



Women's co-operatives and peacebuilding in Nepal



Smita Ramnarain

University of Massachusetts Amherst



September 21, 2011

Conflict and Peace: Definitions



CONFLICT - *‘a disagreement between two (or more) parties involving a perceived or actual physical, mental or emotional threat to either or both parties’ needs, interests or concerns, or more generalized friction arising out of structural circumstances beyond the control of individuals or groups.’*

A. Direct Conflict

- Micro – intra-household
- Meso – neighborhood and community; local level – gang violence, communal violence, crime, exploitation
- Macro – national or regional level – war, civil war,

B. Structural Conflict

PEACE - *‘a situation characterized by the absence of direct violence, the threat of violence, hostility or other sources of friction, as well as a situation of relative security in matters of socio- economic welfare, and the acknowledgement of the principles of democracy, equality, and fairness in political relationships.’*

Rationale



Why look into women and peacebuilding?

- The effects of intra-household conflict, violent civil and military conflict and structural violence on women
- Women's role in building sustainable and long-term peace

Why look into women's *co-operatives* and peacebuilding?

- A bottom-up approach to peacebuilding
- The close link between peace and the co-operative movement
- Women's co-operative organizations and peacebuilding

Background



- The background of conflict in Nepal
- The women's co-operatives and peacebuilding research project



Central Questions



1. How have women's co-operatives reduced violence and built peace in Nepal?
2. Why have women's co-operatives been successful in peacebuilding to the extent that they have been?
3. What are the pros of women's co-operatives taking up this work?
4. What are the limits, dilemmas and challenges that women's co-operatives face in peacebuilding?

How have women's co-operatives reduced violence and built peace?



At the micro level:

Intra-household Conflict and Domestic Violence

- *Poverty and economic stress*

'Since women are involved in the co-operative, the husbands also rely on them for credit. Women can use this ...they can say if you drink and come home, I am not getting any money from the co-operative for you. This also reduces arguments and tensions in the house.' - Savitra Karki

- *Rigid gender and cultural norms and practices*

'(Because of being in the co-operative) I now have exposure and know that I should treat my daughter and daughter-in-law on par. But many women do not have that kind of exposure and continue follow superstitions and discriminatory practices.' – Shanti KC

- *Alcoholism/addictions and domestic violence*

'The co-operative also gives loans to victims of violence. We tell them that they are not alone and that they can join the co-operative where they will find the support of other women.' – Bhagwati Arial

How have women's co-operatives reduced violence and built peace?



At the meso level:

- Gender-Based Discrimination

'Recently we faced this case ...a 22 year old drunk boy raped a paralyzed woman alone at her home. After this incident, we held meetings in the village to highlight violence against women in society.' – Kamala Thapa

'There was a woman in my village ...she had no siblings of her own and lived with her father. When her father died, her step-brother did not give her any share of the property. She got thrown out of her house and had nothing! But it has now been three or four years since she got her share after our paralegal committee intervened.' – Santoshi Mahato

- Caste-based and ethnic discrimination

'The women of the musahar chamar caste (who were regarded as 'untouchable' here previously) have become very active due to the co-operative's training. Through the co-operative, we taught them about women's rights and sometimes they come to ask us about their rights.' – Chandra Lama

- Exploitation

'Earlier to get a loan of Rs. 5000 or Rs. 10000, we would have to keep our jewelry at the zamindar's (landlord) home. But now we can earn and get loans in accordance with the rules of the co-operative. In very rural areas, Tharu women still take loans from moneylenders, but we hope that as the reach of co-operatives and savings and credit societies spread, this practice and the associated exploitation will stop.' – Sabita Neupane

How have women's co-operatives reduced violence and built peace?



At the macro level:

▪ *Intervention during the Maoist conflict*

'We convinced them (Maoists) that the co-operative deals with poor women's small amounts of money and as a result, it cannot give any donations. Since our accounts are transparent and we have a good social reputation, they were convinced and did not trouble us any more.' – Meera Bhattarai

▪ *Ongoing political education and consciousness-raising*

'Dhading (a Nepali district) has a reputation for this kind of violence but because of the co-operative's intervention, it has reduced quite a bit. Peace has been restored in many areas. We are also challenging the governments about the as of yet unwritten constitution and we are organizing rallies so that there should be peace in the country. We are pressurizing the government not just in the village level, but also at the district and national level.' – Bhagwati Arial

Why have women's co-operatives been successful in peacebuilding?



- ***Foundations of Economic Support***

'Once financial condition improves all other aspects become easier to deal with and that minimizes the conflict at home.' – *Sita Khanal*

- ***Source of Collective Strength and Mobilization***

'The members of co-operative stand by each other through thick and thin. And since we have obtained the trust of the community, the members feel free to express whatever problems they have been facing. They appreciate that the co-operative has turned out to be as loving as their mother and *maytighar* (maternal home).' – *Goma Khulal*

- ***Platforms for Women's Voices and Building Awareness***

'Earlier we used to cover our face with veil but now we do not. Now we are known by our own names, not by our husband's name.' – *Yamuna Baral*

- ***Practitioners of Political Neutrality and 'Good Politics'***

'The manner in which the co-operative engages in politics is positive politics. Social help is the base of all good and positive politics and that is what we are trying to do.' – *Meera Bhattarai*

Significance of women's co-operatives building peace



1. Grassroots change
2. Co-operatives promote social cohesion for sustainable peace
3. An alternative vision
4. Women's participation and leadership in the public sphere

Further Discussion



Dilemmas / Challenges

- Co-operatives can also be victims of violence, or spaces of conflict
- Peacebuilding vs. post-facto conflict mediation
- Gender stereotypes in peacebuilding
- Peacebuilding by co-operatives as women's work

Solutions

- Bringing peacebuilding to the center stage
- Focusing on prevention rather than cure
- Coordination between co-operatives for peacebuilding
- Expanding co-operative education programs

Thank you!



For comments, questions, or copies of the full report, please contact:

smita@econs.umass.edu

or

Anna.Brown@coopscanada.coop