

Women and Peacebuilding:
The Athwaas Initiative in Kashmir

Women in Security, Conflict Management & Peace

An initiative of

The Foundation for Universal Responsibility
Of HH The Dalai Lama
New Delhi

Peace, Conflict & Security: Using a Gender Lens

- Listening Project: Document the narratives of Kashmiri Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist and Sikh women affected by the conflict in Kashmir: their experiences of conflict, their definition of peace, their vision for Kashmir.
- Research Project: *Crossing Lines with a Gender Lens: Interrogating the Dominant Narratives on the Causes of Conflict in Kashmir*

They have a different view

- According to the women interviewed, the Kashmir conflict was one primarily related to issues of **livelihood, development & unemployment**, coupled with the easy availability of guns. For example, the women pointed out that if their husbands & sons had jobs, they would not have picked up the gun.
- 90% said that nothing positive had come out of the armed struggle & they **rejected the gun** as a vehicle to deliver justice.
- 69% said that **economic backwardness** rather than rigged elections (25%) was the most important cause for the sustenance of the conflict.
- Acknowledging that there was a crisis of political democracy, 82% said that tackling unemployment was the most urgent task.
- Guns, whether held by their sons, the Indian security forces or the militants, **had not made Kashmiri women more secure** (across the religious divide).

Research Findings

- Research on women's experiences of the conflict are couched in either an **“essentialist”** framework or in a discourse of **“victimology”**. Athwaas attempts to move beyond the two, emphasizing women's proactive roles as peacebuilders.
- Broader understanding of **security**: human dignity, social justice, gender equity, economic wellbeing
- Opening the lines of communication among women across the religious & political divide & **trust-building work** would have to be a first step to address the “interdependence gap”.
- Continuum of violence **“from the home to the street to the battlefield”**: They experience the connected forms of violence, emanating from patriarchy & militarism (structural violence, domestic violence, political violence, sexual violence)

Theoretical Assumptions

- Violence creates trauma. This trauma transcends religious & political fault-lines. “Trauma not transformed is transferred.” This will have to be addressed before we can build peace in our communities.
- **Peace Accords & Social Change:** 40% of all peace accords collapse within 5 years.
- **Sustained Dialogue & Relationship-building:** Face-to-face dialogue conducted in a psychologically & physically safe space over a long period of time, sustained interaction with *the other*, joint initiatives across faultlines & transformation of relationships torn apart by decades of conflict are prerequisites for a sustainable peace process.

Roundtable (2000)

Breaking the Silence: Women & Kashmir

For the first time since the onset of the armed conflict in 1989, Muslim and Hindu women, across ideological & religious divides, came face-to-face to listen to each others' stories.

Message: women wanted the conflict transformed through dialogue; they renounced violence in all its forms; they wanted interaction between Kashmiris across the religious divide; they wanted an end to gender-based violence that the armed conflict had perpetuated.



After the Roundtable, the delegates from Kashmir requested that WISCOMP facilitate the formation of an all-Kashmiri women's network called Athwaas.

Women Building Constituencies of Peace

The *Athwaas* Initiative in Jammu & Kashmir

- In 2001, eight Kashmiri women – representing diverse religious backgrounds & different political perspectives on the conflict – came together to form Athwaas.
- It is an example of how a personal journey and commitment undertaken by women has transformed into a civil society initiative for dialogue and coexistence.
- Despite differences in religion, ideology, “end picture”, the common experiences of violence and pain served as a binding force...the goal was to explore collectively ways to deal with the sense of loss that they all felt.

Methodologies

- Multi-track peacebuilding: focus on horizontal & vertical relationship building
- Income generation activities: Economic empowerment of women
- Rehabilitation of widows and orphans
- Trauma healing workshops
- Conflict resolution workshops
- Women writers' workshops
- Peace education programs for Kashmiri youth to build a “culture of peace”

The philosophy of Sustained Dialogue has informed all these:

Repeated face-to-face interaction over a long period of time generates a deeper understanding of the other's perspectives. This transforms

perceptions, mindsets, improves relationships & influences our capacity to solve conflicts.



Core Group

Focus at this level:

- Peace begins with the self / Personal change leads to social change (“we cannot build peace in our communities if we haven’t been able to address our own trauma and transform ourselves”)
- Address personal trauma (caused by the violence of the last 18 years)
- Accept each other’s different “truths” & “realities”
- Address tension & conflict within this very diverse group of eight women and one man



Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace

Women in Dialogue: Envisioning The Road Ahead in Jammu and Kashmir

5th-6th August 2006, New Delhi

Foundation for Universal Responsibility



Samanbals...Reaching out to the community

Samanbal: A meeting place

- ✓ A physical space where dialogue is centered around an income generation activity.
- ✓ Develop the women's self-esteem so that they believe in the worth of their own potential
- ✓ Each project uses a different methodology in response to the needs felt by the local people of the region.
- ✓ Each WISCOMP-Athwaas member has taken leadership of one Samanbal Center.
- ✓ Through the five Samanbals, WISCOMP reaches more than 300 women and men in Jammu & Kashmir.



Sustained Dialogue's Theory of Change

Harold Saunders



Psychosocial Counseling Center, Zohama, Budgam district

- Create a safe physical space where women can access services for trauma healing;
- Train “barefoot counselors” in trauma counseling as part of their regular jobs, and provide a space for them to share their own experiences with other women;
- A series of workshops are held every few months to upgrade the women’s skills so that they can train other women, thereby making the initiative more sustainable.

Help Line Samanbal, Bijbehara, Anantnag

- Provide a space for Kashmiri youth to dialogue on political & social issues, while focusing on education for employment.
- This Center addresses the need for community education, particularly girls' education, and computer literacy for Kashmiri children and youth, particularly those orphaned by the conflict.
- Activities: Computer skills & desktop publishing; provides access to scholarships for higher education; story-telling & puppetry workshops to address the trauma that the violence has generated.

Purkho Migrant Camp Samanbal in Jammu

- Located in one of 14 migrant camps set up by the government in 1990 for Kashmiri Hindus in the wake of the armed conflict.
- This Center provides a context for displaced Hindu women to engage in income generation activities (tailoring unit) and it also serves as a safe space for women to transform the trauma generated by the conflict and their consequent displacement.
- Dialogues between Kashmiri Hindu and Muslim women have been held in this space.
- The focus is on personal autonomy & economic empowerment. The work at this Center has been focused on addressing their personal stories of flight from Kashmir, acknowledging the pain of exile, coming to terms with the feeling of being uprooted, and rebuilding lives.
- Since their families are dependent on government relief, economic empowerment is crucial.



Widows' Support Center, Dardpora, Kupwara

- In response to the needs articulated by the widows/half-widows of Dardpora (livelihood), WISCOMP has worked with the Women's Development Corporation of Jammu and Kashmir to make available loans and self-employment schemes for the women of Dardpora.
- Twenty widows from Dardpora have applied for loans to set up dairy units. Training in skills for embroidery and carpet weaving has also been made available to them.

Women Writers' Workshops

- These workshops bring together Kashmiri Muslim, Hindu and Sikh women writers who use the medium of poetry and prose to articulate, and if possible transform, the pain and trauma that the conflict has generated.
- An indicator of the transformation that such workshops have facilitated is the fact that many women have used the medium of literature to acknowledge the pain of *the other*, rebuild fractured relationships with women from the other community, and envision a “shared” future for Kashmir.

Women at the Negotiation Table

Women in Dialogue Convention (August 2006)

- Sixty five participants from Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh to **place women's agenda at the negotiating table.**
- Dialogue with policymakers and key players in the peace process to give women a meaningful role in the peace talks.
- The Convention marked an attempt to broaden the community of engaged women peacemakers in J&K by involving women from all walks of life who have not hitherto been a part of the WISCOMP-Athwaas process.
- Recommendations to the Indian Government & all stakeholders to the conflict on four topics: *Politics, Law & Governance; Economic Development, Relief, Rehabilitation & Disaster Management; Cultural initiatives between Kashmiris on both sides of the LoC; and, Health and Psychosocial Healing.*

Challenges

- How do we bring women's perspectives to the official-level peace talks?
- Negotiating Identity. Gender vs. Ethnic, Religious and Regional Identity
- Raise voices against all forms and sources of violence
- Engaging with and building trust among all the diverse stakeholders

Outcomes

- Brought together women across faultlines – regions, religion, class divisions, professional backgrounds & political convictions – to envision a shared future. There is a resolve to continue with the dialogue despite the political & religious differences.
- Trauma healing, development, economic wellbeing & reconciliation are integral to peacebuilding.
- The Samanbal activities have given Kashmiri women a sense of freedom and dignity.



Outcomes

- By providing opportunities for face-to-face interaction, WISCOMP has been able to facilitate a much-needed humanization of “the other”.
- Through the Samanbal Centers, WISCOMP has been able to initiate, simultaneously, psychosocial healing as well as economic wellbeing.
- The Athwaas group has collected and recorded numerous stories of Kashmiri women who have journeyed from the identity of a victim to that of a peacebuilder.
- Expanding constituencies of peace: women health workers, college & high school students, displaced women, journalists, educators.

Recommendations of the Working Groups

- *Politics, Law and Governance:* Ease of communication and travel across the LoC; zero tolerance for violence of any kind, by any party; Regular interactions between the public and the working groups constituted by the Prime Minister's roundtable;
- Clear articulation from civil society that the Kashmiri Pundits are welcome to come back in small groups to their places of habitation and worship.

- *Women, Development and Economic Empowerment: Alternative Pathways*

- Encourage entrepreneurship through micro-credit schemes;
- Facilitate skill-building to make women self-reliant;
- Ensure access to appropriate market channels.

- *Health and Psycho-social Healing*

- Development of health infrastructure;
- Integration of mental and general health services;
- Counseling and sensitization to stress and trauma related problems.

- *Cultural Initiatives for Peace and Reconciliation: Alternative Pathways*
- Revival of the ethos of Kashmiriyat;
- Promotion of indigenous arts and crafts;
- Establishment of community centers for women;
- Introduction of comparative religion as a subject of study in educational institutions.
- Listening to each other's reality and sharing individual and collective trauma has led to considerable healing for the members of the group.

What lessons were learnt about reconciliation strategies by your organisation from their work?

- The women now have reached a place where they acknowledge that one community's pain does not cancel out the pain of another community. Bring in Bemina Need for greater investment in Fear of **physical violence** hinders healing and reconciliation. How can we talk about reconciliation in a situation where the violence continues?
- The lesson learnt from our initiative in Dardpora (Kupawara district) is that **issues of livelihood, economic empowerment and self-sufficiency** need to be addressed before any discussion on reconciliation.
- Development and issues of livelihood are a prerequisite for reconciliation. Development entails visible transformation of the standard of living by the channeling of the peace dividend, which includes normalization, relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction. In a conflict setting where communities are polarized and economic opportunities for one community in particular are few and far between, reconciliation seems hollow without economic development. **Sri Lanka: How can we shake hands when we are sitting on the floor and you in comfortable chairs?**
- Trauma healing must be seen as a key component of any reconciliation programme. However, there is a complex relationship between **livelihood, development and processes of psychological healing**. So in any kind of trauma healing, if economic issues are paramount, those need to be addressed first. Trauma healing should first address the basic human need of livelihood (through a sustainable source of income).
- **Isolation hinders healing and reconciliation:** We bring together Hindu, Muslim and Sikh women to help them realise that though they have experienced different types of violence, they have all endured pain and sharing of this pain can help build a bond between them to envision a better future. Just the creation of a physical space where survivors of violence (whether it is the violence of the security forces or the militants) are able to talk about their pain can be extremely cathartic. It helps to remove that sense of loneliness and isolation that many victims feel. The act of active listening to the stories of trauma and sharing in the grief of the survivors can in itself unleash some degree of healing.

Who we are

WISCOMP was set up in 1999 as part of the efforts of the Foundation for Universal Responsibility to build a gender-sensitive culture of coexistence. Established with the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to The Dalai Lama, the organization seeks to:

- Enhance the role of **women** as peacebuilders;
- Empower the **next generation of leaders** (through educational & training programs) with skills & expertise in peacebuilding;
- Contribute to an inclusive, people-oriented discourse on issues of **security**, which respects diversity and which foregrounds the perspectives of women and the hitherto marginalized;
- Facilitate **innovative research** on holistic paradigms that address issues of peace, conflict & security;
- Build **synergy** between those working in academia, in track one diplomacy and those engaged in grassroots peacebuilding;
- Build **constituencies of peace** in conflict regions through multi-track peacebuilding.