

**BEYOND 2020: TAKING LEADERSHIP AND ACTION TO REALIZE THE
WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA**

WPS FOCAL POINTS NETWORK HIGH-LEVEL SIDE EVENT

16 SEPTEMBER 2021

**Intervention by Civil Society Representative
Women's Regional Network**

STATEMENT

by Dr. Saumya Uma

Board member, Women's Regional Network & Professor, Jindal Global Law School, India

Respected chairs and members of the WPS Focal Points Network, ministers and senior officials from 82 member states, heads of regional organizations who are part of this Network, colleagues and friends,

I am Dr. Saumya Uma, a law professor working at the intersections of human rights, gender and the law, hailing from India. I speak on behalf of Women's Regional Network – a network of civil society leaders working together to advance women's rights and regional peace in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

As women peace builders and women's groups working in the South Asian region, which is rife with internal conflicts and a subversion of women's human rights, where the line of distinction between everyday violence during the so-called peace times and war-time violence is blurred by a continuum of threat to women's safety, the women, peace and security agenda is extremely close to our hearts. We are gratified to be invited to place our concerns before the esteemed members of the WPS Focal Points Network at this important event.

Women across the South Asian region have continued to be subjected to a common pattern of gendered inequalities and subversion of their human rights to live with dignity and security. Such subversions, which are often normalized and treated as the inevitable collateral damage of wars and conflicts, are rooted in patriarchal notions and misogynist practices, leading to a low socio-economic status of women, and multiple layers of marginalization in all spheres of life.

In recent times, women have been targeted for their important contribution to peace, security and justice in their roles as judges, lawyers, medical professionals, academics and educators, journalists, human rights defenders, peace activists, justice seekers and community peace builders. Women's act of taking on non-traditional roles have made them highly vulnerable to militarized tactics, open life-threatening confrontations, and direct targets for killings and violence, including but not limited to sexual and gender based violence. WRN has been able to document women's lived realities, the work they do, the challenges they face and the aspirations they have through a series of field-based research and advocacy reports across the three countries, called Community Conversations (available [here](#)).

Women have faced gender-specific intimidation and threat of reprisals in order to silence their voices, stifle any form of dissent or call for justice and accountability of perpetrators for violations of women's human rights. This poses formidable challenges to their work in empowering women living in the grassroots and at the margins.

For example, in Afghanistan, while there were escalating attacks against and killings of women peacebuilders during the recent peace process between the government of Afghanistan, the United States and the Taliban, now, with the Taliban seizing control of the country, such women and their

families are at grave and imminent risk. A handful of such women were evacuated from the country. But a large number of women peace activists and human rights defenders continue to courageously defy and challenge the dictates of the Taliban, thereby placing themselves at grave risk of being killed. (Our position paper on Afghanistan is available [here.](#))

In Pakistan, women peacebuilders face threats of physical and sexual violence disproportionately from their male counterparts. Additionally, those from religious minority communities face the imminent risk of being arrested and prosecuted under the draconian blasphemy law, and subjected to other human rights violations in custody.

In India, they face the threat of being arrested under national security laws, and languishing in jail as under-trials for years without bail. Women peacebuilders from marginalized communities, such as *Dalits* – an oppressed caste, *adivasis* or tribals, religious minorities, trans and queer communities (such as *Hijras*) face additional threat of sexual and gender based violence, both from members of dominant communities and from state actors.

As human rights defenders and peace builders from Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, we face a range of violations and threats of violations - ‘honour’ killings, acid attacks, arbitrary arrest and detention under blasphemy and other repressive laws, custodial torture, rape and extrajudicial killings, cyber violence, and targeted violence by state and non-state actors. The threat of such heinous crimes hangs like a dagger on our heads even as we do our lawful and peaceful activities of empowering women, building peace and demanding justice and accountability for violations of their human rights.

Additionally, across South Asia, there is an exponential increase in the population of internally displaced persons (IDPs), with a large majority of them being women and girls. They are displaced due to conflict, political upheaval, militarization, predatory development supported by government policies and private projects, land grabs and natural disaster. Such displacement leads to a violent uprooting, a loss of home, livelihoods and communities, existing standards of living, social support networks and comfort zones, and triggers discontinuities and disruptions.

Needless to say, such forced displacement is experienced disparately, disproportionately and especially adversely by women and girls, children, persons with disability and the aged. The [Statement of Principles](#) and the [Call for Action](#) on Gender Issues in Displacement Across South Asia, by the participants of the Women's Regional Network Summit on Forced Displacement & Gender in South Asia Kuala Lumpur, 27 February – 1 March 2019, contains further details of this phenomenon and can be accessed here.

The significant progress made on creating a safe space for women human rights defenders and women peace builders at the community level, is in serious threat of being eroded, breached and nullified in South Asia, taking the clock back to the condition in the pre-2000 era before women's peace and security agenda came into public discourse in an impactful manner.

South Asia is one of the few regions in the world that has no regional human rights mechanism. The governments of Afghanistan, Pakistan and India are member states of international human rights treaties including CEDAW, but there exists a chasm between commitments made to the global community and their actual implementation at the domestic level. Although peace builders in all three countries have taken concerted efforts to implement UN

Security Council Resolution 1325 and accompanying resolutions at the ground level, the governments have persisted in their dismal failure to do so.

What role can the members of this Network play, you may ask. We believe that there are five potential areas of intervention. We request and urge the members of this Network to

- a) **appeal to the South Asian governments to honour their national and international obligations of human rights**, implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and other related resolutions, and support Afghan women's rights and the human rights of all women in the region, particularly those living in the margins;
- b) **collectively raise your voice to end the ongoing tensions between Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan and restore peace and justice**; advocate for the normalization of the ties between them for long-lasting peace and stability in the entire interdependent region, while ensuring that justice is not made a casualty of peacebuilding efforts, particularly for the heinous violations of women's human rights;
- c) **promote cross-border peacebuilding and justice seeking initiatives among South Asian women's movements and civil society actors** to strengthen efforts at regional strategizing and cooperation for raising their voices to advocate for women's equal rights, especially in Afghanistan, but also in Pakistan and India, and beyond. Such an act would enable the building of regional strategy-sharing and solidarity, and a common thread of togetherness among women peace builders in South Asia, regardless of their caste, class, ethnicity, religion, gender identity and sexual orientation, while also recognising that women are not a homogenous community and that women with marginalised identities face disproportionate challenges

to protection and promotion of their human rights and that of the communities they work in;

- d) **integrate women's voices and leadership at all levels of law and policy discourses, peace negotiations and decision making processes** and to counter discrimination and exclusion of women; and
- e) **continue to include South Asian regional women's rights networks and organizations in events such as this** to bring the concerns of women peacebuilders from our region to this network.

Women human rights defenders, justice seekers and peace builders in South Asia have exercised their agency, asserted their rights, amplified the voices of women at the community level, supported women's pursuit of peace, justice and accountability, and have fought against entrenched patriarchy and misogyny at all levels with resilience and courage towards building peaceful and just societies. It is now your turn, as the esteemed members of this Focal Points Network, to extend solidarity and support to our work, not merely through words but through concrete action.

Thank you.

Dr. Saumya Uma

The **Women's Regional Network (WRN)** is a network of women civil society leaders working collectively and collaboratively to advance women's rights and regional peace in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Its core purpose is to amplify the voices of unheard marginalized women, and with them address the interlinked issues of peace, militarization