Mothers and activists in the hills of Assam

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Abstract

Security experts have argued that women's organizations in Northeast India are fragmented, fail to reach out across tribal identities, and lack agency independent of militants with whom they have links. In other words, the experts raise doubts about the independent agency of these women's organizations and their capacity (or even will) to pursue their own agendas. This article will address these assumptions by investigating the evolution of women's activism in a conflict-ridden district of Assam where 'mothers' have recently appeared on the political stage. It asks what the new appeal to 'motherhood' actually means, and whether 'motherhood' is a vehicle for women's empowerment? How do the 'mothers' as political activists relate to conventional gender roles, how do they interact with previous generations of women's organizations, and how do they relate to other political actors? How are the 'mothers' positioned with respect to the different fault lines of conflict? Are they able to overcome ethnic or tribal divides, or do they rather promote or enhance these divides?

Numerous policy studies and reports by international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) have suggested that the equal involvement of women in peacebuilding is a prerequisite for successful conflict resolution. INGOs and multilateral agencies have also promoted peacebuilding processes and related transitions as potential sites for women to advance their rights and take on a greater role in governance and politics. This has helped generate interest among policymakers in the role of women in peacebuilding.

In Northeast India, women's organizations and especially associations of tribal 'mothers' have been increasingly vocal in civil society attempts to engage in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, despite only sporadic responses from the government's mediators, interlocutors and conflict managers (Banerjee 2000, Banerjee and Dey 2012, Laimayum 2012, Manchanda 2005). Security analysts remain absorbed with the fault lines between militant groups and security forces, and between indigenous tribal communities and settlers. In its negotiations with 'underground' groups and related conflict management strategies the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) keeps a focus on the same fault lines. In addition to so-called 'ethnic conflict', which continues to be the key frame used to conceptualize the region's conflict scenario, the MHA is also preoccupied with political protest and mass movements directed against the government. Civil society contributions to conflict resolution remain largely unacknowledged or underestimated.

This article investigates the evolution of women's organizations and activism in a 6th Schedule district of Assam, enquiring how and why 'mothers' as activists have appeared on the political stage, and what the new appeal to 'motherhood' means. Is 'motherhood' a vehicle for women's empowerment? How do the 'mothers' relate to conventional gender roles, how do they interact with other women's organizations, and how do they relate to the local politicians? With whom do they create alliances, and where do they find common ground with other actors and stakeholders? How are the 'mothers' positioned with respect to various fault lines of conflict? Are they able to overcome ethnic or tribal divides, or do they rather promote or enhance these divides? What visions of peace do the 'mothers' aspire to? These are the questions that must be answered if we want to assess the current contributions and potential role of women as peacebuilders in Northeast India.[1]

Debates on women and conflict

Research on conflict and ethnicity has highlighted the significance of identity for ethno-politics, and how the politics of difference or 'othering' is related to political violence (Ashmore et. al. 2001, Banton 2000, Fenton 2003). Contrary to popular views of ethnicity as a cause of conflict, scholars have also shown how ethnic identity rather than causing conflict 'emerges out of conflict' (Schlee 2008). A similar perspective can be applied to investigate how gender identities are enacted in particular conflict settings, and how gender relations, like other social interactions, are recast in conflict. Understanding conflict as socially constructed and employing a 'gender lens' to this construction (Cockburn 2005, Enloe 1993) highlights the ways in which gendered power relations are transformed or reconfigured in conflict.

The gendered nature of conflict is widely debated by peacebuilding practitioners and academics alike (Afshar 2003, Cook and Woollacott 2003, Enloe 1989; 1993; 2000; 2007, Jacobs et.al. 2000, Jordan 2003, Pankhurst 2003), and the increased vulnerability of women during conflict is well documented (see for instance Anderlini 2007, Tripp 2005, Zarkov 2008). Assuming that conflict entails a disturbance of established norms, researchers have also argued that conflict may have unintended positive effects on the status and role of women within their societies by affecting the gendered division of labour and allowing women to perform jobs previously held by men (Rana-Deuba 2005, Waylen 2007, USAID 2007). While there is still considerable attention among INGOs and multilateral agencies on how women are affected as victims of conflict, the more recent line of thought highlights the potential of new opportunities for women arising during and after conflict (Cohn 2012, Eliatamby 2011, Heynes et. al. 2011, Kaufman and Williams 2013, Porter and Mundkhar 2012). The focus of much of this work is on the contributions of women peacebuilders towards the establishment of a more egalitarian post-conflict gender order, and the reshaping of gender roles and relationships during peacebuilding. Conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes have thus been viewed as potential sites for addressing gender inequality, promoting women's equal rights and advancing women's political participation, especially by way of constitutional revisions. Beginning with the negotiations for a settlement, conflict resolution is understood as a window of opportunity, where women can 'contribute to and benefit from a lasting, just and inclusive peace' (Banaszak et.al. 2005). This reiterates the view of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women,

Peace and Security (UNSC 2000) which promotes the increased representation of women in decision-making and mechanisms for conflict prevention, management and resolution. With the same objectives in mind, the UN has also enhanced its architecture for women, peace and security by appointing Special Representatives and Special Envoys and establishing the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), and subsequently reaffirmed its commitment with UNSC resolutions 1674 (2006), 1820 (2008), 1882 (2009), 1888 (2009) and 1889 (2009).

As early as 1992, India enacted constitutional reforms to increase women's participation in governance. The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution stipulates that one third of seats in the Panchayati Raj local governance institution are to be reserved for women, with recent proposals to increase the share to 50 percent. However, in Northeast India the situation is not as promising. In fact, it took nearly ten years to implement the 73rd Amendment in Assam, where the first such elections were held in 2001. Nor does the 73rd amendment apply to the states of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram, and hill areas of Manipur and Assam. As tribal areas, these are left out of the Panchayati system and exempt from the requirement to reserve seats for women in local assemblies. The same areas are also among the most severely affected by conflict.

Though well-documented, the history of women's movements in Northeast India has largely been interpreted within the context of movements for self-determination as manifestations of struggles for autonomy, rather than as movements with agendas of their own and significance in their own right. Similarly, the focus of research on the region's conflicts has been on the granting of statehood and territorial autonomy based on tribal identities and the political settlements that have effectively provided ethnic 'homelands' to certain groups (Baruah 2003; 2005, Samaddar 2004). As regulated by the 6th Schedule of the Constitution, local administrations have been given extensive autonomy in terms of powers of legislation and administration of justice, collection of land revenue and taxes, and issuance of leases. However, these powers are now the stakes in violent homeland politics, where civil society actors and militants continue to raise rivaling demands, ceasefires pacify one militant group at the expense of others, and dialogues give credence to armed groups as legitimate political actors (Kolås 2011; 2012). Unfortunately, women are not only among the victims of violence, as many women are also actively involved in these conflicts despite being framed as helpless bystanders caught between 'two armed patriarchies' (Banerjee 2001, Mahanta 2000). By focusing heavily on the signing of ceasefires and provision of surrender packages,

the MHA and security establishment continue to give importance to the male-dominated militants in the 'underground' while ignoring the role of women, in conflict as well as peacebuilding. The situation is not much different in Kashmir (see Akhtar 2006, Shakhawat 2014, Suri 2006).

By contrast, post-war Nepal's burgeoning women's movement has received considerable attention. It has been recognized that women have played a major role in the process towards amendments of discriminatory legal provisions relating to the ownership of property, citizenship, mobility, marriage, abortion, sexual minorities, domestic violence and marital rape (Aguirre and Pietropaoli 2008, Ariño 2008). Meanwhile, grassroots empowerment programs by international organizations compete in providing opportunities to lower caste people, youth and women (Miklian et.al. 2011). After the establishment of the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction in 2007, district-level Local Peace Committees (LPCs) have been set up with women comprising a mandatory one third of representatives. In 2008, 197 women (33 percent) were elected to the Constituent Assembly (CA) thanks to reservations as stipulated by the Interim Constitution. On the other hand, researchers have questioned what these reservations actually mean in terms of women's empowerment (Nepali and Shrestha 2007, South Asia Partnership International 2009, Falch 2010). The majority of Nepali women leaders remain involved with informal sectors of civil society, as members of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community groups and peace activists, whereas the men wielding decision-making power are still the military leaders, male politicians, government ministers and diplomats. Further, women leaders are often subservient to their politically active husbands, and may be encouraged by international organizations to pursue women's rights agendas above other policymaking (Falch 2010). One potential consequence is that male politicians dismiss the work of female politicians as mere interest group issues that do not fundamentally challenge power dynamics in local or national political spheres. Similar questions can be raised with regard to reservations for women in the Panchayati structure. Are women necessarily more empowered due to reservations, and contrarily, does the absence of reservations for women in tribal areas of Northeast India mean that women in these areas are less empowered? Notwithstanding the salience of women in the Maoist 'liberation struggles' in Nepal (Manchanda 2004), challenges facing politically active Nepali and Northeast Indian women spring questions of methodology and issues of premises on which theories of inclusion and empowerment of women in conflict are based.

While a substantive scholarly effort has gone into the study of women's empowerment in peacebuilding (see for instance Beckwith 2005, Manchanda 2001a, Porter 2003, Waylen 2007), most of this work has been carried out in 'post-war' countries such as Nepal, where multilateral and international organizations have played a major role in peacemaking and post-conflict interventions, and where such interventions have often been a key topic of study (Black 2009, Falch 2010, Kuehnast et. al. 2011, Manchanda 2001b, Mazurana et. al. 2005, Tryggestad 2009). Multilateral agencies such as the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), UN Women, UNESCO, UNDP and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) have also contributed to a sizeable literature on women's post-conflict empowerment as a part of their work to promote women's political participation (Anderlini 2000, Banaszak et. al. 2005, Burke et. al. 2001, Chinkin 2003, Klot 2007, Mayanja 2010, Tripp 2005, UNDP 2010, UNESCO 2006, UNFPA 2007, UNIFEM 2006, UNSC 2009). Seeking to advance the implementation of UNSC Resolution 1325 and active participation of women in peace processes, aid and advocacy organizations have espoused similar notions of empowerment while arguing that women must be empowered both politically and economically, and adequately represented at all levels of democratic decision-making (Acharya 2003, CARE 2010, GAPS 2009, USAID 2007).

Studies on gender and conflict in India have often been sidelined by these international debates, due partly to the framing of India's internal conflicts as matters of 'law and order', and partly to conflict resolution practices in which negotiations have been held almost exclusively behind closed doors and agreements have regularly been signed without any form of civil society consultation (Das 2007). The discursive disconnect is unfortunate for several related reasons. By studying Indian peacebuilding scenarios (especially Northeast India and Kashmir) we can gain important insights into women's participation in peacebuilding in settings without international intervention. This provides opportunities for reflection on the cultural and political premises underpinning the liberal peacebuilding paradigm espoused by the multilateral agencies, and especially the use of women's empowerment as a key measure of democratic statebuilding. We should take a critical view of the assumption that women's participation in conflict resolution is a panacea against all evils. Nor should we assume that women's empowerment has the same meaning across the globe, or that it can be achieved through a 'one-size-fits-all' technique of social engineering. On the other hand, there should be no doubt about the significance of women's contributions to both conflict and peacebuilding, and in this regard India is no exception.

Indian feminist scholars have contributed significantly towards the new focus in the study of women and conflict away from victimhood towards greater attention to women's agency (see for instance Manchanda 2001a). Nevertheless, the Indian security studies community is still reluctant to apply a gender lens to armed conflict, and no less hesitant to recognize the importance of India's women's movements. For instance, in a survey of conflict resolution in Northeast India Ajai Sahni (2003) has argued that the region's women's groups 'respond purely on the basis of tribal identities on issues where conflicting tribal interests are in question', although they play a significant role in 'creating the social basis for collective action'. Despite recognizing that the Meira Paibis ('women activist groups' in Manipur) have been particularly successful and 'generated huge social capital', Sahni questions 'whether they would have been able to generate such capital independent of the political agendas of the extremist groups with whom they have links'. Moreover, these groups are described as 'fragmented', and 'yet to adopt a coherent and larger programme for the restoration of peace' (ibid.). While few security analysts have actually done research on women's movements in Northeast India, they still seem to think they have enough knowledge to judge the success (or failure) of these movements. There is also a tendency to belittle the independent agency of Northeast India's women's organizations and their capacity (and even will) to pursue their own agendas.

In order to better understand and be able to evaluate the successes and failures of women's movements and women's contributions to peacebuilding in the region, security experts and others should investigate and critically analyse the goals and activities of women's organisations and the motivations of their leaders. Through such an analysis we can gain a better understanding of the political agency, challenges and aspirations of women responding to conflict. The present study aims to contribute to this research gap and enlighten security scholars and others interested in peace and conflict in Northeast India with regard to the political agency, methods and agendas of women activists in the hills of Assam. In doing so, it highlights the complex and multifaceted dynamics of gender in the everyday negotiation of power, which is tightly interwoven with other power dynamics as played out in the overlapping spaces of women's associations, tribal communities, armed groups, religious organizations, village councils, networks of clans, relatives and friends, and party organizations.

Women's activism in Northeast India

I came to the field in 2012 to carry out research on women's movements and women's participation in local politics.[2] This was at the momentous time when a political settlement was finally signed, ostensibly putting an end to decades of armed conflict. Despite the lack of reservations for women in the new council, an unusually large number of female candidates contested in the ensuing elections. This was all the more significant considering the scarcity of female council members. After two women had served as council members in the late 1970s there was a gap of nearly three decades until another woman, Seema, was finally elected into the council by her native constituency. As a member of the ruling party she served as an Executive Member (EM), and at the time of writing she continues to hold that position and is still the only female council member in the district.

I was of course interested to find out why there were so few women council members, even though electoral politics had become a virtual 'free for all'? While interviewing Seema I learned that she comes from a family of politicians. Her brother has been active in the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) and her brother-in-law in the Congress. Her father-in-law was the district's second Chief Executive Member (CEM). When I visited her office at the council headquarters, the Assistant General Secretary of her party was keeping her company, and while I actually wanted to know Seema's views, the party leader 'helpfully' answered my questions for her. According to him there were only five or six women in the district who were capable of serving as a council member due to the district's demanding problems, including the still ongoing political violence. This was how he explained the lack of women in the council, while she listened in silence.

Members of local women's organizations disagreed strongly with the party secretary's explanation. In their view the lack of female council members was 'certainly not because women are incapable'. In fact, they said that if women would come out together 'even the insurgency problem would be stopped'. They explained that after Seema had taken the first step, other women would surely follow suit. Some also viewed their own organizational work and activism as an 'entry' into politics. However, party politics was seen as the source of 'real power', and women's participation in politics would be a more important avenue for

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[2] This article presents findings from participant observation, interviews and focus group discussions during fieldwork in a 6th Schedule district of Assam in 2012 and 2013, and subsequent communication with key informants. All interviewees were given the opportunity to check citations and withdraw statements they felt uncomfortable about. Nevertheless, this article uses pseudonyms only.

women's empowerment than NGO work. They asserted that women were better candidates for the council work, as they are 'more sincere, more hard-working and more practical'. However, to run for elections 'the system is such that you need a good amount of funds, and if you are not sure you have support, you won't take the risk'. Moreover, the political parties are all 'male dominated'.

While non-tribal party representatives viewed the majority of local women as incapable of meaningful participation in politics, members of the mother's association saw themselves as highly capable. The mother's association was closely associated with the tribal apex body, as the women's wing or women's branch of the apex body. The daughter of the apex body president, Pushpa, was also the first president of the mother's association. According to the association's leading members, they work mainly for peacebuilding, and for the betterment and upliftment of the women of their tribal community. Their organization was formed as a need of the moment, 'at the time of turmoil':

> It was necessary for the women to participate because some of the victims were women. We were suffering from the underground problem for several years. When the talks with the government started, they needed the women's cooperation. Some of the young men blindly joined the militants, so women were concerned about the well-being of their sons, and wanted to avoid that the young boys joined. Moreover, when youths were caught by the police, their families would approach us and we would help them to get their sons free from the police station.

The mother's association had also organized meetings in villages throughout the district to create awareness among women about their rights and make them more aware of the benefits of education. On the other hand, Anjoo, the association's secretary argued that 'our women are already empowered'. In her view, tribal women were treated as equals and the distribution of work among men and women was also equal: 'The work of women starts from the birth of the child till the final ceremony of the death. We have equal and important roles. Women in our society *are* empowered'. As explained by another member of the association:

> It's not that women are restricted from joining politics, but neither are they encouraged. We need to find a way to make women as politically active as men. The district's CEM is now searching for capable female candidates. The problem is that

women are largely confined to the district, and they are not that educated. In interior areas such as this, politics is not based on issues but on favours and personal connections. We should still ask why women are not given tickets by political parties, even when they want to stand for election.

As representatives of the tribal women, Pushpa and other leaders of the mother's association were the first women in the district to attend peace talks between a militant group and the government. At one stage of the negotiations they were even invited to Delhi for tripartite talks between the militants, the state government and the union government. After the settlement was signed, the 'mothers' celebrated the homecoming of Adeep, the president of the militant faction who had invited them to attend the talks. Their appreciation for being included in the talks was obvious, but it was still not clear to me why the 'mothers' were supporting one of the militant factions and not the other. Members of the association explained that it was Adeep's demands that were met in the negotiations with the government, and his faction that came out of the settlement as 'victors'. It was therefore only natural that they celebrated Adeep's homecoming, despite his group's violent history.

In the post-settlement council elections, Adeep and Pushpa both ran as independent candidates, both contesting in their home constituencies. It was perhaps no surprise that Pushpa's election campaign was supported by Adeep. While Pushpa lost, Adeep won a seat in the council. There were several female candidates in these elections. With the exception of Seema, who again contested for the ruling party, all the others had to run as independent candidates. Seema was also the only successful female candidate. An important factor, I was told, was that the parties were still unwilling to give a ticket to a woman. The local party leaders would simply not take the risk, understandably considering the results. It was nonetheless striking to me that a female activist was defeated while a former militant who still had criminal charges pending against him won a council seat in the first post-settlement election. Had voters already forgotten the decade-long history of violence? Supporters did not deny the facts, but appeared to be adept at apologizing. As explained by a supporter of Pushpa's campaign, it was only because Adeep left too many decisions to his commanders that so many people were killed by his faction: 'As a person, Adeep actually has a soft heart'.

Most women's organizations in the district draw their members from a single tribal community, although an organization known as the Mahila Sanghatan Samiti (Women's Union Committee) was run mainly by 'non-tribal' women. Based in the district capital, this

organisation provided relief for the poor. In the largest tribal community there were numerous women's organizations including village-level women's committees (*mahila samiti*) in which all married women were members by default, community-wide organizations such as the mother's association and the tribal *mahila samiti*, and organizations consisting of the educated (or 'working') women including Alava (Bonfire) and Mahila Shakti Mandal (Women's Power Circle).

Typical activities of women's organisations such as the *mahila samiti* were awareness campaigns for the environment and cleanliness, family planning, and the importance of education. Promotion of self-employment was another key activity, and to this end the *mahila samiti* had opened a weaving centre and provided courses in knitting, embroidery and stitching, as well as running evening adult education programs and extra-curricular activities for students. They also established a pre-nursery school and a meditation centre in their building, and in cooperation with the local government they set up a hostel for working women and girl students.

While focusing on women's 'upliftment', both the *mahila samiti* and the mother's association were involved in 'discouraging youth from joining armed groups'. Despite a certain overlap in activities such as awareness campaigns for the importance of education, as different from the *mahila samiti*, Alava and the mother's association both saw peacebuilding as a key objective and both organizations were established at a time when local militants first entered into a ceasefire with the government. Key members of Alava described themselves as 'working women', and maintained that they started their organization 'because of the conflict'. It was the district bureaucrats rather than the politicians who had invited them to join in the peacebuilding. They held 'peace meetings' with the community-based women's organizations, and collected relief supplies for the displaced during times of turmoil. They blamed 'outside forces' for the conflict while acknowledging the tensions between different tribal communities in the district. As one member explained, 'when we held our peace meetings we noticed that certain groups would refuse to come'.

Contrary to other interviewees, members of the mother's association were alone in pointing out that the conflict had a positive impact on women's empowerment, in the sense that women 'have more say during conflict because people listen more to the women, and we can reason with them more'. Members of other organizations did not share this view. There were also differences with regard to the view of the equal status of women in the local tribal

society. As expressed by Seema, herself a successful politician: 'As a whole we take the man's title after marriage. We feel that men are stronger than us. In that way we feel inferior'.

In a group discussion, members of local women's organizations identified greater opportunities for self-employment and better job opportunities for women as key avenues to women's empowerment. This would enable women to support their family and household independently. The participants also suggested that women's empowerment is based on knowledge, meaning both traditional and modern knowledge, and both practical skills and schooling. Another key issue at stake for women was security. According to some of the women, when girls stay in private housing they do not feel secure, and when women come to town for the weekly market to sell their vegetables they face difficulties because they lack a rest house or inn where they can stay. This illustrates the very practical way of thinking about women's empowerment and security that emerged from the interviews and discussions with members of local women's organizations.

Several of the active members of women's organizations maintained that 'personal choice' was the only reason why so few women were engaged in party politics. Nonetheless, almost all of the interviewees felt that the reservation of seats for women in the council would have been beneficial for women's participation in local politics. Some stated that there should be reservations not only for council elections, but also in recruitment to government jobs. Others maintained that reservations for women in the council would give women a voice of their own, as someone would be speaking for them. This view was shared by Anjoo, secretary of the mother's association, although her own organization made no demands for reservations for women during the talks on the settlement. The mother's association did, however, see peacebuilding as a window of opportunity, or a 'situation where any organisation can go outside'. The association's leadership saw their participation in the tripartite talks as beneficial for 'people's recognition of the women's wing', as well as an encouragement for women in general. This is still a far cry from the ideal of a 'gender-sensitive peace agreement' (Banaszak et.al. 2005), in other words a locally owned and inclusive process 'wherein women can assert their right to participate in the decisions being taken about their future'. Their role in the talks as representatives of the tribal women also highlights the promotion of homeland politics as the primary aim of the mother's association. Though it is difficult to generalize, it seems clear that the association has recast motherhood in support of tribal mobilization rather than women's rights.

Empowerment and motherhood

Social scientists have often viewed armed conflict as a breakdown of society into chaos or lawlessness (Lubkemann 2008), sparked by social mobilization against problems such as poverty, social exclusion, malgovernance or resource competition. By contrast, conflict can also be understood as a consciously constructed effort to employ violence to reconfigure the social landscape and relations of power (Keen 2008, Wilmer 2002, Wood 2008). In other words, armed conflict not only tears societies apart, it reconstructs them, and power relations in particular, whether temporarily or in the longer term (Duffield 1994). As social life is transformed, actors and stakeholders may be empowered or disempowered. Power (especially in war) may come out of the barrel of the gun, but during conflict the power of armed violence is transmuted into both economic and political power, with a range of wider implications. Armed conflict changes the distribution of material wealth, impacts subtly on social norms, and creates opportunities for some actors to take on new social roles and positions in society (Keen 2008). Gendered power relations are inevitably altered by conflict, although it is important to keep in mind that gender is only one dimension of the multi-faceted social landscape.

To return to the questions raised at the beginning of this article, is 'motherhood' a vehicle for women's empowerment, and how do the 'mothers' interact with other conflict stakeholders in the hills of Assam? As we have seen, the mother's association leaders asserted that 'their women' were already empowered and that the women of their tribe were in fact 'almost equal' to the men. On the contrary, other members of the association described the situation in very different terms. As explained by one of them: 'We are all confined to our households, and few men understand and support us in our organization work. Men think that the women should first complete their household chores, before they go out'. The veracity of the rank and file description seems to be corroborated by the poor election results of female candidates. One explanation for the discrepancy is that, gender equality is unequally distributed, both across different tribal groups and within the same group. For some women, 'going out' was no problem at all, and a few were even actively encouraged by their family. This seemed to be the case for both Seema, who comes from a family of politicians, and Pushpa, who belongs to a family of civil society activists. In other words, the more active members of local women's organizations generally had the support of their family, and especially those family members who were active as politicians, civil servants or NGO members themselves. Without the support of their family it was much more difficult to

engage in organizational work. Lack of permission to join activities and lack of support, especially from their husband, was clearly an issue for some. As expressed by one interviewee: 'Women don't want to leave the house. Women are not empowered. Wherever they go, whatever they do depends on their husband'. Another valid explanation is that the mother's association, or at least its leadership, was well aware of gender disparities, but prioritised their personal engagement in tribal politics. In other words, it makes sense to argue that 'our women are already empowered' if the leaders of the mother's association were less concerned with women's empowerment, or even the empowerment of the women of their own tribe, than with personal stakes. As a general conclusion, we can expect that when women are given the same opportunities as men they can be just as motivated as their male counterparts to engage in competitions for the sake of personal gains or political capital. This highlights the widespread fallacy of expecting women to stand united, be 'natural mediators' between conflict actors, or act as 'anchors of peace'.

As regards fault lines of conflict the 'mothers' do not have an independent position 'above and beyond' local politics, nor have they sought to maintain such independence. It is obvious where their allegiances lie, and one could therefore argue that their independent agency is limited. Conversely, one could also argue that it is precisely through these alliances and interactions with other stakeholders that the 'mothers' build power and maintain relevance on the political stage. Being an influential actor means building alliances and engaging in interactions with other conflict stakeholders. In this sense there is no such thing as independent agency among stakeholders.

More outspoken members of the mother's association recognized the challenge of intra-group conflict, i.e. tensions between clans and villages, based on family and personal relations. According to one interviewee, even jobs are allocated on the basis of these relations: 'It's all a power game. No such groups who favour their own people will bring up good leaders for the community as a whole'. There is also recognition among members of the mother's association and other local organizations of the limitations to their capacity for peacebuilding as long as they work explicitly for their own tribal community and base their membership largely on a tribal identity. In the words of one activist: 'When we in our organization reach out for any issues, we are in between and we don't get together with all tribes. This is the problem. The conflict between tribes has affected our moral. We think we are unable to go beyond that'.

The experience of motherhood and women's common 'fate' as mothers was the typical answer to my questions about implications of the conflict for women, and how women might be particularly affected by conflict. As one interviewee explained, 'women are affected differently by conflict than men, because they are the ones to give birth'. In the words of another woman activist:

> It is the young people who join the militants, but the mothers who suffer more. Every woman has a dream that her son will become a leader, get a job, and go for further studies. If one mother suffers, every mother suffers.

There is an obvious tension between 'motherhood' in its prefixed form, as a device to propagate one's own tribal identity, and without the prefix, as an appeal to a common female identity with an implicit peacebuilding potential. There is a similar tension between the contribution of the 'mothers' to tribal and factional 'homeland politics' and conflict on the one hand, and their interest and involvement in peacebuilding on the other. That said, the 'mothers' are still a force to be reckoned with, whether in conflict or peacebuilding.

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