

## **Women and armed conflict: Cultural obstacles to Pashtun women's participation in peacebuilding**

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### **Abstract**

The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on 'Women, Peace and Security' stresses the importance of women's 'equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution'. However, the situation on the ground with respect to women's participation in peacebuilding efforts in many countries is still not very encouraging. This paper highlights the unequal treatment of women in peacebuilding process in Pakistan in general and the Pashtun belt in particular where women have been suffered in a number of ways during the on-going conflict. The article articulates that the patriarchal Pashtun society and culture present numerous hurdles in the way of women to actively participate in the peacebuilding process and that their role in peacebuilding efforts is not recognized and appreciated.

**Keywords:** women, conflict, peacebuilding, gender equality, pashtun, pakistan

### **Introduction**

Research on women and post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding tends to focus primarily on women as victims and passive targets for aid rather than conceptualizing peacebuilding as a process where greater participation by women may help increase the prospects for success (Gizelis, 2011; Woroniuk, 2001). Governmental organizations and international agencies often view peacebuilding in terms of post-conflict reconstruction of societal infrastructures and emphasis structural rebuilding of institutions and infrastructures. Peacebuilding discourses overlook that peacebuilding is both culture-specific and gendered (De La Rey and McKay, 2006). It is important to ensure that gender equality issues are taken into consideration in peacebuilding initiatives because both conflict and peacebuilding are gendered activities. There is a strong gender division of labour as women and men have differential access to resources, including power and decision-making during conflicts, and men and women experience conflict differently. The United Nations recognized and highlighted this in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing:

“while entire communities suffer the consequences of armed conflict and terrorism, women and girls are particularly affected because of their status in society as well as their sex” (UN, 1995: para 135). Given their overall economic and political marginalisation, women in many societies are not well-placed to play an effective role in peacebuilding processes (Woroniuk, 2001).

This article outlines the specificities of peacebuilding in post-conflict situations and argues that women have been traditionally barred from playing their active role in peacebuilding efforts. With a focus upon Pakistan and the Pashtun culture more specifically, we argue that both the societal traditions at the local level and the state policies at the national level have systematically excluded women from peacebuilding efforts. Sustainable peace in the region cannot be achieved unless women, along with other marginalized groups, are given their due role in peace making forums.

### **Conflict, Peacebuilding, and Women**

Peacebuilding refers to those initiatives which foster and support sustainable structures and processes which strengthen the prospects for peaceful coexistence and decrease the likelihood of the outbreak, reoccurrence or continuation of violent conflict (Bush, 1998). Peacebuilding is a two-fold process requiring both the deconstruction of the structures of violence and the construction of the structures of peace. In other words, peacebuilding is a process that facilitates durable peace and tries to prevent violence by addressing the root causes and effects of conflict through reconciliation, institution building, and political as well as economic transformation. This means that peacebuilding process not only prevents violence but also advances the economic and political rights of people. The absence of violence only does not necessarily means peace. Desirable peace can be achieved to protect people from injustice and discrimination and to work for socio-political empowerment. It is important for the positive peace to protect the economic and political rights of the people irrespective of racial and gender discrimination.

During the past few years, there has been an increasing recognition by government and civil society organizations of the importance of women’s participation in peacebuilding. It is mainly because women suffer the most during conflicts but their role in the post-conflict scenarios has not been given due recognition. A growing challenge facing the world today is

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the increasing violence against women and girls in armed conflicts. They are not only the indirect victims of hardship, displacement and warfare; they are also targeted deliberately in the shape of forced marriages, rape, and physical assaults as an instrument of war. In some cases, women suffer even more than men during ethnic conflicts because they are considered symbols of community and ethnic identity, and at the same time, the easy and soft target for violence (El-Bushra and Sahl, 2005). It is because whenever conflict breaks up, a breakdown also occurs in the social and legal order which give ways to more human right abuses and women's rights violations. In the absence of moral and legal order during conflict, women, being the vulnerable groups, are exposed to greater gender based violence (Mohammad, 2009; Woroniuk, 2001). A good example is the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, in which Tutsi women were raped and killed because of their ethnicity (Mohammad, 2009). Studies from different parts of the world have documented that violent acts against women during conflicts further undermine their human rights. Displacement or force migration of people during conflicts creates various socio-economic and political problems generally for whole society and particularly for women. They are socially humiliated and face various forms of sexual violence particularly in refugee's camps after displacement. After the conflict, their unfair treatment in peacebuilding further intensifies problems for them as they are denied the opportunities to put themselves on equal level with men to ensure egalitarian peace. Desirable peace can be maintained when every segment of population particularly women become the part of it.

International organizations such as the UN Security Council, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), and Women Waging Peace have been working to promote the critical importance of women's role in peacebuilding and advocate that women must be included in all aspects of conflict resolution and peacebuilding (Anderlini, 2000). In 2000, the UN Security Council, unanimously adopted Resolution 1325 which advocated broad participation of women in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. It called on all actors who negotiate and implement peace agreements to adopt a gender perspective in considering the needs of women and girls in post-conflict situations and in supporting local women's peace initiatives and indigenous conflict resolution processes (UN, 2002). The UN Security Council recognizes that war impacts women differently, and reaffirms the need to increase women's role in decision-making related to conflict prevention and resolution. The progress so far to include women in peacebuilding, however, is too slow: from 1992 to

2011, women comprised less than 4% of signatories to peace agreements and fewer than 10% of negotiators at peace tables (UN Women, 2015).

It is important to ensure women's participation in peacebuilding activities because improving women's status in society demands that they should be considered as co-architects with men in the process of building societies in post-conflict situations. Women's national, regional, and international involvement fundamentally shapes how peacebuilding projects and processes develop (De La Rey and McKay, 2006). Examining gender and meanings of peacebuilding at international, national and grassroots levels, Mazurana and McKay (1999) concluded that women's peacebuilding is culturally and contextually based and usually located at community and regional levels. Women's peacebuilding interests are likely to be shaped by local and regional concerns, including the socio-economic status of women. For example, Gizelis (2011) argues that societies where women enjoy a relatively higher status have greater prospects for successful peacebuilding.

Despite the widespread patriarchal barriers, women have played a pivotal role in peacebuilding in the different parts of the world at both micro and macro levels (Tripp, Casimiro, Kwesiga & Mungwa, 2009). In countries like Northern Ireland, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Rwanda, women as individuals and as organizations have played a gigantic task during conflict to protect the social fabrics and ensure desirable peace in the conflict-affected areas (Adebajo, 2002). For example, women in Northern Ireland have helped calm the often deadly 'marching season' by facilitating mediations between Protestant Unionists and Catholic Nationalists (Hunt & Posa, 2001). In Sierra Leone, women in the Mano River Women's Peace Network collaborate with women of Liberia and Guinea to foster reconciliation and lasting peace between their countries (Femmes Africa Solidarité, 2000). Women are challenging patriarchal norms and practices in South Korea by advocating against the pervasiveness of militarism and linking it with violence against women, prostitution, and sex trafficking (McKay & Mazurana, 2001). These examples reflect women's oft-emphases upon reconciliation, demilitarization, and calling attention to gender-specific violence and reducing its prevalence (De La Rey and McKay, 2006).

As detailed in the foregoing discussion, it is becoming increasingly obvious that women not only suffer conflict differently than men, they also have unique approaches towards conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

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Without realizing the gender dimensions of conflict and conflict resolution, sustainable peace cannot be achieved.

### **Peacebuilding in the Context of Culture**

An important aspect of peacebuilding is that it is a cultural specific process. Different conflicts in different cultural contexts need various kinds of strategies according to the prevalent socio-cultural environment (Moser & Clark, 2001; Fred-Mensah, 2004). The cultural and socio-political environment of a society often promotes conflict; hence, these factors cannot be ignored in peacebuilding process (Burns & Aspeslagh, 2014). Sometime, culturally embedded factors sabotage the peace process and need to be kept in mind by peace makers (Mac Ginty, 2010). In most cases, these local factors hinder the participation of the minorities and culturally subordinates and marginalized segments of the population, such as women, from peacebuilding efforts. For example, women participation in peacebuilding can be rarely found in the countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and most of Africa as the local culture is not in favour of women (De La Rey, & McKay, 2006).

Another important aspect of peacebuilding process is that it needs a holistic strategy to involve all cadres of people in the society to build a sustainable peace (Brenk, Hellema, & Verhoeven, 2005). Peacebuilding process gives emphasis on the human rights protection and strengthening of governmental institutions and promoting formal and informal process of political participation. Sustainable peace requires the participation of neglected and marginalized community (Tryggestad, 2009; Cohn, Kinsella, & Gibbings, 2004).

The processual nature of peacebuilding demands for a recognition of that fact that it is a dynamic process. In practice, it means that peacebuilding is a dynamic phenomenon and having something to contribute in every phase of a conflict, always changing in response to the situation and the stage of peace-making efforts (El-Bushra, 2000; Kirk, 2004; Porter, 2007; Pankhurst, 2003; Cohn, Kinsella & Gibbings, 2004; Jordan, 2003). Peacebuilding covers all the possible forms of conflict and trying to mitigate the socio-cultural and political factors of it (Chinkin & Charlesworth, 2006; Hamber, et. al, 2006). The dynamic nature of the conflict needs a dynamic peacebuilding process to tactfully deal the various causes of conflicts, particularly socio-cultural (Onyejekwe, 2005; Schirch, 2005; McKay, 2004).

### **Peacebuilding in Pashtun Culture and Pashtun Women**

The Pashtun society, which has endured the brunt of terrorist events in the recent times and is still suffering from violent extremism, presents an ideal case to see how cultural factor hinder women's participation in peacebuilding processes. As mentioned above, peacebuilding process cannot be separated from the indigenous socio-political and cultural context. The patriarchal cultural context of Pashtun provides little role to women in socio-political affairs. The role for Pashtun women is mostly limited to the private sphere of family and indoor activities. According to a Pashto proverb, "*Khazaya da kor da, ya da gor da*", meaning that "A woman's place is either a home or a grave". This proverb indicates the strong line between public and private spheres for a woman and advocate that a woman has nothing to do with the outside world beyond the four walls of the house. A woman's participation in a public issue is considered a matter of shame and humiliation for the family. As we will further explain in this article, local traditions have no provision for women's active role in peacebuilding process. As a reflection of local traditions, the state too has provided little opportunities for women to have access to state institutions and resources. As a result, women are kept marginalized and remain absent from peacebuilding discourses.

In the following pages, the status of Pashtun women and their exclusion from peacebuilding by Pashtun culture has been explained in detail. For this purpose, we have focussed the discussion on *Pashtunwali*-the Pashtun traditional code of conduct, which works like an unwritten constitution for Pashtuns. It is a set of moral and ethical principles which guides Pashtun people in overall socio-economic and political matters. *Pashtunwali* defines the position and role of men and women differently in different socio-political matters. A number of elements of *Pashtunwali* deal specifically with resolution of conflict and maintaining peace at the local level. These include cultural institutions and practices such as *jirga*, *nanawatay*, and *swara*. These elements of *Pashtunwali* have been critically examined from a gendered perspective to reveal that these traditional institutions and practices of Pashtun culture are biased against women and women's agency in socio-political affairs, especially in peacebuilding, is grossly negated.

#### ***Jirga, Nanawatay, and Swara***

The most important institution for conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Pashtun society is called *jirga*. *Jirga* has been considered a convenient traditional instrument of resolving inter-tribal and inter-

community disputes. In a broader sense, it is at once the parliament, court, and the police which take important decisions concerning communal affairs, resolve disputes between persons and tribes, maintain order and implement decision through various social sanctions<sup>1</sup> (Wardak, 2003). It is the council of elders who are culturally empowered to stop violence through peaceful negotiation between the conflicting parties. *Jirga* is composed of community elders called '*speengirimasheran*' (white-bearded elders). It is often claimed by local people that *jirga* is egalitarian in nature and it allows everyone to participate in it and contribute towards peacebuilding. The fact, however, is that it is highly patriarchal in nature as only elderly men can be its members. The institution of *jirga* systematically excludes marginalized and weaker groups including women and children to play any role in making important decisions that affect their lives. Similarly, people from lower socio-cultural backgrounds are not welcomed to be part of *jirga*.<sup>2</sup> As a result, women are denied any formal platform from where they can play a part in peacebuilding activities. It is considered as against the basic principles of *Pashtunwali* to allow women to play a leading role in peacebuilding. In the absence of women, it is no wonder that most of the decisions of *jirga* are biased against women.

There are a number of ways through which the *jirga* reconciles a conflict to resume peace among the conflicting parties. The most famous among them is the ritual of forgiveness called *nanawatay* which literally means "entering [the house of the offended party]". When one conflicting party (the wrong doers) realize their guilt or the *jirga* declare it so, the wrong doer can seek forgiveness through *nanawatay* in which the offenders enter into the house of the offended party to admit their guilt and to beg for pardon. *Nanawatay* usually takes the form of a procession consisting of the guilty part, members of *jirga*, other tribal elders, and a sheep to be slaughtered. The sheep symbolically represents the wrong doers and their submission to the wronged party. In some cases, the *nanawatay* procession

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<sup>1</sup> The institution of *jirga* works as alternative court and go parallel to the formal judicial system of the state. Majority of the Pashtuns still solve their disputes through *jirga* due to the slow and expensive judicial process in Pakistan. In the tribal areas, the state's legal courts do not operate and *jirga* is the only institution for dispute resolution.

<sup>2</sup> A Pashto proverb says: "*Saraychedala she no faisaly ye jolagankawe*", meaning that "*When a man loses honour, his disputes are solved by weavers*". It is pertinent to mention here that the Pashtun consider 'weavers' and other occupational groups such as 'cobblers' and 'masons' as lower in social rank compared to Pashtun themselves. A dispute among Pashtuns is ideally solved by a *jirga* of Pashtun elders, not weaver, cobblers or potters. The proverb suggests that *jirga* and conflict resolution among Pashtuns is an undemocratic process which excludes marginalized groups from its membership.

also includes a few women of the offending party. It is because women are symbol of men's pride and honour, and when a person allows his women to submit to the enemy, this is considered as the height of submission and humility, and the wronged party is obliged to grant forgiveness. The *nanawatay* ritual is based on the concepts of asylum (*panawarkawal*) according to which asylum must be granted even to the one's enemy if asked for, and hospitality (*mel mastiya*) which requires that one must entertain one's guest with honour and provide food and comfort, even if he is an enemy or a complete stranger. A specific Pashtun custom in which women play a role in ending violent conflict is called "*pessa or peskeachawal*", meaning "dropping the veil". In this custom, women go to the house of one of the conflicting parties and put their veil in the feet of the party. They beg for peace and mercy. Culturally, that party is obliged to grant mercy and end the conflict. This shows that the positive peace-making role of women is embedded in Pashtun culture. Yet women do not have a place in *jirga* where disputes and conflicts are discussed and adjudicated. In other words, *jirga* and *nanawatay* are men-dominated shows in which women are neither given any formal and active role nor their contributions are acknowledged.

Another dispute and conflict resolution mechanism is *swara* which has direct relevance to women. In order to end a cycle of blood feuds between two families/tribes, a young girl is given by the offending party to the offended party who is married to one of the male members of the offended party. The rationale behind this practice is to convert the enmity (*dushmani*) into affinity (*dusti*). The young girl married in this way into the enemy's house is called *swara*, which, in a sense, is a sacrificial goat whose life is sacrificed to save the lives of her brothers and other men of her natal house. This practice shows that rather than giving women an active role in peacebuilding, women in Pashtun culture are 'used' as compensation for the wrong done by men in order to resume peace. This practice also exposes the gender biased decisions of traditional *jirga* system.

### **The 'Women Jirga' in Swat:**

While most women surrender to the gendered biased decisions of *jirga*, some brave women have recently stood against the men-only composition and gender biased decisions of *jirga*. In district Swat, for example, women have taken a revolutionary step under the leadership of Tabassum Adnan by establishing a "Women *Jirga*". She first applied for a place in the *Swat Qaumi Aman Jirga* (Swat National Peace *Jirga*) to seek justice and representation for women. When her request was refused by male elders of the community, she organized an all-women's 25-member

*jirga*, the first of its kind in the country. Conservative sections of the society call it a 'shameful act' and equated it with 'blasphemy with tradition' (Kureshi, 2013). Talking to media about the women-only *jirga*, the head of the women *jirga* said, "We're fed up with male-only *jirgas* which decide only in favour of men and sacrifice women for their own mistakes. ... We simply can't leave women at the mercy of the male *jirgas*" (Dawn, 2013). By organizing 'Women *Jirga*', these women of Swat "created a separate space for themselves which is subversive as it defies the cultural ethos while staying within the cultural metaphor" (AWAZ: 2015: 11). So far, the 'Women *Jirga*' has successfully helped abused women of Swat in getting them justice from the legal courts and law enforcing agencies. These women have also raised their voices to put an end to the on-going terrorism in the country by urging "the government, army and Taliban to announce ceasefire and adopt the path of negotiations to avoid further bloodshed in the country" (Pakistan Gender News, 2014).

#### **'Peace Committees' and 'Peace Deals' with Taliban:**

The state of Pakistan has remained mostly silent over the exclusion of women from peace process. Not only that, but its policies has further strengthened the patriarchal structure by excluding women from local and national committees dealing with peacebuilding. In order to negotiate peace with the terrorists, the government of Pakistan has constituted 'Peace Negotiation Committees' (*MasalehatiJirgas*) from time to time. Importantly, none of these committees had a woman as a member. For example, when a peace deal was struck with Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) in 2009, there was no representation of women. Above that, "women became the main target as a result of the passing of this 'peace' deal as women were publicly flogged and attacked for attending schools or going to marketplaces (Bari, 2014). This shows that when women are excluded from peace making process, their rights are further violated. Similarly, the government of Pakistan has formed "*Aman Committees*" (Peace Committees) at the local level in terrorist affected areas in order to support the state against the Taliban. The members of these committees are consulted by government in important matters. Notably, the membership of these state-sponsored "*Aman Committees*", like the traditional *jirgas*, is all male (AWAZ, 2014). This provides evidence that peacebuilding and conflict resolution process at the local and national level have failed to consider women as actors and agents of peace. Women are generally defined as members of vulnerable groups, together with the elderly and the handicapped, as part of the category 'women and-children'. This approach deprives them of the agency as responsible citizen.

Instead of treating women as passive victim of conflict, peacebuilding initiatives at the local, national and international level must incorporate gender analysis into the assessment of the conflict and post-conflict situations and ensure that gender equality considerations are present in situation analysis and formulation of policies, programs and projects intended towards peacebuilding. As argued by Woroniuk (2011), peace is a pre-requisite for achieving the goal of gender equality and women's empowerment, and in some cases, true peace cannot be achieved without gender equality.

### **Conclusion**

Women suffer a great deal during violent conflicts, yet they are often neglected in post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding programs. In Pakistan as a whole in the Pashtun belt in particular, patriarchal traditions and practices such as *jirga*, *nanawatay*, and *swara* exclude women from peacebuilding ventures and discourses. In fact, these traditions are the main sources of women's rights violation as women are sacrificed for the resolving familial and tribal disputes. At the national level, the state too has exposed its patriarchal nature by not giving any representation to women in the various committees it has constituted from time to time for negotiating peace with the Taliban. Instead of protecting women, the state sponsored truces and peace agreements with the Taliban in the conflict affected areas like Swat have resulted in even further abuses of women. Gender representation in peacebuilding initiatives at all levels must be encouraged in order to achieve the goal of gender equality sustainable peace.

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