

Opinion – Patriarchal Norms and Pathways to Peace

Written by Swechchha Dahal

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SWECHCHHA DAHAL, MAY 14 2023

Gender norms are becoming ever more recognised as a key factor in conflict. Power structures at local, national and global levels are shaped by the dominant ideas of masculine and feminine roles and behaviours. In patriarchal systems, this sees women's voices marginalised, rights undermined, and participation overlooked. These imbalances are reflected by the drivers of conflict and often block pathways to peace. Addressing patriarchal gender norms should therefore be placed at the heart of peacebuilding efforts.

At a community level, women often experience unnecessary hurdles to their involvement in conflict resolution and violence prevention. Nationally, governments in conflict settings rarely fully reflect women's interests and give minimal attention to the structural barriers and norms that affect women's participation and needs. And globally, highly masculine cultures remain dominant in public and private spheres, often discrediting people who seek to challenge patriarchal ideologies.

In conflict settings, women face particular and well-established risks, dangers and vulnerabilities. Sexual and gender-based violence, abduction, forced marriage and other atrocities are widespread. The UN rightly recognises the participation of women in peacebuilding as a key priority and has been promoting the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda since passing Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 at the turn of the century. Yet the equal inclusion of women in formal peace agreements and the gender-based provisions needed to ensure their security remain a distant prospect.

Research by peacebuilding organisation International Alert has shown how entrenched patriarchal gender norms are hindering peacebuilding efforts in four specific conflict contexts, namely Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Nigeria and the Philippines. Each of these countries has developed UNSCR 1325 WPS national action plans, yet each is struggling to promote meaningful and sustainable gender equality.

This is in large part because the effectiveness of responses to sexual and gender-based violence is routinely undermined by patriarchal structures. Gender norms refer to the standards of behaviour expected of women, girls, men and boys in social contexts. Patriarchal systems use structures of social power to justify the male dominance of political leadership, moral authority and economic control.

In Nigeria's Bauchi state, for example, traditional and religious leaders are very influential and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) cases are often handled by Sharia or traditional legal systems. These tend to prioritise settlements between families over the needs of the women and can lead to survivors being made to marry perpetrators. In the Philippines, social stigma and discriminatory dispute mechanisms have led to systematic underreporting of gender related violence. With patriarchal expectations making it difficult for women to come forward, effective intervention to assess and tackle gender-based violence is severely hampered.

Finding the right language to promote gender equality and protect women can also prove difficult. Focus groups in Kyrgyzstan have found that the concept of gender is generally perceived as a Western idea that poses a threat to traditional family relations. In line with the localisation movement within peacebuilding, effective interventions must seek to contextualise concepts and support local women-led networks. A Kyrgyz linguistic expert was able to develop a Kyrgyz language lexicon developed from work in five conservative Islamic communities across the country. Rooting

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this work in the local cultural context provided a necessary understanding of what was preventing religious leaders from tackling gender-based violence in their communities.

In many conflict contexts, an increase in the number of women political representatives has not led to the prioritisation and implementation of policies that support women's agency. Within patriarchal institutions, gendered behavioural expectations can hinder the participation even of elected officials. In Nepal, a quota system has contributed to a rapid increase in women's representation but not been translated into true equality and inclusion more widely. Women's participation has often been tokenistic and women are still patronised and portrayed as less capable. Patriarchal values have permeated the political institutions and provide an ever-present barrier to women representatives. Women's participation needs to move beyond quotas and numbers, towards genuinely equal inclusion.

To effectively counter prevailing value systems and establish new sets of values, it is important to undertake targeted, long-term interventions that address the deeply rooted political and cultural issues at play. Broader peacebuilding work, at both a field and a policy level, is consistently undermined by the prevalence of patriarchal gender norms. Addressing these norms therefore needs to be placed at the heart of peacebuilding advocacy, conflict resolution and policy development.

Engaging with men and masculinities is crucial in order to challenge patriarchal normative frameworks and transform institutionalised male dominance. It is impossible to examine patriarchal norms within institutions and communities without adequate inclusion of men and boys in peacebuilding programs and policies. Although the structural subjugation of women poses specific difficulties, it should also be acknowledged that men, boys and people of minority genders can be negatively impacted by patriarchal practices. People should be allowed and empowered to contribute equally to the pursuit of peace in their context regardless of their gender identity.

International gender equality frameworks like the WPS agenda are an important entry point for addressing gender dynamics in conflict and can provide a driving force towards women's empowerment. But achieving gender equality and building sustainable peace requires a deeper understanding of gender identities and societal power relations. Only by addressing the patriarchal norms and underlying social constructions of masculinity and femininity in a given conflict context can we truly hope to achieve gender equality and build sustainable peace.

About the author:

Dr Swechchha Dahal is a researcher and practitioner in the field of gender and peacebuilding. She has a doctorate degree in Conflict, Peace and Development Studies from Tribhuvan University and has worked on the integration of gender into peacebuilding programmes for organisations including Birkbeck University, International Alert, Mercy Corps and Saferworld.