

PROJECT PROFILE

Culture and Conflict

Hub Members

Visaka Dharmadasa, Association of War Affected Women

Azra Nazar, Association of War Affected Women

Fatima Hussain, National College of Arts, Pakistan

Faryal Arif, Laajverd

Ashima Kaul, Yakjah Reconciliation and Development Network

Zakir Hussain, Yakjah Reconciliation and Development Network

Tanya Bhat, Yakjah Reconciliation and Development Network

Mohammad Aamir Ganaie, Yakjah Reconciliation & Development Network

Anamika Bharti, Yakjah Reconciliation & Development Network

Akshay Kumar Sharma, Yakjah Reconciliation & Development Network

Urzeeba Bhat, Yakjah Reconciliation & Development Network

Mossarat Qadeem, PAIMAN Alumni Trust

Aneela Shamsad, PAIMAN Alumni Trust

Abida Kakar, Women for Peace and Participation

Quhramaana Kakar, Women for Peace and Participation

Piyush Suri, Handmade in Britain

Dr Neelam Raina, Middlesex University

Sobia Kapadia, Middlesex University



Photo credit: Culture and Conflict Project

About the Project

Working across four countries, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, this research investigates the value of culture to women in conflict settings, seeking to understand gendered economic exclusion and its relationship to peacebuilding, economic agency and empowerment. It uses a cultural mapping methodology to explore how communities of women across different conflict contexts rely on coded and tacit knowledge to rebuild their lives and to understand how cultural practices continue to exist and resist in these challenging contexts.

The project uses culturally relevant, socially significant practices of making as an entry point into discussions about the conflict, its impact, and its legacy. It then transforms these into an action-oriented strategy that pivots practices of making towards economic development and employment focussed narratives linked to concepts of gender equity, employment, agency, and work within the informal sector. Collectively these approaches inform us of the critical link between gendered knowledge, peacebuilding, and economic development through sustainable livelihoods.



**Practices of Making
Digital Exhibition**

<https://www.practicesofmaking.com/about.php>

Project Approach

Led by Dr Neelam Raina, this project uses a participatory action approach, based on the commitment that those most impacted by research should lead in framing questions and determining which actions will be useful in effecting positive change. 103 women are involved in the project, across 8 research sites in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. Through photography, colour theory training, pattern making, and various other craft making training sessions, the women expand and develop valuable cultural and economic skills. During the process of working together to produce crafts, the women engage in dialogue about issues of identity from national to micro identities and how intersectionality influences the everyday. They speak about their culture, peace and conflict in their contexts, some spontaneous singing, myth and legend story exchange, and notions of love and romance are part of these dialogues whilst the women work on their textiles. Tougher discussions about community relationships, discrimination and biases faced in the everyday are also documented.

The crafts produced by the women through this project have been shared widely in featured exhibitions and through ongoing sales of their art and crafts in markets across the UK. Thus, the last aspect of the project pivots into commercialising research, which benefits those who designed it. Sales in New York, London and Oxford have generated over £10,000 of profit which was distributed across the makers.

Key Findings

- **Informal sector work, and the value of gendered tacit knowledge in contributing to economic empowerment is overlooked.** Women in conflict and fragile contexts, rely on uncoded tacit knowledge to generate solutions for their financial survival. These are often dismissed as tertiary work and their value to peacebuilding and community cohesion is overlooked by policymakers. These are especially useful in nations like Afghanistan, where employment for women is banned, yet the homebased economy is a viable option for sustainable income generation.
- **Co-designed and co-produced policies and programming for economic development lead to more impactful and long-term engagement.** Co-written and programmed interventions from women are more inclusive and perceived as more meaningful by women. This project's work I think indicates a better uptake, deeper engagement, and cascading of training occurs only when the programme is designed collaboratively and in a bespoke manner that does not use a 'one size fits all' approach.
- **Art based practices as a method are valuable for community level change in highly fragile contexts.** By focusing on personal experiences and shared cultural connections, craft-making can help facilitate challenging conversations about identity, peace, and conflict in accessible, equitable and open-minded ways that encourages collective sharing, listening and learning.
- **Creative practices face negative gendered biases.** Even in contexts where policymakers focus on women's economic empowerment, there is still pushback against craft making and art-based practices. These creative industries are often framed as hobbies rather than a source of culture and livelihood. This is a general pattern where any (perceived) non-economic benefit facing labour is relegated as a hobby. The women craft makers are then excluded from engagement with that policy space because they are not seen as artists but as hobbyists.
- **Women rely on women in a feminist practice of making.** Often the women will gather in a house, drink tea, chat and make objects collectively. These are feminist practices where the relationship between the women, the landscape, each other, and the practice of making is the basis of their group community identity.
- **Intergenerational knowledge is highly valued as women pass on their skills and train others.** Women in this research project value the intergenerational knowledge necessary for culturally rooted craft making. This knowledge, passed particularly along matrilineal lines, is central to both the cultural productions of material goods and the active and affective construction of identities within these conflict-affected contexts.
- **Safeguarding principles of care and ethics of research in conflict contexts is key to creating effective projects.** Understanding the context in terms of fragility, both physical and socio-political, is a necessary part of embedding the project with participant buy in. Awareness of local issues – such as inclement weather, access to public transport



Identity becomes more refined and more written in stone when a conflict takes place, because it is all you have to hold on to. "

DR NEELAM RAINA

and other such nuances of the research site – allow for ethics of operating to be clearly defined with care as a key component. Seeing researchers as partners and not data collectors is most important.

- **Agility of research methodology and partnerships to respond to polycrisis.** Each of the project's locations face multiple crises in addition to the global health pandemic of COVID-19. In Pakistan, widespread floods; in Sri Lanka economic and political crisis; in India the abolition of Article 370 removing Jammu and Kashmir's semi-autonomy; and in Afghanistan the departure of NATO and the collapse of Kabul to the Taliban. Each event triggered key methodological recalibration and response that did not place additional burden on partners, and instead relied on collaborative leadership of research teams in-country. Here the principles of equitable research where partners provided leadership in their response is key.
- **Empathy networks across the regions provide encouragement through solidarity.** Very often, the most marginalised lack networks of support and access to information outside of their local/national context, and they occupy a disconnected isolated space both geographically and conceptually. This work connects women in fragile remote contexts to others across their nation and in the wider region. Recognition of challenges that were unique to them, yet present in varying forms in the lives of others, provides reassurance and better engagement across contexts. Peer learning evolves with horizontal linkages between women's focus groups across South Asia.
- **Women face challenges such as marginalisation, minoritisation and exclusion through the prevalence of strong patriarchal structures.** Early marriage, limited access to finances, obedience in behaviour and action in accordance with male expectations, and constructs of community ethics and morals amongst other gendered



Resilience of culture that is so deeply embedded within the identity and their pride is unshakable. You cannot break it irrespective of the presence of the Taliban, or the Russians or the Americans. "

DR NEELAM RAINA



Photo credit: Culture and Conflict Project

behaviour patterns, which influence decision making and related agency, are noted across the research contexts. Intersectional micro identities including gender and religion, identity of age, geographic location, dress and culture, language spoken, marital status, reproductive health, all contribute to understanding the impact of these patriarchal norms, expectations, and structures on women.

- **There is a preference across the intersectional groups for home based economic work.** Gendered roles of care and domestic responsibilities are evident in each group. Economic empowerment through livelihoods seems to be the only route that allows women to negotiate their space and decisions within the family setting. Home based economies through informal employment routes, that enable working from home and its safety, are acceptable to the families of the women. All the project's focus groups bar one consists of women who are related to each other – old aunts and young nieces, young cousins, relatives from the local area. Women travel for training and related work together, ensuring safety and trust through the physically company of a relative.
- **Early career researchers who are community based and engaged within youth groups have a strong desire to break away from micro identities and wish to be seen as change makers.** This is a space between practice and research. This holds true for each partner who is responsible for each aspect of research – inception of the project, selection and identification of case sites, focus group members, building of trust, collection and analysis of data, support for training, cascading of

training, leadership for surveys, engagement and support for retail, commercialisation logistics, disbursement of funds to makers, and reporting. These individuals are key in providing localised insights into the work of the project and its impact on stakeholders and leading on the policy impact and engagement dimension of this research in local settings.

- **The value of local languages in communication inwards (i.e., within the project), is not always reflected when communicating outwards from the project, indicating that while there is diversity, there is also inequality based on colonial structures.** Early career researchers, for example, use local languages to communicate. However, this changes to English when communicating progress, outputs, and results and when they desire to publish. This places English as a more valued language for communicating knowledge and impact, which highlights the need to decolonise research.
- **Public interest and support for research commercialisation where communities of women are supported is high.** Feedback from three retail events indicates that over 93% of those who engaged in our public events strongly support research that supports women, and research that produces tangible impact.
- **Economic development is seen as a key pathway for peacebuilding by policymakers.** In all four nations, interest on the part of the policymakers during and after training is evidenced. Some of this can now be noted through follow-on funding that some of the partners have already received. Afghanistan is the exception: there is no engagement with Afghan policymakers in Kabul. All project trainings, exhibitions, and sales have policy engagement with country Ambassadors, Ministers and INGOs.

- **Local policymakers have shown interest, yet collaborations and knowledge exchange have limited value and possibilities in South Asia, where policymaking remains within the pyramid of power structures.** Policy engagement is viewed as the end stage of research activity, distancing research outputs from policy inputs. This is a traditional way of viewing research and remains the acceptable way of doing so in South Asia. Policy engagement within research methods and design would be of more value in many ways



Photo credit: Culture and Conflict Project

//

Culture provides an entry point into a conversation that is hard to have when politics is the entry point. People can talk about politics in an affable, open-minded way and have fair arguments around it when you enter through culture and identity. "

DR NEELAM RAINA

Recommendations

UN Agencies and Those Working on the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

- **Reframe and broaden what ‘economic empowerment’ is and what it can look like in the context of WPS.** While the WPS agenda acknowledges the importance of economic empowerment, agency and sustainability it fails to adequately emphasise how such work can, and often does, emerge organically and informally from the bottom up in conflict-affected contexts by the women themselves. Economic livelihood does not just mean formal employment in jobs that require qualifications. It also means the vast and varied informal sector and home-based economies, which are often rooted in cultural practices and craft making.
- **Develop a 5th WPS pillar that focuses on women’s economic development and sustainable livelihoods.** While historically addressed in the Relief and Recovery pillar of the WPS agenda, further attention and resources are needed to focus on women’s economic development and sustainable livelihoods in ways that are led by women and for women.
- **Policy and programming need to be locally built and engaged in needs-based approaches that are codesigned.** Women’s engagement in programmes designed for economic empowerment should include them in the design and delivery of such funds. Inclusion within such programmes, which are long-term and sustained, is key for deeper and meaningful uptake.
- **Intersectional understanding of gender is key to future success of policy and programming.** Each micro identity – location, ethnicity, language, accent, age, colour of skin, dress and body language amongst other such fragments of what makes each person – are key to successful policy. Each aspect influences the capacity, capability, access and inequalities that women and other genders experience in the everyday.

//

Culture has brought together communities that had been fractured. Future conversations or dialogue on the future of peace and politics and economics need be embedded within conversations about identity and culture. //

DR NEELAM RAINA

- **Patriarchal structures and their absolute control over each aspect of women’s lives must not be underestimated.** Micro aggressions, emphasis of power structures and hierarchies, moral standards and expectations of compliance, silence and passive acceptance, and diminishing and dismissive behaviours are all part of the spectrum of inequalities women face in South Asia. These should be accounted for and considered when developing any policy and programming.
- **Knowledge hierarchies and colonial hangovers should be carefully considered.** Knowledge and resources are carefully guarded, protected and hidden by mainly male actors, which produces hierarchies that underpin inequalities. Any policy that enhances these structural systems of control exacerbates inequalities for generations of women.



Photo credit: Culture and Conflict Project



Researchers

- **Explore innovative ways of engaging in research commercialisation projects that tangibly improve the livelihoods of participants while also advancing knowledge and practice.** Theoretically constructed projects provide data and insights of value only to the lead researcher and their publication-based outputs. Projects that bring material or tangible benefits to partners and participants, which are sustainably designed, and equitably led/co-produced should be viewed as a key method of conducting research, building decolonial approaches of non-extractive research.
- **Methodology of research needs to be adaptive and accommodating of lived realities and challenges that population groups face.** Micro identity based systemic inequalities should be explored within each aspect of research. Methodology that is co-designed with research teams should be adaptive to crises, which can only be achieved through shared leadership of research methodology. Training of researchers in methods that are relevant can be achieved through collective participatory action-based research.

To learn more about this research project and read its publications visit:



For country specific findings and recommendations, please see linked publications below:

Afghanistan



India



Pakistan



Sri Lanka



This Project Profile was first published in the Hub's final report, *Gender, Justice and Security: Structural Challenges, Feminist Innovations and Radical Futures*. Go to www.TheGenderHub.com to read the full report and to learn more about all 38 research projects in the Hub.



This research is part of the UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub. The Hub is an interdisciplinary, transnational research network working with local and global civil society, practitioners, governments and international organisations to advance the delivery of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality; SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions; and the implementation of the UN Security Council's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.

© 2024. The co-authors of this text are listed on the first page. They share equally the copyright for the work and licence it under Creative Commons BY-NC 4.0. The licence is available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>. The authors additionally licence Professor Kirsten Ainley and Professor Christine Chinkin to act on their behalf to answer queries and requests about using the work outside the terms of its licence. Please contact them via contact@thegenderhub.com or on their institutional email addresses. Copyright for images remains with the photographers. Where photographers are not credited herein, the name of the Hub project should be acknowledged if images are used.



Design: Claire Harrison and West9 Design. Illustrations: Hayfaa Chalabi.