



Relocating Gender in Post Conflict Situation: An Insight into the Assam Scenario

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Abstract

Relocation of people after conflict is not an easy process. There are many hardships and challenges that the victims faced after conflict situation. The present paper is an attempt to see what types of challenges the post conflict returnees experienced after conflict especially the womenfolk. The study tries to understand it from perspective of gender.

Keywords: Relocating gender, post conflict, gender equality, rebuilding society, gender mainstreaming.

Introduction

As a social being human beings shares social bonding and relationship and lives in society. A peaceful society is what everybody wants in their life. But there are instances when this peaceful society is affected by the violence. History has evidences that in order to protect their society many times human beings may engage in violence. Moreover depending on the needs of the hour, society may institutionalize violence making it either legal or illegal¹. However any kind of violence or conflict which affected humanities is not good for the society and for its future development. It severely affected human security. The social break up is almost always seen in the cases of conflict. No matter what conflict it is, be it large scale one or internal conflict within the periphery of the state, it affected entire society and women in particular. In recent years more than external conflict it is internal conflict or 'Non International Conflict' based on identities, ethnicities, and religious fundamentalism etc.² This abandoned, injured and even led to death of thousands of people. It is very pathetic but fact that women and children are the worst victim of conflict. When conflict happens the age old practices and customs tend to become harsher. The institutionalized gender inequality is more prominent during conflict³.

During conflict situation many left their place of habitat in search of security. In that process of relocation the women's situation are most awful. Women faced uncertain future, physical harassment and mental agony during and aftermath of conflict. In the relief camps insecurity, lack of privacy, searching for food, illness created countless problems for the women. On the other hand the post conflict situation is also not better. Even after relocating the affected people in post conflict time the socio-political environment may not be the same. Moreover relocation often leads drastic changes to the women. By and large conflict changes the setup of a society. The role and responsibility of the society got changed. The social structure gets changed. The access to power may change. In the

changing circumstances there are instances where women has to take the charge of household in the absence of male members of the family, but in overall women's position become much more cornered. The needs of women many times got neglected while fulfilling the needs of society as a whole. But women are important member of the society without whom society cannot survive. But, the idea of involvement of women in various socio political activities came much later. In fact the idea of inclusion of gender was not prominent during earlier studies on conflict. It is indeed need to mention here that gender is a continuous social and cultural construction process involving individual, organizational and societal levels that interact with each other⁴. However, women's equality, its recognition in the society and providing them rights came only recently. It was in the Beijing Platform of Action (BPA) that the gender dimension in the conflict situation gets widespread recognition. Later on the United Nation shows its concern towards the women by including the gender dimension in its Security Council Resolution 1325(SC 1325). The SC1325 stressed on the need to address gender relations and gender equality during all phases of conflict and post conflict⁵. Greenberg and Zuckerman provided three dimensions to study gender in conflict and post conflict situation - a. Challenges women faced; b. systematically identifying and addressing gender issues in conflict and peace; c. the transformation of gender through the ages³. It is need to mention that post conflict reconstruction of a society is not a very easy task. Apart from adjustment problem which one faced while living in the camps, the post conflict situation is very harsh in practical sense. Already suffered from mental stress due to the loss of near and dear one these people are very vulnerable and often target of anti- social elements. Keeping in view the conditions the present study is limited only to the Assam of North East India which suffered continuously for the last three decades in the name of nationalist struggle, insurgency and ethnic clash. The present paper tried to understand the challenges the women faced while relocating themselves in a new society.

Reconstructing/Relocating gender

While conflict is the process of deconstructing a society, post-conflict is a complex process of relocating, reconstructing a society which is tormented by violence. It involved process of disarmament, demobilization and re-integration (DDR) and development programmers⁶. It not only means that peace process is starting but also that the negotiations are going on between the parties. However peace itself is a conflicting term. It is often misunderstood as the absence of war⁷. In the process of disarmament, demobilization and re-integration (DDR) for many decades the inclusion of gender aspect was not seen. It was only after Beijing Platform of Action (BPA) that Gender dimension in the post conflict situation got recognition. But till now only in few cases the involvement of gender aspect is seen. Gender inequality always remains a persistent challenge and barrier to equal development in society. Moreover in developing countries this inequality is exacerbated by extreme poverty⁸. Due to this the gender involvement is very much necessary to bring equality in the society. While it is necessary to understand the gender dimension it is also important to make the women involve in the matters of the society. When people started to return back to their original place of habitat after a major conflict they are already suffered from the fear, anxiety and insecurity. Psycho-social problem engulfed their life. The trajectory of their life is already altered by the conflict. In the post conflict situation society faced changing patterns of norms, roles, responsibilities and access to power and resources. In the due course of time the women's role also got changed. In fact in some families in the absence of male members of the family the female members may took over the charge of family. The post conflict situation may change the pattern of the norm of household where female headed households may be in rise after the conflict due to migration or death of the male member of the house during conflict. The post conflict interventions are different from 'normal' development work, contending with the need to rebuild social capital and to build nonviolent institutions⁹. In simple the post conflict society is a re-built society with a new social atmosphere. This society which is relocating and rebuild cannot be regarded as the reconstruction of the old society. It never can be the replica of the same. Moreover the conditions and situations are not the same. The terminology 'Reconstruction' meant putting back what was there before. However in post conflict situation it cannot be possible. The people who will be relocating themselves will be facing new challenges. So, in that sense the society is not reconstructing but a newly construct society.

One of the biggest challenges of the relocation plan was the inclusion of gender in the development process. To ensure peace in the society inclusion of women in the activity is very much necessary. Only equal participation can ensures sustainable progress and development. The gendered equality is indeed necessary: i. To ensure proper sustainable plan¹⁰. ii. To recognized and respect women's right to participate in different aspects of society. iii. For proper allocation of goods and

services to all. iv. To implement justice component which ends impunity and ensures accountability for crimes committed against women and girls during the conflict¹¹.

More often in conflict situation women are more submissive than other time. It is because women in conflict situation are often regarded as soft target to humiliate opponent party. Violating women's rights is many time becomes part of the strategy to destroy the social structure of the society. The post conflict situation is no better than that. However, in post conflict situation a kind of feeling of insecurity started to perceive among the people. The post conflict Peace, Participation and Prosperity (PPP) can be possible only in an equitable society³. Greenberg and Zuckerman focused on inclusion of gender dimension in the post conflict plan process in order to rebuild the society and also in removing injustice, disparities and exclusion which are post conflict occurrence in a society. They stated three frameworks to understand gender dimension during post conflict- i. To analyze gender related disparities- in basic needs, education, physical security and power. ii. To focus on the mainstream policies and program emphasizing the importance of understanding gender based roles and relations for peace, participation and prosperity. iii. The third gender dimension is strategic and transformative changes or gender oriented social transformation.

Keeping that in view it can be emphasized that post conflict situations provide extraordinary opportunities to set new norms, draft new rules, engage new leaders and build new institutions. Women focused activities include women's right to – i. participate fully and effectively in decision making, ii. own property, iii. work without discrimination, iv. live free of violence³. While it is needed to mention that post conflict reconstruction process is not an easy process as many time durable solutions are not found. The challenges are always there. Moreover 'Relocation' as a durable solution would have to consider that conflict affected Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) may be unwilling to return to their original places or integrate in the present location, mainly because this group of people do not have houses or land in either of the origin or the present location¹². So, how far it can be applicable is depend on the adaptability of the population, government and to the responsible authorities. In the context of Indian sub-continent where insurgency and ethnic violence taking its toll on the human rights violence the involvement of gender to maintain peace is still negligible. In Indian the conflict is not always international conflict but it is intra-conflict. Due to its multi lingual, multi ethnic and multi religion characteristics the sub nationalistic sentiments are always high leading to conflict. The pressure on land, overly population, economic underdevelopment, unequal distribution of power and economy, unemployment all lead to rise in ethnic differentiation and rise in insurgent groups in the region. Besides, the son of the soil theory is also affected in rise of conflict among different groups.

Assam in post conflict situation

Although not properly defined the post conflict means neither war nor peace. The term post conflict is very complicated term in case of north east India especially in Assam where for the last thirty years conflict is going on in the name of preserving identity and secession movement. However last one decade is very crucial for the state as it is affected by many ethnic conflicts. It is seen from the table 1 that in last one decade or more around one thousand people died due to conflict. In the year 2014 itself till 23rd November there are 112 people (Including 72 civilians) who lost their life. As latest report till 1st January 2015 there are 81 people including 26 women and 18 infants died as militant group attacked villages in Kokrajhar, Chirang, Udalguri and Sonitpur district¹³.

Table -1
Total number of people died due to conflict in Assam¹⁴

Year	Total died due to conflict	Total injured
2014	112	10
2013	19	10
2012	15	02
2011	36	13
2010	51	42
2009	126	195
2008	192	294
2007	201	151
2006	59	100
2005	94	12
2004	137	144
2003	87	08
2002	63	01
2001	92	03
2000	125	00

In post conflict situation it is seen that sometimes the victims cannot return to their homes as their homes may be occupied by others. For example during the Bodo – Adivasi conflict in 2005, December after the end of conflict the Adivasi people have found that their homes are already occupied by the Bodo community people¹⁵. In that condition relocating them to a proper place where they could adjust themselves is becoming a problem. Post conflict reconstruction emphasized that some basic level materiality is a necessary pre condition for social reconstruction¹⁶. In the post conflict situation relocating people to their old place is always a critical problem. Many times the refugee camps have to shut down forcefully so that the conflict induced internally displaced people can go to their homes. Many

people do not want to leave their camps for fear of death. It is very pathetic to see returning of the people to their original homes which sometimes is nothing but heaps of ashes. According to an official report of the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA) there are 2, 36,349 people who are currently staying in 118 relief camps in Kokrajhar, Chirang, Udalguri and Sonitpur District. However, people are slowly returning to their homes. But returned to homeland is very less, as sporadic incidents of violence is still going on. The post conflict situation in Assam many times becoming very critical as affected people faced a changed scenario after returning to their homes. During the time of conflict also in the refugee camps the affected people are living in a situation of hell. With very limited food supply, almost negligible amount of hygienic system, with no adequate facility for toilet and no security and privacy for the women, the people suffered immensely in the camps. In that situation in the post conflict period instead of reconstructing a society it could be more beneficial if we newly construct a society.

Relocating/Rebuilding society: The challenges ahead

After the conflict when the displaced persons returned to their homes many things got changed including how to adjust to their present situation. In case of Assam which is already burdened heavily by conflict, economic underdevelopment and a patriarchal society to overcome the situation is not easy. While relocating the affected people is not a very complex process but to give them proper security and safety including economic security is not easy. A society which is still relied on tribal notions (the Kokrajhar, Chirang, Dhekiajuli, Karbi Anglong is tribal dominated area where Adivasi are also a majority) to contradict and challenge age old traditions is not an easy task. Moreover, as the peace started to come new problems are emerged. In Assam, the government provided relief material to CAPs (Conflict Affected People) when they are in relief camps. However, there are no post conflict rehabilitation data or record to understand their situation or what happened to those people who returned to their homeland after conflict. Even in maximum times they are not provided with any cash and kind to rebuild their houses and if provide that also comes through various stages in which case the allegations are always charged for corruption. In such situation, it is necessary to unite all in the new development process in such areas. Without the help from both the section of the society a new society cannot be possible. Moreover, women should be given spaces to develop their ideas and goals so that they also can help in rebuilding society with a fresh look. Gender disparity needs to be overcome in order to make an equitable and just society. However, the age old customs which affected the tribes for centuries is not easy to overcome in short span of time. It can be possible only when women also took part in the restructuring process. They should be given proper dues. Conflict leads to nothing but economic underdevelopment, conditions of extreme poverty and social backwardness.

Now if we examine the challenges that women faced during and after conflict in Assam the first challenge is the need for protection and security. This is indeed necessary because when conflict happened women are the first one to bear the brunt of conflict. There are instances when pregnant women die during conflict. Moreover in relief camps also there are no privacy for them. No sufficient medical facility for the expecting mothers in the relief camps¹⁷. The women in many cases become victim of rape, sexual harassment which never comes out in open. Their vulnerability is their biggest enemy. The safety and protection of women in both reliefs camps and in outside it is necessary. Human trafficking which is very high in the Kokrajhar belt is due to the economic crisis which is the result of conflict. A proper awareness is very essential. The human security in the form of economic, social and political is particularly necessary to ensure proper protection to them.

While systematically identifying and addressing gender issues in conflict and peace it is found that women have no voice in particular during the conflict situation. There are many who are afraid to say their sufferings to media and to the authority due to the fact that they feared that they might not clearly highlight their problem. Lack of self-confidence engulfed them with feeling of insecurity. This is one of the major challenges that need to overcome which can be possible only if women are empowered with education and economic independence.

Apart from that the other challenge is the health issue of the women. Most of them are not very much knowledgeable about proper health and sanitation system. Day by day deterioration of health is seen among the displaced women. According to the report of Joint Needs Assessment (JNA) in areas like Chirang, Kokrajhar, Dhubri the post conflict consumption of food has been reduced by 53% in females and 41% in males as reported by the community¹⁸. The clashes in the Bodoland, Kokrajhar, Chirang and other lower Assam states deteriorated the health scenario of the area. The Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) and Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) are high in the conflict affected districts of Baksa, Chirang, Kokrajhar and KarbiAnglong¹⁹. There are even instances of child delivery in the relief camps. In the post conflict situation the lactating mothers many times are not getting the proper food and food which supplied to them are also not sufficient²⁰. This is a cause of concern for the whole state itself because in overall in Assam the MMR is 328 whereas in India it is 178; infant mortality rate is 58 whereas all over India it is 40²¹.

Another challenge in relocating gender in the conflict zones of Assam are the poor economic conditions that persistently affecting the society at large. The poor conditions led the migration of people to the cities, the economic hardship led rise to all anti-social element in conflict affected areas. The GDP (Gross Domestic Production) of the conflict affected areas are very low comparatively other parts of Assam²². The disguised migration in the cities and towns takes place due to the conflict. The rise in crimes and other anti- social activity is seen in the

neighboring towns and the cities after a major conflict. The victims fled from their area of early inhabitant due to the fear of life during any conflict and even after that. In those circumstances they usually seek refuge in the neighboring towns where there is no fear of violence. But it led to the pressure on the land of that area leading to other types of tensions. It is a challenging process for the state to accommodate these people in a proper area which will not create pressure on land. As many affected people may not be wanted to settle down in the same area after the conflict. A proper program is needed to ensure a safe and sound economic development in the area in order to have a peaceful violence free zone.

Conclusion

Redressing issues of women Greenberg stated that in the gendered dimensions it is necessary to create awareness of who makes decisions, whose input and collaboration is needed, who participate effectively and who benefits. Keeping the situations of Assam in mind it can be said that while relocating gender in post conflict situation the women should be given space to adjust to the new society. It is new in the sense that after conflict nothing remains same. Everything including mindset of the people got changed. In those circumstances women should be included in all spheres of societal activities, so that they can identify themselves with the society. Economic justice is very much necessary for them who want stand on their feet. The self-help groups in that sense is very much encouraging. The government need to provide full support to the people living in conflict affected areas and should see that no middle man took the benefits provided to the Conflict Affected Persons (CAPs). The gender mainstreaming²³ is necessary in order to have equal development of both male and female member of society.

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