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REVIEW ARTICLE

ROLE OF A FAITH BASED NGO IN PROMOTING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PEACEBUILDING IN NORTH EAST INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This article tries to highlight the work of a faith based NGO in its endeavour to build peace in the North East region of India. Drawing on case study documents from four target states, it seeks to draw out how in its peace programme, the organisation capacitated women and girls enabling them to participate in the process of mitigating conflict and take actions on social issues relevant in their village and community.

Key words:

Conflict Resolution, Faith Based,
Peacebuilding, Peace Club.

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INTRODUCTION

A nongovernmental organisation, an aspect of civil society, is a legally constituted non state organisation created by natural or legal persons. It has no participation or representation of any government. Even in cases where NGOs are funded totally or partially by governments, they still maintain their nongovernmental status by excluding government representatives from their membership. Though, NGO is legally constituted and is in general use, no legal definition is assigned to it. In many jurisdictions, NGO is defined as a civil society organisation or as any other names like independent sector, social movement organisation, private voluntary organisation, voluntary sector, self help organisation and non state actors (Uzuegbunam, 2013, p.208 as cited in Anheier *et al.*, 2001). Similarly, Faith-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are non-state actors that have a religious or faith core to their philosophy, membership, or programmatic approach, although they are not simply missionaries (Actors and Activities, 2009). Therefore, Peace and Conflict NGOs, as ostensibly impartial actors with humanitarian goals, can play a unique role in resolving conflict at the international, intrastate, and local level. Peace and Conflict NGOs are non-governmental organizations that work to promote reconciliation and coexistence among conflicting parties. They engage in a wide variety of techniques to promote peace, both

on-the-ground in conflict areas and at the policy level. The work of these organizations may include grassroots action (letter writing, direct action, petitions, demonstrations) or work in diplomacy (promoting and arbitrating discussions). Peace and Conflict NGOs may work at the policy level, developing policy recommendations and advocating for peaceful solutions at the international and national level. In addition, Peace and Conflict NGOs contribute to peacebuilding efforts after the immediate conflict is resolved, including community building and development efforts (Peace and Conflict NGOs, n.d).

Concept of peace building: The term "Peacebuilding" first emerged in 1970s through the work of Johan Galtung who called for the creation of of peacebuilding structures to promote sustainable peace by addressing the "root causes" of violent conflict and supporting indigenous capacities for peace management and conflict resolution. Since then, the term Peacebuilding has covered a multidimensional exercise and tasks ranging from the disarming of warring factions to the rebuilding of political, economic, judicial and civil society institutions (<http://www.un.org/en/peacebuilding/pbso/pbun.shtml>). Peacebuilding is the development of constructive personal, group, and political relationships across ethnic, religious, class, national, and racial boundaries. It aims to resolve injustice in nonviolent ways and to transform the structural conditions that generate deadly conflict.

Peacebuilding can include conflict prevention; conflict management; conflict resolution and transformation, and post-conflict reconciliation (Kroc Institute, 2018). Within the peacebuilding field, a distinction is commonly drawn between negative and positive peace. Negative peace is defined by the majority of theorists and practitioners as the absence of war. Positive or just peace encompasses much more. John Paul Lederach describes it as "an orientation toward conflict transformation characterised by approaches that reduce violence and destructive cycles of interaction while at the same time increasing justice in any human relationship". This definition fits well with Catholic social teaching, according to which, "peace is a condition of comprehensive well being of human persons and their environment", and where "peace is only guaranteed through meeting the demands of justice". This vision is found in the statements of Catholic development agencies. A common component of these definitions is that justice cannot be divorced from peace and this requires working to end conflict through the creation of right and just relationships. Justice is both a condition for and foundation for peace (McCan, 2000, p 113).

Women in peacebuilding: Women are often viewed as victims of conflict. But this view masks the important roles women play as leaders, especially in helping end conflict, developing post conflict reintegration efforts and economic life and even in leading the organisation of camps for internally displaced persons. In conflict zones, women are active participants in the conflicts that affect their countries. They may become combatants. They may become the sole providers for their families, more active in the informal or formal sectors of the economy or more active in peace making groups as a result of conflict. They also suffer disproportionately from sexual violence and displacement. Yet during war and its aftermath, women too often are excluded from activities aimed at resolving the violent conflicts that so deeply affect them. Women are typically excluded from formal peace processes. They tend to be absent at the peace table, underrepresented in parliaments that are developing policy in countries emerging from conflict and underrepresented in peacekeeping forces. The United Nations reckons that fewer than 3 percent of signatories to peace agreements have been women (United States Institute of Peace, 2011). Women's unique contribution to non violent conflict resolution, their capacity to negotiate for justice and peace, to confront issues collectively to challenge violent ways of managing conflict, have remained largely invisible in mainstream policies. To date, most institutional and policy frameworks for conflict resolution at all levels have not effectively taken advantage of women's participation. Despite this drawback, women's informal conflict resolution initiatives have used methods that have created an enabling environment for peace building and non violent conflict management (UNESCO, n.d, p. 7). In north east India, several women's organisations have come up to protect and promote the rights of tribal people especially the women. Some of them are the Assam Boro Women's Justice Forum, Nagaland's Naga Mother's Association, Naga Women's union, Manipur Hmar Women's Association, Arunachal Pradesh's R.K. Mosang Memorial Society, Tripura's Borok Women's Forum of Twipra, Dimas women's society, Manipur's Zomi Mother's Association, Assam's All Tiwa Women's Association, Rabha Women's Council, The Manipur Women Gun Survivor's Network, Control Arms Foundation of India etc. These women's groups have helped the women deal with trauma and agony owing to armed conflicts.

They also have worked towards the economic empowerment of the women affected by violence (Mullick, 2013). In spite of these, there are several challenges faced by women while engaging in peace building, conflict resolution and post conflict peace initiatives. One of the primary reasons lie on the issue of women's representation in negotiations, being a part of decision making and lastly, being recognized as peace builders/human rights defenders by those who run the state. The case of Irom Sharmila Chanu of Manipur is an example. Her fast, with a demand for repeal of AFSPA (Arm Forces Special Powers Act, 1958), has crossed 10 years. Civil society support is large now but not adequate by the state. There are scores of women all over the region who are fighting different forms of social injustices and violations (<http://northeastnetwork.org/content/challenges-faced-women-peace-building>). The peace programme on which the present study is based is not meant specifically for female participants. It is a programme where both male and female participate but women/girls are encouraged to join so as to increase their participation in peacebuilding. It is not a women run or only for women programme. This paper examines the contributions a faith based NGO (in this case, the Catholic Church) have made to peace building in North East India with participation of more women in certain activities.

Unlike mainstream development interventions in health and credit where there are clear indicators of success, the gains from peacebuilding are often very slow and intangible. Impact is difficult to gauge within the three to five year time frame typical of many development programmes. Some would say peacebuilding is multigenerational and cannot be adequately measured or assessed by conventional development indicators and assessment tools. Changes in perceptions and attitudes cannot be easily measured, yet these are pivotal in breaking the cycle of prejudice and animosity inherent in most conflicts. Anecdotal evidence, properly gathered, is a key indicator of the impact of peace programmes yet very little credence is given to such evidence. Case studies are a vital part of this and provide a body of knowledge which can be disseminated for learning and improvement (McCan, 2000, p. 124).

Case experience: The Catholic Church in North East India has always been there in the background in times of conflicts in bringing hope where there is hopelessness. Through the church related (NGOs) organizations, it can take important steps without being viewed with suspect from the other denominations and religions. The social wing of its structure, known as Diocesan Social Service Societies, has a long history of involvement in society beginning with interventions in the educational and health sectors. But realization dawned that time has come where it is important that the Catholic Church play an active role. Its presence is important not as a competing, domineering but uniting group providing an umbrella role in coordinating the other churches. Where Church structures itself are yet not ready to take up issues, this role can be taken by these organisations that work with Catholic Christian inspiration, but as independent structures in civil society. Through these church related organizations, it can take important steps without being viewed with suspect from the other denominations and religions. The peace programme under review is led by the regional office known as North East Diocesan Social Service Society (NEDSSS), the social wing of the catholic Churches in North East. It is a registered body under the Societies Registration Act of 1860 after serious and deep consultations, initiated by the Directors of the Diocesan

Social Service Societies (DSSS) functioning in the entire region. Since its inception, NEDSSS has been engaged in Peace Building. The programme is implemented in Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura through its local partners – BGSS (Bongaigaon Gana Seva Society), Bongaigaon, DSSS (Diocesan Social Service Society), Imphal, JUST (Jana Unnayan Samiti Tripura), Agartala & Peace Channel, Dimapur. Varied stake holders are involved such as Faith Based Organisations, Media Houses and Civil Society Organisations, various ethnic groups and religious communities, institutions, schools and universities of the North East region, youth clubs, Student Bodies and Community Based Organisations (SHGS [Self Help Group], OFGS [Organic Farmers Group], PVT [Peace & Vigilant Team]) with the participation of both men and women. In order to bring about meaningful change, specific issues have been taken up such as Ethnic Conflicts, Land Alienation, Corruption, Atrocities and Human Rights Violations by the state and non state actors.

The strategies proposed to address these specific problems are Mobilization of people for Peace Building, Research, Sensitization and Advocacy & Lobbying. Many activities were undertaken such as peace club formations at educational institutions & localities, peace dialogues, workshops and seminars on issue based themes for leaders from various strata, mass media workshops, trainings on conflict resolution skills for children, youth and community people, awards to persons promoting peace, awareness creation on peaceful coexistence through rallies and street plays and appreciation of diversity through cultural exchanges and peace festivals. Research on topics like traditional conflict management among the tribes, intra village conflict, displacement through conflict and development projects and impact of migration of youths from rural areas to cities etc have been studied. The purpose of the research is to understand the relevance of the traditional conflict management mechanisms, effects of development and result of migration and at the same time, to develop the analytical thinking of the researchers themselves. Although quite many activities were implemented, there were certain activities where the participation of women and girls were more than in others. In activities involving dialogues and discussions, the participation of women was minimum or none at all. Therefore, only two major activities will be discussed in which participation of women and girls were equal or more than men.

Women SHG peace clubs: In order to mitigate conflict and take up social issues that could create conflict, women from the target areas were mobilized and formed into peace clubs. The peace clubs composed of 15 to 20 members each. Once the clubs were formed, the members were capacitated on peacebuilding skills, human rights and good governance on regular basis. The various capacity building activities helped the SHG women to resolve conflicts and take up issues at the local level. Not only that, they are able to seek for schemes and benefits that is provided by the government. For instance, The “SHG members of Simari Cluster South Tripura under the leadership of Mrs Konika Jamatia sought justice for a 14 years old girl of Burburia village who was raped by 4 men. They held a protest rally and went to the Police Station demanding the arrest of the culprits; the culprits have been arrested. Compensation has been given to the girl and both the girl and her parents have been given counseling by the SHG

members”.¹ Another case in point is the Conflict averted in a village in Chandel District in Manipur through the active initiative of SHG members who meet and discuss on peace & conflict resolution. They also stood up for dialogue and peaceful resolution of conflict rallying along Imphal to Jiribam highway and public discussion on peace.² The SHG members took initiative to organise rallies, held awareness camps and meetings and observed international peace day as well. In May 2013, at Machi village, the road connecting the village, a sub division in Chandel District was blocked. The road blockade was because of the construction of the road on top of the water source by the contractors. The road is constantly used by the villagers in transporting and marketing their farm products but the people of Machi village blocked the road for the larger interest of the village. The road was blocked for 4-5 days. The Peace & Vigilant Team Members (PVT), SHG members and the women Society repaired the road and thus ended the 5 days road blockade. It was such a relief to the farmers who could carry on their normal business again, earns money or buys essential commodities such as rice for their families and medicines for the sick. The conflict in the village that erupted between the contractors and the villagers was settled by the people themselves.³

In Chanshil village, there was constant conflict between the Assam Rifle personnel and the people especially women folk with regard to use of water at the water source. The Assam Rifle Personnel not only fetch water from the source but would take bathe at the source creating a lot of inconvenience for the women folk. The conflict reached its peak when the people of Chanshil and the Assam Rifle battalion fought over the issue of bathing near the water source. Women and PVT members intervened and negotiated between the people of the village and the Assam Rifles Battalion by making the Assam Rifles personnel agree not to take bathe at the water source. Thus, the conflict was brought to an end before it reached its climax with the timely intervention of the women and Peace & Vigilant Team members. In another instance, the Awungtang SHG successfully intervened and prevented occurrence of brawling and rowdiness in the locality by organizing several awareness and sensitizing programme and prevailing upon the youth and local bodies to incorporate proper measures to prevent them.⁴ Twimuk Bodol which means “Collective of water” have taken up several issues such as eradication of borrowing money with high interest rates and brought together 11 families who were divided. Another SHG, by the name Kha-thansa Bodol meaning “A united Group” of Chankola Village of Khowai Tripura District was the enlightening group for the development of the village. “The bank officials are very happy over the attitude of the members of this SHG as they are very regular in payments. By looking at the good progress we have made, three more SHGs are established in the nearby villages”, said Mrs. Tamari Debbarma, President of the SHG. They have organized meetings with neighbouring SHGs in their village and made a collective resolution to concentrate on issues that destroy peace. They have united two SHG groups of their village which had misused the money and broke into misunderstanding and enmity among one another. Mrs. Tamari Debbarma exclaimed, “As I look at the progress of our SHG, I am indeed very much excited and feel great. We are

¹ Interview with SHG group on 10th January 2016

² Unpublished document of DSSS, Imphal, 2016

³ Peace Initiatives in North East India, April 2015, NEDSSS publication

⁴ Same as iii

enlightened to be the light of the village and the society".⁵ Transformations take place at the personal level as well as the level of awareness on peace and related issues increase for the participants. Members of these SHGs have reported several positive outcomes from the training and education they have received on peace and conflict resolution. For instance, Mrs. Sirawon from Vashintang reflected that conflict resolution and management skill she learnt from the workshops and trainings have helped her in coping with her drunkard and constantly quarrelsome husband. She confided that she can now handle her husband's intermittent complains and outbursts without anger and impulsive reactions on her part. She has succeeded in convincing her husband to drastically reduce his drinking habit. She hopes that she would be able to help him wean his drinking in course of time. Another lady, Mrs. Philasing of Dungerei also confided that the peace and conflict resolution trainings helped her ease a long time constraint and uneasy relation she has had with her immediate neighbour. The peace and conflict resolution trainings and education has also made women more conscious of their responsibilities and roles in the family and raise their confidence. Mrs. Philayo confides that the conflict management and resolution skills she acquired have been very helpful in managing conflicts within and outside the family. It has, at the same time, broadened her perspective and responsibilities as well.⁶

School peace clubs: Another initiative taken by NEDSSS and its partners is integrating peace into formal education system. The school authorities are first consulted informally and then the concept of peace education is introduced to them in the form of personal meetings which is followed by a formal introductory training. Following this, many more trainings and workshops are conducted for them over time. As the schools get involved, the concept of peace clubs are introduced to the children and voluntarily the clubs are formed. Membership of a club is around 30 to 45 each. The peace club members are trained on conflict resolution skills, life skills, human rights and other related topics. They are also taught to appreciate and value different races and religion. Regular monthly meetings and other activities are carried for the peace clubs as well as by them. A teacher or two of the school are also inducted to help with the functioning of the peace clubs. Many interventions have been taken up by the peace club members like – resolve conflicts at peer & family level, cleaning drive, planting of trees, visit to hospitals & orphanages, peace garden, competitions like drawing, debates, helping less privileged children, sports, rallies, observation of peace day. Interestingly, girls make up around 60% of the total membership in a peace club. Becoming a peace club member not only encouraged them to take up social actions but also helped them in transformation at the personal level. Here are some stories⁷ Priyanka Debnath became a peace club member when she was in class VI. It has helped her to have inner peace which has helped her to study better and secure good marks in maths and social science. It has helped her to channel her emotions in a proper way. For instance, whenever she feels angry, disgust or fear, she writes it on a piece of paper and then tears it, walk in the garden or listen to music without hurting anyone. She shared her learning with her family. Wahida Sultana is a class 8 student who joined peace club in 2015. She has learnt why she should accept people from different communities, inner peace, the value of respect and kindness, giving to the poor and

the importance of treating everyone equally. She has learnt how to express her feelings without bottling it up within through different means such as writing down on a piece of paper, drawing on it etc. Peteneinou Celina Zao is a class X student and a peace club member since 2014. She said, "Through these many years, I have learned how to maintain peace within myself and how to share peace with others. I have built my confidence in standing in front of a crowd without fear, speak fluently without hesitation and to meditate and stay calm whenever I am stressed". Several actions have been taken up such as replanting the peace garden, clean the school compound and repair the school banner. Lodevino Natso is a class X student and a peace club member since 2015. She has learnt to maintain peace within herself, her family and friends. She also has gained confidence to stand in front of others, speak fluently without any hesitation and meditate and stay calm whenever she is stressed. She has also been part of her peace club in repairing the road of the school; clean the surroundings replant the peace garden and repaired the banner of the peace club. Nevelu, a class X girl claims her ability to stand and speak in front of a crowd is because of many leadership trainings she has attended after becoming part of Peace Channel. Yepli Yephthomi, a class X girl spoke during a District Level Consultative meeting of Churches and NGOs against violation of Girl Child Rights. Swapnanil Deb Nath, another class IX student learned about personality development, antiwar toys, conflict resolution, discipline and dignity of all human beings. She said, "as a student, the learning helped me a lot, in developing my morality, be honest and first of all to be a good human being, being in peace with others and treating everybody equally. She resolved a quarrel between members of two teams during a cricket match. Ankita Chakroborty, a class IX student, a peace club member shared that she has been taught on human rights, inner peace, discipline etc. she said it has helped her to be a better person, live in peace with others, been helpful towards the needy. She has taken several actions after what she had learnt through the peace club like helping her friend in solving maths problem, stop fight between two girls fighting over a pen and an old lady who was very sick. Sneha Acharjee, a class IX student, through her membership as a peace club member, shared that it brought changes in her attitude and behavior. It helped her to be wiser and understand better what it really means to have peace. The strength of the peace clubs lies in equipping them with advice, structure and an alternative group membership. However, the stories do not just explain that they want to join groups, they also explain how this process takes place, through powerful leaders, friendship groups and when the group is fulfilling an un-met need; in particular by boosting their confidence to take action and personal growth. As McCann said, "women are the worst affected in conflict situations, yet with few exceptions they are glaringly absent or underrepresented in virtually all bodies directly concerned with conflict resolution and peacebuilding" (2000, p.166). Interestingly, though the NGO and its partners were able to bring some kind of change at the village level in term of the participation of women in peacebuilding. It did not have much impact when it came to inter tribe/leaders of civil society and faith based leaders' peace dialogues and other discussion forums. The participation of women was totally absent or at minimum especially during peace dialogues where conflict took place between different communities.⁸

⁵ Same as iii

⁶ Same as iii

⁷ Unpublished documents of NEDSSS, 2016-2017

⁸ Official reports documented for dissemination of studied NGO and partners

But inspite of this drawback, the organization has done a commendable job in promoting the participation of girls and women at the very grassroots level.

Conclusion

Men tend to dominate the formal roles in a peace building process; there are mainly male peacekeepers, male peace negotiators, male politicians, and male formal leaders. Power is unequally distributed between men and women and the majority of women do not have a voice in local and national decision making processes. However, women do play an important, if largely unrecognized role, in peace building. The underlying assumption is that women involved in these processes will help design a lasting peace that will be advantageous to the empowerment, inclusion and protection of women (<http://www.peacebuildinginitiative.org/index.cfm?pageId=1959>). From the preceding narratives, it is clear that women/girls given a chance can play effective roles in their community lives in mitigating conflict and building peace. To conclude, thus, this does not necessarily mean that women's participation should be considered as the crucial element in successful peace building, but that to understate their contributions is also taking a position—one detrimental to the attainment of peace. Women are equally as capable of constructive participation in peace negotiations and promotion processes as men, and so their continued marginalization denies peace builders fifty percent of their potential resources for problem solving and for creating change at every level. Thus, without essentializing women's participation as the deciding variable, one can safely conclude that women's participation does have a positive impact on achieving lasting peace, and that the more substantial the women's participation—particularly in civil society groups and in the formal government—the greater the potential for their contributions (McCarthy, 2011).

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