

CHAPTER – VI

RESPONDING TO THE IMPACT OF ARMED CONFLICT: EXPLORING THE EVIDENCES OF WOMEN'S AGENCY

There are various studies which argue that women are affected by armed conflict in unique ways and the impact of armed conflict upon them differs from men as well. One prime reason for this difference is the existing gendered inequalities between men and women in society. Hence, the impact of conflict upon women has gendered connotations. Based on existing literature, this study has also argued that historically women, their role in conflict and its impact upon them has largely been ignored (Manchanda, 2001) just as the views of the subalterns were excluded from history until subaltern historians such as Ranajit Guha (1997) and Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak (1988) asserted the need to incorporate their views and rewrite the history from a subaltern perspective. Thus, the literature on conflict is mostly gender blind and ignores the role of women in conflict completely (Behera, 2006). Navnita Chandra Behera also mentions the stereotyped notion of ‘men make wars and women make peace’. Such stereotypes characterise men as active and women as passive, men as agents and women as victims, men as rational and women as emotional. Thus women are underrepresented and misinterpreted in terms of gendered causes, costs and consequences violence has on women’s lives (*ibid.*). It was primarily feminist scholarship and activism that first challenged such notions and stereotypes and threw light upon the fact that women are not just passive victims, but has the potential to act as active agents in conflict situations.

Evidences of women's agencyⁱ under armed conflict situations have been brought to light by multiple scholarly studies conducted around the world (see El-Bushra, 2003; Manchanda, 2004). Further, while it is true that women become specific targets and worst victims of armed conflicts; it is equally true that in many occasions they have actively participated in conflict as well (see Jones, 2006). Moreover, there are studies which, on the basis of empirical evidences, draw a distinct correlation between higher levels of gender equality enabling women to be more empowered and independent and lower levels of international an interstate conflict (See Melander, 2005; Caprioli and Boyer, 2001; Caprioli, 2000).

Evidences of such correlation are present in the context of North-East India itself. Paula Banerjee, reflecting on women's efforts for peace describes the success of Naga Mothers Association in working in collaboration with the state government (Banerjee, 2001). Doing so, women in Nagaland in North-East India has become active agents of peace, instead of passive victims of conflict. Rita Manchanda in her works focused upon North-East India and other conflict zones in South Asia observes similar evidences (See Manchanda 2001, 2005 & 2008).

Thus, we can see that women do not just passively bear the effects of conflict. Instead the relation between conflict and women is dynamic. Hence, it is not enough to look at women just as the victims of armed conflict. Rather, they must be understood as active agents reacting to and dealing with the impact that armed conflict exerts upon them constantly. Keeping this in mind an attempt has been made in this study in order to explore such evidences of women's agency in the specific context of the respondents and the field area incorporated in it; if there exists any. This study has attempted to do this by looking into how the respondents

in this study has reacted to the impact of armed conflict upon them and how have they responded and attempted to cope with the adversities caused by the armed conflict in their lives. A look into these challenges and opportunities, in the light of a gendered perspective, presents a novel picture of women's agency in this study. The purpose of this enquiry is to explore and present a more accurate and complete picture of the respondents and their position in an armed conflict situation. This chapter and the analysis incorporated in it will forward a detailed account of the findings in this regard.

CHANGING ROLES AND BUILDING AGENCY

While discussing regarding the impact of armed conflict upon the respondents in the chapter – V prior to this one, it became clear that financial insecurities is one of the worst impacts caused by armed conflict. This is worsened by the fact that only 93 (26.57%) of the respondents were found to be engaged in some sort of income generating activity (henceforth IGA). The kind of IGAs the respondents are involved in and their state of income has already been discussed in this thesis. However, in order to put things in perspective, mentioning them again becomes necessary. The findings of this study showed that out of 93 respondents who were found to be engaged in income generating activities, 9 (2.57%) respondents were engaged in agricultural activity, 24 (6.86%) in animal husbandry, 7 (2%) respondents were engaged in their own business, 25 (7.14) respondents were in government service, 5 (1.43%) in private company jobs and 23 (6.57%) respondents were engaged in other kinds of income generating activities. It will be important to mention here that the scale of the respondents' engagement in income

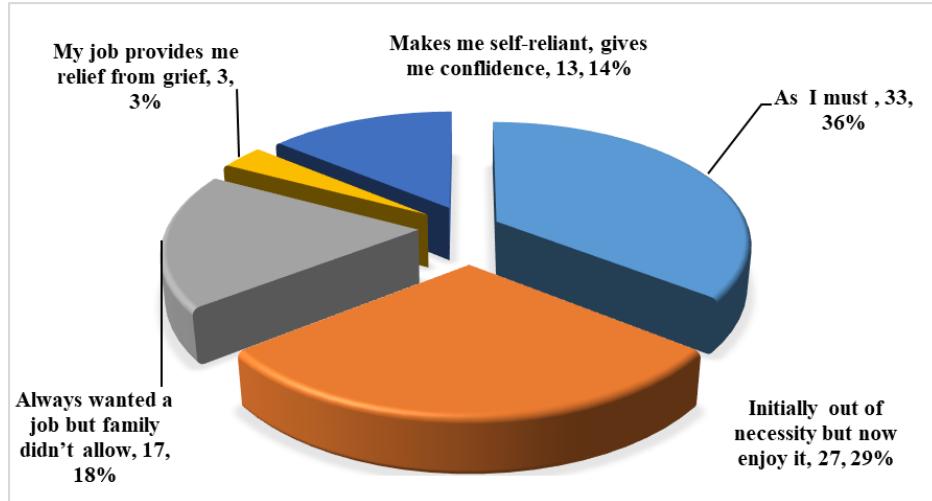
generating activities was found to be small which is reflected in their income. 71 (20.29%) out of 93 respondents earned within Rs. 1000 – Rs. 10000. As many as 16 (4.57%) respondents earned in between Rs. 10001 – Rs. 20000 and only 6 (1.71%) respondents earned in between Rs. 20001- Rs. 30000. These findings undoubtedly put forward a bleak and abysmal picture in regard to the financial condition of the respondents and their potential to be financially independent and having a respectful and dignified life that comes with it. However, one piece of finding needs special attention here. Only 12 of the 93 respondents having some IGA were engaged in that IGA prior to the incident. Again, 81 of these 93 respondents were forced to get engaged in an IGA after the incident took place. In the earlier chapter, while discussing the impact of armed conflict upon the respondents; financial trouble caused by the death of the primary breadwinner of the family and sudden exposure to previously unknown and unfamiliar roles and burden of running the family on the part of the respondents were discussed. The inability of the respondents to be financially viable under such circumstances was also found to be an adverse impact of armed conflict upon them. However, while exploring the impact of women's agency; a new line of enquiry was made.

The Experience of Engaging in Income Generating Activity

The respondents were asked to describe their experiences regarding their engagement in the IGA. In case of most of the respondents, as they had never been in a job or income generating activity before, it presented with certain challenges. But at the same time it was also found that in case of a few respondents this engagement in income

generating activity brought about new experiences and opportunities for the respondents as well. Figure: 6:01 depicts the findings in this regard.

Figure: 6:01
The Experiences of the Respondents in Regard to Their Engagement in IGA



As can be seen in the Figure: 6:01, when enquired about their experiences, 33 (9.43%) respondents stated that they are engaged in that job or IGA as they must, 27 (7.71%) respondents stated that they engaged in it out of necessity but now they enjoy it, 17 (4.86%) stated that they always wanted a job but their families didn't allow and 3 (0.86%) mentioned that their job provides them relief from their grief. The rest of the 13 respondents commented that their job makes them self-reliant and confident. It is significant to mention here that all the 13 respondents engaged in IGA agreed that the self-reliance and confidence that their IGA provide them were absent before they had engaged in that IGA.

The respondents were also asked to describe their IGA. Of the 93 respondents, 54 (15.14%) described their IGA as stressful, 3 (0.86%) described as mundane and boring and another 3 (0.86%) respondents described it as something

that is difficult to maintain. Only 7 out of 93 respondents were found to be running their own businesses. Out of these 7 respondents, 5 respondents stated that they find it difficult to maintain. However, 2 respondents stated that learning to run a business is ‘exciting’. Further, 10 (2.86%) respondents stated that they enjoy their work and 24 (6.86%) described their IGA as satisfactory as well.

Facing the Challenges of Life and Changing Position in the Family

Having an IGA must have and earning abilities must have affected the ability of the respondents to face the challenges of armed conflict and their status and position in the family. Considering this an attempt had been made to enquire in this regard. When enquired if their job or IGA helps them to accept the challenges they face in life; all 93 respondents responded positively. Except 6 respondents, 87 respondents stated that their job or IGA provides them more decision making power and respect in the family in comparison to what they had or didn’t have before.

When asked if the decision to get a job or IGA was their own, 75 (21.43%) respondents responded positively. However, 18 (5.14%) responded negatively. In case of the 75 respondents, 63 stated that their family members supported their decision. However, 12 respondents stated negatively in this regard. Those who opposed were parents in case of 2 respondents, In-laws in case of 5 respondents, husbands in case of 3 respondents and brothers in case of another 2 respondents. However, in case of the 18 respondents who didn’t make the decision on their own, in case of 2 their husbands, in case of 7 their children, in case of another 2 their brother-in laws and in case of 7 their brother helped and motivated them to engage in a job or IGA. Table: 6:01 reflects these findings.

Table: 6:01
**Relatives and Family Members Who Supported and Opposed the Respondents
in Their Decision to Engage in IGA**

Family members who supported Respondents in their decision to engage in their IGA			Family members who opposed Respondents in their decision to engage in their IGA		
Relatives & Family Members	Findings	%	Relatives & Family Members	Findings	%
Husband	2	0.57	Parents	2	0.57
Children	7	2.00	In-Laws	5	1.43
Brother-in-Law	2	0.57	Husband	3	0.86
Brother	7	2.00	Brother	2	0.57
Not Applicable	332	94.86	Not Applicable	338	96.57
Total	350	100.00	Total	350	100.00

The data presented in the Table: 6:01 reflect a mixed picture. It becomes even more so as the findings of this study also suggest that in case of 6 respondents out of 7 who were found to be running their own businesses; a family member was helping the respondents in running their businesses. In case of 2 respondents their husbands, in case of 1 respondent her children and in case of 4 respondents their brothers were assisting them in running their businesses. Thus, it is clear that when it comes to engaging in IGA, while some respondents faced opposition, yet at the same time others enjoyed the support and encouragement of their family members and relatives.

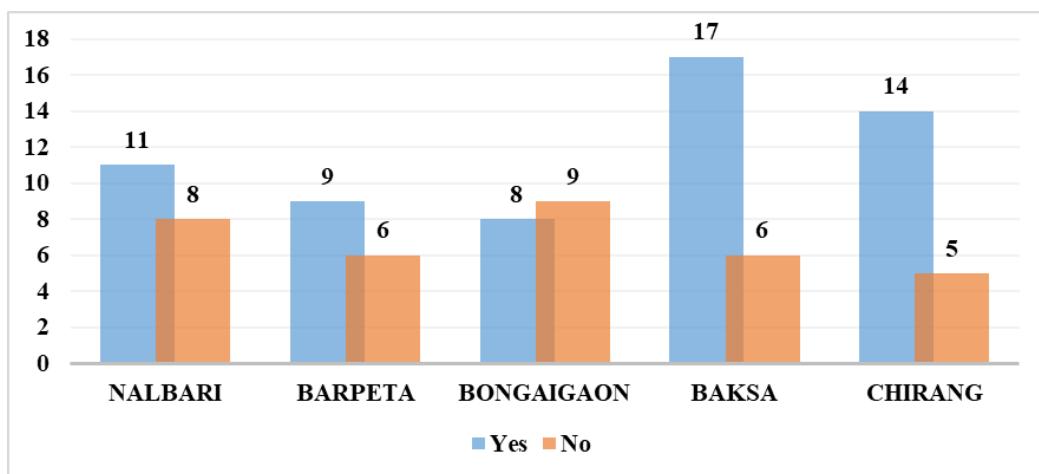
Respondents were asked if their experience with their IGA has helped them to be more familiar with banking and financial investments. While 59

respondents responded positively in this regard, 34 respondents responded negatively to this enquiry. This shows that a large number of the respondents who are engaged in IGA got exposed to the experience of banking, investment and ultimately the public sphere, at least to some extent.

In order to determine whether getting engaged in IGAs as a result of the challenges created by armed conflict situation have affected their position and status in the family, they were asked whether or not their financial contribution to their families have generated more respect for them in the family. To this question, 59 (16.86%) respondents responded positively while 34 (9.71%) respondents responded negatively. Figure: 6:02 depicts this finding.

Figure: 6:02

Respondents' Views Regarding Whether or Not Their Financial Contribution to Their Families Have Generated More Respect for Them in the Family



Thus, it becomes clear that although conflict situation has exposed a few respondents to new roles paving the way for them to be free and independent, such exposure is making any actual impact upon the status in the family level in case of even fewer respondents. Here, this study resonate the findings of the study conducted by Judy El-Bushra (2003) in five African countries that although in

certain cases conflict situation creates rare opportunities for women to be independent in patriarchal societies; the institutional changes that are required to sustain these opportunities are slow in coming.

Decision Making Ability

Coming to the decision making abilities among the respondents in regard to choosing their job or IGA, the findings of this study show that majority of the respondents engaged in IGA i.e. 87 (24.86%) chose their job or IGA themselves. In case of only 6 (1.71%) respondents some relative or family member made that decision for them. Among these 6 respondents, in case of 3 their children, in case of 2 their brother-in-law and in case of 1 respondent her husband made that decision for them. In regard to making decision in terms of their income, 84 (24%) respondents were found to be capable of making such decisions themselves. However, in regard to the rest of the 9 respondents, in case of 2 respondents their husbands, in case of 5 respondents their children, in case of 1 respondent her brother-in-law and in case of another 1 respondent some other relative made that decision for them.

The exploration of women's agency in the context of exposure to new roles and availing of rare opportunities resulting in independence and freedom and changing position and status has shown mixed results. While it can be seen that the respondents' comments show signs of positive experiences and their empowerment through engagement in IGA, income and decision making abilities; it is significant here to mention that the analysis so far has been about only 93 (26.57%) of the respondents who were found to be engaged in jobs or IGA. Further,

among these 93 respondents as well, negative signs in regard to possibility and potential for agency are clearly visible.

Thus, just as Judy El-Bushra (*ibid.*) observed changes in the existing gender relations with women taking on greater responsibilities at home in Uganda, Angola, Sudan, Mali and Somalia and just as Rita Manchanda (2001) studying displacement of women under conflict in South Asia finds that conflict there, led to emergence of women headed households which provide women with certain decision making powers and independence in economic terms; in this study also the findings point toward such evidences as well. However, when it comes to the respondents in this study, it must be stated here that examples of conflict leading to attainment of greater and more significant roles by the respondents in the family, getting into jobs and enjoying financial independence and decision making abilities by them are very rare and quite few. Hence, this researcher cannot present the findings in this regard as general trend. However, it must be mentioned that in this context, evidence of women's agency has been observed, although at a very shallow depth, in this study.

NEW ROLES AND THE SOCIETY

The exposure of the respondents to previously unfamiliar roles and responsibilities presents them with both opportunities and challenges. However, it is also important to understand how and to what extent the society and the community in which the respondents live in accepts the respondents having acquired these new roles and responsibilities. This line of enquiry, however, shows promising signs.

The respondents were asked if the people around them consider it inappropriate for them to work as they are women. In this regard, 270 (77.14%) respondents responded negatively. The rest of the 80 respondents responded positively to this enquiry and pointed towards various family members and relatives when asked who consider it inappropriate for them to work. The Table: 6:02 reflects the findings in this regard.

Table: 6:02
Relatives and Family Members Who Considered It Inappropriate for the Respondents to engage in Job or IGA

Family Members & Relatives	NALBARI	BARPETTA	BONGAIGAON	BAKSA	CHIRANG	Total	%
Husband	4	0	0	1	1	6	1.71
Children	3	4	5	2	2	16	4.57
In- laws	4	10	7	2	2	25	7.14
Brother-in-law	1	0	0	0	0	1	0.29
Daughter-in-law	0	0	3	0	0	3	0.86
Parents	2	3	2	2	1	10	2.86
Brother	1	4	3	1	2	11	3.14
Grand Parents	2	2	1	0	0	5	1.43
Others	1	0	1	1	0	3	0.86
Not Applicable	52	47	48	61	62	270	77.14
Total	70	70	70	70	70	350	100

The respondents were also asked whether people around them in the society and community consider their behaviour due to their engagement in IGA

unfitting for a woman of their age. With regard to this query while, 253 (72.29%) respondents responded negatively, only 97 (27.71%) of the respondents responded positively. These 97 respondents were further asked why they think people deem their behaviour as inappropriate. As many as 4 (1.14%) respondents stated that it is because they are women, 68 (19.43%) respondents stated that it is because of their widowhood, 10 (2.86%) respondents stated that it is because they don't conform to the expected patterns of behaviour for women in their society and 15 (4.29%) respondents stated that it is because of some other reason which they didn't specify.

From the above discussion it is clear that to a large extent, the society where the respondents live in and the community with whom they interact has acceptance if the respondents have or ought to acquire new roles as a result of the impact of armed conflict situation. Hence, it can be stated here that although there are various factors which is limiting the scope for the respondents to engage in job or IGA and at least there is potential for women's agency to emerge in the society.

SEEKING JUSTICE: WOMEN'S AGENCY IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

One impact that the armed conflict situation has upon the respondents is that it compels them to enter into the public sphere for various reasons such as work, getting compensations from govt. and seeking justice for the loss of their loved ones. Generally, the respondents were not accustomed to the public sphere as their male counterparts, getting exposed to it becomes challenging. However, it also open doors for women to come out of the private sphere, to which they remain largely attached due to their gender in a patriarchal society. Hence, the activity of the respondents in seeking justice for their loved ones and their experiences of this

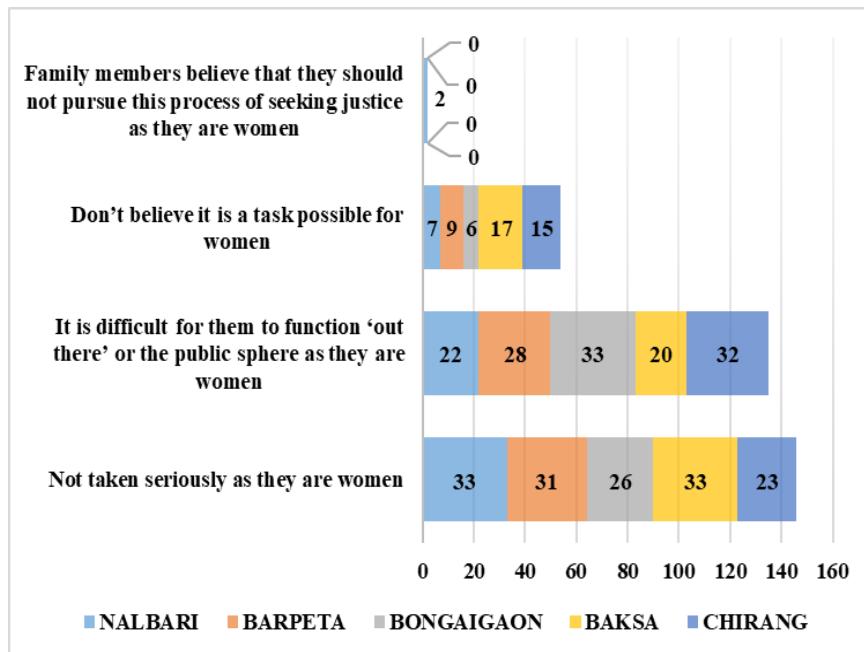
process have been looked into in order to explore the evidences of women's agency in this context. It was done as it will provide important clues regarding women's agency and their attitude towards the challenges they face.

Respondents were asked whether they feel that they have received justice or not. To this query, 312 (89.14%) of the respondents viewed that they have not received justice yet while 38 (10.86%) respondents responded positively in this regard. However, only 12 (3.43%) respondents stated that they are still fighting for getting justice. These 12 respondents were asked to give reasons as to why they are still continuing their fight for justice. 7 out of these 12 respondents stated that they continue to fight because they believe they must receive justice. The other 5 respondents stated that they believe in the state machinery and that they hope that justice will be done one day.

When it was enquired to the respondents whether it becomes difficult for them to continue the fight for justice as they are women; most of the respondents i.e. 337 (96.29%) responded positively. The respondents were further asked to elaborate their responses. While 146 (41.71%) respondents stated that it is so because they are not taken seriously as they are women, as many as 135 (38.57%) respondents stated that it is difficult for them to function 'out there' or get things done in the public sphere as they are women. In case of 54 (15.43%) respondents they simply stated that they don't believe it is a task possible for women. Other 2 respondents stated that their family members asked them not to pursue this process of seeking justice as they are women.

Figure: 6:03 depicts these findings.

Figure: 6:03
Reasons for Not Seeking Justice among the Respondents



The findings mentioned under this subsection portray a very bleak picture of women's agency. Not only a very few and insignificant number of respondents are actively seeking justice being in the public sphere; the reasons for not getting involved in the process of seeking justice also point toward a complete lack of awareness and activism among the respondents. These findings have strong gender connotations as the respondents themselves considering the process of seeking justice beyond their capacities for being a woman. Thus, it will not be wrong to conclude that in the context of breaking away from the traditional gender roles and actively seeking justice by exposing themselves in the public sphere; the respondents don't exhibit any sign of agency.

FIGHTING BACK: WOMEN'S AGENCY IN REGARD TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND PEACE BUILDING

As has been discussed earlier various studies conducted across the globe suggest that women hold significant potential in terms of conflict resolution and peace building. There are numerous examples around the world which substantiate this statement. In the North-East Region of India, the efforts of Naga Mothers Association (NMA) in resolving the conflict and bringing peace in Nagaland remains the best example of this potential that women possess (*ibid.*; Manchanda, 2008). Hence, an attempt has been made in this study to explore women's agency in terms of conflict resolution and peace building in the context of the field and respondents of this study.

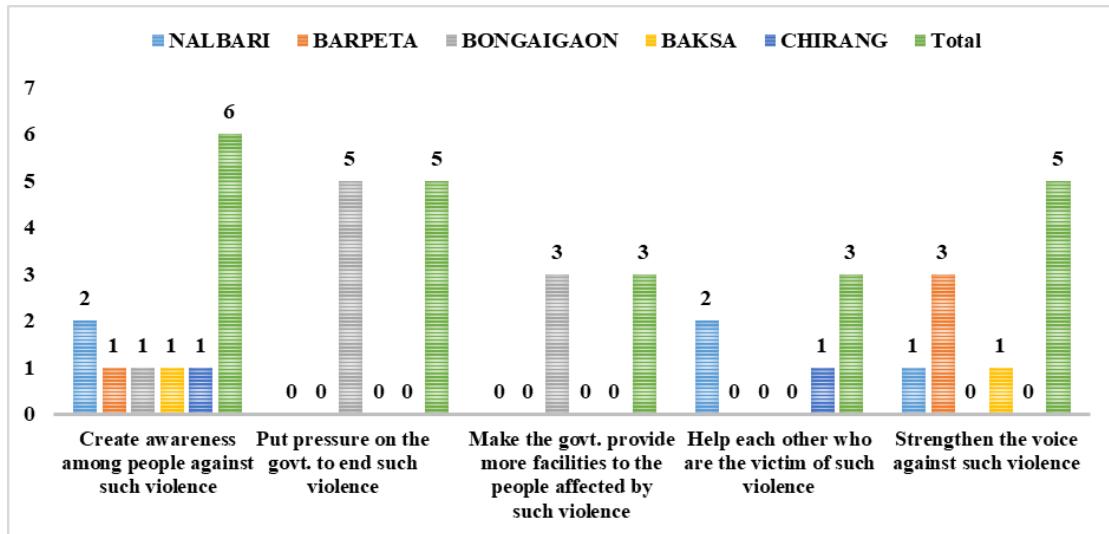
All the respondents in this study stated that they condemn terrorism and insurgency. However, when asked whether they have joined a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) or any such organization which take initiatives for resolving conflict and building peace; only 22 (6.29%) of the respondents were found to be engaged in civil societyⁱⁱ initiative and have raised their voice against terrorism and insurgency actively.

When enquired about why they have joined such initiatives and what they hope to achieve through it; 6 respondents stated that their aim is to raise awareness against violence, 5 respondents stated that they wish to pressurize the government to take steps for ending such violence, 3 respondents said that they have joined to 'help each other' (victims of conflict), another 3 respondents stated that they have joined to ensure that the government will provide more facilities to the

victims of armed conflict and 5 respondents stated that their aim is to strengthen the voice against violence. Figure: 6:04 incorporates these findings.

Figure: 6:04

Reasons Provided by the Respondents for Joining NGOs and Other Civil Society Initiatives for Conflict Resolution and Peace

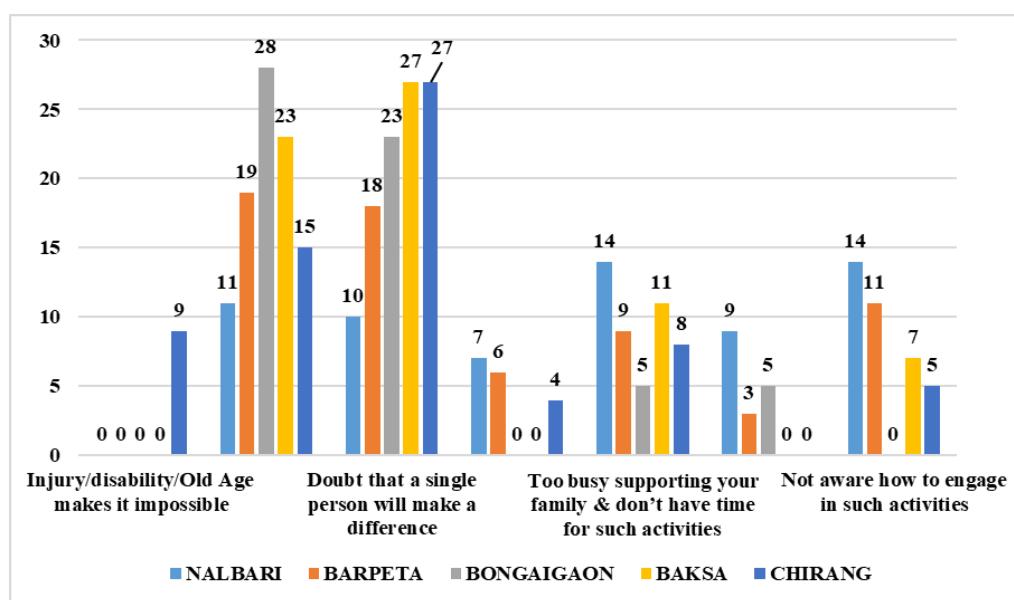


It was enquired to these 22 respondents who are engaged with NGOs and other civil-society initiatives against violence whether their families support such activities or not. To this query, only 7 (2%) of the respondents responded positively. 15 (4.29%) respondents stated that their family members opposed to such activities. Among these 15 respondents, in case of 8 respondents their in-laws, in case of 3 their brother in-laws, in case of 2 their parents and in case of other 2 respondents their brothers opposed their decision to join such initiatives.

Finally, those respondents who haven't joined any such initiatives were asked why they haven't joined any NGO or Civil Society effort for conflict resolution and peace. In this context, 96 (27.43%) respondents stated that it is not

possible for them to engage in such activities as they are women. 105 (30%) respondents said that they don't believe a single person will make any difference. 47 (13.43%) respondents stated that they are too busy supporting their families which leaves no room for such activities, 17 (4.86%) respondents stated that they don't engage in such activities as people consider such activities inappropriate for women and 37 (10.46%) respondents stated that they have no idea about how to engage in such activities. Figure: 6:05 reflects these findings.

Figure: 6:05
Reasons Provided by the Respondents for Not Joining NGOs and Other Civil Society Initiatives for Conflict Resolution and Peace



The discussion above suggests that the participation of the respondents in civil society initiatives for conflict resolution and peace is quite negligible. However, it is not at all surprising considering the bleak socio-economic background of the respondents of the study. Further, the overall political participation of women in the state of Assam, especially in active politics or electoral politics is far less in comparison to its male counterpart.

The number of women in the current legislative assembly of Assam i.e. the 14th legislative assembly constituted in the year 2016 is only 8 out of a total of 126 members (Assam Assembly, 2018). Even at the national level, the scenario of the participation of women in the political arena is bleak at best. The United Nations Organisation, known as UN Women which is dedicated towards gender equality and empowerment of women along with the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) prepared a ‘Women in Politics 2017 Map’ which highlighted the women members in the lower and upper houses of the parliaments of 193 countries around the world. India secured the 148th position with 64/542 women members in the lower house and 27/245 members in the upper house (UN Women, 2017). Hence, the low participation of women in conflict resolution and peace building is quite understandable. Assam has, however, seen the emergence of many women organisations created with this very goal which includes *Matri Manch*, The *Sajagota Mahila Samiti*, *Mahila Shanti Sena* (MSS), Bodo Women’s Justice Forum etc. (Nag, 2006; Phukan, 2010). However, these organisations failed to rise to the level of Naga Mothers Association (NMA) which is also reflected in the findings of this study.

From the above discussion it becomes clear that the conflict situation has generated certain ques for women’s agency to develop among the respondents. However, it was gathered that due to the lack of socio-political structure and lack of change in the existing social institutions fail to help the respondents to take advantage of these opportunities, build agency and to sustain it. It is also crystal clear that women’s agency in regard to active socio-political engagement against terrorism and insurgency and for conflict

resolution and peace building is negligible, though not completely absent among the respondents in this study. However, it is important to retrospect about the reasons for this here. Mental will or ability for active participation in socio-political arena depends upon various factors. It cannot be denied that egalitarian gender relations pave the way for women's agency. But, in this study, it was clearly observed that the respondents were deprived of in terms of education, decision making abilities, employment and income etc. As a whole it can be stated that the respondents in this study are not empowered enough for engaging in such activities as the society and the state apparatus haven't been able to pave the way yet for active political participation for them.

NOTES:

ⁱThe concept of Women's Agency has been explained and operationally defined in the context of this research work. For details refer to page no. 16-17 in the Introduction Chapter of this thesis.

ⁱⁱCivil Society is a complex and abstract concept. Rita Manchanda has defined civil society as “the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power” (Manchanda, 2008, P. 146).

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