



## Foreword

History has demonstrated, time and again, that women – even though they may not be combatants themselves – have had to bear in large measure the grievous impacts of conflict and violence. These could range from injury and the loss of close family members to dispossession, displacement, and the vulnerabilities and responsibilities that accompany such conditions.

It is in response to this tragic history that International Humanitarian Law (IHL) envisaged general protections for both women and men caught in situations of armed and other forms of conflict. In general, IHL makes mandatory the humane treatment of the wounded and sick, prisoners and civilians. It outlaws hostage taking and the use of human shields and lays down that women must especially be protected from sexual violence, or the threat of the use of such violence. Additionally, it recognises the right of families to know the fate of missing relatives.

Since conflict often means the absolute destruction of the foundations on which normal life functions – the destruction of homes, the disruption of food and water supplies, and the denial of access to education and health care – IHL makes it obligatory on parties to the conflict to allow the quick and uninterrupted flow of humanitarian relief to those in need of such help. And although IHL aims at preventing and alleviating human suffering in any conflict without discrimination based on gender, it does recognise that women face specific problems in such situations that require comprehensive redressal.

One of the challenges in achieving this, however, lies in the general lack of awareness about the often disproportionate costs that women bear during such crises. Not enough information about women's specific problems during wars,





iv *Across the Crossfire*

riots or instances of civil unrest has emerged in the public arena, either within the media or in the corridors of power and policy making. We believe that this book will contribute towards changing social attitudes and refining official interventions, so that women come to be perceived not just as victims of conflict but as part of the process of ushering in recovery and justice in a post-conflict world.

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## Introduction

*Pamela Philipose*

Let us begin with an intriguing irony. While the impact of conflict and violence on the lives of women in India is well recognised as being deeply destabilising and profoundly disempowering, women for the most part are missing in the conflict discourse. Media reporting on wars, insurgencies, riots and natural calamities routinely overlooks them; administrative responses to the social disruptions caused by conflict remain insensitive to their special needs; legal regimes and the redress they offer continue to be gender blind; and women remain seriously under-represented at the policy making and peacekeeping table in the aftermath of situations of conflict. In other words, it is in their absence that women register their presence in the annals of our disturbed times.

It is against this backdrop that we would like to place the present collection of narratives from various zones of conflict in India. Written between 2009 and 2011, these reports focus on the discrete experiences of women caught up in insurgencies, wars, riots, situations of civil disorder and natural calamities in “one of the most culturally diverse and socially fragmented agrarian societies in the world”, as political scientist Paul Brass has described India.

The word ‘conflict’ itself is a multilayered one. Although it has been broadly defined as incompatibility between two or more actors that cannot be simultaneously resolved, conflict can range from overt clashes to covert ones; it can entail individual traumas or the collective tensions of an entire community; it could have a verbal dimension or a physical one – and sometimes it could have both; it can exist in popular perception in terms of potentially destabilising threats or it can be reflected in concreted and continuing states of armed assault and violence.

International Humanitarian Law recognises two broad categories of armed conflict: international armed conflicts involving two or more States; and non-international armed conflicts between governmental forces and non-governmental groups or between non-governmental groups. The conflicts that this collection documents constitute a broad spectrum of disruptive developments, violence, struggles and pitched battles, all of which have resulted in considerable human suffering.

Our intention in putting this collection together is twofold. First, these narratives attempt nothing more ambitious than to tell the stories of women in conflict-ridden regions and situations, women whose voices would not otherwise figure in the public sphere. These are women whose only fault was that they were at the wrong place at the wrong time, caught in a scenario they did not create and over which they had no control. Second, this reportage seeks to explore the commonalities in the experiences of women working in such zones of combat, in differing locations and circumstances.

The fact is that conflict plays out in physical/geographical spaces, on people's bodies, as well as in their minds. As living landscapes get radically altered by social tensions, women and girls are disproportionately affected because of their gender. When health centres are rendered non-functional, more women die in childbirth; when neighbourhood schools are converted into police barracks, fewer girls go to school. The loss of income and livelihood generation is immediate and telling. Women who had earlier been earning independent incomes from farming and rearing cattle are suddenly forced to inhabit relief camps and subsist on doles or forage for forest produce to keep families going. Once the fabric of normal life is destroyed, women also become extremely vulnerable to sexual violence, and coping with the ensuing stigma and social rejection only compounds their existing trauma.

What also comes through with great clarity in this collection is that long after the hostilities have ended – and some could have stretched on for decades – there is a continuing and

persistent lack of human security that threatens the well-being of not just the present generation, but that of the future as well. However, the reportage here stands as testimony to the fact that while women may be the victims of enormous violence and conflict, they are also great survivors who display courage, wisdom and initiative in the most daunting of circumstances. The book's three sections reflect this fact: the first, *Lives, Interrupted*, presents stories of women who have experienced conflict, violence and calamity at firsthand, the *Survival Guides*, is about how the conflict-affected organised themselves to resist repression, deliver on education and health care, ensure justice delivery, and rebuild lives, with varying results; the final section, *The Power of One*, focuses on unsung 'she-roes' who have made all the difference in the conflict zone by exerting individual agency.

### **Health Care: Missing in Action**

The long term impact of conflict has many dimensions. Seeds sown a long while ago continue to sprout destruction, as seen in the mined fields of Punjab on the India-Pakistan border. *Farming Amidst Landmines: Amputated Lives in Fazilka*, the report which opens the first section of this book, deals with how the landmines laid by the Indian army during Operation Parakram in 2002 still leave the predominantly farming community of Punjab's Fazilka district extremely vulnerable to severely debilitating injuries, the real costs of which are hardly covered by the monetary compensation awarded by the government.

Access to health care in conflict zones is a challenge, not just for the poor farmers of Fazilka, but also for those who inhabit the insurgency hit districts of Odisha like Malkangiri and Nabarangpur. Health care delivery is generally poor in rural India, but the problem is compounded several times over in areas of insurgency. Trained doctors and nurses are unlikely to serve in such regions fearing attack, and regular strike calls by militant groups can mean the crippling of public transport services, leaving the seriously ill in distant villages with no recourse to medical assistance. Two features, *Desperately Seeking*

*Doctors in Odisha's Red Zone* and *Ghost Health Centres to Treat Real People*, deal with these realities, while another, *When Sikkim Shook*, looks at the chaotic emergency health care conditions that prevailed in the small Himalayan state after it suffered an earthquake measuring 6.9 on the Richter scale in September 2011. Whether in Odisha or Sikkim, expectant mothers were the most vulnerable in these conditions: there are few emergency support services for childbirth in rural India, especially in situations of social chaos. This is another reason why the country reports one of the highest levels of maternal mortality in the world.

It's a similar story when it comes to bomb blasts, even in a metropolis like Mumbai which boasts world-class medical institutions and which has been the site of innumerable blasts and attacks over the last two decades. Doctors interviewed for *Mumbai Blasts: Emergency Response Lost in Transportation*, revealed how poor the facilities were in terms of reaching blast victims to hospitals and how limited the infrastructure for emergency medicine in public hospitals.

### **Life Behind Bars**

Conflict and incarceration go hand-in-hand. The uncertain lives, lack of financial support, and the legal battles of women whose husbands are in jail as political prisoners or for trade union activity is addressed in *Conviction and Courage Keep Wives of Political Prisoners Going* and *Arrested Lives: When Trade Unions Struggles Came Home*. Visiting the other side of the criminal justice divide, *Behind Police Lines: Edgy Lives of Constables' Wives* looks at the personal lives of the lowly constables – considered the main actors in cases of police brutality and custodial deaths – and concludes that the poor living and service conditions of the police could also be an important contributory factor for the high levels of police atrocities in the country.

The parental rights of women who find themselves in prison, whether for domestic altercations or for crimes, have never been considered an urgent area of reform, although the right to care for one's children is a human right. Going by the

experiences of women prisoners documented in *Barred from Life: Experiences of Women Prisoners* and *From the Streets to the Jail: Painful Transitions*, the source of greatest agony for women prisoners is the lack of access to their children. As one woman sadly observes, the reason that she stole and was sent to jail was that she needed some extra money for her children who are now lost to her.

For some women, life itself has proved to be a jail term. In *Behmai's Widows: "We've Been Left to Die Forever"*, the women whose husbands were gunned down by the woman bandit Phoolan Devi in 1981, exist on the margins of society without any hope of redress. Tragic indeed is the story of Munni Devi, a child bride, who had not even begun to live with her fourteen-year-old husband. She caught her first glimpse of him as a corpse after the massacre and has since had to live the life of a widow in conditions of great privation.

### Degrees of Vulnerability

Neither Dantewada nor Lalgah would have made national news had they not been embroiled in some of the worst conflict-related violence in recent times. Both places – the former in Chhattisgarh and the latter in West Bengal – were sites of Maoist insurgency, with Dantewada continuing to remain so to this day. The Lalgah conflict saw an unprecedented mobilisation of women, with many espousing the Maoist cause and picking up weapons to form armies of the dispossessed. In *When Women Take Up Arms*, the writer poses the question: how were ordinary women driven to threaten violence against the State? Ultimately, this conflict was about the discontent of a troubled agrarian community fighting for survival in an increasingly rapacious economic and political environment. *How Lalgah's Flames Engulfed Ordinary Lives* looks at how the Lalgah conflict came to divide local neighbourhoods right down the middle, with each side left as terrorised and dispossessed as the other.

Violations against children are among the most egregious of crimes committed in situations of conflict. The children of

Dantewade have seen close family members being targeted by both Maoist insurgents and the state's security forces. They themselves have been recruited as child soldiers or used as human shields. With their neighbourhoods turned into battlefields, these children have had their homes destroyed and their education disrupted. In *Chhattisgarh's Children, Nobody's Children*, the tragedy of a lost generation is delineated. Meanwhile, as *Life In Salabila: No Relief from Relief Camps* illustrates, the child inhabitants of relief camps in places like Assam's Bongaigaon district grow up to become displaced people without any home to call their own. The chapter, *The Lost Daughters of Bengal's Border Communities* relates the story of stolen childhood through rape and abduction. Child traffickers, taking advantage of the disturbed, violence-prone circumstances of families living near the Indo-Bangladesh border, spirit away young girls into prostitution.

### **Rising Amidst the Ruins**

It is important not to confuse 'powerlessness' with the lack of resilience. Time and again, various female protagonists in this volume have found themselves without the power to change their realities. However, once they were presented with such an opportunity, they seized it with alacrity and went on to effect some remarkable transformations as we see in *In the Valley, Women Paramedics with a Healing Touch*. If ensuring education is central to any conflict resolution paradigm, so also is health care delivery. The lack of qualified medical personnel in the conflict-ridden Kashmir of the 1990s led to an interesting experiment: women were recruited from local communities and trained as paramedics. Under the shadow of militancy, these women went on to deliver invaluable medical assistance to ordinary people and, in so doing, also reach out to those suffering from severe psychiatric distress caused by the violence raging around them.

Similarly *Health Care Workers Deliver Hope In Maoist Country* illustrates what a major difference the Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) have made in the insurgency-hit districts

of Odisha that otherwise had no health care worth the name. Like the Kashmiri paramedics, ASHAs are recruited locally and have helped, healed and saved lives in forgotten swathes of the eastern Indian state. Neighbouring West Bengal also witnessed an audacious experiment, when villagers ran makeshift health centres in the Salboni block of the backward Paschim Medinipur district at a point when the state government's health care system had all but collapsed in the face of raging gun battles between security forces and the Maoists. *Delivering Health Care at Gun Point in Salboni* captures this and also shows how a breakdown in health care delivery can be an important trigger for civil unrest.

Given its long history of conflict, the Northeast has developed many models of peace-building and interventions to resist repression. The Meira Paibis of Manipur are well-known. This group of elderly women made national news in 2001 when they stripped themselves naked to protest an incident of rape and murder by the state's security forces. In *Illness and Debility Can't Stop Manipur's Meira Paibis*, we catch up with these women, who although now considerably older, are still continuing their activism, which is especially focused on preventing violence against women by both local armed groups and the security forces. In other locations in the Northeast – such as Assam's Karbi Anglong Hills district (*High Up in Assam's Hills, A Band of Peace Builders*) and Manipur's Churachandpur district (*Fighting for Gender Rights in Manipur's Centre of Violence*) – courageous and committed women activists are speaking out and taking action against all forms of violence that women in these areas routinely face, even as they counsel them in the ways of survival.

It is also important not to confuse powerlessness with the lack of hope. Take the young girl students of Govind High School (*6,300ft Above Sea Level, A Kashmir School Helps Girls Reach for the Sky*). Coming from communities marooned by conflict in Jammu and Kashmir's Rajouri district, they trek uncomplainingly for hours to reach their school. Talk to them about what they want to be when they grow up, and they

will reveal professional ambitions like any schoolchild. But in a region like Kashmir, caught in the vice-like grip of six decade-long civil war, their words are portents of better times.

### **Combating Hate**

Communal pogroms in India have undermined the country's secular principles and unleashed trauma, fear and uncertainty in large sections of society. But many women, despite their lack of literacy and financial stability, have successfully overcome the legacies of hatred created by such tragic episodes. *After the Delhi Riots, How Women Rebuilt their Lives* follows the lives of women who had to flee their childhood homes and neighbourhoods to save themselves and their families when anti-Sikh riots broke out in Delhi in 1984 after the assassination of then-prime minister, Indira Gandhi. It took them decades to regain some control over their circumstances, but they succeeded in doing so without allowing bitterness or despair to destroy them even though justice has never been delivered to them.

How can a state like Gujarat ensure that the terrible anti-Muslim pogrom of 2002 is never repeated? One possible way is outlined in *Lessons from Gujarat: To Prevent Riots, Talk to Children*, which describes how girls and boys from all communities attending government schools were systematically exposed to the idea of a syncretic India in accessible, fun-filled ways. In Odisha, too, interesting peace-building interventions took place in the wake of the anti-Christian attacks of 2007-2008 – and it was women who anchored them, as revealed in *Kandhamal's Wonder Women Fight Hate*.

Conciliation after violence can come about in many ways. It can, for instance, come through personal writing, as *Assam's Women Writers Capture Conflict's Many Shades* indicates; or it could come through getting immersed, once again, in activities that had earlier provided an identity and income, as *Hope Among the Ruins: Fulara Wants to Farm Again* shows. It could also come through reaching out to others in similar

circumstances. After the Indo-Pak Kargil war, two mothers in the Kangra Valley had to face up to the fact that they would never again see their soldier sons who had been killed in action (*Scars of War: Kargil's Blowback in Kangra*). Today, both women have learnt to rise above their personal grief and are counselling army widows and mothers like themselves who have lost their loved ones to the war and civil conflict. And what happens when two young men from the same village get embroiled in a police encounter which leaves one of them dead and the other in prison? In distant Sanjarpur village, in Uttar Pradesh's Azamgarh district, village women are trying to understand the complexities of the law to defend the reputations of their sons and brothers (*Azamgarh's Women Fight Stigma and Stereotypes*).

### Search for Justice

The grief of another mother, in Mumbai this time, is also palpable (*Mumbai's Mother Courage: Turning Grief To Justice*). Each time she looks out of the window of her small home in an alley in the heart of that city, she remembers how her seventeen-year-old son was gunned down at that very spot by the police, during the height of the communal tension that had engulfed the metropolis in 1993. Today, all these years later, all Akhtar Hasan Wagle wants is that the killers of her innocent son be brought to justice. Nasreen Bano is also a Mumbai riot survivor. The conflagration of 1993 pushed her out of her home and she is fighting for a foothold in the city by arguing for her right to a roof over her head (*A House for Nasreen, Riot-Affected*).

Fifteen years after the 1993 riots, another Mumbai woman watched her husband meet his death live on her television screen. A devastated Kavita Karkare, widow of Hemant Karkare, chief of the Anti-Terrorist Squad, who was killed during the terror attacks on the city on the night of November 26, 2008, is now publicly demanding better protection for those on the frontlines of policing as well as a more transparent police administration (*Kavita Karkare's Courage Quotient*).

All these women are unlikely crusaders. Personal circumstances forced them to articulate the larger concerns that are embedded in situations of violence. Their diligent assertions have had far-reaching impact. Rafat Seema, a teacher by profession, could have opted for a life of academic pursuits, but instead she chose to assist the families of men jailed after the Mecca Masjid blasts that rocked Hyderabad in 2007, many of whom were later released for lack of evidence. She did this despite being told by well-wishers that she would only be inviting trouble by getting involved. But, as she points out in *Fight for Prisoners' Rights, Clad in a Burqa*, the basic rights of women and children related to these incarcerated men were being violated and she felt she had to help them at a point when they were being shunned by most others and branded the family members of 'terrorists'.

### Unsung Saviours

Not just articulate urban women, but rural women like Prabhavati, working in an *anganwadi* in Bihar's disturbed Jehanabad district, have made difficult choices, too. She rejected the path of violence that her husband, a Maoist leader, had chosen for himself, arguing that she was contributing more effectively to society by teaching village children rather than by waging war against the state (*Maoist Violence is Not Prabhavati's Way*). The response of Asma Khan to the communal frenzy of Gujarat was similar. She reached out to children orphaned by the 2002 pogrom, taking care to inculcate in them the values of humanity and respect for others (*Gujarat Riot Kids Come Home – In Faraway Delhi*). Another school teacher, this time in Assam's Sharon village, made sure that the education of her students did not suffer even after their school building and homes had been burnt down during fierce clashes between the Dimasas and Hmars in 2003 (*There's No Stopping Bimala's School*). How did Bimala achieve this? By turning her own home, which had fortunately escaped the conflagration, into a school for local children. Regular classes were held and

examinations conducted on schedule in these most extraordinary circumstances!

Ultimately, it comes down to life choices. Gynaecologist Dr Rani Bang, trained at the prestigious Johns Hopkins University of Medicine, could have practiced her profession anywhere in the country, in comfort and amidst great wealth (*In Gadchiroli's Zone of Fear, A Doctor Saves Lives*). Instead, she took the road less travelled, putting her powers of healing towards the cause of some of India's poorest communities: the tribals of conflict-scarred Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra. Finally, there is C. Thenmozhi (*A Sri Lankan Tamil Refugee Builds New Worlds*), a Tamil refugee who has proved a refuge to many who, like her, were compelled to flee Sri Lanka's civil war and make their way to Tamil Nadu, leaving behind their homes and dreams. When asked why did this, she smiled and said, "Someone had to do it."

### **Many Voices, Many Concerns**

When taken together, the stories in this volume raise many issues and argue for urgent changes – in the law, in the administration, and in the way the country considers such issues. Human rights advocates have long campaigned for the idea of reparations to become part of Indian jurisprudence. Reparations go far beyond mere relief and rehabilitation interventions; they also include concepts like the restitution of rights and the guarantee of non-recurrence of acts of violence and repression.

Internally Displaced Persons also need to be recognised as a category of people entitled to a specific protection regime. Far too many men, women and children are wasting their lives away in derelict relief camps in many corners of the country without any hope of leading lives as equal citizens.

These stories also testify to the principle that no matter the situation, no matter the severity of conflict, two rights are non-negotiable: people's right to health care and children's right to education. Lack of health care has emerged as one of

the most serious challenges in situations of conflict, precisely where it is needed the most. It is time to seriously consider putting in place alternative systems of health care in affected regions. The role played by ASHAs in assisting critically ill women in insurgency-affected districts of Odisha or by the paramedical teams of Jammu and Kashmir in delivering health care to the doorstep are, despite their inadequacies, good examples of such alternative health regimes.

Sexual violence perpetrated by State and non-State actors in situations of conflict is widespread but continues to be under-reported and poorly addressed because of the social stigma it entails. Thus, affected women are dealt a double injury: first at the hands of their rapists, and then by their families and community. The criminal justice system has become so cynical in such cases that heinous acts are dismissed as routine or perceived as being part of collateral damage. More often than not, it needs the involvement of local women activists for a modicum of justice to come the way of assaulted women.

In fact, many crimes against women in zones of conflict do not even have a legal language to define them, so how can they begin to get addressed? This is why it so important that the stories in this volume are heard – not just in the areas where such crimes had played out, but in the country as a whole. Finally, if there is a single insight that emerges from these pages it is this: women who have found themselves on the frontlines of violence have invariably risen to the challenge the situation poses. They have found ways to cope with every reversal while actively evolving methods to respond to the crises around them. Clearly, their presence as central players in formal conflict-resolution and peacekeeping forums is critical for a durable and just peace. Their wisdom and experiences must shape the lifelines to the future.

As Maya Angelou observed, “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.”