict situation for the women”.

Participants engaging in a group discussion

Many participants felt that incorporating gender perspectives into peace processes is more important than raising women’s issues. Some also claimed that when women have in fact participated in peace negotiations they have raised different issues than men, and focused on issues rather than positions. This was seen as evidence that there is in fact a difference between the peacebuilding approaches of men and women. Others doubted whether women can really make their voice heard in male-dominated peace processes; firstly because of the ‘low level of knowledge among women’ and secondly because of the strong views of men. Within this context, the role of customary law was also brought up. Some participants felt that customary law is being used to block the inclusion of women into political processes (including peacebuilding) and that customary law is therefore an obstacle to the promotion of women’s rights. One participant maintained that both traditional authorities (such as village councils) and elected members have been appealing to customary law and traditional practices in this way. Another participant stated that to exclude women
from peace processes is to ignore justice for victims. The session concluded with the agreement that new alliances are needed where women participate in peace processes as a part of larger civil society groupings, to replace the state interlocutors. The key issues are how to create new spaces for participation, and how to redefine gender roles and move beyond embedded questions.

Session IV: Group discussions

In the final session of the second day of the workshop the participants were again engaged in group discussions. The groups addressed questions related to women’s role in party politics, their agenda, and their demands for responsiveness from male representatives within their party, as well as opportunities for women’s empowerment in terms of women’s entry into politics in the conflict and post-conflict setting.

The first group discussed the question of women’s participation in politics and the incorporation of ‘women’s issues’ into the party agenda. Several group members responded that political parties simply ignore efforts to introduce women’s issues into the agenda. Political parties have their own agendas. Prior to elections candidates may paint a rosy picture of the productive actions they will be undertaking, whereas after a successful election the Party Manifesto is soon forgotten. A participant from North East Network (NEN) explained that they once distributed a ‘manifesto of women’s issues’ to political parties to suggest what they should include in their party manifesto, but unfortunately nothing was done to follow up this initiative after the elections. Others felt that rather than promoting ‘women’s issues’ such as health, education, children’s welfare and so on, it might be more important to apply gender perspectives to all policies impacting women, including foreign policy. At the local government level, the 73rd amendment has been implemented in most parts of India, and one third of seats in the Panchayat assemblies are thus to be reserved for women. Despite the election of women into local government bodies, participants argued that gender perspectives are still not applied to the political agenda. Moreover, in the Sixth Schedule areas and areas governed by customary institutions such as the durbars in Meghalaya, there is no reservation for women. At present efforts are being made to elect women into municipal wards, but the local durbars tend to resist such efforts and most of them disapprove of reservation for women. According to one group member, after Action Aid implemented a community development program in Khasi villages involving the establishment of self-help groups for women, women have been allowed into the durbars in some of the target villages. Other group members warned that economic empowerment of women sometimes gives rise to increased incidents of domestic violence. Different aspects of empowerment do not always go together, and the assumed links between economic empowerment and the assertion of rights should therefore be questioned. Economic empowerment creates opportunities to rethink gender roles, but this may
lead to a backlash resulting in disempowerment in other spheres. Members of the group expressed the need to find ways to make women as politically active as men, but identified several obstacles. Women are largely confined to the district, and they are often less educated than men. Moreover, a political career requires personal connections and exchanges of favours, and with their limited ability to engage in such networking, women are much less likely to be nominated by a party even when they want to stand for election. Despite these challenges, the group concluded that it is still important for women to be represented in governance structures from the lowest to the highest body of governance. This was seen not just as a question of promoting women’s issues, but a question of building a women’s perspective into every field of governance. The presence of women in political debates is therefore important in its own right. However, the question remains as to how women are to gain this presence? There is still a need to ask whether reservation for women is empowering or disempowering, and whether reservation is an acknowledgement that women are inferior. On the other hand, the group acknowledged that without reservation it may be nearly impossible for women to gain a foothold in governance.

The second group debated the question of opportunities for women’s entry into politics in the conflict and post-conflict settings. Members of the group agreed that social norms change in conflict situations, but that women are still denied their rights. One group member shared the view that in Nepal the conflict actually created new
opportunities for women. As men took part in the armed conflict, women were often left at home and had to negotiate with the state and non-state actors, hence becoming decision-makers. This may have helped to shift the decision-making process to enable women to engage directly with the political system. After 33 percent representation of women in assemblies was made a norm, the shift became irreversible. The legal reform was extensive and a culture of women’s representation emerged in every field, impacting gender roles as well as gender relations. Taking the example of Northeast India, other group members acknowledged that conflict might similarly provide women with opportunities, although they often remained silent for the sake of larger issues of identity and group representation. For instance, when women were invited to meetings in Delhi in connection with peace talks they usually refrained from speaking about gender representation to avoid group division, as in this situation there were ‘greater issues’ being addressed. Women came out collectively mainly to address issues of human rights violations by the state actors. Some participants felt that women need to prove their abilities when governance is concerned. The members of the group agreed that representation of women in the political space remains low.

The final session concluded with presentations by the group moderators, followed by concluding remarks by Åshild Kolås.

Conclusions

When we talk about women’s empowerment, we mean the process of renegotiating accepted norms and expectations about female and male roles, relations, and responsibilities, to open up new opportunities for women within the household, the community, the country and beyond. The workshop discussions brought to light the wide range of contexts and situations in which women in the region have come together to work for common interests. It is obvious that women in Northeast India have joined hands for a multitude of reasons, and with many different aspirations and objectives. It is better to recognize and appreciate this diversity than to try to create a simplistic image of the region’s ‘women’s movements’. That said, it is also clear that the social and political activities of women and the boundaries between male and female roles and social spheres come into sharper relief when they are looked at through a ‘gender prism’. Despite the many and sometimes deep divides between women in terms of ethnicity, class, education, age, family background and religion, and despite a wide variety of individual differences, women still have a common interest in how their identity as a woman is socially framed, legally defined, and culturally shaped. Even as processes of framing, defining and shaping the female identity are constantly in flux over time and across space, there is a shared interest in the meaning of ‘womanhood’. Not surprisingly, the workshop discussions returned frequently to the definition of ‘women’s issues’.
By identifying ‘women’s issues’, we highlight the boundaries of the female sphere of responsibility, where women are expected to be in charge and men’s contribution is minimal. The classification of ‘women’s issues’ thereby brings to light the legitimate spheres and spaces of women’s activities, or the female domain. In contemporary Northeast India, it seems that these female spheres or spaces can be found mainly under the rubric of the ‘domestic’, demarcated by labels such as health, education, reproduction, and family welfare. Importantly, spaces of women’s activities, or ‘women’s issues’, are not the same as spheres of female decision-making. Rather, notions of ‘women’s issues’ demarcate how opportunities and responsibilities are structured, and form the basis for normative prescriptions and expectations about acceptable female and male roles. When we set out to define ‘women’s issues’, or even to identify ‘key challenges facing women’, we run the constant risk of solidifying the very boundaries that delimit the female sphere, which those who aim for empowerment may rather want to break through. Such a ‘feminist dilemma’ is also apparent in the debate on the ‘empowering’ effects of reservation.

Another recurring theme in the workshop discussions was the contestation between two different perspectives on the causes of women’s disempowerment. In one view, the main obstacles to women’s empowerment can be found within the gender roles and governance structures of the ‘traditional’ or ‘local’ community. In the other view, the forces of ‘modernity’ and ‘globalisation’ are cast as the key challenges. The nature of gender relations in indigenous communities, the role of women in indigenous society and the evolution of customary law and practice is at the centre of this debate. Some of the workshop participants thus portrayed customary law as a male sphere, stating that ‘men always interpret it’, and ‘if disputes arise, men will make the decisions’. Tradition is here seen as an obstacle not only to women’s empowerment but also to equal political participation and the promotion of women’s rights. In conflict situations, tradition is often dislocated or disrupted, and reconstituted post-conflict. The challenges women face in overcoming the traditional roles prescribed by the community is at the core of this narrative.

A very different view of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ is offered in the alternate discourse. In this view the problem of disempowerment is rooted in the lost economic independence of women who have been left disadvantaged in the market-place as new actors have entered, and competition has increased. As women earn less from the crops that they cultivate, many leave cultivation for ‘better opportunities’, and forfeit their independence in the process. Moreover, as customary law is reinterpreted, the rights of women are weakened, and women are hence also politically disempowered. In the encounter between tradition and modernity, matriarchal elements are often erased and the patriarchal ethos heightened. This account links the plight of women closely to the predicament of the indigenous community, and its disempowerment by the state. Violence against women by the armed forces is the extreme manifestation of such disempowerment, and this also appears as an acute focal point of conflict between society and state.
## ANNEXURES

### LIST OF WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants name</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>E-mail</th>
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Making Women Count for Peace  Workshop 3rd & 4th August 2012

GENDER, EMPOWERMENT AND CONFLICT

Workshop programme

DAY ONE
09:30    Welcome and project introduction (Åshild Kolås, PRIO)
10:00    Participants’ round of introduction

Roundtable discussion sessions WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT AND CONFLICT

SESSION 1:  Key issues for women and how they are being addressed
10:20    What are the issues that have inspired women to work together? What are the challenges faced by women that organizations are unable to address?
10:40    What are the divisions among women that have so far not been bridged? What might discourage women from working together?
11:00    Tea break

SESSION 2:  Womens’ empowerment and causes of disempowerment
11:20    When people talk about women’s empowerment, what are the contexts and what are the issues of debate? Does anybody disagree that there is a need for women’s empowerment, and on what grounds?
11:40    Are different communities and organizations divided in their views on gender equality? Is gender equality a contentious issue, and on what grounds?

SESSION 3:  Conflict: Its impact on women and on the work of women’s organizations
12:00    How do women deal with situations of conflict? What are the key challenges they face if they try to work for peace?
12:20    How does conflict affect the work of women’s organizations? How do women’s organizations deal with more powerful conflict actors and stakeholders?
12:40 Summing Up: In situations of conflict, can women find a common ground?

01:00 Lunch

02:00 Group work: Questions to explore

  A. How is women’s empowerment being pursued by women in Northeast India? What are the key issues at stake?
  
  B. How do women activists and stakeholders in empowerment relate to more powerful actors in the local community, and how does this affect their agenda?
  
  C. Does the assertion of women’s rights and gender equality contribute to women’s empowerment? Can such assertion of rights be counterproductive?
  
  D. What kinds of capacity-building measures would help women to assert their voice? Which measures are the most appropriate and effective?

03:30 Presentation of group work (Group moderators – 15 minutes each)

04:30 Summing Up

07:30 Dinner

DAY TWO

09:30 Projects and perspectives of UN Women

(Roshmi Goswami, Women, Peace and Security Unit, UN Women South Asia)

Roundtable discussion sessions WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNANCE

SESSION 1: Women in governance and women’s agendas

10:00 When working for the interests of women, is it more effective to work in political parties or in NGOs? If work in political parties is more effective, would it help women in general if a women’s agenda were to be promoted in electoral politics? If so, should women seek to monopolise such an agenda?

10:30 If more women were to be elected into councils and assemblies, would it benefit women in general? As council/assembly members are elected to promote the interests of their constituency rather than the interests of women, are elected women able (or even willing) to promote women’s empowerment?

11:00 Tea break
SESSION 2: Reservation for women and other paths to women’s participation

11:20 What are the pros and cons of reservation for women? Is reservation the best way to enable more women to be elected into councils and assemblies?

11:40 In the areas not under the reservation system, why are so few women elected into councils and assemblies? Can more equal participation of women in tribal governance structures be promoted without diminishing tribal autonomy?

SESSION 3: Peacemaking: A challenge or window of opportunity for women’s participation

12:00 What is and should be the role of civil society in peace processes?

12:20 Is the peace process the best window of opportunity for promoting women’s participation, or is it better to leave the issue of women’s participation aside until a settlement has been reached?

12:40 Summing Up: Is there a “women’s voice” and do women need help to assert it?

01:00 Lunch

02:00 Group work: Questions to explore

A. If the role of women in party politics is to work for “women’s issues”, what might these issues be? In their efforts to put “women’s issues” on the party agenda, how can women go about demanding responsiveness from male representatives within their own party?

B. What is the impact of civil society on the representation of women in politics? What is and should be the role of civil society in working towards women’s participation in governance?

C. Can affirmative action measures to usher more women into politics (e.g. reservation) make parties more responsive to gender equality issues? Does reservation help construct electoral constituencies with an interest in gender equality?

D. Is the conflict or post-conflict setting the best window of opportunity for empowerment, especially as regards women's entry into politics?

03:30 Presentation of group work (Group moderators – 15 minutes each)

04:30 Summing Up and Concluding Remarks

07:30 Dinner