AMPLIFY WOMEN’S VOICES
AFGHANISTAN, PAKISTAN AND INDIA together make up one of the crossroads of Asia. Long before this region became synonymous with protracted conflict and bitter inter-state rivalries, it was a hub for the exchange of goods, ideas and people across the vast Eurasian landmass. Civilizations and strategic regions intersect at this location, placing them forever in a symbiotic relationship with the world around them. In recent decades, it has become hard to narrate an Afghan, Pakistani or Indian story entirely divorced from the reality of internal and international conflict.

THE WOMEN’S REGIONAL NETWORK
Founded in 2011, the Women’s Regional Network (WRN) is a network of individual women civil society leaders from Afghanistan, India and Pakistan working together to strengthen women’s rights to ensure peace and security in the region. WRN is animated by a vision of women working collaboratively within and across borders, to listen to and learn from each other to construct a common agenda towards equitable and sustainable development in building a just peace.

At its launch, members of the Network identified interconnected areas of concern — militarization, extremisms, corruption and lack of security — as a priority for all three countries. WRN networks in Afghanistan, India and Pakistan are autonomous but work in close coordination with each other. Network members in each country have invited others to join and establish working relationships with individuals and organizations working for women’s rights in their respective countries.

THE COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS
How do you take discussions about security, conflict, militarization and governance outside elite security policy circles? How do you bring more women’s voices into this discussion? How do we integrate their experiences and concerns into the security discourse? Brainstorming around these questions generated the idea of Community Conversations.

The “Community Conversations” process initiated in 2011 was one of the first activities undertaken by the Women’s Regional Network. It evolved organically in each of the three WRN countries, adapting to different ground realities. The resulting documents reflect this diversity clearly — the methods are different, the questions are different, and the perspectives vary.

At the core, however, a few things remained the same in every country. We sought out women who live and work in remote and conflict areas to understand their experiences, fears and insecurities. Our objective was to document the impact of militarization, extremisms, and corruption on their ability to access rights and justice. The Community Conversations emphasize women as survivors and make visible their agency in everyday life and in resistance movements. They also acknowledge women’s contribution to the post-conflict processes of justice, peace, and social reintegration.

This process has generated rich and detailed accounts from Afghanistan, India and Pakistan of the gendered social impact of politicized violence, militarization and corruption in conflict-affected areas. It anchors WRN’s work firmly in the real world of women’s experience. While the findings of each Community Conversation process remain context-specific, by identifying the common threads and themes, WRN will create cross-border strategies and seek common solutions.

REGIONAL CONTEXT
Across the region, the security agenda of states has undermined the rule of law and accountability. Escalating defense expenditures, declining social funding and predatory development models that exploit national resources and marginalize and displace communities have deepened structural inequalities. The growing democratic deficit and rampant
corruption are reinforcing extremist, militant and fundamentalist ideologies. As such, the region has become a playground for private and state actors with global geo-strategic interests. Unfortunately, people, especially women, pay the price.

THE AFGHANISTAN PROCESS
In Afghanistan, WRN members visualized a dialogue-based research process. They partnered with “Equality for Peace and Democracy (EPD)." A total of 40 focus group discussions were organized, each featuring between four and six participants across eight (out of 34) Afghan provinces — Kabul, Balkh, Bamyan, Faryab, Herat, Kandahar, Nangarhar and Kunduz. In other words, the Afghanistan Community Conversations engaged around 160 women, including high school and university students, teachers, health care workers, civil society activists, government workers and home-makers. The findings from the focus group discussions were supplemented by key informant interviews at both national and provincial levels.

THE PAKISTAN PROCESS
WRN Pakistan chose to focus on Swat and Balochistan because conflict is ongoing in both locations, allowing a rare contemporaneous glimpse of the impact of conflict on women’s lives. Dr. Saba Gul Khattak and Dr. Nazish Brohi undertook the project on WRN’s behalf. Conflicts in both sites have historic underpinnings and both have been affected by the “War on Terror.” In Swat, the conflict is relatively contained both in terms of its location as well as the number of conflict parties (Tehrik-e-Taliban and the army). In Balochistan, multiple conflicts play out simultaneously — ethnic, sectarian, resource battles, for starters, and the role of the army is less well defined. The researchers used qualitative interviews with women and focus group discussions to gather data. In Balochistan, the group discussions engaged 22 professional women across ethnicities but based in Quetta; 20 young women between 18 and 30 years, from urban and semi-urban working class backgrounds, coming from five towns; 18 ethnically Baloch peasant women from three troubled areas; and conflict-displaced Baloch women. In-depth interviews were done with ten of these women. In Swat, ten detailed interviews and one focus group discussion with 18 participants of diverse backgrounds were undertaken.

THE INDIA PROCESS
The India Community Conversations were focused on “conflict affected areas” and interpreted the notion of conflict situations as broader than a “militarized zone.” The result is a mix of conventional conflicts engaging with the border districts of Jammu and Kashmir and Tripura, peoples’ democratic resistance movement against land acquisition and dispossession in Jagatsinghpur, and communal violence and its aftermath in Kandhamal, Odisha.

Data collection was done through a combination of methods — one-to-one interviews, home visits, focus group discussions, town hall meetings and structured seminars. Site visits were also undertaken and interviews done with affected women, civil society members and grassroots political leaders. On an average, each study drew on about 15-20 days of field research. The researchers were aware that reaching women without “going through the men” would be a challenge. The report flags the reality that research projects of this nature require sensitivity and pose risks to both researchers and their respondents, equally. Talking to women, in particular, poses an additional complexity in view of the patriarchal control within family, community, and struggles.

KEY ACTIVITIES IN 2013
• Updated Annotated Bibliography on “Effects of Corruption, Extremisms, and Militarization of Aid on Women’s Security in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India
• Revised two Concept Notes on the Effects of Corruption and Militarization of Aid and Development on women’s security
• Held stakeholder Meeting in Kabul, Afghanistan, April 2013
• Established Regional Office in Delhi, India
• Launched Women’s Regional Network website
• Convened Regional Consultation Meeting in Delhi, India, November 2013
• Released Executive Summaries of Country Reports with key findings and recommendations for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India
• Established a social media presence
• Commissioned a communication strategy by a top PR firm

Survivor Women of some of the worst Kandhamal violence.
DONATIONS IN 2013 TO WRN
$25,000 – $50,000
Channel Foundation
Open Society Foundations

$10,000 – $25,000
Cynda Collins Arsenault
The Arsenault Family Foundation
Beyond Our Borders Special Interest Fund (Housed with Women’s Foundation of Colorado)
Lynda Goldstein
Ford Foundation
Jane Hays
Mama Cash
Linda Mason
United Nations Development Program

$3,000 – $10,000
The Cloverleaf Foundation
David and Joan Hadden
Tricia Nichols
Mary Zinn

$1,000 – $3,000
Robert Hickler and Ann Lederer
Patricia Foley Hinnen
Mary Sissel
Eliza Woloson

Up to $1000
Linda S. Gore
Regina Gray
Janet Larson
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Amy Claire Wild, Global Marketing Strategist
Sima Samar, Chairwoman of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission

STAFF
Jenifer Carpenter, Executive Assistant
Patricia Cooper, Founder/Convener
Women’s Regional Network (Pro Bono), Emeritus Director, Pathfinder International; Fellow, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University
Rangina Hamidi, Outreach Coordinator
Founder and President of Kandahar Treasure, the first women’s private enterprise in Kandahar
Chelsea Soderholm, Regional Coordinator
Regional Coordinator based in Delhi, India, Previously served as a Project Coordinator for the South Asia Forum for Human Rights.

WRN WORKING GROUP MEMBERS
AFGHANISTAN
Wazhma Abdulrahimzay, Human Rights Program Officer, Open Society Afghanistan
Judge Najla Ayubi, Deputy Country Representative, Asia Foundation, Afghanistan
Selay Ghaffar, E-D, Humanitarian Assistance for Women and Children in Afghanistan
Rangina Hamidi, Founder, Kandahar Treasure, Kandahar
Nargis Nehan, E-D, Equality for Peace and Democracy
Huma Safi, Deputy-Director, Equality for Peace and Democracy, Former Program Manager, Women for Afghan Women
Hossai Wardak, Former Deputy Director, Equality for Peace and Democracy

PAKISTAN
Shad Begum, E-D, Association for Behavior and Knowledge Transformation, Peshawar
Huma Fauladi, E-D, Rights, Research and Development Foundation, Quetta
Farhat Parveen, E-D, National Organization of Working Communities, Karachi
Kishwar Sultana, Director, Insan Foundation, Islamabad

INDIA
Abha Bhaiya, Founder, Jagori and Nishtha, Dharamsala
Bishakla Bhanja, National Alliance of Women, Odisha, Bhubaneswar
Sahba Husain, Independent Gender Researcher, Delhi
Anuradha Bhasin Jamwal, Executive Editor, Kashmir Times, Jammu
Rita Manchanda, Director, South Asia Forum for Human Rights, Delhi
Patricia Mukhim, Editor, Manipur Shillong Times, Shillong
Binalakshmi Nepram, Founder, Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network and Arms Control Foundation of India, Delhi/Imphal
Swarna Rajagopal, Founder, Prajnya Trust, Chennai
Saumya Uma, Independent Researcher on Gender, Human Rights and Law, Mumbai

WOMEN’S REGIONAL NETWORK
AFGHANISTAN • PAKISTAN • INDIA
Women’s Regional Network, c/o The Colorado Non-Profit Development Center • 789 Sherman Street, Suite 250 • Denver, CO 80203
www.womensregionalnetwork.org • info@wrn@gmail.com
www.facebook.com/WomensRegionalNetwork • @WRNnews