

The
JOURNEY
of the
WRN

HerStory of a
Women's Regional
Network

A COLLECTIVE MEMOIR CAPTURING OVER A DECADE
OF PEACEBUILDING IN SOUTH ASIA AND BEYOND

BY CHELSEA SODERHOLM



WOMEN'S REGIONAL NETWORK
AFGHANISTAN • PAKISTAN • INDIA



13, IN 65

What we have in common yields to what is different but still we somehow forge from shared purpose, one thread of stories. Listen, these voices you ignore, reveal hidden realities, clues to your vaunted ambitions. You will not fix the world. They will, if you listen. Hoarse voices on deaf ears—how anyone ever built peace. And still, together, we worked, hope, words, hands, love, heart.

Swarna Rajagopalan
Founding Member, India
October 1, 2024



Girls at the Kuchi School in the Char Asiab Valley in Kabul Province. Photo Credit: Ellen Jaskol

Table of Contents

PREFACE: Letter from the Pro Bono Founder Patricia Cooper.....	3
CHAPTER 1: About the WRN	4
CHAPTER II: Activities, Events and Growth from 2010 to Today.....	6
CHAPTER III: Founding of the WRN	10
CHAPTER IV: Community Conversations	12
CHAPTER V: Advocacy and Programs of the WRN	15
CHAPTER VI: Lessons Learned	18
CASE STUDY: WRN as a Model – WRN East Africa is Born	22
CHAPTER VII: Storytelling from the WRN Members	26
CHAPTER VIII: The Way Forward – Passing on the Torch.....	28
CHAPTER IX: Gratitude.....	32
ANNEX A	36

WHISPERING FLAME

Each one of us is a beautiful pattern, on the never-ending quilt of our mothers, grandmothers, and their mothers and grandmothers

The cross-stitch crosses limits, questing a recipe of fragrance to harbor the hearts

Each one of us is a reflection of an ocean, of never-ending love and passion, of our mothers, grandmothers and their mothers and grandmothers sailing with sails of daring colors; and for the sparkling eyes of the nature that never wilts

Each one of us is a note of a symphony of never-ending dreams of our mother, grandmothers and their mothers and grandmothers

Weaving together the melody of feelings and prayers for the blissful ears and eyes of toddlers to come

Each one of us is momentous tale, In long and starry winters nights, told by our mothers, grandmothers and their mothers and grandmothers

That story of a strife and resilience to witness Mother – the Gaia, the Earth – living and breathing; and smiling upon us in content

Each one of us is a ray of light In the never-ending universe of our mother, grandmothers and their mothers and grandmothers

Space filled with wisdom nurturing the hearts, Like whispering sixth-sense, echoing and brushing

Posing a question, would you hold the torch?

*Kishwar Sultana, WRN Founding Member, Pakistan
March 6, 2020*

PREFACE

Letter from the Founder

The Women's Regional Network has spanned almost 15 years across conflicted borders and in some of the most dangerous countries in the world to be a woman. As the network sunsets in 2024, we want to take stock of our key achievements and identify what was left undone. This is our collective letter to the new generation of young feminists who want to boldly take up the women, peace and security agenda in South Asia, East Africa and beyond.

This memoir serves as both a reflection of the past as well as strategy for movement-building in the future. It draws on a number of internal reports including a 2014 report which documented how the WRN could be a model for other networks and a 2017 report on the WRN as a model used for the launch of the East Africa Chapter of the WRN. These reports also served to inform a 5-day symposium held in Guatemala with feminist leaders from seven Latin American countries to explore the viability of their own regional network. These reports are the result of dozens of interviews with founding members, members, global advisors, staff, and WRN supporters.

The WRN family members have been vital to the development of the vision, the implementation of the mission and ultimately the survival of the network through a global pandemic, numerous crises affecting South Asia and of one of the most tragic of all—the fall of Afghanistan in August of 2021.

Since 2021, Taliban authorities have enacted over 100 edicts and orders that virtually confine women to their homes and prevent them from accessing education, employment, or participation in public life. Under these restrictions, Afghan women and girls face deteriorating mental and physical health, increasing domestic violence, and the pervasive threat of violence and arrest for allegedly violating edicts. Floggings of women in urban areas has increased making the conditions for women and girls the worst in the world.

WRN has remained a flexible and adaptive platform to document rights violations against women and amplify their voices to advocate for policy changes.

The sunset of the network comes at a time of unprecedented crises in the world. Catastrophic climate disruptions, deepening inequalities within and among countries, the growth of authoritarianism and the attack on the basic rights of women, transgender people, minorities and indigenous people, has left us despairing if we made any progress in our vision for a more just, peaceful and sustainable world.

The Network's focus on documenting the voices of the most marginalized women in conflict regions across South Asia, has shown that sustaining peace requires addressing both the inequities and the marginalizations that fester and lead to armed conflict. Peacemaking and peace building must address domestic violence and structural inequalities between men and women.

As we prepare for unprecedented intersecting crises, we will need the talents of all of our citizens, men and women together, to work on humanitarian disasters and displacement on a scale never witnessed before. Our focus must be on the threat to all humanity. The removal of inequities and prejudice will be essential if we are to be successful in surviving what the 21st Century has in store for us. The Women's Regional Network is one model among many of how working together in harmony across borders can and will be the only way to address crises beyond our control.



Patricia Cooper October 2024

CHAPTER I

About WRN

INTRODUCTION

Established in 2010, the Women's Regional Network (WRN) is committed to amplifying the voices of marginalized women, often overlooked in the discourse surrounding peace, militarization, forced displacements, security, justice, and governance in the South Asian region and beyond. WRN's dedication to addressing these complex and interconnected challenges extends across countries, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka, as well as Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, where women often confront obstacles related to economic and socio-political inclusion, discrimination within the justice system, and varying levels of security affecting their lives. Guided by an unwavering commitment to human security and a gender-focused approach, WRN acknowledges that non-traditional crises and threats constitute "conflict" for women. These encompass scenarios where women's lives, safety, and peace are jeopardized, particularly for those experiencing displacement, trapped in armed conflicts, or subjected to exclusionary, divisive, and aggressive politics.

CORE PURPOSE

Amplify the voices of unheard, marginalized women, and together address the interlinked issues of peace and security, justice and governance and growing militarization in South Asia.

To this end, WRN connected women peace advocates, committed to working collectively within and across national borders in an open, respectful, learning environment. WRN presented an effective flexible platform for collaborating on research and analysis, joint advocacy and representation, and the implementation of well-designed initiatives. WRN developed and delivered specific advocacy campaigns to ensure that grassroots women's concerns and their voices directly shaped political discourse, policy development and program implementation. WRN viewed conflict from a women's lens which included what would not traditionally be considered

conflicts such as predatory development projects and communal violence incidents- however these were described by women as "war-like" situations for them.

We actually expanded the definition within WRN as to what do we mean by a conflict? Because generally, conflict is seen in terms of war, it is seen in terms of military oppression. But we started looking and understanding that conflicts are not only war related, but there are conflicts of destructive development processes. There are conflicts of communal violence. We became very inclusive in our documentation about different locations of conflicts. That was, I think, WRN. I think it was a very important contribution of the WRN, because it was not only capacity building, it was not only about training, it was about the very important voices of women to be documented and foregrounded.

—Abha Bhaiya, Founding Member, WRN India

MISSION

The Women's Regional Network is committed to a collaborative network to both strengthen the security of women and to enhance women's leadership to initiate and take action in preventing conflict, developing solutions to eradicate corruption and work collectively towards building peace across the region.

VISION

A network of women working within and beyond borders to ensure the enshrinement and protection of human rights; sustainable development and women's full participation in equitable growth to ensure a more peaceful and just world.



Photo Credit: Ellen Jaskol

CORE VALUES

- Commit to working as part of a regional and global movement that builds our collective voice, power and influence.
- Promote and sustain leadership that is participatory and inclusive.
- Support appropriate strategies to ensure each participant's personal security is safeguarded.
- Ensure transparency, accountability and responsible use of our financial resources.
- Strive for excellence, while being creative, bold and courageous.

MEMBERSHIP

The WRN Network was composed of members from across Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka and later with a chapter in East Africa (Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania). The network was intergenerational and intersectional with women of diverse ages from various ethnic and religious minorities from diverse geographic areas. Members were interdisciplinary, inclusive of activists, academics, journalists and human rights lawyers among others. The membership spanned various movements where members were leaders in feminist movements, labor rights movements, LGBTQI+ movements, peace building movements, migrant movements and more. The thematic specialization of the group was vast including experts on the gendered dimensions of displacement, tribal

rights movements, religious extremism, minority rights, political participation and peacebuilding to name a few. All members served as volunteers and used the platform to take on the bold agenda items they were often not able to take on in other platforms.

ROAD MAP AND CHECKLIST FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Future WRN models should invest in an initial gathering in which each member helps define the core values and the strategic plan. This initial gathering needs to focus on building ownership of the core values and the organization's goals. Discussions on the desired structure and accountability should also be clarified. The initial retreat can also assist in melding personalities and building relationships that are truly the core that drives the Network's activity.

Having women from all three countries coming together despite all of the politics and tension was really amazing. WRN made a huge impact by documenting the voices of women in remote areas (the Community Conversations). That was a big achievement. Later on, having joint advocacy in the region regarding WPS, that was the second thing that WRN contributed to- amplifying the voices of women from these remote areas.

—Huma Safi, WRN Founding Member, Afghanistan

CHAPTER II

Activities, Events and Growth from 2010 to Today

Over afternoon tea in Boulder, Colorado, Cynda Collins Arsenault, Elizabeth Roberts and Patricia Cooper decided a listening tour across South Asia was necessary to not only learn from women the breadth of the dire issues they faced, but to develop a strategy to improve women and girl's lives—today and tomorrow. Personal health issues prevented Cynda and Elizabeth from embarking on the tour they spent months organizing.

2010

Listening tour in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, with large and small groups of women from civil society organizations. Women unanimously agree a network would add value to their work; agree to focus on corruption and extremism as they impact women's security.



Survivor Women of some of the worst Kandhamal violence.
Photo Credit: Saumya Uma

2011

- Launch of Network in Nepal with four representatives from each country, plus international delegates. Network members add “militarization of aid and development” to their mission. Agree to document the experiences of women in remote and conflicted regions of each country.
- First annotated bibliography conducted on corruption and extremism as they impact women's security.

2012

- Governing structure established with a Steering Committee from the region.

Women at the initial Kathmandu Meeting included:

Abha Bhaiya, India	Tahira Abdullah, Pakistan
Najla Ayoubi, Afghanistan	Selay Khan, Afghanistan
Patricia Cooper, USA/Canada	Sabiha Syed, Pakistan
Rangina Hamidi, Afghanistan	Julie Shaw, USA
Huma Safi, Afghanistan	Jyotsna Maskay, Nepal
Swarna Rajagopalan, India	Madeeha Gauhar, Pakistan
Kishwar Sultana, Pakistan	Jane Barry, USA
Rita Manchanda, India	Kirti Thapa, Nepal
Mary Jane Real, Philippines	Tikka Dahal, Nepal
Binalakshmi Nepam, India	Anne Carter, Canada

- The Steering Committee held meetings in Dubai, Istanbul, and Islamabad.
- Second annotated bibliography on militarization as it impacts women's security. Both annotated bibliographies survey research in all major languages and resulted in background papers with findings.



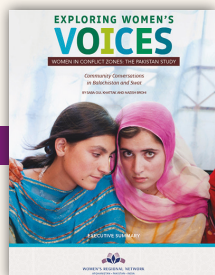
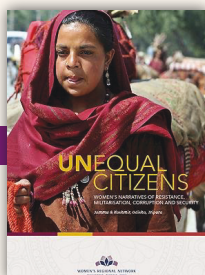
WRN founding Meeting, Kathmandu, Nepal, 2011



WRN Launch of Regional CCs, India International Center, 2013

2013

- Completed Community Conversations in all three countries.
- Convened a Regional Consultation meeting for 75 stakeholders at the India International Center in Delhi, India.
- Released India Community Conversations Report *Unequal Citizens Women's Narratives of Resistance, Militarisation, Corruption and Security*.
- Steering Committee Meetings in Kabul, Afghanistan and Dharamsala, India formalizing the operational norms of the network.



2014

- Released Community Conversation Reports:
 - > *Exploring Women's Voices Women in Conflict zones: The Pakistan Study in Quetta and Islamabad*
 - > *Surviving War and Transition Perspectives of Afghan Women in Kabul*
 - > Regional Overview released at the U.S. Institute of Peace, Washington D.C.
- Conducted a 4-day Advocacy Tour in Washington, D.C.
- Steering Committee meeting in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.
- The Steering Committee agreed to study a South Asia Women's Human Rights Tribunal.
- Held 1st Tribunal Preparatory Meeting in Nepal. Agreed to focus on women IDPs fleeing conflict.
- Established the South Asian Women's Emergency Fund for WHRDs, housed at Urgent Action Fund.

2015

Invited to attend, speak, present papers and or/workshops at:

- U.S. Naval War College in Rhode Island, USA
- WILPF's Women's Power to Stop War Conference, The Hague, Netherlands
- WRN Steering Committee Meeting held with organizational development expert, Stephen McComick
- Defying Extremism Regional Dialogue in Sarajevo, Bosnia Herzegovina
- Asia Pacific Regional Consultation on UNSCR 1325, Nepal
- Registered WRN in The Hague, Netherlands and established a new governing structure



WILF Women's Power to Stop War Conference, The Hague, Netherlands, 2015



L-R Cynda Collins Arsenault, Pres. Our Secure World; Patricia Cooper, Founder, WRN; Elaine Nonneman, Pres. Channel Foundation

2016

- Held 2nd Tribunal Preparatory Meeting in Sri Lanka.
- Released Tribunal Scoping Study Report, Community Conversations Reports and Regional Overview.
- Presented workshop at the AWID conference in Salvador, Brazil.
- Launched WRN Tribunal Scoping Study Report and conducted an associated advocacy tour in the United States and at USIP in September.



WRN Report Launch United States Institute of Peace, Washington, USA, 2016



Community Conversations, Assam, India, 2016

2017

- Community Conversations Report launch tour in India: *Homeless at Home Internally Displaced Women in India's North East*, Afghanistan: *Afghanistan's Internally Displaced Women: Complex Realities*, and in Pakistan: *Women in Conflict: Voices for Equality Internally Displaced Women from North and South Waziristan*.
- Launched Women, Peace and Security Online Course.
- Conducted organizational consulting on the WRN Model with 30 women activists and peace-builders from 7 countries in Latin America in Antigua, Guatemala.
- Invited to attend, speak, present, and/or consult at:
 - > UN General Assembly Preparatory Process for the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration
 - > The Carter Center, Atlanta, USA
 - > Halifax International Security Forum
 - > Renewed Canadian National Action plan on 1325 and associated advocacy in Ottawa
- Re-established Country Coordinator staff in offices across the region.



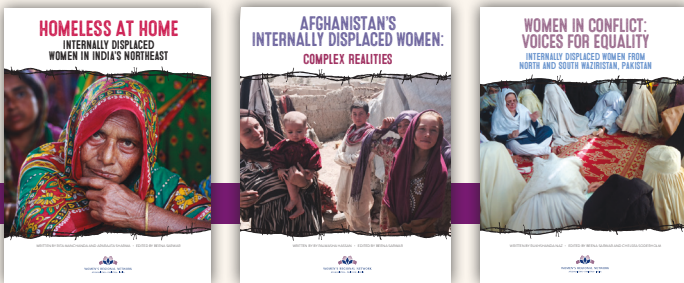
Afghan/Canada Women's Symposium, 2022

2019

- Summit on *Forced Displacement: Why Gender Matters* held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in late Feb. WRN supported over 85 delegates representing 17 countries including 2 UN Special Rapporteurs to participate in this Conference. A Statement of Principles and a Call to Action resulted from this consultation.
- WRN Steering Committee Meeting, Istanbul, Turkey
- 2nd WPS Online Course for students across South Asia



Summit in Kuala Lumpur, 2019

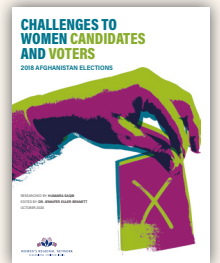
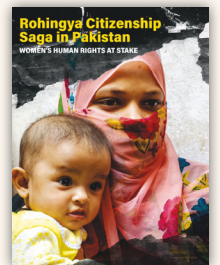


2018

- First Women, Peace and Security Online Course supporting students from across South Asia to engage with seasoned WPS professionals and earn a certificate.
- Community Conversations launches of the Afghan report, *The Cycle of Struggle A Human Security Perspective on Afghanistan's IDP Women*, in Kabul; the Pakistan report, *Shattered Souls Internally Displaced Women from Punjab, Pakistan*, in Islamabad and Lahore; and the India report, *Resistance Revisited: The Chutka Anti-Nuclear Power Plant Movement Madhya Pradesh*, in Delhi.
- WRN Sri Lanka Meeting, May 2018.
- Chelsea Soderholm COO and Padmini Ghosh attend RightsCon in Toronto, Canada.
- WRN Board Meeting Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

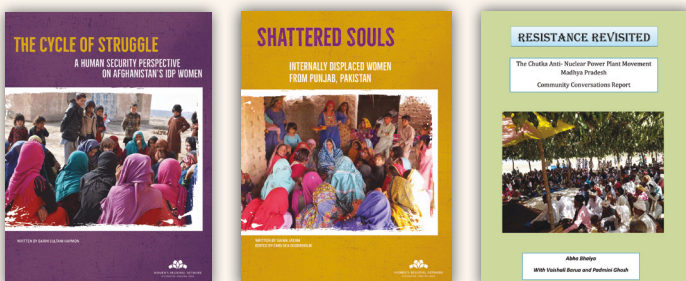
2020

- Rohingya Citizenship report *Rohingya Citizenship Saga in Pakistan: Women's Human Rights at Stake* released in Islamabad.
- Afghanistan Women Voting report *Challenges to Women Candidates and Voters: 2018 Afghanistan Elections* released in Kabul.
- WRN Webinar series connecting South Asian Countries on WPS and YPS.



2021

- Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021.
- WRN rapidly starts to raise funds for WHRDs safe houses and supports evacuations of staff, members and WRHDs at risk.
- 3rd WPS online course for students.



2022

- Fundraising Campaign—Women Globally Working to Protect Afghan Women, contributions to Women's Regional Network provided shelter, security and evacuation of Afghan women human rights defenders, supported over 450 families.
- *Afghan/Canada Women's Symposium* held in Ottawa, Canada brought over 80 Afghan women delegates from across Canada to address the needs of Afghan women both inside and outside of Afghanistan. A *Call for Action* to both the Canadian Government and the international community was released.
- WRN launched its Podcast series Women, Peace and Rights.



(From left to right) Sen. Marilou McPhedran, WRN founder Patricia Cooper and MP Iqra Khalid at the Afghan/Canadian Women's Symposium



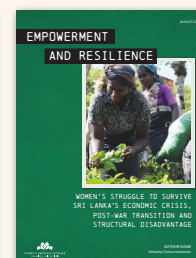
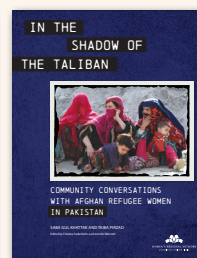
WRN Side Event at the 56th Human Rights Council with Richard Bennett, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan

2024

- In March 2024 WRN along with several partners hosted the event *Crimes Against Humanity in Afghanistan with a Gender Lens: Strengthening Global Coordination*. This was an official side event to the 68th UN Commission on the Status of Women, which WRN co-hosted and organized in partnership with the UN Permanent Missions of Afghanistan and Malta, Canada's Feminist Forum for Afghanistan, International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) and Peace Direct. WRN also launched its reports in the Office of Vital Voices in Washington D.C. and embarked on an advocacy tour on Capitol Hill.
- Women's Regional Network, India, in collaboration with the India International Centre, launched their CC report on 12th April 2024 at the India International Centre, New Delhi.
- In May, WRN's Afghan seed initiative Canada's Feminist Forum for Afghanistan, organized and delivered a special parliamentary event entitled *Combating Gender Apartheid: Another Step Towards an Equal World*. MPs and Senators from across the political spectrum joined together in Ottawa, Canada for a special parliamentary event.
- *Countering Gender Apartheid & Gender Persecution in Afghanistan: Call for Global Action for Accountability and Codification* was held on the sidelines of the 56th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council on June 19 at the Palais des Nations, Geneva, Switzerland. The event was hosted by Afghanistan's Permanent Mission to the UN in Geneva, Albania's Permanent Mission to the UN in Geneva, Center for Dialogue and Progress – Geneva, Women's Regional Network, Canada's Feminist Forum for Afghanistan, Womankind Worldwide, Atlantic Council Strategic Litigation Project, and the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security.
- The Community Conversation report conducted by WRN Sri Lanka was launched nationally and internationally.
- The 5th Women, Peace and Security Course is ongoing for 2024 led by WRN Pakistan.
- Conducted and launched a CC in Pakistan entitled *The Continuum of Insecurity and Violence: Voices of Afghan Women in Pakistan*
- Launched Pakistan's first Humanitarian Observatory

2023

- Working group meeting to decide on sunseting of the WRN held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.
- Refugee Day celebration in Toronto, Canada.
- Launch of seed initiative networks of the WRN: Canada's Feminist Forum for Afghanistan (CFFA), White Dot Solidarity Network (India) and Young Women Leadership Development Program (Pakistan).
- WRN Sri Lanka and WRN East Africa continue work with seed initiatives.
- 4th Women, Peace and Security Online Course.
- Several Afghan related advocacy meetings in the U.S. and Europe.
- WRN participation in Conference on Shaping Feminist Foreign Policy in the Netherlands November, 2023.
- Launch of the 2023 three Community Conversation Reports in the House of Lords, London, United Kingdom: *Suffering Unveiled—Afghan Women's Struggles Under the Taliban; In the Shadow of the Taliban—Community Conversations with Afghan Women Refugees in Pakistan; Women Seeking Security—Asserting Agency India Afghan Refugee Community Conversations*.



CHAPTER III

Founding of the WRN and Lessons Learned

CONCEPTION OF THE NETWORK

A listening tour was held across South Asia to determine the issues critical for women and whether a regional network would add value to their existing work. Through this tour followed by an annotated bibliography on the broader landscape of the region, the critical issues and gaps were identified.

Key Questions were asked across this listening tour:

1. Would a network of women civil society leaders be of value?
2. If it would be of value, what would you like the Network to focus on?
3. How would you do this?
4. Would you involve men? How would you involve the younger generation?

WRN Members who attended the first meeting in Kathmandu responded that “yes” a network would add value, they wanted to focus on extremism and corruption and its impact on women’s security.

“One of my very strong memories with WRN is the Founding meeting in Kathmandu, it was the first time I felt my voice was truly heard.”

—Judge Najla Ayoubi, Founding Member WRN, Afghanistan

Overall Key Achievements Identified by Network Members

1. The survival of the Network—women transcending diverse fault lines, face-to-face meetings were viewed as vital to keeping the network alive.
2. Empowerment of young women—bringing young women into the network, supporting them through activities such as the online WPS course, mentorship of young women staff and empowering them through WRN seed initiatives.
3. The Community Conversations was identified as the greatest achievement of the WRN. Agency and empowerment of women, critical documentation and potential use for future accountability mechanisms.

4. The rapid response funding for safe houses in Afghanistan before and shortly after the fall of Kabul supporting over 450 women human rights defenders and their families—over 3000 Afghans received shelter.

Overall Key Challenges Identified

1. Logistics: face-to-face meeting across conflicted borders with all the visa requirements, difficulties in moving funds to South Asia, human and financial resources.
2. Geographical size and diversity—for example for India it was difficult to capture the breadth of diversity and also difficult logistically to bring people together.
3. Structure as a volunteer network with one sole founder/fundraiser and limited staff made it difficult to implement activities without burnout—less sustainable in terms of structure.

“Well, you know, one thing is team effort. WRN is very much where it has worked, and we have done so in our community conversations, whether it’s in the process of discussing issues, finalizing agendas and so forth. I think of great value is the team effort that went into it, and when we had the conferences, the kind of camaraderie, the kind of solidarity, the sisterhood, very, very special. So there’s a very special quality in that.”

—Rita Manchanda, WRN Founding Member, India

For the first time it was great to see good coordination with our sisters across borders.

—Judge Najla Ayoubi, WRN Founding Member, Afghanistan

LESSONS LEARNED

- Existing trust amongst members working as part of diverse movements or having shared concerns is helpful.
- Careful expansion and vetting of new members as well as information sharing.

- Technical expertise is important but collaborative personalities are equally important.
- Creating a list of shared core values and a pledge to be signed is important while there should be accountability when core values are breached.
- Ensure intersectionality–diversity of voices, geographic, religious and ethnic minorities, caste, class and women with disability.

Regional Dialogues

- Require connectivity–through online dialogues or in-person and a staff member who organizes this.
- Responsiveness must be rapid and cohesive through a defined mechanism to speak as one voice but ensure democratic inputs into outward messaging.

Security

Severe deterioration in the situation for WHRDs in the post-COVID-19 era requires specific attention to risk analysis of activities. This is also dependent on the registration status of the network or if a loose network like the WRN an assessment of the potential threats to the members for involvement and cyber security are essential.

“Three of the lessons that I took away from WRN and I hope, lessons which will stay with me, professional, political and social: one is, of course, this wonderful coming together of women whom I love. I have always been engaged with Pakistan. I’m a member of several trans border networks with Pakistan, South Asian networks. But frankly, Afghanistan has never been part of any of those networks. So to get the opportunity to engage with Pakistan, with Afghanistan members, was amazing.”

—Rita Manchanda, WRN Founding Member, India

“I think we as feminists have problems in working out issues of transparency and working out issues of sharing. But one thing that I did take away, and that is really like a cherry on the top, is the care that women share is something you don’t get in other networks. Yes, and the laughter, even the crying, even the grief, the shared grief, that’s something that’s very much a part of a woman’s network. But I think there are things that feminists do have to work through, about trust, about transparency.”

—Rita Manchanda, WRN Founding Member, India

We managed to learn from each other’s contexts, experiences and successes and learned together how to use this regional platform to conduct joint advocacy at the national and international level.

—Judge Najla Ayoubi, WRN Founding Member, Afghanistan

ROAD MAP AND CHECKLIST FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

- Initial member selection: This is a critical decision as it will ensure the sustainability of your network and the ability to work and have credibility in the community, across the region and with donors internationally. In the case of WRN, Members were selected based on technical expertise and with recommendations from advisors in the region. The initial Board of Directors should be selected with in-depth insights from local communities on the ground and all of your civil society allies and alliances.
- Attention should be paid to engaging with and starting with western headquartered organizations operating in South Asia as these are often looked upon with suspicion.
- Specific strategies should be developed with how to develop and maintain regional connectivity and address security concerns.

WHY DO NETWORKS SURVIVE?

A number of aspects were mentioned in interviews:

- Consistency of the body of work: type of work (technical), politics, vision, impact.
- Communication style of members: open, like minded, non-conflictual.
- Timeliness: responding to urgent appeals in the region–being a relevant voice.
- Singularity of purpose: a specific purpose should be defined, purpose and mandate should be clear without too much diversion to avoid “mediocre in many areas but master of none.” This supports good fundraising and also credibility.
- Singularity of leadership: home grown, consistent vision, political capital to bring others in and sustain = simpler execution of activities.

CHAPTER IV

Community Conversations

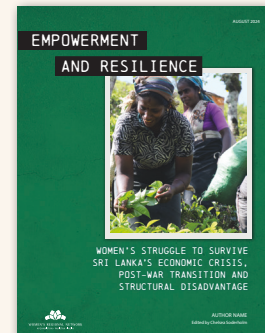
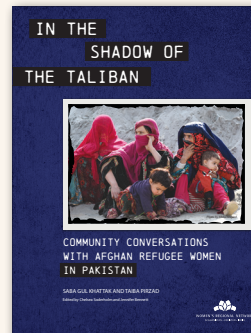
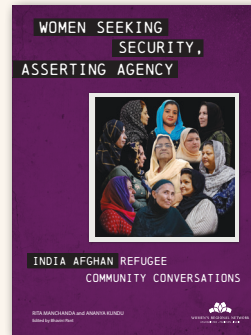
“So I started my journey as a feminist activist, and we started, very interestingly, what we are doing today with WRN. We started a feminist film collective in the 1990s and made six films to actually record and document women’s struggles all over the country, which were never documented. That was when I realized the power and the importance of documenting all of our struggles and really create archival material for our younger generation of people.”

—Abha Bhaiya, WRN Founding Member, India

ABOUT COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

- CCs are the cornerstone and unique contribution of the WRN to the WPS field with over a dozen publications.
- WRN always maintains a regional lens conducting research while in communication with the other countries, understanding the commonalities and divergences of the experiences of women in conflict and identification of common solutions or areas where advocacy should be focused.
- WRN almost always writes a regional analysis which serves as a key basis for larger regional trend analysis as well as larger scale advocacy efforts.
- WRN always includes well drafted recommendations at the end of each report to various stakeholders and thus the reports serve not only as a rare documentation of women’s voices but as an advocacy tool for the WRN and other groups.

See Annexure A for the baseline regional questionnaire for our most recent 2023 CC research. Each questionnaire was adapted to national contexts in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India and based on an original questionnaire for the CCs developed at the inception of the WRN.



Sri Lanka joined the WRN organically in 2018 after a consultation with diverse Sri Lankan activists as to whether it would add value to their existing work. Their first Community Conversation was completed in 2024.

“I have been a passionate women’s human rights defender, dedicating my life to empowering and advocating for the rights of women in my community. Now, I find myself without a job, living in constant fear for my safety. I have reached out to numerous organizations for evacuation, but no one has come to my aid. This has taken a severe toll on my mental health, and I feel utterly abandoned in my time of need.”

—Quote from a WHRD who wished to remain anonymous, Kunduz, WRN Afghanistan Community Conversations

“A week after the fall of Kabul, I remember that I wanted to go to school. They shut the doors of our school right in front of us and told us we are not allowed to enter the premises. I saw the boys of the other school entering the school premises and only girls were not allowed. I felt terrible being born as a girl at that moment. I felt less of a human because of the way I was treated due to being a girl.”

—Faristha, 11th grade girl, Nangarhar, WRN Afghanistan
Community Conversations

KEY QUESTIONS FOR THE COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS:

Power dynamics: researcher/subject

- Participants are not research subjects, but subjects who set the agenda of inquiry, are stakeholders and participate in the advocacy
- Participants are ‘experts’ & producers of knowledge
- Give strongest voice to women of the community, illustrate the experiences through stories and quotes

Emphasize structural barriers and intersectionality

- Prior informed consent, transparency of objectives
- Gendered lens: power relations interrogated
- Safety, care & solidarity: anonymity and integrity
- Trauma: taking responsibility
- Shedding assumptions: What is security? What is justice? What is closure?
- Careful listening to silences: documenting sexual violence
- Non judgmental: women’s vulnerability & resilience
- Flexibility and adaptation to context

Be conscious of:

- Going through the men
- Victimhood vs agency
- We know better!
- Re-writing globalized norms
- Learning to listen to women as ‘experts’

FROM THE FIRST COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

AFGHANISTAN

Violence against women in Afghanistan was all pervasive. Placed on the wrong side of power and hierarchies, women globally have faced interpersonal as well as structural violence.

PAKISTAN

WRN Pakistan chose to focus on Swat and Balochistan because conflict were ongoing in both locations, allowing a rare contemporaneous glimpse into the impact of conflict on women’s lives.

INDIA

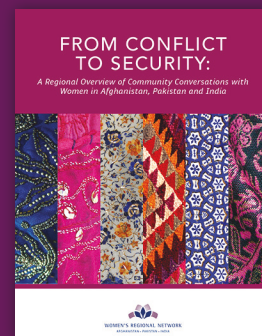
WRN India documented the impact of militarization, extremism and corruption on women’s ability to access rights and justice.

Emphasize was on women as survivors and made visible their agency in everyday life and in resistance movements.

The Conversations acknowledged women’s contributions to the post-conflict processes of justice.

REGIONAL OVERVIEW

In each round of Community Conversations there is a regional overview which identifies the interlinkages and the commonalities amongst women’s lived experiences in conflict zones. The recommendations map the way forward for joint advocacy and collaborative action.



ROADMAP FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

- Add more of an “action” element to the research in line with building indigenous local networks and capacity building with young people, promoting these communities to raise their own voices and undertake their own advocacy rather than being represented by someone else.
- Reflect on how to bring women with whom research is conducted into the network in a meaningful way.
- Research can draw more heavily upon quantitative data publicly available and conduct basic quantitative analysis to underpin the qualitative elements of the report to strengthen report findings and use it as an advocacy tool.
- This work has become extremely sensitive with the governments in many countries. A more in-depth risk analysis should be done prior to selecting communities to work for research or involve in a network.



Kandahar, Afghanistan Election workers wait for voters at a polling station during parliamentary elections. Photo Credit: REUTERS/ Omar Sobhani

“I really, really appreciated the community conversations and the way they were developed and grounded, both technically and in the design process. I also applaud the community priority areas that clearly came up and that there was a process that didn’t force them and allowed it to be more organic. For me, that was always so interesting, because reading what came out of it, and reflecting on that, is the kind of true feminist research and sharing voices that we really need. I was always happy and proud when those would come out, they weren’t just reports, they were primary sources. It wasn’t just research. It was real.”

—Jane Barry, WRN Facilitator

“Community Conversations should not be a one-off they should be the way policy is made.”

—Clare Lockhart, Co-Founder Institute for State Effectiveness, WRN Former Board Member

“I remember the day when the Taliban came, when the news came out that the Taliban is in Kabul city, I had a sudden moment of numbness as if my soul left my body. I felt partially dead because all I could think was that everything is over, our dreams, our life, our freedom, everything! I think about suicide every day. I only continue to live for my children. I am afraid of what their fate will be after me? Every day of our life becomes more difficult, I was a woman who two years ago was a platform and voice of marginalized women. And now I cry out my own struggles, but no one hears my voice.”

—Fatima, Former Journalist, Bamyān, WRN Afghanistan Community Conversations

CHAPTER V

Advocacy and Programs of the WRN

Some felt that advocacy at the national and regional level was very challenging. Various issues were raised ranging from the lack of a mechanism to lobby for WRN (for example in India on behalf of Afghanistan), to weak institutions, to lack of political connections. Many noted however the success in global advocacy efforts (led by founder Patricia Cooper) and this has been successful in raising the visibility of regional work, the issues WRN documented and providing a global platform to ensure women's voices were heard. However, some noted that advocacy efforts and tangible outcomes particularly nationally/regionally must be scrutinized. Many mentioned that there is a great deal of talking, even declarations but sometimes little action after that. Before and during the fall of Kabul, advocacy and messaging efforts were strong with several public letters written to key stakeholders in the United States.

“WRN was more about documentation, but advocacy, to be very honest, advocacy strategies in the region haven't worked the way we wanted it to work. We also planned to do an advocacy meeting with the women parliamentarians of these three countries, and we couldn't do it. So there have been also these memories that, although we wanted it, and we would have got a lot more mileage if we were able to reach out to these women parliamentarians or the SAARC members, we could have strengthened that. So that's my sense of a bit of disappointment. But we did not stop. We did not stop ever and whenever we were together, we were able to actually take our strategies and our understanding and our conceptual as well as practical aspects forward. So I personally feel there has been a mix of failure or disappointment or kind of moving backwards, and there has also been lot of gains, and that we stayed with Afghanistan is for me, very, very important.”

—Abha Bhaiya, WRN Founding Member, India

The WRN undertook several advocacy tours across Canada, the United States and Europe targeting key policymakers, while also addressing prominent media outlets, more can be viewed on the archival [website](#). These tours included joint key regional messaging developed by members.

EMERGENCY PROTECTION

The WRN was involved in different types of emergency protection work firstly with its Special Interest Urgent Action Fund which was developed to support WHRDs at risk. This was a successful model which was supported by the Urgent Action Fund (UAF). WRN had their own small committee of advisors that within 72 hours referred and confirmed the cases. This model helped numerous WHRDs at-risk to have the financial support and sometimes logistical support to get to safety particularly during the fall of Kunduz in October of 2015.

In July 2021 just prior to the fall of Kabul in August of 2021, WRN rapidly raised funds through a Go Fund Me Campaign that resulted in almost 500,000 USD raised. The timing allowed WRN to raise the necessary funds to establish 8 safe houses before August 15th. After the Fall of Kabul, WRN funds, through this campaign, supported another 12



HOW TO APPLY:
Applications can be processed on the WRN website (emerged). Furthermore, applications distributed through WRN's partners on the ground will also be considered to facilitate application for those without internet access.

The applicant would have to submit a budget. The recommendation and ultimate decision will be based on what is appropriate for their safety and that of their family under those circumstances. It is assumed that no more than two grants would be given to one recipient. The grant would flow through an accredited organization identified by the members of the Women's Regional Network. As in existing UAF grants, the maximum is US \$5,000.

HOW CAN I HELP?
Donate to today! Donations can be made to UAF Special Interest Fund entities: South Asia Women's Emergency Protection Fund.

www.womenregionalnetwork.org

MISSION:
THE WOMEN'S REGIONAL NETWORK IS COMMITTED TO A COLLABORATIVE NETWORK TO BOTH STRENGTHEN THE SECURITY OF WOMEN AND ENHANCE WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP TO INITIATE AND TAKE ACTION IN PREVENTING CONFLICT, DEVELOPING SOLUTIONS TO ERADICATE CORRUPTION AND WORK COLLECTIVELY TOWARDS BUILDING PEACE ACROSS THE REGION.

SOUTH ASIA WOMEN'S EMERGENCY PROTECTION FUND

WOMEN'S REGIONAL NETWORK
AFGHANISTAN • PAKISTAN • INDIA

Safe Houses operated by AWN, AWSDC and SRMO, NGOs based in Afghanistan. In total these funds supported over 450 Afghan WHRDs and their families, a total of over 3000 Afghans.

WRN witnessed gaps in the collation of information and mapping and information sharing in the entire journey of a WHRD from pre-flight, flight, post, flight and long-term solutions. WRN had proposed a mapping which started with a secure database of WHRDs at risk, provided training to them on security (cyber and physical) as well as planned evacuation strategies, then outlined cash drops, evacuation strategies and ensured their names were on viable international organization evacuation transport lists as well as follow up mechanisms and referral mechanisms. This was the proposal as a result of that fund back in 2015.

SOUTH ASIA TRIBUNAL ON WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS

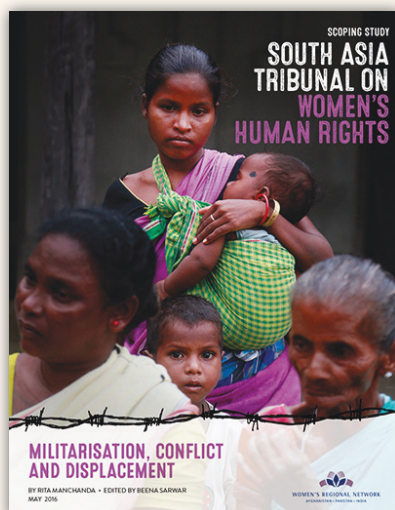
The aim of the Tribunal was to create a community led “South Asia Tribunal on Women’s Human Rights” as a public platform for women’s testimony across caste, class, religion, ethnicity and national borders to identify gender concerns and needs, to demand accountability for failure of the state to provide protection against abuses perpetrated by state and non-state actors, and to highlight innovative organizing around these issues to strengthen efforts for transparency, justice and institutions of good governance.

WRN created a preparatory committee and held two preparatory meetings, one in Kathmandu, Nepal and the other in Colombo, Sri Lanka to start this initiative. There was a promising funder but in the end the funds could not be raised for

this ambitious and high budget project. The Scoping Study, which lays out the legal, logistic and content related process can be found [here](#). This was one of the most comprehensive and well received publications to-date. In combination with this, WRN held a large-scale Summit in Kuala Lumpur on forced displacement and its impact on women and girls. See the Statement of Principles and Call to Action here: [SUMMIT 2019 | WRN \(womensregionalnetwork.org\)](#). The Tribunal is a task left undone and could be taken up by future generations.

WPS ONLINE COURSE

- Topics such as: WPS agenda, a feminist understanding of peacebuilding, justice and reparations, and South Asian country-specific discussions and case studies.
- Pro Bono lecturers included human rights and peacebuilding experts from around the globe as resource persons, including government-level advisors, lawyers, award-winning activists, researchers, UN special rapporteurs and Nobel Peace Prize nominees.
- Included lectures, seminars, assignments and open house sessions.
- Over the last three iterations of the WPS course, 400 students were trained in feminist peacebuilding and became part of WRN’s community.
- Effective tool to successfully engage young men and women across South Asia to deepen their understanding of the struggles and successes of this WPS movement, which has helped build up a new generation of informed activists.





Community Conversations, Islamabad, 2023

ROADMAP FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

- Advocacy efforts should be well thought out, one suggestion emanating out of the CC process was to conduct advocacy very locally which has much less risk associated and often greater impact on the ground.
- The South Asia Tribunal is still an idea that becomes ever more pressing as continuous violations of WHRDs occur. This is an activity with a rich background study and one which can be taken up by the new generations factoring in the new geopolitical situation and circumstances in South Asia.
- In WRN's protection work the project left undone is a regional protocol for WHRD protection. This requires mapping of the entire journey of a WHRD at risk who requires relocation and cash support. This collation of information between local organizations and international organizations as well as training and logistics components can be taken up in areas where WHRDs may need relocation for safety.
- The WPS course developed by WRN is a great initiative and was an important tool particularly during COVID-19. The online medium helps overcome unforeseen

challenges such as the situation in the pandemic but also ongoing political and logistical challenges such as visas across conflicted borders and high costs of travel for in-person meetings. This also allowed Afghan girls to attend despite being banned from school. This curriculum will be used by WRN's seed initiatives to take the course forward with leadership of the younger generation and can be modelled by others. This course requires a revision in terms of updating it on the current discussions on peace and gender and critiques of 1325 in the contemporary sphere.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the course provided a valuable opportunity to learn and enhance knowledge around the WPS agenda, particularly in understanding the gaps and challenges in its implementation. The course curriculum has evolved with each iteration, incorporating feedback and recommendations from both participants and moderators, ensuring its relevance and effectiveness.

The fact this course is offered free of charge has been particularly appreciated by participants, many of whom would otherwise be unable to afford such courses due to associated fees. Currently the course is being launched by the WRN Pakistan seed initiative.

CHAPTER VI

Lessons Learned

FUNDING AND REGISTRATION

WRN initially took the decision not to take State funding from any government as the network works in conflict zones where many states are complicit. This decision allowed the Network to:

1. Drive our own agendas and take on issues which are controversial and sensitive involving state accountability, for example, human rights violations by the military.
2. Ability to make solid and bold recommendations to the State and advance initiatives that aim to hold the state accountable for its grave violations of human rights in the region.

Registration

WRN was housed in the United States as the Founder was living in that country and receiving donations from mainly U.S. based women philanthropists. The WRN was registered in The Hague, Kingdom of the Netherlands due to: A. Political sensitivities that the United States is culpable in relation to conflict and displacement in the region. B. Did not want to have our 'Global Secretariat' be falsely viewed as a U.S. organization. C. The Hague is historically deeply entrenched in principles of peace and justice worldwide, and traditionally supportive of gendered agendas. D. Due to the crackdown on civil society by governments in the South Asian region and many NGO registrations being cancelled, did not pursue registration in any of the three countries. After losing its U.S. fiscal agent, WRN was approved for its own 501c(3) IRS status in the U.S. An accountant was hired and for several years and independent fiscal audits were conducted.

Important questions to grapple with if a loose network:

- Where to register depends on what is best for security of members, upholding principles of peace and justice, financial survival, and other logistical and related issues.
- If the context permits, it would be desirable to register in the country you are working in. Preferable to have proper documentation and legal standing. Be connected on the

ground. Many funds in the WPS arena require local organizations to apply, even when they are regional. WRN has been ineligible for a number of funds as we were not technically registered in any of the three countries and has been viewed completely falsely by many as an 'international INGO.'

- Choose a head regional office where money is easily moved, visas and travel are easy, government regulations are more lenient and possible tax exemptions for large foreign donors are still possible.
- WRN was housed in-country within existing civil society organizations which handled financial management, housed staff and performed other duties for a certain percentage of the incoming funds. If opting for this, select an independent organization (not one of the Board of Directors') with the capacity and skills to serve this role and ensure their credibility to avoid corruption. This is also a good way to link your staff person or network members together with existing local organizations.

Fundraising

The WRN relied primarily on a single person, the founder, Patricia Cooper to secure the funds needed to support operations and activities that advance the organizational goals. Various issues, such as restrictions for receiving foreign funds, fiscal agent issues, lack of opportunities in South Asia for raising funds remained an issue. It was noted that the fundraising responsibility should have been shared, and core resource mobilization strategies should have been adopted that would make the fundraising more sustainable. This was identified by Members as one of the most critical downfalls of the WRN structure although they recognized the funding method's usefulness in terms of flexibility and adaptability of the agenda of the Network. WRN had a great many individual and small foundation feminist organizations who provided ongoing support with core operations, not imposing parameters and allowing the WRN to be driven by the ground needs and agenda of the members in the region.

GOVERNANCE

By-laws, Resolutions and Policies

WRN did not have these documents in place at the beginning of the Network as it was housed at a fiscal agent, The Colorado Nonprofit Development Center, whose own governing policies and resolutions informed how WRN operated. Policies and Resolutions were established when WRN received its own non-profit status under the IRS in the U.S. These By-Laws are key to moving forward in a transparent way. In 2017, Chelsea Soderholm, the former WRN Chief Operating Officer, developed an HR manual along with organizing principles. It would have been better to have these documents in place sooner than we did. Transparency in all aspects is also key in hiring, decision-making, new membership and so on. Mistrust and lack of transparency have been identified by members as some of the key reasons many networks fail.

- ToRs of levels of membership should be clear with roles and responsibilities and time commitment.
- Mixture of regional (physically present on the ground) and foreign members but members in the region always form the majority.
- Draw upon Founding Members as a resource even in an advisory capacity.
- Women leading: female identifying people in the leadership.
- Agenda Setting: Remain flexible and adaptive to the changing dynamics of the region, be bold but realistic! National level members know their context best, always a bottom- up regional led approach.
- Decision-making: Decision-making structures should be clear from the beginning, particularly if staff are hired. Clear processes and protocols as to the role of the Board members, the membership in each country and the mandate of the Country Coordinators avoid misunderstandings and difficulties in implementation of programs, decision-making and reporting. In WRN's experience this was not very clear leading to a number of problems.

Autonomy

- Have trust in members to undertake activities in the name of the network
- Less oversight and more trust and empowerment of staff or volunteers

Membership

The WRN remained a voluntary-based network and was founded on this principle. Members were invited who were committed to movement building rather than project-based work. This was a key focus of the network and has allowed it to accomplish a great deal of work with minimal staff, minimal funds and difficult security and travel restrictions in conflicted areas. This is the core foundation of our model which has provided the network with both the resilience and flexibility to continue to operate in hostile environments and challenging funding situations. Members were identified through the existing membership of interdisciplinary activists who shared WRN's vision and represented intersectional geographic, ethnic, religious and other communities.

However, multiple considerations need to be taken into account:

- Some people are unable or unwilling to do volunteer work.
- Regular in-person meetings are key to maintaining the momentum, if necessary some members can join via virtual technology.
- Developing strong national core teams in each country is key to a good regional network.
- Decision-making: WRN used a consensus-based, democratic decision making style which allowed ownership of the Network and its outputs.
- Type of Network: Debated heavily on this issue of whether the network should be member based or not. We decided to always be run by a Board of Directors and are not member-based. WRN opted for an appointment system in which the new Board Directors are appointed by the existing Board of Directors rather than voted in by the larger membership or assembly. In this structure the Board of Directors play a key role in maintaining the vision, regional lens, feminist politics and the core purpose of the network as originally envisioned. The Network aimed to continue to be grounded in the South Asian Women's Movement and avoid party politics and state narratives.
- Removal of Members: Developing a short policy in the initial stages is key. This should be focused on violations of the core values of the network and a process should be in place for removal.
- Representation: Made significant efforts to include diverse geographical areas and various minority communities such as caste, class, ethnicity, religion, ages and so on recognizing the multiple layers of marginalization in the

South Asian context. Ensure connectivity to grassroots movements and ideally the membership will be from these movements.

Our mission evolved into the direct documentation and amplification of the voices of women in conflict zones. This was a process which crystallized over time.

COMMUNICATIONS AND CONTENT

Key Messages & Advocacy:

- Many regional issues affect all of the countries and are key to debate across the countries to develop key collective statements that can be kept for all public events and conference materials.
- Although theoretically not possible, remain as ‘neutral’ as possible amongst the countries and have outsiders as well as outside experts read the documents.
- Make sure messages and demands are clear regional ones with a clear “ask” in advocacy efforts.
- Take precautions and use encrypted messages, less phone calls and cyber security measures to protect yourself from state and non-state actors conducting surveillance.
- Reacting to incidents: As a regional network there should be immediate reaction, statements of support or condemnation of various incidents and acts that affect the security of women in the region. WRN has been relatively weak in this area but has managed to react swiftly to isolated incidents particularly during the fall of Kabul where letters were written to senior officials in Western governments to advocate for Afghan women and statement letters with recommendations to policymakers were drafted.
- ‘Community Conversations’—the Documentation of Women’s Voices: direct documentation with the use of their words, metaphors and strategies, crisp analysis and rigorous regional lenses applied.

“The personal stories were just heartbreaking and eye opening and inspiring. And I thought, wow, this is very different than anything I’ve ever worked on. I think, if I’m not mistaken, it was the first research paper of its kind to have all of these personal stories interwoven with background and policy recommendations so you could make that connection between what is happening on the ground and why we are making these policy recommendations. So it was just very eye opening for me.

—Kirsten Ankers, long time WRN Graphic Designer

“I’m so thankful that I can be a part of something so important. But I’m not risking my life to go out and interview people so I do take it very seriously because I want that message to get out there, I want people to read it, and I want it to make an impact. It was my job to bridge that gap between the information that these women gathered—and risked their lives to tell their stories—and the intended audience. That’s the role of the graphic designer, to create something that has visual appeal so people want to read it and it has clarity.”

—Kirsten Ankers, long time WRN Graphic Designer

MOVING LOCK STEP AS A REGION

- The value of the WRN is in the regional lens and the regional interlinkages that are foundational to the network. It is the commonalities of women’s lived experiences despite the different contexts, building upon local and national initiatives that has gained traction and added to local and national ongoing work. WRN maintained ongoing regional programs and regional overviews which almost always accompanied country reports.
- WRN recognizes the value of strong national groups and supports and links them together.
- Regional funding can be difficult and is often a case of contacting multiple (at times very disconnected) national offices and convincing them of the value of a regional proposal.

- Maintain the regional integrity of the network and encourage others to view and redefine both the issues and solutions as regional.
- Power as a region: the impact of regional advocacy cannot be overstated—when the WRN conducted high level global advocacy, policymakers were surprised to see women from the 4 countries together advocating for the same issues with common messages- some had never seen such a delegation before.
- Protection: WRN has been able as a network to speak out on issues when the person in-country could not, raise concerns on behalf of other members and provide support and solidarity where needed.

So I think I'm just a believer. I think that a regional approach is very important. I think we need to connect with each other. We need to know that we're there for each other. And I really think that the personal and human connection is far more important than the projects.

—Swarna Rajagopalan, WRN Founding Member, India

Documenting the Successes

Due to the nature of the work, outcomes and outputs can be hard to quantify and often WRN did not document its successes very well. Successes may be in the form of a legal battle won by a people's movement who utilized our reports as a key tool, or the use of our publications in various institutions or our recommendations being included in a country's Universal Periodic Review process. This documentation is not only important for donors and stakeholders but for a network to take stock of its impact and journey.

Keeping the Connection

Face-to-face meetings make a key difference. Despite the advances in technology, it is the face-to-face meetings and informal time spent together where the trust building, overcoming of deep seated biases and long-lasting relationships have developed that have brought the network to where it is today. This is not only true of the members within the region but our partners, supporters and friends around the world.

There are countless alliances, coalitions and groups that exist, but in this Network members have become family. Everyone has overcome huge obstacles within their societies, families and themselves and members continue to partner and align in countless ways across increasingly conflicted borders. All Members contribute to a true sisterhood and will continue the long-lasting regional movement for peace and justice despite the sunset of the WRN in its current format.

Focus on Cyber-Security

Now that the world has increasingly moved online, cyber security has become vital to the operations of CSOs, who must protect their members and the activists who participate in their activities. Although operating online is the solution that bypasses many of the challenges for the work, WRN experienced some serious cyber security concerns for its staff and members from both state and non-state actors.

ROADMAP FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS:

- Conduct an initial assessment. Have a diversified fundraising base, seek multi-year grants with longer term support, do not rely on one sole person or committee for fundraising. Ensure it is a collectively supported effort. Ensure qualified staff are in place to do this technical work as it should not be underestimated.
- Registration or functioning model of the network is an important discussion to be had with the above points.
- If a regional network, a person needs to be responsible for regional connectivity.
- If volunteer-based respect for people's time, private life and family matters must be balanced and cannot function as a network with tight deadlines.
- Have a clear regional strategizing document with SMART goals.
- Have a clear communication strategy and policy document.
- Select a model to track and document successes of the Network's programs.
- Remain adaptable in the dynamic context of conflicted countries.
- Ensure a security assessment including cyber assessment is done and a risk analysis for members and work.

CASE STUDY

WRN as a Model



WRN-EA Leadership

WRN EAST AFRICA IS BORN

“The WRN model is flexible and trusts women’s way of knowing, and this has given women human rights defenders, who are usually marginalized, the confidence to use their own narratives to bring peace to themselves, to individuals and the communities they serve ...”

—Ruth Ochieng, Co-Founder, WRN-EA Uganda

Longtime activist from Uganda, Ruth Ochieng, while at a retreat in Colorado, sponsored by Women have Wings, was introduced to Patricia Cooper. During their three-hour interaction, where they shared their journeys of defending women’s rights and facilitating women in different countries to build peace, Ruth realized the common dream they shared of building meaningful peace. This peace is driven by giving power back to women in communities to help communities re-learn from their home-grown peace initiatives that women have used for decades, to resolve conflicts and live in

harmony. Upon her return to Uganda, Ruth shared this great idea with some of her very close activists, in Uganda and Kenya, Joy Mbaabu being one of them. In 2018, with support from WRN, the 15 activists Ruth had identified met at Amani Communities Africa, in Kenya, where Joy is a Co- Founder, to visualize what and how the WRN model would look like in East Africa. After three days’ reflection, a moment gave birth to The Network that would be built on women’s spirituality informed by women’s daily journeys, and using the feminist conceptual frameworks and approaches as the basis in achieving women’s wholeness. The network found this to deeply connect with the founders’ values.

Indeed, the activists embraced the WRN model and called it a network “with a soul.” The Network has continued to use feminist ideology; indigenous knowledge, resources and spirituality, to optimize women’s agency and power to restore social cohesion in a region that continues to experience various forms of violent conflicts starting at the household level. In 2018 the regional office was registered and housed in Amani Communities Africa. In 2019 the Kenya chapter

was born, and in 2020 Uganda also registered. The network has continued to mobilize community women to profile their solutions for peace and defend the rights of women in Kenya and Uganda. The network hopes to roll out the initiative in all countries in the East Africa region, namely Tanzania, South Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

APPROACHES TO ENHANCING WOMEN'S WAY OF KNOWING

The Network has since tapped on to WRN and Patricia Cooper's strong approach of organizing and mobilizing women to hold conversations on critical concerns in their communities. The WRN has continued to support the WRN East Africa Network to document and mentor young women, as a way of facilitating them to re-identify and re-define themselves for effective intergenerational sustainability. Questioning is central to the regional activities, because this raises women's political consciousness. The members in the region have continued to question and challenge patriarchal power dynamics that hinder their implementation of peace and wholeness. Healing is very central to the network's goal, given the numerous conflicts that have happened in the region, targeting women and girls' bodily integrity. The network also believes in building alliances and partnership for stronger national, regional and international peace movements. WRN has made this possible for the East Africa network to connect with the South Asia network for interactive learning.

SOUTH TO SOUTH INITIATIVES

The East African coordinators and members have engaged with the sister network in South Asia, with a goal of building South-to-South initiatives for the networks to redefine what peace means in their context, identify the opportunities that each network could build on, facilitate interactive learning to build on individual strength and common areas of collaboration. Some of such conversations included the WRN symposium in Sri Lanka, where Joy Mbaabu and Ruth Ochieng attended; while Carol Idembe and Joy Mbaabu represented WRN-EA at the WRN Board meeting in Istanbul, Turkey in 2019. In 2023, the WRN supported three members of WRN-EA to attend a working group of South Asian members in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. These members included Joy, Ruth and Kagwiria Mbogori, the former Director of the Kenyan Human Rights Commission. In the meeting they shared experiences with the South Asian WRN Members.

NETWORK ACHIEVEMENTS

Three Community Conversations were held in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania; that enabled the network to develop its niche. Despite COVID-19 and with little seed funding, WRN-EA has made great strides in establishing the network in the region. The network has held conversations through women community groups on a number of issues identified by the women in the communities. The network was able to use the outcome of these conversations to develop its first five-year strategy plan in the Tanzania workshop, which led to the establishment of the national chapters in Kenya and Uganda, with various activities cascading to remote and isolated areas in Uganda. An example includes providing skills to women individuals and groups in mediation and reconciliation in the region. In December 2023, the network convened a group of carefully selected WPS activists under the theme: "Strengthening the Leadership of Women PeaceBuilders", which brought together a total of 23 participants from Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and a representative from the DRC, to discuss regional issues and how to think differently about peace and conflict in the EA region. Since its inception WRN-EA has solely depended on the support from WRN and a few smaller seed funds.

The EA region continues to face poor implementation of national, regional and international signed laws and ratified conventions with tokenism of political participation of women.

At the heart of the WRN-EA work is:

- Intersectionality—conducted CCs with women from remote areas and focused on grassroots WHRDs with various identities.
- Transparency—is at the heart of the work. Capacity building involves all of the women who were part of the CCs, who eventually, voluntarily become WRN-EA members involved in that capacity.
- Action focused—building the capacity of those WRN-EA speaks with and involves them in the budget expenditure for the CC.
- WRN-EA takes on bold agendas such as addressing religious institutions.
- WRN-EA has started to build a women's empowerment center to facilitate capacity building among the marginalized, in a strategic location in eastern Uganda that borders both Kenya and Tanzania.



WRN EA Community Conversation

WRN-EA LEADERS' VIEW – WHAT MAKES REGIONAL NETWORKS SURVIVE?

- Good leadership of 3-4 deeply committed persons who have deep bonds.
- Persistence and consistency in the work, commitment should be unwavering and to a niche topic- replication should be avoided.
- Sustainability is key, women should feel that the network will be sustained and can continue its work. They feel that having an office or base is important. Even a small hut on owned land for the women to call their own home, for them to meet and organise.
- An anchor of fundraising support is critical—a funder who will sustain you and believes in your work for the long-term.
- Streamlining of young people at all stages providing mentorship and valuing their inputs.
- Ensure dialogues with other women's networks within and outside the region for learning.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION OF WRN-EA

WRN as a Model

Questions and Hot Topics from the WRN as a Model paper

1. Sources of Funding and Fundraising

- A. Do you take government funding or not?
- B. Are certain governments more acceptable than others?

- C. What funders are acceptable to the network?
 - D. Who will do this fundraising and how will it be sustainable?
2. Engagement of young women in a meaningful way
- A. How to engage young women in the network, what are the strategies, challenges and opportunities?
 - B. What are the barriers to their engagement?
 - C. How will they participate meaningfully and who will mentor them?
 - D. Are there any real intergenerational gaps and issues that need to be addressed?
3. Personalities
- A. How to navigate difficult personalities and ensure smooth functioning of the network?
 - B. How to remove members who violate the core values, what are the policies in place if required?
 - C. How to put policies in place that ensure the network is not used by individuals to promote their organizations, themselves, political agendas etc...
4. Building of Trust, Transparency
- A. How will trust be built within the group?
 - B. What policies or practices can be put in place to ensure decision making, funding and opportunities are transparent to the members to avoid mistrust?
 - C. What issues are likely to cause mistrust, break down cohesion? Outline them so as to avoid them in the future.

5. How do you balance the regional-national push-pull, not just in politics but in terms of organizational issues?
 - A. When 'regional' is actually extra-regional, then is it global/ outsider?
 - B. If strong national teams are needed for the regional to work, how do you prevent them from setting entirely different agendas?
 - C. What's the line between The Network and the member's own local work? Does there need to be one?
 - D. Growing strong nationally means looking inward (and in large countries this can be a much larger pull than the one to look out), how to keep both in balance and keep the regional connect?

APPENDIX B: LONGER VERSION OF WRN CORE VALUES in PLEDGE FORM: I, _____, member of the Women's Regional Network (WRN), hereby pledge to abide by the WRN Core Values as follows: Honor our collective vision of the network and believe in the importance of a shared mission; Ensure women and women's issues are an integral part of our policies and activities at all levels; Commit to working as part of a regional and global movement to build our collective voice, power and influence; Work independently from any government or religious institution.

Not be formally representing any political party. Promote and sustain leadership that is participatory and inclusive; Ensure transparency, accountability and responsible use of our financial resources; Support appropriate strategies to ensure each participant's personal security is safeguarded; Ensure our work is done with sensitivity to doing no harm; Sustain our network through open, ongoing and in-depth communication; Ensure confidentiality of WRN documents and exchanges of a sensitive nature; Identify and resist militarization of civilian authority/institutions and development aid; Strive for excellence, while being creative, bold and courageous. As a member, I pledge to bring to all my relationships, interactions and communications: • Honesty and integrity; • Respect; • Acceptance of diversity, of age, ethnicity and region, as well as differences of opinion and perspective; • A willingness to honour the decisions made by the Network. WRN met with a group of activists from central and South America in Antigua, Guatemala who wanted to learn from the model of the WRN.

WRN shared their perspectives and the model with the group and learned from their experiences. The Network did not take off in the end but it was a learning experience for both WRN and the activists.



WRN as a model in Central and South America, Antigua, Guatemala

CHAPTER VII

Storytelling from the WRN Members

WHEN SISTERS GATHER

Sisters gather, sisters who are strangers, in the hope of finding themselves in each other.

Sisters gather, and stories are exchanged, mumbling, halting, then gushing like a torrent unstoppable... stories in spate.

Sisters gather, sceptical about sorority, defensive about their anxiety, urgently in need of hope and each other. Will you be the one to heed my need?

Sisters gather, having forgotten nothing about the last dozen times they squabbled, fought, argued—the Cold Wars that thaw with the first tickle of laughter and the first trickle of tears.

Sisters gather, to grieve over other sisters, spent, lost, felled, and to lament the silence over their fate. When you are cut, I bleed, they tell each other.

Sisters gather, and promise each other that they will not forget. Not the ones who disappeared. Not the ones who died. Not the abandonment or violence. Not each other.

Sisters gather over the baby's crib, gushing, cooing and remembering why they are here. This baby, and all the others, deserve better than we have got.

Sisters gather to partake of food, wine, love and empathy, to celebrate each other, generously, and in solidarity.

When sisters gather, they change the world.

—Swarna Rajagopalan

“Meeting Patricia Cooper was a great pleasure, she has a deep commitment to women and a determination to support women. She is an icon if I may put it that way. I was so impressed with her and I wanted to set up something in her honour. She is so compassionate and empathetic, she is one of those heroines that needs some formal lasting legacy. I was so delighted that when I went to Nepal I saw that she is an honorary member of the TEWA center led by Rita Tapa. Her footprints will be permanently instilled somewhere in the hall of fame in East Africa as they were in South Asia. I don't think Patricia ever sits and thinks that this person comes from Asia or Africa, the only thing she always asks is if this woman is defending women? Is this woman making women peaceful? Is this woman concerned about another? I think that is all that drives her. Patricia will live for a very long time. I have seen many women and no one as committed as her.”

—Ruth Ochieng, Co-Founder, WRN-EA, Uganda

“Of importance is the Global South and Global North connection with Pat. It is important to have that weaving to the network and she linked the WRN with resource centers, with advocacy groups and that part we will miss. This is the most valuable and the most appreciated thing which shows the commitment of a strong activist from the global world who worked on South Asian issues. WRN was a stronger network with a regional lens.”

—Nimalka Fernando, WRN Board Member, Sri Lanka

“The learning comes from the relationships and I learned a lot from many of these women and understanding that relationships are key and I have had great friendships with all of women I have worked with.”

—Manoj Mathew, WRN Communications Consultant, India



Launch of the 2024 WRN India Community Conversation. From L-R: Ananya Kundu, Former Country Coordinator, India, WRN; Syeda Hameed, Former Planning Commission Member of India and Rita Manchanda Board Member, WRN holding the India Afghan Community Conversations Report.

“But it was the laughter, it was the dancing, it was the ability to celebrate each other and to be so happy in meeting each other. There was just so much happiness in just coming together and laughing, because most of us come from highly stressed situations and it helped a great deal. After all, if you have to define what is femininity, femininity is values of care, compassion, empathy, if we don’t have that, if we lose that, what is it then that we have? I do not doubt that the new generation will find their own language. They will find their own way of articulating it. But these values are values that, no, we are not going to lose. On the contrary, we want to share them. We want to regender the men.”

—Rita Manchanda, WRN Founding Member, India

“So this was actually the thing that was provided to me from the Women’s Regional Network. Because we are all women in the Women’s Regional Network, we have a sisterhood. We support each other, we encourage each other, in the dark days, in the difficult days. We console each other. So that was the impact. I feel that the entire interaction was like a family we all developed.”

—Shad Begum, Former Pakistan Country Coordinator, WRN

“One can feel good among people from the same field, but WRN was a diverse blend. We are connected with three generations in one network. This has been a good feeling. The knowledge documented through the discussions, storytelling, how women’s voices were documented, highlight core issues and helps us see the way forward. Voices of common women, and those affected on the ground. It was truly inclusive and participatory.”

—Rukshanda Naz, Former Chairperson, WRN, Pakistan

“Recently, I went to CSW, the Commission on Status of Women in New York to present a report amongst senior researchers and it was such an opportunity to network and get that space. After the meeting I had a lot of young girls, Afghan girls, come up to me and say it was very refreshing to see somebody closer to their age out on the panel presenting their reality. So this opportunity to have a young woman out there presenting their own work and research, it is something that WRN did, and it’s a very impressive, very bold and very amazing, courageous thing that WRN was able to do.”

—Ananya Kundu, Former WRN India Coordinator

CHAPTER VIII

The Way Forward: Passing on the Torch

“After a sunset there is always a sunrise...”

—Chelsea Soderholm, Former WRN COO

INTERSECTIONALITY AND INCLUSION

- Although great efforts were made to ensure intersectionality, strengthened diversity amongst minority groups including geographical, caste, religious, ethnic, abilities, and sexualities, in the past the WRN had a larger outreach to such members, but sometimes network membership has not been sustained.
- In regards to the activities, advocacy and partnerships of the network—intersectionality could be strengthened with caste-based, LGBTQI+ and women with disabilities movements.
- There is the effort now to push for “Gender, Peace and Security” and not “Women, Peace and Security”—this needs to be looked at.

“It is very important in the present day, given the crackdown on civil society and women human rights defenders, really globally, to be bold and to make a stand for what you believe in. Despite the security situation and political pressure from inside and outside the region, our members took on bold agendas and did not compromise on amplifying the voices and demands of women from the ground.”

—Chelsea Soderholm, Former WRN COO

“Sometimes introspection was missing in the WRN, there was a lot on their hearts and minds. But before we reach out to others we need to reach out to ourselves, renew our energies and renew ourselves.”

—Joy Mbaabu, Co-Founder, WRN EA

“So when I really look back at my journey, at WRN, and as you said, I am the youngest country coordinator that WRN ever had, it was this intergenerational learning that was intensely valuable. I did research with a very well known Senior Researcher and it was an intense privilege to get that constant guidance, being taught how to do things, then being led to learn through their rich experience, that sort of intergenerational learning is the most valuable thing. I think, in our movement we do have issues with age based representation. We do have issues with young women coming into this movement, but the value of intergenerational solidarity is what I learned in WRN. Nobody has taken a stance that is so courageous, so bold, calling for these intense, large policy changes, changes in attitude and perception, as WRN has done. The imprint that WRN leaves behind is definitely really deep that I am sure many organizations and movements in the future will look back upon it.”

—Former WRN India Coordinator, Ananya Kundu

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUE

- The many young women that formed the staff of WRN brought new ideas, challenged the status quo and represented the network, their communities and their issues at the highest level panels including the AWID forum and the WRN’s event at the UN Commission on the Status of Women.
- Young Members were able to bridge the gap with students involving WRN in their studies/academic research, conducting activities that addressed young people such as book clubs and film screenings.
- Young interns from both South Asia and beyond contributed immensely to the WRN programs, organizational development and communications efforts.

CHALLENGES

- Intergenerational dialogue continued to be a challenge despite its clear articulation since the founding meeting. Young WRN staff and members have not always felt their voices have been heard.
- Although WRN aimed for 40% young women this so far had not been achieved.
- Concerns that the Network was not moving with the changing dynamics of the WPS arena which is now moving to be called GPS- “Gender, Peace and Security” and that the network was not sufficiently addressing intersectional issues for example caste-based issues and WPS issues in relation to the LGBTQI+ community.
- More mature network members noted the importance of working with youth and of the great fact that Country Coordinators are young women but noted several concerns:
 - > Often a lack of understanding of how critical the security and political situation is in the region.
 - > Many noted that staff and young members must be carefully guided, while the onus is on the Core Members to ensure they take the time and efforts to provide this mentorship and guidance.
 - > Another concern is that youth want to be engaged but they require long-term and sustained engagement. One-time activities do not support building young leaders or cultivating tolerance and dialogue.
 - > Young people often do not understand the ground work ethic required and have an overreliance on social media in which they post a few posts and then become a “leader”, they are often not willing to do the ground-work, volunteer work and background work required.
 - > When one looks at the communities that WRN works with which are often remote and isolated, social media should not be over emphasized- the digital divide is still great within the region.
 - > It has been noted that in many cases young people have been in the lead of struggles (Sri Lanka) or are active on the frontlines (Pakistan) but they reject feminism, have radical politics or reject the elder generation of activists painting them with the same brush of corruption along with institutions and the status quo.

The older generation belongs to a time where people volunteered to do social change work. They came from relative privilege, and that made it possible. But they also came from a culture where service work was its own reward.”

—Swarna Rajagopalan, Founding Member, WRN

ROADMAP AND WAY FORWARD FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

- Inviting more young women into a network particularly in leadership roles as this will not only ensure that the network has one of the key stakeholder groups but that it is able to engage with youth in a meaningful way
- Incentives related to school work or professional work are always needed
- Practice non hierarchical feminist leadership
- “Mentors” can be assigned and must be accountable for this mentoring

“I was on the staff as an employee of the Women’s Regional Network. There is no boss culture implemented in this network. It was friendly, it was supportive. It was all collective, participatory, and collaborative. So I realized that, in fact things can work in this way as well.”

—Shad Begum, Former Pakistan Country Coordinator, WRN

“In regard to earlier generations, our ideas and approaches to feminism might be wholly different, but they are led by very similar core principles, that we envision a world of equality, we envision social justice, we envision liberty. And what I have learned from WRN, from interacting with these amazing women across the region, is that we need to hold space for each other’s experiences and learning, and we need to reach a situation where we understand rather than argue or compete. We’ve always come back to the idea that multiple experiences can exist at the same time when they are led by the same core principles. So really holding space for experiences and diversity while being truly intersectional and inclusive is what WRN has taught me.”

—Ananya Kundu, Former WRN India Coordinator

“Never be afraid to start doing something. Remember when we were talking about a network in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. There were so many challenges—would we even get visas to travel? But we did it. Women who were impacted by war, by gender injustice, they have similar experiences and we can all put their voices together. We started WRN very small in Afghanistan and we can see the achievements. The most memorable work was the community conversations where I myself went to 7 provinces to document women’s voices. Those memories will stay with me forever.”

—Huma Safi, WRN Founding Member, Afghanistan

“We were very optimistic. The dream for a South Asian tribunal, not realized. The process was more important than the destination. What we left off, the next generation can take up.”

—Rukhshanda Naz, Former WRN Chairperson, Pakistan

“Women from 3 countries (India, Pakistan, Afghanistan) with turbulent political relations. Being able to put things aside, analyse things objectively, together. We become one nation as women.”

—Rukhshanda Naz, Former WRN Chairperson, Pakistan

“The younger people have to now start visioning how they want to change and transform this society. Whatever we did, wherever we failed, the next generation must pick it up. But we tried. We tried hard, and definitely today, the younger generation is getting some advantage, some benefits of the struggles, as we did, learning from our earlier feminist friends and activists and researchers and writers and also professors. So there has been a great coming together of academia and activism in our countries. We did not see it so separated. So that has been the history of our coming together. And we managed to walk across the border. We somehow managed to get together in different countries.”

—Abha Bhaiya, WRN Founding Member, India

“The good lesson is the vindication of the idea that interpersonal networks matter. The other lesson is that they’re getting harder and harder to build.”

—Swarna Rajagopalan, Founding Member, WRN

THE LEGACY OF THE NETWORK - WRN SEED INITIATIVES

WRN sent out an internal call for proposals to distribute some of the remaining WRN funds before its sunset. WRN received proposals from all 4 countries as well as East Africa. The proposals were judged on the following criteria:

1. The project must honor the vision and mission of the WRN.
2. The project must be a sustainable initiative in which this seed money contributes to a longer-term impact and larger regional movement building.
3. The project must have an impact on women particularly if possible WRN’s focus groups such as IDPs and minorities.
4. The project must have a clear structure and work plan with roles and tasks outlined as well as structures for final reporting.
5. The project must be realistic in the current security situation, adhering to “do no harm principle” and feminist ethics.
6. The project should be unique-not a replication of existing work. Find out more about the seed initiatives here.

RETHINKING THE GLOBAL WOMEN’S MOVEMENT FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE

1. “Where did we go wrong?” the current situation for women is worse than ever in global South and North countries alike.
2. Implementation of international covenants is very poor despite that states are signatories, there has been little change for women on the ground- how can we improve this process?
3. How can we better connect globally and share our best practices and strategies/solutions?
4. What can regional networks learn from one another in terms of regional advocacy?
5. How can we collectively document, fruitfully discuss and comprehensively heal from our disappointments and



Canada's Feminist Forum for Afghanistan Meeting, Toronto, Canada

despair in the current global human rights climate? How can we talk more about crises like the fall of Kabul and be able to share the collective despair for those working in the women's rights movements in South Asia? Once discussed, where do we go from there?

6. Re-focus on women journalists—women should be able to tell the stories that affect other women and be supported and safe—this ensures women speak their truths.

“Our life as per our vision of peace, harmony, togetherness, solidarity, erasing the borders, those were our dreams, and we continue to hold those dreams close to our heart. WRN, or no. We belong together.”

—Abha Bhaiya , WRN Founding Member, India

“I think for future generations, there's nothing like the power of women coming together. Together, we're better.”

—Katy Tartakoff, long time WRN Photographer

“WRN definitely leaves behind this immense space in the movement that young people and a new generation of feminists and people within the movement can come and take over. And my message to them would

be to learn from the legacy and to find a balance between looking ahead and looking back. I realized, from my experience with a lot of old membership based organizations, that that balance becomes hard to achieve. And for young generations who come in, you should value the history that has taken place, like WRN and many other feminist movement networks have put in place. You learn from it. And then you take these values ahead, you adapt them to changing contexts. You radicalize it more based on political situations, and you take it ahead and make it grow our movement. It has to be inclusive, it has to be intersectional, it has to be sustainable. We should learn when to not just pass the mic but also leave the stage when it's not our space. We need to step back. We need to learn to let go. We also need to create systems and structures in place where the system outlives us.”

— Ananya Kundu, Former WRN India Coordinator

If younger people have the opportunity to be part of networks and gatherings like this, They should embrace them with an open heart and an open mind. You will learn more from this than you will from any courses or Seminars.

—Swarna Rajagopalan, Founding Member, WRN

CHAPTER IX

Gratitude

As the WRN sunsets we would like to thank some of those involved for our journey these past 13 years. It was thanks to the dedication of all of our members, advisors, supporters and funders that the Network was able to thrive and leave a lasting impact.

A special thanks to our long time funders without whom the Network would have not been possible. Elaine Nonneman and Katrin Wilde from the Channel Foundation and Cynda Collins Arsenault were more than funders but partners in our journey for peace and justice in South Asia. They supported WRN's founding meeting in Nepal and stayed with WRN as significant funders until sunset. Mama Cash, based in The Netherlands, provided the early funds to support each country (Afghanistan, Pakistan and India). Anne Carter in Canada provided initial funding for the founding meeting. Significant multi-year funding from the NOVO Foundation and the CarEth Foundation allowed WRN to be bold in its research and advocacy. The Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development supported our final round of research in India. Womankind Worldwide supported our last round of significant research on the reality of women and girls lives in Afghanistan under the Taliban rule.

Over four thousand individual donors from around the world supported WRN's campaign to build and operate Safe Houses in Afghanistan. MADRE along with Capital Sisters International, IIE, Dorothy Woodcock, Libby Cunningham, Ann Lederer, Margery Goldman, Eliza Woloson, Dottie Lamm, and many others gave generously to this campaign. We would also especially like to thank: Jim and Susan Driesbach, Helen Gair, Lynda Goldstein's family, Jan Larkin, Linda Mason, Mary Sissel, Jean Saul, Jo Lynne Whiting, Karen Yuan and her family, Mary Zinn, Constance Mortell, and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund over the years.

Thank you to Jane Barry, Mary Jane Real and Julie Shaw for providing extraordinary facilitation skills and counsel at critical junctures in our life-span.

The Network would not have been possible without Chelsea Soderholm, Chief Operating Officer, who joined WRN in the latter half of 2013. With her characteristic zeal

and attention to detail, Chelsea organized our first regional meeting in Delhi, India. It is due to Chelsea's skill sets and passion that WRN grew to become a formidable research and publication NGO in South Asia. Chelsea's coordination from 2013 to 2024 (with a 4 year hiatus from 2019 to 2022) of each country office, oversight of the editing of WRN's research documents and publications, combined with her significant diplomatic skills, allowed WRN to flourish. Chelsea forged a special partnership of trust, honesty, and a shared vision of cross border collaboration with Patricia Cooper, Founder/Convener. She is loved and admired by the Board members and Country Coordinators she managed over the years.

A special heartfelt thank you goes out to Swarna Rajagopalan, a Founding Member and a key support in the development of this document and the entire archiving process of the WRN, ensuring our collective memory lives on.

Manoj Mathew, our Communication Consultant and Kirsten Ankers, our graphic designer, worked passionately to give the women's voices we documented meaning, through words, outreach and visual storytelling. They helped to ignite the change we sought. Cheryl Fellows, our accountant, provided the financial stewardship that was indispensable to our success. Thank you all!

A heartfelt thank you to our long time WRN photographer Katy Tartakoff who documented many key moments of the WRN such as the WRN Summit on Forced Displacement in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, the regional convening of Central and South American activists in Antigua, Guatemala, and the Afghan/Canadian Women's Symposium in Ottawa, Canada.

WRN Country Coordinators, Fatema Kohestani (Afghanistan), Shad Begum (Pakistan), and Ananya Kundu (India) embodied the positive change WRN hoped to achieve. They worked tirelessly to ensure women's voices were magnified and a vision of peace with justice and equality might one day be a reality.

We hope that the value of the Community Conversation documentation will outlive all of us, while our seed initiatives will ensure the legacy of the WRN's work continues.

Key Reports referred to

WRN as a Model papers Tiffany Boyle 2014; Chelsea Soderholm 2017, WRN Transition Paper Chelsea Soderholm 2022, Rita Manchanda and Saima Jasam CC Training Sri Lanka 2024.

Interviews with staff, members, supporters, funders, creative supporters and global advisors conducted by WRN staff and members in 2023/2024.

13 YEARS

1.
The valley is less verdant than I expected
but my enthusiasm colours it in with hope.
Strangers await, who will become colleagues, friends,
family—
differing in experience and perspective,
bonding over concerns and values,
bickering over small things
and relating over big.
We link hands, light candles and share,
wander in wonder through a historic town,
carry names and voices and images and stories
back to our homes.
We travel separately to the valley
and return, resolutely together.
2.
The reality is that while our hearts and minds
and work draw us together,
we stand apart in so many ways.
We have shared and learned what we had in common.
We must also now learn what distances us
from each other—space, time, responsibility,
age, experience, interest.
We have not come here from a vacuum and
once home, our other responsibilities call out insistently.
We must learn now how to nurture
our new friendships, redeem
our promises of solidarity, complete
the thousand mundane tasks
that will take from each of us.
Connections of the heart are the easy part.
3.
Miraculously, we pull together while pulling apart,
insistent on our individuality and uniqueness.
We produce the same thing in entirely different ways
and add a verb to explain ourselves. Amplify.
We amplify the voices of those you may not otherwise hear
from.
Amplify their stories while effacing ourselves
(though every eraser will leave a stain somewhere).
- Incredibly, the completely different stories we write down
form a thick, single braid and we are able to say, in one
voice:
Listen, this is what happens to marginalized people
in militarised times. The network finds a coherent purpose
and we find our voice for the first time.
(If you listen carefully, though,
you can still hear the varying breath of each person
who listened and wrote down and distilled this message.)
4.
We carry those stories forward
but the question of who we are and what we mean to be
stays with us, and the variety of our answers,
which are really, the spectrum of our expectations,
confound our discussions. Solidarity or centrifuge,
our network is both.
Sometimes, we draw together. Sometimes, we pull apart.
This is not synchronized. So we step out as one,
while heaving and shoving and pushing and cleaving
within, all at once.
What binds us still: purpose.
Together, we can do something in this awful world.
What nurtures our new bonds, small moments of sharing
and sisterhood,
like a family, chuckling over an inside joke, muttering
discontentedly in corners.
One voice, amplifying many stories.
Many minds, processing those stories, pointing in many
directions.
5.
Woven into the fabric of the stories we had heard
and that we had stitched into a common narrative,
was the thread of lives scattered helter-skelter.
Flight. Loss. Homelessness. Separated families. Lost
children.
Miscarriage. Poverty. Vulnerability. Corruption. Exploitation.
Death. Disability. Bereavement. Betrayal.
Rinse and repeat, with further damage each time.
We saw. We could not turn away. So we followed this
thread

and listened carefully. Across a continent-sized region, where people fight to assert authentic belonging, too many are nowhere people—in transit, in perpetuity. Invisible, unheard, undocumented, illegal, unrepresented. We wrote down what we heard from them. Surely, there was much more that we could do.

6.
Everything must change. We are no different from those whose stories we write down. Some of us have left our homes. Others are readying to. The centre does not seem to hold, anywhere. Storms rise and we cannot see each other. Sometimes, in our despair, we complain as if the other is hiding on purpose. Through these storms, we continue to build within, and surprisingly, beyond our first circle. Some have long left us. New friends have joined. And now, beyond the seas, we find new sister networks. Some will grow steadily, defining their purpose to suit their climes and surpassing what we are able to do. Others remain ideas. Some other day, their time will come. Where it all began, we are entering unpredictable, insecure times. Together.

7.
The journey is half-done though we do not know it then. We have begun to use the word 'sunset' while assessing what we can and cannot do. Even as we do, we are moving forward to accomplish the tasks that we wrote for ourselves. This responsibility, this promise, to do something for those who are left with nothing, no home, no community, no security, in the shadow of conflicts and policies made by someone else. Amplify their stories. Amplify their needs. Amplify those asks. Amplify and achieve. We meet. Sometimes to discuss. Sometimes to plan. We meet to collectively advocate and demand. Our intentions are sound and solid. An inner voice asks: Is this enough?

8.
History has no time for those who would wallow or introspect. Voices that have spoken to us,

voices that have spoken out for others, are now calling to us: Help! The waters are rising and there are no life-rafts, no ropes, no guard-rails. Valley-forged bonds are stronger than our familial push-pull and we rally for a season of meeting and talking and writing letters and petitions and posts and articles. We amplify, but we are also shouting now, crying, "The waters are rising! You promised to help! Pay attention, the waters are rising!" The waters continue to rise, our friends continue to swell the ranks of the displaced. The stories we told, the stories we tell are now ours as well. Our politics were the same and now, so is our pain.

9.
Locked down, sheltering in place, but with no cover from the virus that destroys so much more than the bodies it attacks. Surveillance, security, nationalist barricades, fraying nerves, unsupported solidarities, each of us in our corner, anxious alone. Connectivity is a challenge and connections are fraught. And yet, we are together, checking in as much as we can. There are things we meant to do that must now wait for a time whose arrival we cannot predict. We know this time matters. Each of us has enough experience to know the world will not be the same again. We know this time will complicate every problem we ever wrote about. We learn new ways of communicating but also new fears that arouse our inner censors. We watch our words. We measure our actions. We pick. We choose. We use. We lose.

10.
The waters have risen, flooded, engulfed us. Luckily, we could arrange life-rafts and ropes and pull many out but we know, we know of, so many more who remain in a world that will shrink and shrink and shrink again,

suffocating and immuring them in order that their spirits should die.

We have long known and warned of this deluge
but even so, we are shaken and stunned.
We are also stirred to anger and action.
By now, our own numbers have changed.
New visions and energies, new strengths and directions,
define who we are and what we do.
Some teach. Some write. Some lobby.
Together across fractured lines,
we work separately almost. Together but apart.
Apart but together. Every effort an island,
connected to others by a name,
a history and a commitment to be together.

11.

The flock gathers, one last time.
We speak of what we have meant to be.
We sing the songs we have sung together,
trying to remember the words and the tune,
inevitably remembering differently.
The ravages of recent years have left their mark.
We are tired, maybe cranky. We are also sad.
The signs are clear but we do not wish to read them.
The wall, the tea-leaves, the lines on our palms,
all point to a reality we want to ignore.
One last time. And this time, we will turn things around.
Through all the cracks, the disappointments, the
self-recrimination,
we look at each other, grateful to be together,
grateful for each other. Friends. Comrades. Sisters.
We also see how much we have done.
So many stories written down.
So many voices amplified.
So many rescued. So many lobbied.
So many truths spoken on so many platforms.
One last time, we promise ourselves.

12.

The time for promises speeds past us, too quickly.
We start to put together what has scattered.
We finish the things we started.
We begin to pack away "stuff."
We are not yet remembering. Not yet mourning.
Enough of us have drifted away that

this is unreal, even when the practical details come to us.
Where should this go? Do you want that?
And then, when one thing fades away,
the light falls on others. Important work continues
even in the half-being state we have entered.
We are still gathering, supporting, amplifying, speaking.
The platforms are more prominent than ever,
like the bright light before sunset.
Sunset. Is finally almost upon us.

13.

I am grateful for this lingering sunset
that has stretched to accommodate
the reaping of harvests sown in recent times
and the planting of future yields. These will find
their forms and seasons, but hold a speck of our spirit
within.

I am grateful for this lingering sunset
that has given us time to rewind and reminisce.
What is the story as you recall?
What is the gift you will carry?
What do you want others to know?
And when we have answered, in unusual unison,
we have said: Us. We are the story, the gift, the legacy, the
lesson.

These ties that bind our hearts and lives
across distances and differences of time, space and
experience
will live beyond the arrangement that enabled them.
They will outlive the collective and each of us
and remain, as memory, as teaching, as practice,
a reminder that we are, in fact, one.
In our humanity and in our care, we are one.
And in this way, we will finally have built
our little garden of peace.

Swarna Rajagopalan

October 1, 2024

ANNEX A

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION REGIONAL BASELINE QUESTIONNAIRE FOR RESEARCH IN 2023

WRN Community Conversations Regional Baseline Questionnaire (later adapted to specific country contexts)

June 2023: Research Direction

This research is intended to help the Women's Regional Network develop a gendered analysis to build evidence on 'Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan' and map the related challenges faced by Afghan women refugees in India and Pakistan.

The overall theme integrating the three stand-alone field based CCs is 'Afghan Women: Living With Fear in a Gender Apartheid Polity.'

The CCs will document and explore the systemic interlinkages between—Discrimination, [In] Security, Militarisation and Gender Based Persecution in Afghanistan. The evolving legal discourses around GBP and the emerging campaign against Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan hold out the promise of enhancing our understanding of the gravity and systemic nature of the crime of gender-based persecution in Afghanistan, and bring us closer to the possibility of putting an end to impunity and ensuring gender based persecution as a recognised crime for invoking (refugee) protection. The research will be conducted in 3 countries: Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. In Pakistan and India the focused group discussions will be conducted with both Afghan women/girl refugees who came in before August 2021 and those who arrived after. There will be attention to intersectional discrimination e.g. ethnic, religious and sexual minority identities, and vulnerable targeted groups such as women human rights defenders (WHRDs), women in public life associated with the previous regime, and female headed households. Also, in view of the significant presence of 'stranded' Afghan students and 'medical tourists', there will be a need to acknowledge their presence and their degree of overlap with the precarity of the situation of refugees and the challenges they confront.

In each of these countries, a *minimum* of 20 focused group discussions will be conducted. 10-20 women should be gathered for each of the focus group discussions. The target number of women for each country is 400 inclusive of various geographic locations, minority identities as well as WHRDs. The research and its purpose will be explained in advance and all informed consent, security measures and ethical measures will be followed according to WRN's feminist qualitative research methodology and protocols. They should be assured that all information they provide will remain anonymous and confidential. Participants should be informed that they should feel free to leave the research setting at any time. Each focus group discussion is expected to last between one and two hours. In addition to these focused group discussions, key informant interviews will also be conducted with 10 or more individuals who have particular insights and expertise in the areas of Afghan women's rights, refugee rights and security. This will include individuals working for international protection agencies, foreign embassies, the government, NGOs, community bodies, legal experts, activists etc., to be determined by the research team. The Field based conversations will be preceded by a desk-based review of existing work, reports, advocacy efforts and their gaps.

Definitions:

Gender Apartheid

Gender apartheid is the systematic segregation of the sexes imposed through law and policy as a governing ideology. In this construct, segregation may be accompanied by the total exclusion of women from educational spaces, workplaces or public spaces as we witness in Taliban Afghanistan, the paradigmatic example of gender apartheid. What differentiates it from gender-based violence or persecution is the active role played by the state as a perpetrator, where gender-based discrimination becomes the governing ideology. So involvement of the state/governing body in segregation and discrimination becomes the determining factor of gender apartheid and should be focused on, in the data collection.

Militarisation

"Militarism is belief system that: endorses military values in civilian life; believes in the construction of a strong masculinity that is also a necessary component of state power; legitimises the use of violence as a solution to conflict and dissent; and closely intersects with patriarchy and nationalism. Notions such as national honour, national pride and the ambition of being a great power form the basis of this militarised nationalism in India. Militarisation involves the increasing use of military power by

states to further their national interests, with the option of using military threats and war as an extension of politics. It implies the growing dominance of militarist values in civilian institutions. Militarisation encompasses the process whereby military values, ideology and patterns of behavior dominate social and political systems and influence gender relations, resulting in the militarisation of the structural, ideological and behavioral patterns of both state and society.” —Anuradha M. Chenoy

Security

Security is the degree of protection to safeguard a nation, union of nations, persons or a person against danger, damage, loss, and **crime**. Security as a form of protection is *structures and processes that provide or improve security as a condition*. The Institute for Security and Open Methodologies (ISECOM) defines security as “a form of protection where a separation is created between the assets and the threat”. This includes but is not limited to the elimination of either the asset or the threat. Security as a national condition was defined in a United Nations study (1986) so that countries can develop and progress safely. Contemporary critical security discourses increasingly centre the human subject as the focal point for assessing ‘whose’ security, and involve a definition which approximates to *human security* and encompasses structural insecurities: economic, social and environmental security.

Gender based Persecution (GBP)

International Criminal Court (ICC) defines Gender persecution as “the crime against humanity of persecution on the grounds of gender, under article 7(1)(h)^{*[1]} of the Statute. Gender persecution is committed against persons because of sex characteristics and/or because of the social constructs and criteria used to define gender.” Gender persecution includes a range of grave crimes including murder, torture and other kinds of violence that is based upon the perpetrator’s intent to discriminate against a group on the basis of their gender. Gender Persecution is part of a systematic attack that is perpetrated against a civilian population.

Field Work

Please try to ensure that everyone actively participates and shares their opinions and views.

India and Pakistan CCs questionnaire will be structured around two inter-dependent experience segments which will capture affected groups narratives of the situations in Afghanistan: country of persecution and flight/exit

India & Pakistan: search for safe haven, the forced displacement experience

Suggested structure of questions to be interpreted by the facilitator as open ended and not ‘leading.’ Facilitator is advised to also read the 12 Standard Questions developed in 2012 for conducting Community Conversations in situations affected by conflict (including pre and post conflict situations) structured around the themes of Corruption, Security and Militarisation and their systemic interlinkages. They are designed to serve as signposts for facilitators and interviewers and to be adapted to specific contexts.

QUESTIONS	ANSWER					
No.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Name						
Position						
Age						
Education Level						
Ethnic, Religious, PWD, LGBTQI+ Identity						
Single/ family						
No. of minors: f /m						
Family members in Afghanistan						

NO	QUESTION	ANSWER
1.	Date of Interview (Day, Month, Year)	
2.	What kind of location is this?	
3.	Reason for choosing India/Pakistan as destination country? / Alternatively, reasons for staying back in Afghanistan?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Kin networks b. Own/ family's previous visit familiarity c. Transit d. Secure place of refuge e. Economic potential f. Historical-cultural linkages
4.	Status : Visa: : Blue Card : RSD Other:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Overstaying: 'illegal immigrant' b. Contested c. Pending
5.	Experiences/Challenges faced in Afghanistan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Generalized Insecurity, ii) Targeted Violence iii) Personal/ Family Insecurity iv) GBV, discrimination, punitive or transgression of gender norms [use proxy for sexual violence] v) Intersectional Vulnerability: Identity-minority, vi) Oppressive Cultural Practices subjugating women: vii) Denial of Freedoms: Education, Work, Mobility, Expression viii) Forced Marriage, ix) Economic Insecurity x) Corruption xi) Did they reach out for support of any kind humanitarian, relocation, who supported them? How accessible were these resources and was it successful? (Revisit this in the discussion on Afghan situation and in-security)	

6.	<p>What is the means of livelihood?</p> <p>Employment: What kind of jobs are available (in host countries. Those living in communities and those in refugee camps)? Impact of restricted employment opportunity on family and survival.</p>
7.	Challenges in access to basic services like healthcare and education as well as quality of services (in refugee camps or/and in communities).
8.	Afghan women in popular discourse. Role of a sympathetic media
9.	<p>Afghanistan: Country of Persecution Flight/Exit</p> <p>Open ended discussion on understanding of [In]-Security</p> <p>What makes you / the family feel insecure?</p> <p>Understanding of Root Causes</p> <p>Meanings of Militarisation & Conflict</p> <p>National Army, Militia, International forces,</p> <p>Taliban, warlords, police [women in security forces]</p> <p>Focus also on diversity of women's attitudes depending on their socio-political location; and diversity of differential attitudes to sources of [in] security depending on location and context.</p>
10.	<p>Revisit: What makes you feel safe and secure? What helps maintain your well being?</p> <p>Multiple aspects: Human Security, Economic Security, Social Security</p> <p>Guidelines of those in host countries:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psycho-social support • Protection from different forms of Gender based Violence (GBV) • Community support
11.	<p>When did you/family feel secure?</p> <p>Why then?</p> <p>And now?</p>
12.	<p>Discussion on Economic [In] security</p> <p>How has your economic situation changed after the Taliban came to power?</p> <p>Social Security: Identities, Social Oppression</p>
13.	<p>Discussion on Cultural Practices: 'accepted' gendered norms</p> <p>Did you get exposure to freedoms such as freedom of movement, speech and so on during the previous government leadership which provided for constitutionally guaranteed freedoms for women? How did you feel then versus now? What were the scope of these freedoms and were they enjoyed just by urban women or did rural women enjoy them too?</p> <p>What kind of restrictions are now in place? Do they only apply to women? How has this been implemented?</p> <p>What do you think of women and men's resistance against these restrictions?</p> <p>What is the situation for those who have opposed these restrictions and rules?</p> <p>How has this affected your mental health and well being? Have you accessed any services? Do you know of any services? What would you need?</p> <p>[**Often GBV/GBP trivialised and dismissed as 'accepted' cultural practices]</p>
14.	<p>Discussion on current gendered laws and Policies</p> <p>Why do you believe there are new restrictions on women?</p> <p>What do you think they hope to achieve through this?</p> <p>How are women being treated as citizens now? Is this acceptable to you?</p> <p>What do you want for yourself?</p> <p>What do you want for your daughters and sons?</p>
15.	<p>In Afghanistan , did you try to report violations, seek protection from threats?</p> <p>Then and now?</p> <p>Who can you go to or did you go to for redressal/ to seek justice? What kind of justice is possible in these cases?</p> <p>What are the hurdles in getting justice?</p> <p>What recommendations do you have to address your concerns?</p>

Framework for Gender Apartheid and Gender Persecution Lens Questions

Please employ where relevant and refer to preface sheet for interviewer. NOTE this is not testimony-taking simply for the lens of the report and the future advocacy efforts*

1. Have you heard of these two terms? What do you think of them?

Element 1: The perpetrator severely deprived, contrary to international law, one or more persons of fundamental rights[2];

2. Please describe which of your rights were violated providing detailed examples?

Element 2: The perpetrator targeted such person or persons by reason of the identity of a group or collectivity or targeted the group or collectivity as such;

3. If you were targeted, why were you targeted based on what reason?

Element 3: Such targeting was based on political, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious, gender as defined in article 7, paragraph 3, of the Statute, or other grounds that are universally recognised as impermissible under international law;

4. Please provide information on how you were targeted for the above reasons if applicable.

Element 4: The conduct was committed in connection with any act referred to in article 7, paragraph 1, of the Statute or any crime within the jurisdiction of the Court;

5. Refer to Rome Statute.

Element 5: The conduct was committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population; and

6. Please describe if you feel this is part of a wider systemic issue and why? Please provide examples.

Element 6: The perpetrator knew that the conduct was part of or intended the conduct to be part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against a civilian population.

7. Please describe in your words how the perpetrator intended that these actions are part of a more widespread attack?

Interviewers Name (where applicable): _____

Interviewers Signature: _____

Date: _____

Location (general): _____

**Legal references documents to be provided.*



"Constant slow movement teaches us to keep moving, Like a small stream that stays clear, That does not stagnate, but finds its way, Through numerous small details, deliberately. That is what gives us hope."
-Jalaluddin Rumi as recited by Dr. Syeda Hameed, WRN Global Advisor at a WRN meeting



IN LOVING MEMORY OF
ELAINE NONNEMAN,
A KEY PARTNER IN THE
JOURNEY OF WRN FOR
PEACE AND JUSTICE
FOR WOMEN IN
SOUTH ASIA AND BEYOND.



WOMEN'S REGIONAL NETWORK
AFGHANISTAN • PAKISTAN • INDIA