

Breaking Stereotypes: Women's Empowerment in Conflict and Post-Conflict Contexts

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Speakers:

Mona Dave

Asia Program Officer, National Endowment for Democracy

Patti Petesch

International Development Consultant and Researcher

Moderator:

Nick Oatley

Director of Institutional Learning, Search for Common Ground

Often, the connection between war and women is discussed in a negative framework. Sexual violence increases dramatically in times of conflict and women are often the most vulnerable to civilian attacks. However, violent conflict and reconstruction also create opportunities for women. When men are away fighting, women are often forced to take on the role of head of household and to act as the primary breadwinner for the family. Between 1940 and 1945, when the US was engaged in WWII, a publicity campaign pushed for women to replace men in the workforce, increasing women's participation in the labor force by 60%. Women took on traditionally male jobs in factories while the men were fighting overseas. This phenomenon was exemplified by the fictional character of "Rosie the Riveter." After the war ended, many women were pushed back into the domestic sphere or more stereotypically "feminine" positions, but opportunities for women were irreversibly changed. It is important that we ask why these changes in women's roles are often temporary; and how the opportunities that come from times of conflict can be maintained.

Women's empowerment in post-conflict situations—Reflections based on the life stories of 125 women

Patti Petesch presented her conclusions based a study she had undertaken examining the life stories of 125 women in four countries: Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Colombia. Conflict zones existed in all four countries between 1995 and 2005, although the three Asian countries were mostly calm between 2002 and 2005. In Colombia, there was a low-intensity conflict throughout. In all four countries, the data showed that women living in conflict communities rated more highly on empowerment measures than those women who were living in conflict-free zones. Once a modicum of security was restored, the communities that experienced the most rapid recovery were most likely to empower women. The empowerment levels in the report reflect both womens' agency and the structure of opportunities in the mostly rural context of the study.

Petesch noted that the women from the Philippines were the most educated, and controlled the most assets of all the women in the study. They also inherited property through their families or through dowries (which are transferred from the groom's family directly to the bride). The research showed that women who controlled major physical assets demonstrated higher levels of empowerment. One woman interviewed for the study made this point when she stated that "land is always a fallback."

The vast majority of women had worked for pay at some point. In fact, out of 125 participants only 3 reported never having worked for pay. Women who could count on a supportive spouse who welcomed their economic initiatives were more empowered. Local women's collective action was also a valuable factor in empowerment.

Finally, Petesch noted three factors that were common to what she called 'superstar communities' where women experienced significant levels of empowerment. These were: the restoration of local security, women's access to active markets, and an inclusive economic recovery path.

Women and Conflict—The Case of Nepal

Mona Dave discussed the specific case of Nepal. The country had been faced with a 10 year civil war between the Nepali Army and Maoist insurgents. Many women became single or widows, and effectively became the heads of their households. Women living near army camps or living in areas considered sympathetic to the Maoist cause often faced sexual violence at the hands of the security forces. This experience of sexual violence led many women to join the Maoist rebel army. Women in the Maoist army fought alongside men and many became officers. The reputation of the Maoist rebel army for empowering women and providing an egalitarian space for all of its fighters was a great departure from traditional Nepali society and a significant motivation for women to join.

After 2008, when the monarchy was abolished and the country became a republic, the interim constitution created a quota of 33% of seats in the Constituent Assembly for women. However, most power is still held by a handful of high-caste men.

Politically and physically, female combatants felt different from other women. They viewed themselves as actors in ending the monarchy. Many felt entitled to a more inclusive post-conflict process and wanted to continue to play a role in improving their society. Women have asked for training as UN peacekeepers as well as for vocational training for professions such as social work. After the war, they were given two stark choices: either integrate into the Nepali army or be rehabilitated. Women were limited in their ability to participate in integration and rehabilitation processes because of family responsibilities.

Nepal is home to many identity groups and gender dynamics are different in each group. For example, Sherpa communities prize their women as being great business people. Thus, one cannot generalize about Nepali gender dynamics.

Nepal has a plethora of progressive laws and policies that have been put forth in the last few years. However, the international community needs to stress the structures and mechanisms that are needed to make these laws effective.

Conclusions

Peace processes are happening community by community. It is very sticky for women to play a political role at the national level. The international community needs to stress capacity building, the democratization of political parties, support the discussion of the responsibilities of politicians as well as citizens and push for a substantive movement forward in domestic peace processes. It would also be beneficial if the international community emphasized the three factors that create “superstar communities”: local security, women’s access to markets, and inclusive economy recovery.