

# The war against women

Even in times of peace, women in conflict zones remain vulnerable to violence, sexual abuse, loss of bread winners and much more.

India accepted the UNSC Resolutions 15 years ago. However, it is yet to formulate a National Action Plan (NAP) to implement those resolutions photo: AFP

## **Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty**

Tiny Nepal has shown the way with a National Action Plan for Women. The Himalayan nation has become an example not just for its much bigger regional peers but beyond South Asia too. To put it simply, Nepal has set in motion steps to protect women and girls from sexual and gender-based abuse in an armed conflict by allocating funds.

“It is not that women in Nepal have achieved everything because the country now has a National Action Plan for Women, but it has helped us create more awareness about the need to safeguard women’s rights in a conflict situation. The Nepal Government is now mandated to address issues of gender violence in conflict areas because of the action plan,” said Bandana Rana during her address at a South Asian women’s conference in New Delhi recently.

The well-known Nepali women’s rights activist was referring to a piece of gender-sensitive action plan her country adopted in 2011 following the United Nations Security Council’s (UNSC) Resolution No. 1325. Nepal won appreciation from many quarters also for allocating dedicated funds to achieve the goals set in the action plan. Because, most countries with National Action Plans (NAPs) based on UNSCR 1325 typically depend on UNDP funds for their implementation.

Like so many UN member countries, India, too, accepted the UNSC Resolutions 15 years ago. However, it is yet to formulate a NAP to implement those resolutions even though there have been many reports on gender-based violence of Indian women, particularly in the North East, the Jammu and Kashmir and in the Maoist-affected areas.

The South Asia Women Peace and Security Conference that Bandana Rana attended in New Delhi was organised by Control Arms Foundation of India (CAFI) and four other organisations in support of European Union and Welthungerhilfe, particularly to highlight this need. Most speakers at the conference in favour of an Indian NAP were from the Northeast region, who related the brutalities unleashed on many of their women by long years of armed conflict between insurgents and the security forces. From sexual abuse at the hands of security forces and militants alike, to being trafficked for flesh trade, to loss of their bread-winning fathers and husbands to the ongoing conflicts, the grassroots activists held up for the audience in the two-day conference a list of crimes committed regularly on a vulnerable section of the society.

“Most of their sufferings don’t even get reported in the media. Importantly, lack of legal, financial and societal support make it worse for them to seek justice,” points out well-known women activist from Assam’s disturbed Bodoland Territorial District Council, Pratima Brahma. Yet, the likelihood for India to bring in an action plan to protect women in conflict situations any time soon seems remote. States Anuradha Chenoy from Jawaharlal Nehru University’s Department of International Studies, “The biggest roadblock to having a NAP in India is that the Indian Government doesn’t recognise its conflict areas as so. Instead, it refers to them as disturbed areas.” Chenoy, who has been advocating the need for a NAP for women in India for

some time now, points out that the government is not in favour of bringing in such a plan “because it doesn’t want any foreign intervention in the areas identified as disturbed.”

The institutional recognition that there is, and can be, gender-related violence on people caught in an armed conflict is, however, key to hand out justice to them. CAFI founder Binalakshmi Nepram highlights this need, “Unless you recognise that such crimes are regularly happening, it is not easy to bring relief and rehabilitation to the victims.” Nepram’s organisation has been working for the micro-disarmament of arms, particularly in Northeast India, by involving and empowering women affected by conflict. During the course of her work, she has seen “how most women have suffered because there is no cushion, no relief, no institutionalised hand holding for them.”

Here, Chenoy counts another roadblock. “The NAP is, after all, a power-sharing agreement between men and women. Ours is a male-dominated system. If an NAP is brought in, which also talks about participation of women in peace negotiations and post conflict reconstruction, the traditional power bases will be eroded. The political class is not ready to do it. It is more for bringing in populist policies but such policies can be patriarchal.”

This is the reason, says Nepram, women have never been on the peace table in the North-East. “Presently, 17 peace talks are going on in the North-East but none of them have a woman in the actual negotiations even though many of them have been affected by those conflicts, even though women there have always played the role of peace negotiators on the ground during some conflicts between militant groups which have led to de-escalation of violence.”

To give a head start to the process of formulating an NAP in India, Nepram’s organisation, with help from some experts, have put together a guideline on women, peace and security. Among other clauses, it includes one on sensitisation of the media towards the issue. “Media is an important tool which can help bring out stories of atrocities on women in disturbed areas and thereby document the impact of conflict on women. However, our media is getting more urban-centric, more corporatised. In such a scenario, we need in the NAP regular sensitisation workshops, awards, fellowships, etc. for reporters and editors to keep them deeply connected to the issue.”

Pressing on the need for such a document, Chenoy says, “Importantly, a NAP will come with a methodology, a policy directive, a check list of dos and don’ts, which will go a long way in fighting for Indian women’s rights in conflict situations.”

Like Bandana Rana said, it might not solve all the problems of Indian women but will certainly give the government a mandate on how to be gender sensitive beyond lip service.

---

### **Some suggestions for National Action Plan for India**

1                   Bring in legislations as per India's commitment to the Convention on Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the UNSCR resolution nos. 1325, 1820, 1888, 1889, 1960, 2106 and 2122.

2                   Make the society more gender balanced by increasing participation of more women in electoral processes, judiciary, police, economic decision making and other decision making processes.

3                   Include more women in peace talks so that such processes can have better gender perspectives since women suffer more during conflict situations. Also, the role of women in peace processes needs to be recognised.

- 4 Include women in post-conflict reconstruction by both the Central and State Governments to recognise the fact that women too have a stake in the process of rebuilding peace.
- 5 Develop intensive and result-oriented training modules for all security personnel deployed in the disturbed areas.
- 6 There should be zero tolerance of sexual abuse by peacekeepers. Such cases should be dealt in fast-track courts. There should be adequate provisions to ensure the security of the victims so that they or their family members are not intimidated by the perpetrators of the crime.
- 7 Peace education should be part of all curriculum.
- 8 The State should provide proper protection of women human rights defenders.
- 9 The security sector should be reformed so that there is an effective component of protection of women in conflict situations. There should be provision for more women police officers in stations as well as during arrests of women.
- 10 The government should work towards empowering women survivors of any violence with emphasis on economic justice and rights.
- 11 There should be adequate services to engage the displaced women so that they become economically independent. An established and effective mechanism should also be brought in for rehabilitation of victims of gender-based violence.
- 12 Till the State builds a dedicated capacity for restoring governance, stability, development and rule of law in disturbed areas, there should be an established mechanism whereby the armed forces leadership constructively engages with the State and civil society in disturbed areas.
- 13 Media personnel should be sensitised and trained on conflict coverage. Fellowships and awards should be instituted to encourage the media to cover conflict situations responsibly.
- 14 The customary laws should undergo reformation to involve more women in decision making processes.
- 15 All ethnic groups and women from different ethnic communities should work towards a common goal of peace and prosperity.