

## **Asia Rising Podcast Involving Women in Conflict**

### **Jasmine Westerndorf**

Welcome to Asia Rising, a podcast of La Trobe Asia where we examine the news, events and general happenings of Asian States and Societies. The podcast you're about to hear was recorded in front of a live audience. I'm your host Jasmine Westerndorf, a lecturer here at La Trobe's Politics and International Relations Programme.

Today I'm joined by Dr Meenakshi Gopinath who is the founder and honorary director of WISCOMP which stands for Women In Security Conflict Management and Peace.

As well as one of India's most well-known educationists and former Principal of Lady Shri Ram College in Delhi India, welcome.

### **Doctor Meenakshi Gopinath**

Thank you Jasmine.

### **Jasmine Westerndorf**

I'm very interested in the work of WISCOMP, especially this year as it's the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the United Nations Security Council Resolution on Women, Peace and Security and so there's been a lot of buzz around the idea of women's roles in peace processes and also a lot of disappointment I think, in terms of why, despite all of the efforts of the last 15 years, women still seem so excluded from many processes of conflict management, security building and peace.

Why, from your perspective is it important for women to be included in these processes and what is it you're doing to support their active participation?

### **Meenakshi Gopinath**

Well let me start with when WISCOMP was set up. WISCOMP is an acronym for Women in Security Conflict Management and Peace - but it also fuses Wisdom and Compassion, together so that's a happy acronym to work with.

We were set up in 1999, a year before the 1325 Resolution was actively adopted by the UN Security Council and it's a matter of tremendous synchronicity that in the late 90's already, there were people from across the globe who were working on issues of women, peace and security. You had of course, the famous theoreticians of the western world (Tichner, Synthia, Enlow), who talked about the fact that international politics for women was really not making sense anymore, because the nature of the state had changed, the nature of warfare had changed, the nature of conflict had changed.

So when we began our work in 1999 it was really an initiative for Asian women to find voice in the hitherto untenanted space of security, and to enable and facilitate their leadership in multi-tasked diplomacy in peace processes and so on. Of course it is now a truism that women who hold up half the sky are not included formally at the negotiation tables that broker peace, and therefore you leave out, literally 50% of the solution.

But, my contention is that it's more than just that, it is also about justice. Because conflict as you know, impact women and children, mostly non-combatants, in very violent and different ways than they do impact men and combatants. And therefore to leave out their concerns and their

solutions to the amelioration of violent conflict would be not just a short-sighted, but it would be also looking at it from a justice lens, a kind of exclusion which is violent, which is in a sense the violence of exclusion, which is a structural cause of conflict in and of itself.

You talked about 1325. The positive aspect is that now there is a normative global instrument that allows women to articulate the necessity and the imperative which is recognised across the world for women's inclusion in peace processes. But I think the '3 P's of Participation, Power and Protection' we've stayed largely within the Protection end of the spectrum. The Power and Participation aspect which 1325 envisaged is still not foregrounded enough, whether it's South Asia, whether it's South-East Asia in the conflicts across the globe, and women's voices need to nuance and enrich that debate.

You yourself have recognised that in your work that it's not really about adding women and stirring, it's about looking at gender relations which impacts both men and women in different ways. It's about interrogating masculinities and certain types of masculinities which sometimes, shall I say, reinforce the cultures of militarism across societies. So that's where we began and while there I think are about 55 countries that have accepted the National Action Plans, I think Japan was the latest to sign in, India still has not developed an NAP. Because from the perspective of the leadership, we don't have conflicts in India and so the recognition of 1325 in that sense would be to recognise that we have interested conflicts, which is such a short-sighted approach, both to internal security and also diplomacy and foreign policy.

However, what women's groups have done, I'd say very effectively, is that because India is a signatory to CDOR, they have invoked the General Resolution 30, which talks about the rights of women in conflict and the protection and participation of women in, not just DDR issues but also in peace building processes, they have actually invoked GR30 to try and exalt the government to adopt some of the principles that are integral to 1325. You've been to Nepal and in the last, I'd say 10 years in Nepal, the women have become extremely, shall I say savvy about the language of 1325. Now whether that has impacted the patriarchies of family, community and the state is yet to be seen. But they do have a new vocabulary and I feel that women have a very important role in redefining the 'Holy Cow' of National Security and look primarily through the lens of People Security which for countries of the global South, would involve issues of Human Security. You know, access to livelihoods, to water, to food, all of these which have been the perennial security concerns of people.

### **Jasmine Westerndorf**

So it strikes me that there's an interesting gap there as well. Even though there is a growing movement at the civil society level and particularly with women's groups who are using the language that's been developed at the international level to support their own demands for greater participation inclusion, there seems to be a lack of willingness from their national leaderships in many countries, not just in South Asia (but since you spoke about India and Nepal as well), there seems to be a reluctance to actually allow women to participate because many people don't actually see that these non-traditional security concerns should be on the table and they also don't necessarily believe that women have a valuable, additional role to play at the table.

Do you think that's the case for instance in India in the government's resistance to the idea of developing a National Action Plan?

### **Meenakshi Gopinath**

Well national security is still very male dominated and it's also very much Westphalian and sort of state and military centric. There are alternative voices, they're beginning very gradually, I would

say, to find their way at seminars and so on where security is discussed. From the last session on the last day on any security discussion, gender issues have moved perhaps to the second day. We look forward to actually opening sessions on security with gender. But gender is a cross-cutting issue, across all security and development debates and I think the very interesting confluence that we have in 2015 of the Beijing Plus 20 and also the Sustainable Development Goals Debate has reached the conventional division between the soft and hard development versus security, kind of matrix. And has brought development now, at least in the Doepel Consciousness, to sit somewhere squarely within the security debate itself.

Here women have to pry open spaces for themselves, it really means women can't wait to be invited and it needs disobedient women to do that, and a lot of the new writings on international politics at peace building and alternative security vocabularies have been put together by these disobedient women who are really breaking the earlier bastions and questioning glass ceilings.

**Jasmine Westerndorf**

Can you give us an example of these disobedient women?

**Meenakshi Gopinath**

Well there are many in India. I just wanted to share with you that many of the movements, both expand democracy and include other notions of security, are led by women in India.

So if you go back, so you go to the Equal Feminist Movement, which is about food security, you have people like Wanda Nashiva whose work you know. If you look at the mobilisation against large dams and displacement of large populations in the name of development you have Metabaka, you have women who've led the opposition to missile sites in Balibai or Godam Culum. It was a woman who led the Right to Information movement which make governments accountable for the money they spend and they are answerable to the public. So they have actually led many of these movements, movements for democratic rights and they see security as a matrix of freedom from want and freedom from fear. Therefore, it cuts across the democracy – security divide. These were supposed to be two separate domains but they have brought them together in their agitations and their movements for change.

So there is a lot to be said for that kind of power, it's not always made visible; for example in Nagaland in the North Eastern area of India which has seen a lot of ethnic conflict, women's leadership has proved decisive under the Naga Mothers Associations to, shall I say, 'Do No Harm' kind of policy. To look at both the security forces and the radicalised combatants, to refrain from violence so they have – 'Shed No Blood Day' where they look at killings on both sides as equally bad and do not privilege one set of rules over the other. They've also managed to mediate between conflicts across warring ethnic groups.

In Kashmir I'd like to say that we, in our small way WISCOMP, has looked at billeting dialogic spaces amongst women across fault-lines of region / religion / ethnicity and so on and so forth. So there are many such examples. There are also the iconic eruption Mila who has undertaken a 'Fast until death' to protest the rape and death of a young woman by the armed forces. So you're taking on huge establishment.

But of course there's usually a push back as well and that's something that women's groups and movements have to learn to take in their stride and build upon. It's not just about the negotiation table per se, but the voices around the negotiation table which comes in from civil society that can inform both men and the few women at the negotiation table to reflect the voices that have not always heard.

So I see hope because without hope, really there's little point in our working, but as you said there is a gap between the top level leadership and people at the grass roots, but it's theoreticians like you and peace builders like you and whether universities, civil societies, groups who need to collaborate to find greater spaces for articulation of gender concerns. So that women who are hitherto on the margins, find space and can provide you with alternative vocabularies.

And if you look at violent extremism which is something that we're all combating, clearly the old methodologies are not working, the nature of violence has changed, the nature of states has changed, the nature of militancy has changed, so we need a different kind of an approach. It is my belief that perhaps women's movements, having known marginalisation, having struggled with this 'one step forward and three steps back', and who have eschewed violence, perhaps might come up with alternative ways which are non-militaristic, to begin to look at this problem differently because we certainly need new spectacles – we need new lenses. Bombing and so on is not working, the groups that are committed to violence, internationally better networked, have access to the most modern technology and above all, they are willing to die, the value for them of their own lives is also not crucial. A completely different approach and vocabulary is needed and perhaps if men do speak in a different voice, then it's possible.

**Jasmine Westerndorf**

I always think to the Mark Twain quote that; "To a man with a hammer everything looks like a nail", in these sorts of discussions, and I think what you're talking about is a really good example of how, when we think of security in a particular way, we see only particular sorts of responses that don't necessarily capture the variety of the experiences and challenges but also opportunities around these processes. And education is a really central way of opening up the spaces for alternative ideas and approaches. What is the work that you've been doing around education and how does that contribute to the transformation?

**Meenakshi Gopinath**

We've had a series of training programmes in Kashmir and in the North East with schools and universities and the idea is to look at the pedagogy of Peace Building. I know this kind of sounds like motherhood and apple pie but it isn't really because it's about changing the mindsets that sustain militaristic responses even to crisis. It's long hard work, so it's about training off trainers, it's about looking at issues of identity, it's about looking at issues of masculinity and above all it's also looking at active co-existence, not just tolerating the other but understanding the so-called enemy also has a face.

So that's one, and the other thing that we've done over the last 12 years is an Indo-Pakistan Future Influentials Workshop using different themes every year to bring young peoples in dialogue, on issues that separate and divide us and to see if they're any connectors that can be found. These are not just women, these are men and women and today we have a network of about 500 alumni and interestingly, they're talking to each other through the internet, through Facebook, so there is an alternative epistemic community of potential peacebuilders that's out there and I think much of this work is about investing in the long term. But somewhere a seed would have been sown which will sprout beautiful branches.

**Jasmine Westerndorf**

I think that's a great point to leave on, we've unfortunately run out of time today. You've been listening to Asia Rising the podcast of La Trobe Asia. If you like this podcast you can subscribe on our iTunes or Soundcloud pages, thank you for listening.

**Jasmine Westerndorf**

Thank you for being with us today.

**Meenakshi Gopinath**

It's been a pleasure, thank you.