



Amplifying Women's Voices Towards Sustainable Peace

Women CSO-Led Panel Discussion during the High-Level Meeting on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace, April 24-25 2018

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Introduction

Naripokkho believes that the essence of sustaining peace and countering intolerance is building solidarity across, caste class, ethnicity, occupations, religions and other diverse identities.

Solidarity has to be nurtured through continuous communication, interaction, dialogue and debate.

Women's rights organisations and social movements, including Naripokkho, have traditionally engaged in creating circles of solidarity, which link with each other through various forms of networking.

Women's organisations have engaged in advocacy for policy change and law reform to uphold the principles of mutual respect and equality for all.

Naripokkho has put into practice principles of respect for diversity of needs, lived realities, customs and beliefs which should be recognized in the law, national policies and even educational curricula. The implementation of these principles needs to be strictly enforced and monitored by both government and civil society, women's where the views of diverse groups will be represented, including those of women and men of those communities.

Special measures should be taken so that the voices of the minority groups and especially the women of these groups are heard and acknowledged.

It should become normal practice that any discussion concerning a specific group or population cannot take place without representation from these groups, both women and men, ensuring representatively and accountability of the representatives to their own community.

Part 1 – Highlighting work of women's organizations

I would like to share with you Naripokkho's approach to sustaining peace and peace building which is intertwined with our work to ensure women's rights. Naripokkho is a membership-based,

women's activist organisation working for the advancement of women's rights and entitlements while building resistance against violence, discrimination and injustice.

The primary work of Naripokkho has been to develop its members as activists and leaders who can analyse discrimination, critique injustice and take action to bring about social transformation. We have also felt the need to reach out to other women's organisations to build a common platform for the women's movement, working across divides to create solidarity

Some important examples of our work include 1) our work in building solidarity across women's organisations across the country bringing together various types and sizes on a common platform for women's rights; 2) Creating a network of organizations in solidarity with sex workers in the face of forced evictions and violence from the community; 4) working towards creating communal harmony between Muslim and Hindu communities as well as between different Muslim sects (e.g. Ahmadiya and Sunni) and awareness of the continuous risk of communal violence at critical points such as pre and post national elections and 5) creating awareness of the situation of Rohingya women, girls, men and boys who have been victims of atrocities and systematic violence and violations of their rights in Myanmar and are still vulnerable as displaced persons with broken families, children without parents, women and their families who have lost their male members. I will talk about a few of these.

Naripokkho has initiated a national network of women's organisations named Doorbar, (which means "indomitable"), around the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. Today, a total of 530 local level women's organisations from all over the country are part of this network, which works together on issues of VAW and women's political empowerment. Through this network, over the years, we have been able to build a platform that was open to including diverse interests such as transgender organisations that wanted to join the women's movement, sex workers rights organisations that were struggling to be recognized as citizens, workers and also entitled to women's rights and we worked hard to ensure that membership was diverse both geographically and ethnically.

This meant that women of different classes, religions, backgrounds and interests learned to work together and identify their common interests as women while respecting their diverse identities. It allowed women of different regions and religions to meet together, work together and protest injustices against each other together. It also allowed women from the majority Bengali community to get to know indigenous women from the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Garo women, sex workers, etc.

Such coming together across different divisions and identities is a crucial element of work to sustain peace and prevent conflict. Due to the geographic spread and the leadership qualities of the membership of Doorbar it could stand with the Ahmadiya community when it came under attack by Sunni extremist groups. It also provided support to other minority groups who were under threat of communal violence, sometimes anticipating possible violence and sometimes standing with them once the conflict had occurred, providing social, legal and even humanitarian support when needed.

Young women are also key actors whose potential has to be recognized in the work to sustain peace. As part of Naripokkho's initiatives to strengthen movement building we have in the last

five years put greater emphasis on the development of young women's leadership both within our organisation as well as in all our programmes. Naripokkho is now part of a multi-country initiative to mentor and develop young women leaders to build a cadre of young women as strategic visionaries and change leaders focused on building strong movements capable of addressing the challenges facing youth, and particularly young women including various kinds of conflict and participating in peace building.

Women's organizations have also been at the forefront of responding to the most recent challenge that Bangladesh as a country and the women's movement in Bangladesh is facing – the arrival in the span of a few months of more than a million Rohingya women, men and children who have had to flee communal violence and atrocities by the Myanmar military and seek refuge in Bangladesh. The women were subject to systematic rape, children have seen their parents and siblings being killed in front of them and men have been killed, made to watch their wives and daughters being raped and tortured and their houses and crops destroyed. While there are class and educational differences in this population for the most part it is a population that has been deprived and neglected for years even in Myanmar. Those who fled to Bangladesh were malnourished, in ill health and traumatized.

There are a number of organisations that are actively working with the Rohingyas providing food, health care, education for the children. There is now increasing realization that there is a need to provide mental health care and support for the women, children and also men.

There are few organisations that can represent the interest of the Rohingyas. While there are community leaders in the form of Imams and Majhis (traditional headmen) they are generally conservative and the women have no voice or means of being heard. The Governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar are negotiating repatriation processes without the Rohingya community, men or women, having a seat at the table.

As a women's organisation that has the experience of organisation building, leadership development, facilitating women's voices and their demands Naripokkho will play a role in the present situation. It will introduce a well-tested approach of how confidence and leadership within the Rohingya women and girls can be developed so that they can articulate their own opinions and needs. Naripokkho can also facilitate their interaction with local administration and the host community so that their differences are respected as well as their fundamental rights recognized. There is a need to build bridges with the local community, local women's organisations and national ones as well so that they are given solidarity and support through processes of working together and getting to know each other better.

Part 2 – Challenges

In addition to the influx of the Rohingya women and men, and their needs, Bangladesh faces a number of other challenges to sustaining peace.

Bangladesh's location makes it vulnerable to larger neighbours and the huge borders with India and Myanmar make it difficult to resist outside influences and influxes. The recent Rohingya influx of about 1 million persons was in response to the violence inflicted on them. The only option was to flee to Bangladesh and some to India. As a relatively smaller country (although with a huge

population) the country has to be careful about maintaining good relations with the large countries in the region such as China and India. These two countries have not condemned Myanmar's actions against the Rohingya minority.

Bangladesh is not immune to the influences of international radicalisation of Islam. While the Ahmadiya Muslim community is a minority and has been co-existing peacefully with the majority Sunni Muslim population, international so-called Islamic puritans have been inciting violence against this community in other countries in the region including Pakistan. Although the Government has taken a stand against violence against this community, in the present day and age where media and social media are transnational various religious groups are being incited by their networks and leaders internationally.

Nation building involves building a common identity. However, nationalist ideologies often lead to denying or overlooking diversity that exists in the country. This is what has happened to the Chittagong Hill Tracts and other ethnic minorities who have been compelled to use Bangla (the majority language) and conform to the majority culture to enter the mainstream for employment and to be considered as citizens. While sometimes it is recognized that their land rights, culture and leadership structures are different and there was a Peace Treaty signed in 1997 this has not been implemented and tensions and conflicts continue with the local population and Bengali settlers in the CHT. As this was also an area with a history of insurgency the military presence remains. This is a major barrier to returning to peace in the area.

Part 3 – Recommendations

In view of the above, I would like to make the following recommendations which should be factored into the discussions and decision-making about the Sustaining Peace agenda and its implementation on the ground:

1. The international community and national governments should allocate adequate resources for capacity building of women's organisations and women leaders, including young women leaders, for greater understanding and appreciation of diversity of religion, culture, sexual identity with an emphasis on conceptual clarity, leadership skills and solidarity across different divides.
2. Governments and international agencies should build alliances with civil society organisations and facilitate joint activities and campaigns for peace and security.
3. Civil society organisations should stand with organisations protesting the violation of safety, security and rights of minority groups so that their protests are amplified and there is follow-up at the national level.
4. International agencies and national governments should ensure representation of women's organisations and participation of women from the affected communities in negotiations, discussions on repatriation of Rohingyas, management of refugee camps, etc. should be made mandatory.
5. International agencies and national governments should commit resources for rehabilitation of both perpetrators and victims of armed conflict.