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Women in Peace and Security Agenda in India

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the theme of women in peace and security (WPS) in South Asian nations. It outlines the reasons why there is no national action plan in India and its effect on women in three areas - participation, prevention, and protection. Four South-Asian nations, including India, are compared based on their socio-political conditions, discriminatory laws, and legal frameworks. By analysing the situation in Kashmir and the North-east through a gender lens, it examines the disproportionate burden placed on women by the state response.

Keywords: National Action Plan, Kashmir, North-East, Women and Peace.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Women in Peace and Security agenda is a landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR 1325) that aims to achieve gender equality through the full, equal and meaningful participation of women in the three areas of peacebuilding - participation, prevention and protection from violent conflict and extremism. Women in peace and security refers to the level of participation of women in their country's military and police forces. The participation of women in conflict prevention, peace-building and conflict resolution increases the effectiveness of the entire security apparatus in a country. The inclusion of gender-sensitive strategies and reforms in the security sector improves the lived experiences even at the grassroots level.

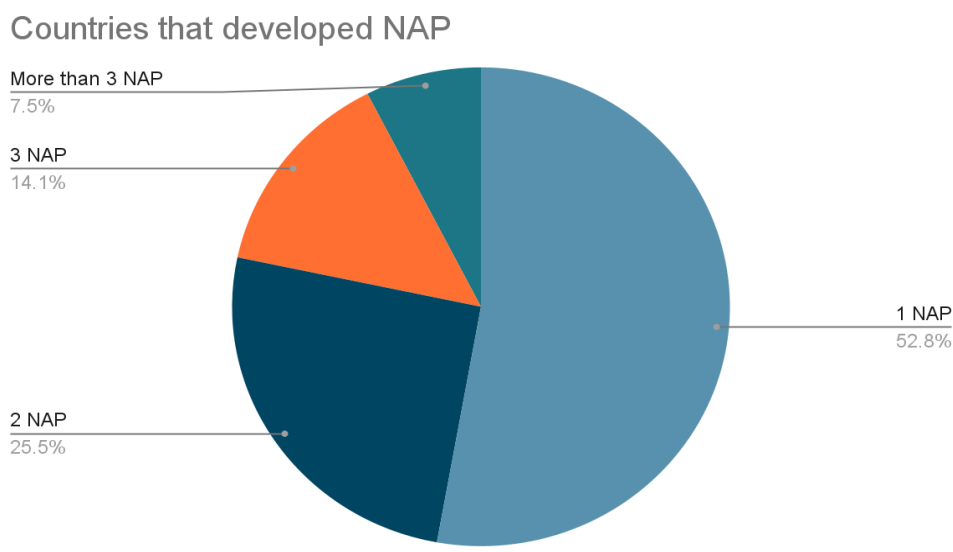
The impact of armed conflict on women, the international legal framework and the inclusion of women in peace negotiations are priority areas of the WPS agenda. The UN Security Council has mandated the implementation of this agenda through National Action Plans (NAPs) and has called on states to take proactive steps and work with local women's networks. The National Action Plan is an official document that outlines the goals, strategies and objectives of the government's commitment towards the inclusion of women in peace negotiations, education and active discourse. The plan is therefore created with the idea of women's agency and the gendered impact of conflict on the lived experiences of women in conflict regions in mind. It is

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seen as crucial for the creation of peaceful and just societies.

According to the Women’s International League of Peace and Freedom, in the twenty years since the resolution, some 107 UN member states have adopted the National Action Plan (NAP), which corresponds to approximately 55% of all member states. The inclusion of resolutions such as UNSCR 1820 (which recognizes sexual violence as a weapon and tactic for war) has also improved the localization of the agenda in the countries that implement it. However, around 30% of the NAPs developed by these countries have already expired in 2022. Nearly 20 years following the adoption of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda by the United Nations, India remains one of the many member states that are yet to formulate a National Action Plan (NAP) for WPS.

The four indicators that can be used to measure the readiness of nations and the impact of subsequent efforts to implement the national WPS plan are - ‘outcome mapping’, ‘political will’, ‘institutionalization’ and ‘training’. The narrative analysis of conflicts and how they have historically impacted women is essential for the formulation of a national plan. Diachronic analysis of sexual violence and the state's response to it is crucial for drawing up a concrete list of positive measures. In this way, governments can identify what resources are available and what infrastructural capacity exists to address this issue. Ensuring an effective evaluation system is a *sine qua non* for the long-term success of the agenda. The pie chart below illustrates the percentage of countries that have developed at least one national action plan over a twenty-year period. This chart allows us to understand how national action plans need to be revised as the time and the country's socio-political landscape changes.



Data Source: Programme of the Women’s International league of peace and freedom website

(compiled by Author)

Countries that have failed to formulate or revise their national action plan or implement a gender perspective in their security sector have performed poorly on gender indicators. For example, the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security has ranked India 128th out of 177 nations (with an index score of 0.595) on the three parameters of 'inclusion', 'equity' and 'security' for women.

II. PARTICIPATION LEVELS

According to the Observer Research Foundation of India, in 2019 less than 4% of the Indian Army, 6% of the Indian Navy and 13% of the Indian Air Force were women. The number of military personnel in India stood at 1.4 million and only 2.65% of officers in the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) were women. The Army's promotion policy has been regressive for women as it leaves no scope for their career progression from Brigadier to Major general. In 2023, for the first time, 5 women officers were commissioned in the Army artillery regiment. Out of the army's total strength of about 49,000 officers, 150 colonel vacancies have been provided to women officers out of the total of 5,995 posts. This underscores the limitations women faced in securing promotions to higher officer ranks and their exclusion from participation in special force units, consequently constraining their access to decision-making roles. On April 16, 2024, the Supreme Court of India granted women army officers the opportunity to contest the promotion policy (Hindustan Times). This represents a positive stride toward gender equality within the defence sector.

In 2019, India deployed a female engagement team to the UN Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (L. Klossek 2021). The sharp contrast between international and national efforts highlights the unsystematic approach to gender-specific initiatives in the security sector. Governments in India have used the international legitimacy of sending women on peacekeeping missions as a smoke screen to not implement a national action plan. Successive governments have equated achievements in protection measures with participation and prevention. The participation of women in negotiations, mediation and peace dialogue has been unsatisfactory. The Council for Foreign relations suggested that inclusion of women in peace agreements and negotiations makes them 64% less likely to fail. However, the ability of women to participate in negotiations and decision-making processes is influenced by political will. The political will of the government is often motivated by its political objectives in specific regions, especially in protracted conflict areas. The institutional capacity for reform in most countries is not able to complement the implementation mechanism. In India, both political will and

institutional capacity hamper the integration of the WPS agenda into the security sector. The masculinization of the security sector in India has not only affected the participation of women in police and military jobs, but has also prevented gendered discourse on 'hard security issues. The gender essentialist approach in the sector has further restricted women's access to higher positions even if they are given the opportunity to join the armed forces.

III. POLITICAL WILL IN INDIA

Even after two decades, India has still not adopted the National WPS Action Plan. Various think tanks have identified a mismatch between India's national endeavour and international ambitions. While India has made progress in deploying women peacekeepers in UN peacekeeping missions, it has done little to improve domestic realities. India's ambiguous strategy on the WPS agenda has paved the way for non-compliance. The Lowy Institute has pointed out that India is unlikely to adopt a WPS NAP because it has no clear categorization of 'conflict areas. The misclassification of Kashmir and the north-eastern region as 'disturbed areas' has delayed and even prevented the implementation of a NAP. The history of militarization and internal conflict in these regions has exacerbated the fragility of the state and directly impacted the vulnerable stakeholders in the region. The Peace Research Institute Oslo indicator suggests that about 11.6% of women live within 50 kilometres of conflict in India.

(A) North-East Women Peace Groups and State Response

The recent incident of sexual violence in Manipur (2023) demonstrated how women bear the disproportionate burden of conflict-based violence. The women rights groups in the North-east such National Alliance of Women of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association, Sikkim and Civil Society Women's Organisation Meghalaya had appealed to the state-governments to initiate peaceful dialogue through 17 peace talks including women as primary stakeholders. Institutional policies have marginalized women in the past and structurally limited opportunities for collective action, especially in times of violent conflict. A civil rights organisation called 'Naga Mothers Association' has contributed immensely to peace building and conflict resolution. Its contribution to the Indo-Naga Peace Pact in 1997 and the Mao-Gate incident in 2010 has proved the effectiveness of local women's rights organisations or peace groups in ensuring peace and stability in local regions. The Naga Mothers' Association has also helped change the political will of the state by advocating for 33% reservation for women in local elections. The state responded to the violence in the region with extraordinary laws that coupled with patriarchal, traditional and tribal norms make conditions even more difficult and threatening for women. This contributed to women and children being at higher

risk of gender-based violence, disrupted livelihoods and deteriorating mental health. The north-eastern states have also experienced exceptional circumstances in the past, which have influenced the discourse in the long run. The appeal by women rights and peace groups comes as a wake-up call for state-governments to take some concrete steps for integrating the WPS agenda.

(B) Women Peace Groups in Kashmir and State Response

The levels of sexual and physical violence committed against women in Kashmir (e.g., rape, domestic violence, acid attacks, etc.) have been documented in a number of studies. Sexual violence has significantly impacted the lived experiences of women since 1988. It has been used as a means of retaliation in attempts to harm the 'community honour' associated with women's bodies. It has resulted in women resorting to militancy in Kashmir in order to gain a voice within the socio-political sphere. It is evident from Swati Parashar's paper, "Women as Perpetrators, Planners, and Patrons of Militancy in Kashmir," that the media justification of women's involvement in militant activity contributes to the problematic narrative of Kashmir. Kashmir's women's peace initiatives differ slightly from those in the North-East, as there have been several collaborative efforts with Pakistan. Example: Women's Bus for Peace by Women's Initiative for Peace in South Asia (WIPSA) and Connecting Women across the Line of Control (LOC) conference. In addition to the state response, orthodox and Islamic traditions had exacerbated the situation.

The country's political landscape has had a disproportionate impact on the pillars of the WPS agenda - prevention, protection and participation. While India has still made progress on participation, efforts remain flat due to inaction on prevention and protection measures for women. Governments have consistently taken the general position that there should be no armed conflict in the country, but the transitive nature of these arguments means that the WPS agenda is not applicable.

IV. COMPARISON WITH OTHER SOUTH-ASIAN NATIONS

1. Sri-Lanka

Sri-Lanka launched its national action plan on 8th March 2023 for the period 2023-2027 with the support of UN Women. The draft of NAP was formulated in 2021 through a series of multi-stakeholder consultations and working groups on Women, peace and security. The government of Japan offered technical and financial support for the formulation of the 1st NAP in Sri Lanka. The socio-political landscape of Sri Lanka is not quite different from India. The national plan includes factors such as socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic or religious affiliations and

geographical location along with its main focus on gender. India too has a diverse and complex system with a number of different ethnicities and religions. The countries therefore share more similarities than differences. The personal and religious laws in Sri Lanka have been discriminatory against women (i.e. Marriage, divorce and inheritance). The Muslim Marriage and Divorce act (MMDA) was one of the most debated acts in Sri Lanka due to the issues associated with women's agency, rights and representation within it. The Kandyan Law also consisted of provisions which were discriminatory in the cases of divorce and inheritance.

The national action plan of Sri-Lanka however recognizes these discriminatory laws and proposes to amend the provisions of territorial/personal and religious laws in line with its constitution and commitment to Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). In India on the other hand, a draconian law like Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has not been repealed despite multiple appeals by citizens and the UN working groups. An article on "Women and armed conflict" states how "*Women in the AFSPA-imposed regions (i.e. North-East states and Kashmir) do not feel safe or secure in their own houses*" (S. Mishra 2015). Under AFSPA the security personnel exercise unrestrained powers and enjoy impunity in their operations in the region. They are allowed to shoot with impunity." The impact of AFSPA was also criticized on the grounds that "*Torture, rape, arbitrary detention, forced migration and displacement has become part of life of the people. There is a need to repeat the debate that AFSPA has failed to solve insurgency challenges; rather, it has only intensified the problem of human rights for the people of the north eastern state.*" (Dr. Saikia, 2020). Sri Lanka has been able to prioritise these issues by working on specific themes within the NAP. This also enabled them to align their domestic commitments with international laws and fast-tracked the process of amending obsolete legal procedures and ordinances. Sri Lanka has also been focusing on training on gender sensitive law enforcement procedures through dedicated personnel. Sri Lanka however has been ambiguous about the budget regarding these institutional and legal reforms. Bangladesh, on the other hand, has provided a clear distinction in the budget division regarding the institutional, policy and legal reforms (i.e. through mobilization of funds in certain areas and separate allocation of funds in the national budget)

2. Bangladesh

Bangladesh National Action Plan (2019-2022) was formulated with the support of the Japanese and Australian governments. The UN women capacity building initiatives also contributed to the success of a comprehensive NAP formulation. The Institutionalization process within Bangladesh was strengthened by incorporating the good practices and integrating other NAP

agendas within this one (i.e. National Action Plan on National Women Development Policy 2013, NAP to Prevent Violence Against Women and Children 2018-2030, NAP for Disaster Management (2010 – 2015) etc.). In commemoration of the 20th anniversary of Resolution 1325 in 2020, the government opted to implement the National Action Plan, with the objective of formalizing and institutionalizing effective practices while also providing recommendations for future actions, especially focusing on addressing emerging challenges within conflict settings. The focus on non-traditional security issues and localization of WPS discourse led to the success on grass-root level. Examples of notable accomplishments include the establishment of a 160-member, all-female police unit within the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) in 2015, as well as the pioneering appointment of the Democratic Republic of Congo's (MONUSCO) first two female combat pilots.

These actions were identified in the plan and carried out after discussions with a Coordination Groups. According to UN Women Asia-Pacific, over 120 participants from women-led CSOs became a part of the consultation process. The Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha also contributed immensely in building the institutional capacity. Initiatives like community policing patrol, first line assistance to women and counselling can be a good example for countries with larger populations that want to localize the agenda. These coordination groups with representatives from relevant ministries ensured proper monitoring and evaluation of the NAP. The intricate process of monitoring and evaluation also highlight the impact of women advocacy groups within Bangladesh.

India however has been unable to integrate existing laws and initiatives with the WPS agenda as most state governments consider the existing laws to be sufficient. The political will within Bangladesh to implement the agenda can be majorly attributed to its parliamentary framework. According to the Bangladesh National Action Plan (2019-2022), about 20% of seats in parliament are secured by women and about 50% seats are reserved for them. However, such representation does not align consistently with the objective of politically empowering women. The allocation of 50 seats out of 350 does not represent an equitable distribution for women, indicating a form of tokenism rather than genuine political empowerment. Furthermore, the selection process for these reserved seats involves the 300 MPs elected to regular seats, rather than direct election by constituents. In case of India, only 81 out of 540 members in the Lower House of Parliament and 11 out of 78 council of ministers, are women. This highlights the persistent challenge of limited access to decision-making positions for women, despite reserved quotas or initiatives aimed at empowerment, rendering them symbolic rather than substantive measures.

3. Nepal

Nepal has formulated two national plans, 1st NAP (2011-16) and 2nd NAP (2022-2025). Although significant progress has been made, NAP I had certain shortcomings, particularly the lack of a targeted focus on individuals affected by conflict-related sexual violence. Their right to redress and legal protection by state agencies was not recognised and that they lacked the tailored assistance, facilities and resources they need to restore their lives with dignity. Recognising survivors of conflict, making provisions for their medical and psychological wellbeing, facilitating access to redress and facilitating civil registration were all identified areas of concern. The 2nd NAP therefore focuses on the implementation gaps of the 1st NAP and prioritises the institutional arrangement through a number of different committees. The National steering committee, provincial steering committee, provincial coordination secretariat, district steering committee and NAP implementation local committee are the committees working on an effective implementation process. These also focus on resource mobilisation issues which have been a concern for India as well. The NAP justifies the importance of developing and revising the national strategy.

Table 1: Comparison amongst four South-Asian Nations

Parameter	India	Sri Lanka	Nepal	Bangladesh
Laws and legislative frameworks	Discriminatory laws exist (i.e. AFSPA, Personal, custody laws, land rights)	Proposed to amend and revise the existing legislative enactments to be gender sensitive and increasing state involvement for service delivery	Committed to strengthen the existing laws - Crime Victims Protection Act, 2018, Privacy Act, 2018, Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016	Assessment of key challenges in decision making process and appointing women in higher positions in peace and security
Awareness and training	Centre for UN Peacekeeping (CUNPK) in New Delhi and UN women	Raising awareness at grass-root level through state services and conducting training programmes for public	Building on the success of 1st NAP, working more on institutional arrangement through committee awareness	Improving the percentage of local stakeholders and civil servant training,

	working to impart training in peacekeeping operations and creating awareness	officials on the implementation of WPS agenda	campaigns and implementation measures	conducting national campaign and devising curriculum for WPS
Relief and recovery	Have taken no concrete steps for relief and recovery	strengthening people-centric relief through board Division and focusing on war widows' relief measures	one-time relief and compensation activities, economic relief, medical treatment, skill training and scholarships for girls	Focusing on involvement of women in disaster management and targeted training to women

Data Source: National Action Plan of Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka PDF on UN Women Website (compiled by author)

V. CONCLUSION

India's approach towards gender equality must be revamped. The complexity of issues that India faces makes implementation or integration of a WPS agenda difficult. India's adherence to the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda exhibits internal inconsistencies and an emphasis on participation at the expense of prevention. The existing system advocates for a limited, militaristic strategy aimed merely at rendering conflicts less perilous for women, rather than proactively preventing them. Shifting focus to the needs and aspirations of women in India is necessary for sustainable growth of the country. The security sector needs reforms in terms of women's access to decision making position and greater participation in combat roles in long run to make India a powerful nation. The integration of a WPS agenda therefore becomes the need of the hour and requires efforts from all concerned stakeholders. Women rights and advocacy groups/organisations have a responsibility to collaborate with local networks and governments to localise the discourse and mobilise the required resources.

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