



**INSTITUTE OF  
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

**web:** [www.issi.org.pk](http://www.issi.org.pk)  
**phone:** +92-920-4423, 24  
**fax:** +92-920-4658

## Issue Brief

# Gender Aspect of Conflict and Peacebuilding: Opportunities for Women in Pakistan

**Dr Minhas Majeed Khan**, Visiting Senior Fellow, ISSI

April 02, 2016

To grasp the intersection of women, peace and conflict in both war affected and peace setting, we have to understand the social, political and economic status of women in a society. We have to see the religious impact in shaping women's role in peace building in conflict zones and the existing challenges and opportunities.

In many societies, cultural traditions, social practices, intensifying ideological religious and ethnic passion and low literacy have left women increasingly vulnerable. They have been tortured and targeted for being educators, for holding important positions, for resisting discrimination and violence against themselves and their families.

Historically religion and religious norms have played an important role in shaping the public policies and public life around the world. Some countries may experience the impact of religion on their public life more than other. It has an impact on the social standing of both women and men. However, in a conservative religious society this impact is far more on women than on men. This is particularly so when in a conflict-ridden society, religion operates as an institution.

It is generally said that women, today, are the centerpiece of international peace, security and development. With this intention, the question arises as to whether increased access to education, employment, decision making and leadership can truly bring a change in and around the lives of women or not and what is or is there any role of gender in conflict and peace? This is more interesting; it raises more questions and can probably be researched further.

Women's role in any community during peace and conflict can be determined by how she is perceived and accepted in a society - i.e., as a weak or strong individual. This classification of women as weak and strong individual is based on their social status, which we may refer to as the *privileged* and the *underprivileged* women. The society treats these two classes of women as a whole. Both are exposed to similar cultural and social codes and religious traditions but the degree of effect of these elements on both the groups may vary. While some associate religion as greatly impacting the *underprivileged* women, others associate low literacy rate as a factor affecting their abilities to grow and stand up against violence as opposed to the *privileged* women.

If we take the case of Pakistan, broadly speaking, women's condition in Pakistani society is weak despite the fact that they have demonstrated considerable leadership but most are invisible. However, there

position has changed with shifting social, economic and political circumstance. In recent years, mainly due to the ongoing war on terror and the resultant religious extremism in tribal areas and adjacent districts along with the pressure of anti-women laws, women with some level of education and awareness have realized that besides social constraints, religion is being used as a tool of oppression against them. They have realized that the underrepresentation in decision-making prevents them from having a significant impact on many key institutions.

As we look deeply into the issues from Pakistani perspective, which includes, poor governances, gender discrimination and social injustice, there are various hurdles faced by these courageous women. Unfortunately, in the zones in Pakistan ravaged by terrorism, women are vulnerable, which makes it more difficult to create spaces for women in policymaking. They have to strive within family and forums such as political parties and state institutions for a greater role for themselves. Besides institutionalized discrimination, the increasing extremism and use of religion have mobilized conservative forces.

In Pakistan, religion has one impact on the rural women and another on urban women on their social, political and economic identities. These identities, again based on their social standings, make women dependent or independent. To put it in simple terms, a woman with a *privileged* background will be more independent with an ability to construct her identity and hence play a role in policy making than a woman from an *underprivileged* background. However, this class has also its own constraints in a male dominated society, as there are constraints on their engagement on national security issues and conflict resolution strategies.

Women caught in terrorism or violence are often considered as victims and not as actors in addressing and resolving crisis situations. However, it is time to involve women more deeply in such situations and enhance their participation in peace building. Infact, a vocal group of women has emerged to promote women's rights and raise their voices in support of women empowerment and against violence against women.

The list of women who have contributed significantly in Pakistan is not very long. However, they remain steadfast in creating a space for themselves in policy-making and civil society. Two outstanding examples would be of Begum Kulsoom Saifullah Khan from the Southern District Lakki Marwat of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) as a *privileged* and Mukhtaran Mai from the Southern Punjab as an *underprivileged* woman. Begum Saifullah, widowed at an early age, expanded her family business, entered political arena and became the first female Federal Minister. Mukhtaran Mai as an *underprivileged* woman

endured a tribal council-sanctioned gang rape and fought back against the system. As a result of her struggle with the support of civil society, Pakistan laws regarding the prosecution of rape victims were changed and the Protection of the Women Bill was signed in 2006.

It is also important to highlight the role of organizations led by women belonging to remote areas of KP and other parts of Pakistan, who are focusing on development of women, children and strong families as well as community based programmes and are involved in designing educational curriculum for secular and religious schools. They are also engaging many stakeholders like women, youth, and political and religious leaders to discuss peace and security to shape an alternative, peaceful vision for the future of Pakistan. Female activists visit remote parts of country to uplift the condition of women in areas experiencing violence, to promote peace education and tolerance among the radicalized young madrassah students in Taliban strongholds, to de-radicalize and reintegrate them into communities. This does not mean that these women did not face challenges. They are often stereotyped as 'not from amongst us' or 'liberals'.

The role of ordinary invisible woman in remote areas is also important who, despite odds, are fighting the system. They are reluctant to send their children to mosques and Madrassas (especially young boys) due to the suicide phenomena and its association with Madrassah education. At community level there are religious women who are promoting sustainable peace by running madrassas and delivering sermons at their homes. Unfortunately, mostly they are unsung heroes.

In the end, it is important to state that living and working close to the roots of conflict, women are well positioned to explore the root causes of and propose solution to violent extremism. They have a crucial role to play in promoting harmony and peace and are able to open the doors of dialogue and peace, during strife. In a male dominated, violence prone pockets, they have continued to struggle for promoting common values based on peace and tolerance, equal rights, protection from violence, and public participation. Increasingly, they are taking active roles as leaders in politics and civil society, where they are countering extremist ideology, besides mobilizing their communities to begin the process of reconciliation and peace building during and after bouts of violence.

So here is my answer to the two questions raised earlier: the inclusion and empowerment of women in peace building setting requires representation at the levels of government including legislature and women affairs ministries. Women are engaged; it is the society that we need to change and engage. And

as Dr. Chris Seiple puts it: 'Change is only sustainable when it is socially owned from the bottom up and legally protected from the top down.'<sup>1</sup>

#### Notes and References:

---

<sup>1</sup> Chris Seiple, "Paradox to Possibility: Practicing the Golden Rule in a Global World", (June 30, 2014), <https://globalengage.org/news-media/from-the-president/from-paradox-to-possibility-practicing-the-golden-rule-in-a-global-world>