Rebuilding Security and Peace for Women: Exploring Women's Security Challenges and Activism for Security and Peace Building in Northeast India

Rubi Devi
University of Southern Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: https://aquila.usm.edu/dissertations

Recommended Citation
https://aquila.usm.edu/dissertations/534

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact aquilastaff@usm.edu.
REBUILDING SECURITY AND PEACE FOR WOMEN: EXPLORING
WOMEN’S SECURITY CHALLENGES AND ACTIVISM FOR
SECURITY AND PEACE BUILDING IN
NORTHEAST INDIA

by

Rubi Devi

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
and the Department of Political Science,
International Development, and International Affairs
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Approved:

________________________________________
Dr. Joseph J. St. Marie, Committee Chair
Associate Professor, Political Science, International Development, and International Affairs

________________________________________
Dr Robert Pauly Jr., Committee Member
Associate Professor, Political Science, International Development, and International Affairs

________________________________________
Dr Edward Sayre, Committee Member
Associate Professor, Political Science, International Development, and International Affairs

________________________________________
Dr David L. Butler, Committee Member
Professor, Political Science, International Development, and International Affairs

________________________________________
Dr. Karen S. Coats
Dean of the Graduate School

August 2016
ABSTRACT

REBUILDING SECURITY AND PEACE FOR WOMEN: EXPLORING WOMEN’S SECURITY CHALLENGES AND ACTIVISM FOR SECURITY AND PEACE BUILDING IN NORTHEAST INDIA

by Rubi Devi

August 2016

Women have been affected by violence and conflicts ever since the wars were first waged on earth. Woman as a grieving mother or widow is a common portrayal of war and conflict. However, the common portrayal of women as passive victims does not recount the whole story of women’s experience in conflict/post conflict scenario. Women face countless security challenges in the form of physical, psychological abuses, economic burden, and most importantly, sexual violence- rape, murder, molestations, kidnapping, and sex trafficking. The gendered nature of conflict, thus, increases women’s security challenges and places them at a critical juncture of experiencing and understanding security and peace differently. Understanding women’s experience can offer critical perspectives in analyzing conflict and developing strategies for peace building.

There is a lack of research on women’s experience of (in)security in conflict and their activism for building peace and security in the mainstream IR, Peace, and Conflict studies. Assessing this gap in research, this study looks at the security challenges women face in conflict, and their role in addressing those insecurities and building peace at the grassroots. This study focuses on these issues in the context of Assam, Northeast India.
India’s northeast region has been the cauldron of ethnic violence and political conflicts since 1979. In the midst of armed militarization and political movements, women’s security is at risk. Using feminist perspectives of security and gender, this study explores women’s myriad security challenges in Assam since 1979. This study further explores the role of women in grassroots peace building. It takes into consideration three women’s groups and their activism towards grassroots peace and capacity building. This study uses ‘feminist’ Social Capital theory to access women’s group activism towards peace and security building. It is situated at the intersection of feminist IR theories, Peace Studies, and feminist Social Capital theory. The feminist scholars have discussed the concepts of feminist security, peace, and the connection between women’s activism and peace building. This study argues that women’s activism in conflict society increases social capital and increasing social capital is conducive to peace and capacity building at the grassroots level.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Since the beginning of this dissertation journey, I have looked forward to the opportunity to thank those who have mentored and supported me and whose presence in my life have made this achievement possible.

I first wish to convey my heart-felt gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Joseph J. St. Marie for years of guidance and encouragement without which this endeavor would not have been possible. His patience, kindness and positivity motivated me to continue in this journey especially during the times of personal troubles and challenges. Next, I express my sincere gratitude to my committee members: Dr. Robert Pauly (Jr.) for his guidance and years of teaching that has shaped my ongoing development as a graduate student and his words of encouragement; I am grateful to Dr. David L. Butler for his advising, support, and guidance, especially for challenging me to think differently and teaching me the rigors and importance of methodology in research. His commitment to health is another source of inspiration for me. Next, I would like to thank Dr. Edward Sayre for providing me the encouragement and guidance, especially during the initial stages of my dissertation research and field preparations without which I would not have come this far.

I would also like to extend my sincere thankfulness to Dr. Shahdad Naghshpour, Dr. Robert Press, and Dr. Brian Richards for their kind words of encouragement, guidance, insightful comments, and discussions that enriched the course of my graduate years. In addition, I would like to thank the office staff (past and present) of the Dept. of Political Science and International Development and the International Students and Scholars Services whose help and support throughout the years of graduate program have made my life more pleasant and less stressful.
I extend my heartfelt thankfulness to all members of the women’s groups – Tezpur District Mahila Samiti (TDMS), Mahila Shanti Sena(MSS), and All Bodo Women’s Welfare Fund (ABWWF). I am indebted to all those women who volunteered to participate in the surveys and interviews at various field locations who generously offered their time and commitment towards my research. I am so touched by their energy, strength and commitment towards life, family and community. I would like to especially thank a few women whose interest in my research and willingness to help made an enormous difference in completing my research – Ms. Biju Barbara, Ms Sabita Roy, Ms Alpana Devi Chaudhari, Ms. Kanon Basumatary, Ms Kabeen Tenronpi, Ms. Larim Teranpi, Ms. Manashi Dutta, Ms Meenakshi Bhuyan, Ms Anurita Pathak, and Dr. Gita Bharali.

Also, I would like to convey my sincere thankfulness to the North East Social Research Center (NESRC), Guwahati, Omio Kumar Das Institute of Social Science, Guwahati, Tamulpur Anchalik Gramdan Sangh(TAGS), Tamulpur-Kumarikata, Mission House, Manja-Diphu, and Assam State Commission for Women, Guwahati for letting me use their resources, published documents, and library facilities. I am especially grateful to Dr. Alphonsus D’Souza (NESRC), Dr. Ratneswar Devnath, Kokrajhar, Father Tom Mangattuthazhe, Diphu, without whose helping hand, community outreach, insightful suggestions, and coordination, it would have been near impossible for me to conduct my field research in Assam.

I acknowledge my sincere thankfulness to all my friends in Assam and outside especially, Dr. Dilip Gogoi, Dr. Debarshi Nath, Dr. Juri Dutta, Dr. Namrata Goswami, Dr. Hemjyoti Medhi, Kishor Kumar Kalita, Leena Doley, Teresa Rahman, Dr Gita
Bharali, Dr. Ranjana Srevatsan, Dr. Denise Francois, Dr. Benicia D’sa, Heather McGunn, Joy Millner, and many others whose encouragement, support, and friendship made my life richer.

This journey would not have been possible without the unconditional help and support of my family. I am indebted to my parents for their constant support and faith in me throughout my life and in this endeavor. I acknowledge the loving support of my sisters and brother. I am also grateful to my cousins, Pranab Sarma and Gunajit Sarma, for accompanying me in my field trips and my aunt, Dr. Sabita Devi, for being so supportive throughout my stay in Assam.

Lastly and most importantly, my deepest thankfulness to my husband, Nayan, and to my daughters, Tora and Tonoya, who have brought me immense happiness, taught me to be dauntless, be patient, and accept the challenges of life.
DEDICATION

This journey would not have been possible without the unconditional support of my parents and siblings. I am indebted to my parents for their constant support and faith in me throughout my life and in this endeavor. To my mother, who have instilled her passion to continue the journey; To my sisters. Runa and Chumi- and my brother for always being there for me and be the pillars of unconditional support whenever and wherever I needed. I am also thankful to my extended family members and relatives in both sides who in some way or the other have taken interest in my work and offered their suggestions and helping hand. This journey would not have been complete without the unconditional help and support from my husband, Nayan. He persistently reminded me to keep working to the finish line. My heartfelt thankfulness to him for being there for me.

Most importantly, I acknowledge my daughters, who were part of this journey since they were born. Their mere presence and unconditional love enriched and transformed my life, challenged me in new ways, and restored my soul.

I dedicate this dissertation to my daughters – Tora and Tonoya and to my parents.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................................... ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .............................................................................................................. iv

DEDICATION ........................................................................................................................... vii

LIST OF TABLES ...................................................................................................................... xiii

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS ....................................................................................................... xiv

CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................. 1

A Brief Background of the History and Conflict in Assam and the Northeast India ..... 7

Introduction to the Study Region ............................................................................................... 7

The Conflict in Assam .............................................................................................................. 16

The Armed Conflict by ULFA .................................................................................................. 21

The Bodo Conflict .................................................................................................................... 25

Women and Conflict: (In) security, Activism, and Peace in Assam and the Northeast India ................................................................................................................................. 31

Aim of the Study ....................................................................................................................... 36

The Need to Look into Women’s Security ................................................................................ 36

Role of Women’s Groups in Conflict Prevention and Peace Building .................................. 37

The Plan of Study ...................................................................................................................... 38

CHAPTER II – REVIEW OF LITERATURE ............................................................................ 40

Introduction .............................................................................................................................. 40
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The System-Level Analysis of War, Security, and Peace</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>State-Level or Domestic-Level Analysis of War, Security and Peace</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual-Level Analysis of War, Security and Peace</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feminist Understanding of War, Security and Peace</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women, Conflict and Peace: Victims, Role Players and Victors</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women in Conflict - Violence and Peace</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Role of Women in Conflict and Peace Building</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>International Conventions and Documents on Women, Peace and Security</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women’s Activism, Social Capital and Peace Building</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CHAPTER III - RATIONAL AND METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Question and Expectation</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rationale</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Design and Methodology</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feminist Methodology</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using Feminist Framework</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feminist Social Capital Theory</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In-Depth Interview</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview Questionnaire</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview Participants</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interview Timing, Locations and Use of Technology ........................................ 108
Survey Research ........................................................................................................ 110
Survey Questionnaire ................................................................................................. 110
Survey Participants ................................................................................................. 112
Survey Procedures .................................................................................................... 115
Data Analysis ............................................................................................................. 116
Limitations and Challenges ....................................................................................... 119

CHAPTER IV – RESEARCH FINDING AND ANALYSIS: WOMEN AND THE
SECURITY CHALLENGES ......................................................................................... 122

Interview Findings: Women and the Security Challenges ........................................ 124

Insurgency and Militarism Breeds Insecurity .............................................................. 125

Involvement of Women in Students Movements and Armed Militancy ............. 126

Women are Soft Targets for Public Humiliation, Assault and Abuses .......... 130

Women within the Armed Groups Face Challenges and Insecurity ............... 132

Women and Children are Easy Targets to Perpetrate Violence and Terror .. 136

Militancy, Internal Displacement and Sex Trafficking Exacerbate Women’s
Insecurity .................................................................................................................. 138

State Authorities Fuels Insecurity ........................................................................ 141

Women Are Targets of Physical, Sexual and Psychological Abuses .............. 142

Women face the Challenges of Social Injustice and lengthy Legal Procedures. 145
Insecurity Embedded in the Socio-Cultural Practices ........................................ 146
Domestic Violence .................................................................................................. 147
Dowry Deaths, Witch Hunting .................................................................................. 149
Survey Findings on Women and Security Challenges ............................................ 153
Personal Safety and Wellbeing .............................................................................. 154
Direct Impact of Conflict ....................................................................................... 158
Victims and Sufferers of Conflict ......................................................................... 159
Impact of Conflict on Society .................................................................................. 161
Role of Government and Administration ............................................................... 162

CHAPTER V – RESEARCH FINDING AND ANALYSIS: WOMEN’S ACTIVISM,
SOCIAL CAPITAL, AND PEACE BUILDING ......................................................... 165

Survey Findings: Women’s Activism and Social Capital ...................................... 167
Groups and Networks ............................................................................................. 168
Trust and Solidarity ................................................................................................. 172
Collective Action and Cooperation ....................................................................... 176
Communication, Information/Knowledge Sharing ............................................... 182
Inclusion and Social Cohesion ............................................................................... 187
Political Action and Empowerment ....................................................................... 192

Interview Findings: Women’s Activism and Social Capital .................................. 201
Bonding and Building ............................................................................................ 201
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter/Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bridging and Linking</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning and Living</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towards Peace and Progress</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER VI – DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions and Expectations</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Review of the Theoretical Perspectives</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Expectations 1 and 2</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Expectation 3</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Implications</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A – Interview Questionnaire</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX B – Survey Questionnaire</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX C – IRB Approval Letter</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Crime Against Women (2001-2012: Kidnapping and Abduction, Rape, and Molestation ................................................................. 139

Table 2 Crime against Women (2007-2011_Cruelty by Husband and Dowry Death .... 148

Table 3 Personal Safety and Security within community......................................................... 155

Table 4 General Safety and Wellbeing ..................................................................................... 157

Table 5 Direct Impact of Conflict .............................................................................................. 159

Table 6 Victims and Sufferers of the Conflict ............................................................................ 160

Table 7 Impact of Conflict on Society ....................................................................................... 161

Table 8 Role of Government and Administration....................................................................... 163

Table 9 Social Capital- Groups and Network ............................................................................. 171

Table 10 Social Capital-Trust and Solidarity............................................................................. 175

Table 11 Social Capital _Collective Action and Cooperation....................................................... 180

Table 12 Social Capital – Communication and Information Sharing........................................ 186

Table 13 Social Capital – Inclusion and Social Cohesion ............................................................ 191

Table 14 Social Capital – Political Action and Empowerment .................................................... 198
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AASU</td>
<td>All Assam Student Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSU</td>
<td>All Bodo Students Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABWWF</td>
<td>All Bodo Women’s Welfare Federation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGP</td>
<td>Assam Gana Parisad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFSPA</td>
<td>Armed Forces Special Power Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATTF</td>
<td>All Tripura Tiger Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAC</td>
<td>Bodoland Autonomous Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLT</td>
<td>Bodo Liberation Tigers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KNA</td>
<td>Kuki National Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MNF</td>
<td>Mizo National Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSS</td>
<td>Mahila Shanti Sena</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCRB</td>
<td>National Crimes Report Bureau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEN</td>
<td>Northeast Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDFB</td>
<td>National Democratic Front of Bodoland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLFT</td>
<td>National Liberation Force of Tripura</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NMA</td>
<td>Naga Mother’s Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNC</td>
<td>Naga Nationalist Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSCN</td>
<td>Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagalim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWUM</td>
<td>Naga Women’s Union of Manipur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCG</td>
<td>People’s Consultative Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLA</td>
<td>People’s Liberation Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTCA</td>
<td>Plains Tribal Council of Assam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Full Form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TADA</td>
<td>Terrorists and Disruptive Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TDMS</td>
<td>Tezpur District Mahila Samiti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TUJS</td>
<td>Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TNV</td>
<td>Tribal National Volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNLF</td>
<td>United National Liberation Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ULFA</td>
<td>United Liberation Front of Assam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UPDS</td>
<td>United People’s Democratic Solidarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNSCR</td>
<td>United Nations Security Council Resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USM</td>
<td>The University of Southern Mississippi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZRA</td>
<td>Zomi Revolutionary Army</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

Women have been affected by armed violence ever since wars were first waged on earth. The common portrayal of women in wars are often grieving mothers, daughters, or wives, who lost their loved ones in the battlefields and struggled to survive or to raise fatherless children and support themselves and their families. This traditional portrayal of victimized women has been challenged and re-examined in the post-Cold War era as the nature of warfare has changed from interstate wars to internal conflicts, based on ethnicity, political rights, or religious freedom. Since the end of the Cold War, interstate and intrastate conflicts have been on the rise and the ravages of war time violence have affected women far more deeply and profoundly than perhaps at any other time in the history of war. With the changing nature of warfare the effects of war or wartime violence on women have also become more devastating and unique. Reports from the war zones and conflict torn societies indicate that women are continuously subjected to physical and mental abuses; sexually assaulted, mutilated or raped, diseased and displaced from their homes and communities and traumatized and humiliated psychologically for the rest part of their lives. Men are also being victimized as civilians in any war zones or conflict torn societies. However, women’s experiences of war/conflict are far more intense and unique as they are susceptible to sexual violence, forced impregnation or abortions, reproductive violence, and sexually transmitted diseases. In present day war fares, rape and sexual violence are being used as strategic tools; inflicting sexual violence on women is one way to assert power, domination, or defeat over the “other” by the warring parties. Being directly targeted to sexual violence, women’s experience of war differs significantly from men. The insecurities caused by
personal, economic or political loss for may be similar for both men and women; but the insecurity women face for just being ‘women’ is far more heartfelt and humiliating and deeply embedded in the gendered nature of the war and also in the gendered norms of human society. The gendered nature of the warfare has exacerbated women’s insecurities and places them at a critical juncture of experiencing and understanding war and peace differently than men. It paralyses the social dynamics of the community as well as society during and after the conflict period.

The gendered effects of war on women and their connection to national and international security were first brought to attention at the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. It was soon followed by the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 which recognizes gender as a key issue for conflict analysis and resolution. Assessing the gendered nature of today’s warfare, UNSCR 1325 acknowledges the inordinate effects of war on women. It recognizes that women experience war differently than men; and in any war/conflict zones, women play various roles by adjusting-readjusting to their war-time realities. Their experience and insecurities can offer critical perspectives in analyzing conflict and developing strategies towards peace building and security studies. The traditional picture of women only as a passive victim has now been challenged by the emerging research reports on women and conflict. Although limited in its category, research on women and conflict show the multiple roles women play in conflict zones – as victims as well as perpetrators of violence; from passive spectators to activists against violence or supporting their families and communities as bread earners, leaders, or peace-makers (Moser and Clark 2001, Conaway 2006). Unlike portrayed in the traditional literatures of war, peace and security
studies, recent research on women and conflict indicates that women often do not remain as passive bystanders or victims during a war (Cockburn 2001, Giles and Hyndman 2004, Devon 2006) rather they take up varied roles and responsibilities, participate in the struggle as combatants and supporters such as messengers, caregivers, and nurses, or shoulder responsibilities to provide for the family, and rebuild communities (Anderlini 2007, Conaway 2006, Alison 2009, Sjoberg 2011). In many conflict regions, women have also been taken part in conflict prevention, healing, and peace building (Marshal 2000, Cockburn 2007, Hunt 2005, Punkhurst 2008). In conflict regions and countries therein, such as Liberia, Sierra Leon, the former Yugoslavia, Israel-Palestine, and Cambodia, women at the local levels are seen rebuilding their families and communities, repairing relations, initiating informal protests, mediation, healing, hence, and paving way for reconciliation and peace at the local level (Rehn and Sirleaf 2003, Anderlini 2007).

Such activities, however informal, directly/indirectly add a sense of unity and trust among groups and contribute towards building peace and security at local level. Reports also indicate that many women’s groups have been acting as pressure groups voicing their protest against violence, gathering consensus for peace at grassroots levels, and also publicly demanding the warring parties to come to the negotiation table. A handful of research also points out that in many conflict regions, women have been instrumental in organizing and mobilizing civil society to stand against violence and to demand warring parties to negotiate for peace (Iliatamby 2011). However, their participation and presence have largely been invisible in the official peace negotiations and decision making process.
The partial picture of women as faceless victims or passive spectators has been depicted in the large volume of International Relations (IR) studies and Peace and Conflict studies. It has not only overshadowed the multiple roles women play in the conflict zones; it has also failed to recognize and explore the multiple ways women can contribute to peace-building at the grassroots level. The lack of literature on women and peace—how women have or possibly can contribute to peace building poignantly shows the existing gaps in the theory and practice of conflict and peace building studies. It has been understood that agreements, peace accords are the official markers of ending violent conflicts and/or beginning of peace or restoration process. However, these do not secure lasting peace. Creating lasting peace is a long term process, and it involves numerous factors, parties, civilian groups, including women and their involvement. A top down approach to establishing peace will not ensure peace and security if it is not reciprocated with a bottom up approach of community participation and commitment. It is, therefore, important to recognize the assets, experience and dedication of women at the local level in any discussions of conflict resolution and peace building. However, most discussions of conflict and peace studies either overlook or underestimate the involvement of the grassroots women groups and/or their potentialities for peace building.

The scarcity of research on women and security during conflict or post-conflict societies and their roles/activism for grassroots peace building demand further inquiry. Assessing the gaps and dearth of research on these issues, this study aims to explore the notions of security/insecurity from women’s points of view and their role in addressing those insecurities and create pathways for grassroots peace building. It explores these issues in the context of the intrastate conflicts in Assam, one of the northeastern states of
India. Assam and the northeast India have witnessed numerous violent conflicts based on ethnicity, political rights and self-determination in past six decades. Throughout the conflict, women have been victimized directly or indirectly, physically, socially, psychologically as well as economically. While some women bear the brunt of conflict in silence, others have chosen to take stand, playing various roles - combatants, mediators, protesters and most importantly as activists working towards building social capital and peace at the grassroots level.

This study focuses on how the women in northeast India (especially Assam) view the question of security against the backdrop of violent militarization and conflict in the region. It particularly examines the notions of security, conflict from women’s point of view. The research began with a set of research questions and expectations which focus on women’s experience of conflict and security/insecurity and their perspectives on security and peace. The following research questions were set for this purpose:

RQ1:

*How do women in Assam experience conflict?*

RQ2:

*Does their experience of conflict as women change/shape their perspective of security/insecurity and peace?*

As the research questions indicate, this study seeks to examine/reexamine the meaning of security/insecurity and peace from the perspective of women in Assam in northeast India. Based on the research questions, the following research expectations are developed for the study:
RE1:

As women’s experience with conflict in Assam increases, women experience (in) security and conflict differently than men.

RE2:

Increased experience with insecurity/conflict shaped women’s perspectives on security (and peace).

An initial inquiry into women, security and conflict in Assam have also brought into notice the role and potentialities of women’s groups in addressing the issues of insecurity and creating pathways for peace and security building through various means. Assam has a long history of women’s activism especially during the time of India’s freedom movement. However, with the changing socio-political scenario of Assam during and after the Assam movement and armed conflict, the role of women’s activism has changed. Various women’s groups are seen to be engaged in creating awareness, sharing knowledge, bridging gaps, building trust and solidarity among people at the local level and hence, rebuilding communities and empowering people. Such activism increases social capital and increasing social capital creates prospect for security peace at societal level. This study also seeks to find out whether women’s groups in Assam have indeed contributed to create social capital and peace at grassroots level. For this purpose of the study, another set of research question and expectations were formulated.

RQ3:

Does women’s activism contribute towards peace building in Assam?
RE3:

*The increase in women’s activism contributes to an increase in social capital and peace building in Assam.*

The research questions and expectations present a brief overview of the study. These are further discussed in detail in the methodology sections in Chapter III.

This chapter presents an introduction to the study – it presents the aim of study and a brief background to the study area and the conflict scenario in the study region. It also presents an overview of women and conflict in the context of the prevailing conflict in Assam and the northeast India – how women in this region have faced the question of security/insecurity and how women responded to the security/insecurity challenges. It also discusses, in brief, their role in grassroots activism towards peace and security. The chapter also discusses in brief the specific aims of the study and the plan of study for future reference. The following section introduces the region and the conflict in general followed by an overview of women’s activism in the region and the aim and plan of study.

A Brief Background of the History and Conflict in Assam and the Northeast India

*Introduction to the Study Region*

The state of Assam is located in the north eastern region of India. The region, north east India refers to the seven states of India - Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, and Meghalaya. Recently, the state of Sikkim has been officially added to the groups as the eight states. At the time of India’s independence, the entire region except the princely states of Manipur and Tripura (also Sikkim) were known as one state – Assam (Please see the map of Assam 1950 and 1999 in the Appendix 1 and
During its first three decades of independence, Assam was further divided into five states namely- Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam (Baruah 1999, 91). Being located at the northeast corner, Assam and the whole of northeast India are linked to the Indian mainland only by a narrow pass of 37 kilometers wide known as Siliguri corridor in the state of West Bengal. The region is a diversified mix of different races, cultures, religions, languages which itself is a miniature India. With 255,037 square kilometers, the Northeast region (including the state of Sikkim) covers almost nine percent of India’s total geographical area. According to 2011 census, the total population of North East India is approximately 40 million consisting of around 475 ethnic communities/groups/sub groups and over 400 languages/dialects. More than 200 out of the 635 tribal communities listed in Indian constitution are from NE India. However, the total population of this entire region is only of around four percent of India’s total population. On the contrary, this region shares India’s international border with five countries – Bhutan, China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Nepal – adding to its vulnerability as well as strategic importance in terms of India’s border security and international relations with other South Asian countries. Despite such importance, Assam along with the other North Eastern states have remained isolated from the mainland India in the post-independence period. Some attributes its distinct geographic location as a cause of the ‘historical’ isolated from the mainland India, while others point to the divergent ethnic population with their unique cultural, racial, socio-political systems as causes to spic up this isolation. The region, as pointed out by Subir Bhaumik, is “rooted more in the accidents of geography than in the shared bonds of history, culture and tradition” (Bhoumik 2009:1). Since India’s independence, this entire region has been a cauldron of
conflict – whether it is in demand for sovereignty or for greater autonomy and power sharing or separate statehood within the democratic framework of Indian constitution. Scholars have been of divided opinion regarding the causes such prolonged conflicts. Many point out to the historic and geographical isolation of this region from the mainland India as a prominent cause while others agree on the diverse cultural, linguistic and demographic differences as the underlying cause of conflict (Bhoumik 2009, Baruah 1999). However, as the most scholars argue, it is primarily the misguided political strategy and economic underdevelopment, exploitation of the natural resources by the mainland India’ along with the environmental and ecological degradation among others which have fueled the conflicts in Assam and the entire region (Mahanta 2013, Baruah 1999). Beginning with the Naga insurgency at the immediate aftermath of India’s independence, this region has been witnessing conflict, social resistance movements, self-determination movements, and numerous ethnic armed insurgencies. Sustained militancy and violence have taken a huge toll on the entire population in a number of ways. As the rebel groups challenge the state authority, the Indian state also unleashes the security forces in retaliation. During the numerous counter insurgency operations by the Indian government security forces in different North Eastern states, the local civilian population becomes the scapegoat – being subject to numerous physical and emotional harassments, including sexual abuse of women and girls along with other human rights violations. Considering the continuous militancy as a threat to India’s national security, the state has also enacted a number of draconian laws such as the 1953 Assam Maintenance of Public Order Act, the 1955 Assam Disturbed Areas Act, or the Armed Forces Special Power Act 1958 (AFSPA) which have violated the democratic rights of the people of this region.
It is important to note that the political conflict in north east India started alongside India’s independence when the Naga people led by Naga Nationalist Council or NNC expressed their desire for self-determination (Hazarika 1994; Nuh and Lasuh 2002). On the eve of India’s independence during 1946-47, the Naga National Council (NNC) declined to be part of the newly independent India. However, the Naga hill regions were still included within the geo-political map of newly independent India. The decision to include the Naga Hill regions into the Indian state and also, within the state of Assam, created furor and confusion among the Nagas. The NNC argued in favor of autonomy and power sharing at the very beginning of India’s state formation. However, the Indian state condemned their demand as secessionist and anti-national which led a group of hardliners to resort to guerrilla war in late 1950s. For more than four decades, Naga separatists groups have been fighting the Indian military for the Naga cause. It especially took violent turns under the leadership of National Socialist Council of Nagalim or NSCN since 1980 (Shimray 2005, Goswami 2007). Although NSCN later divided into two factions namely NSCN –Issak Muivah and NSCN- Kaplang (in 1988), there were various other subgroups fighting for the Naga cause with support from a cross section of Naga society. In an accommodative stance, Indian government signed the cease fire agreement with the two NSCN (IM and Khaplang) groups in 1997 and 2001 respectively and since then it’s been renewed almost every year. The conflict parties are yet to arrive at a permanent solution and the demand for a ‘greater Nagaland’ by the Naga rebels have been met with greater opposition from other neighboring states such as Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. And the situation of fear and violence still persists although at a lesser degree.
Similar to the Nagas, conflicts in Mizo hills erupted during 1960s (1966-71). After a period of intense armed rebellion by Mizo National Front led by Pu Laldenga, the initial negotiations between the Mizo National Front (MNF) and the Government of India began in 1977. It finally resolved in 1986 as Mizoram was separated from Assam and was declared a state within the Indian jurisdiction. Conflict resolution in Mizoram remains as a success story in the history of independent India as Mizoram remains peaceful as compared to any other states or areas plagued with conflict and insurgency and especially among the other north eastern states of India (Bhaumik 2009). Addressing the root causes of the Mizo conflict, most importantly the elimination of the oppressive local chieftain system known as Lal and the formation of separate state alongside new regulations in matters of land ownership, recognition of language and culture have laid the groundwork for success in this regard (Goswami 2009).

Conflicts in the princely states of Manipur and Tripura also began during the 1960s due to various socio-political and demographic issues. In Tripura, the issue of Bengali immigration from Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) and the socio-political, economic and cultural marginalization of the indigenous tribal communities led to the emergence of various guerrilla organizations after the merger of Tripura with the Indian Union in 1949. The end of princely rule upset the tribal communities who enjoyed a long standing independence under the Maharaja Bir Bikram (Bhaumik 2007). Also, the growing stronghold of the immigrant Bengali communities in state politics and administrations aggravated the sense of insecurity and alienation among the indigenous tribes. Motivated by the Communist ideologies the tribal youths and leaders during 1950s-60s began political mobilization and formed various political as well as armed groups to
fight for their grievances. Many such organizations such as The Tripura Rajya Mukti Praishad (1948) during the 1950s, the Tripura Upajati Juba Samiti (TUJS) and the Sengkrak or the clenched fist during 1960s and 70s, and the Tribal National Volunteers (TNV) not only radicalized the political mobilization of the tribal communities, but also set in motion the armed insurgencies against the Indian state. During the 1990s, the emergence of the guerrilla organizations such as the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) and the National Liberation Force of Tripura (NLFT) further exacerbated the politicization of issues (tribal grievances, illegal Bengali immigration, land alienation, economic under development) leading to widespread violence, killing and kidnapping throughout the state. The rebel activities have been declined since 2003 and the leftist government with the help of police action, national intelligence and security forces has been controlling the insurgencies since 2005. However, unlike Nagaland, the movements and armed struggles in Tripura are primarily centered on Tribal grievances and not separatist in nature (Bhaumik 2007).

Similar to Tripura, Manipur was merged with independent India in 1949 and remained as a union territory till 1972 when it was declared as a separate state. Prior to the merger, Manipur was also a princely state. Although the merger was signed by the then Maharaja of Manipur, it raised doubtful questions and discontent among the Manipuri people (Bhaumik 2009). The grievances against the merger coupled with the delay in getting statehood, along with economic backwardness paved way for the emergence of separatist tendencies among a section of Manipuri societies (during 1950s - 60s) led by Hijam Irabot Singh under the banner of communist Party of Manipur (underground) in 1950. The separatist movement remained dormant during the 1950s and
60s while Manipur remained as a Union territory directly ruled by the president of India. With the establishment of underground groups such as the Revolutionary Government of Manipur (RGM, 1969), militancy in Manipur during the 1970s gained new momentum and Manipur was declared a disturbed area and the Armed Forces Special Power Act or AFSPA\(^1\) (1958) was invoked in 1970. The presence of Indian military as well as various paramilitary forces along with the draconian laws put restrictions on the civilian life in Manipur ever since. The growing number of rebel groups (most notably United National Liberation Front or UNFL, Peoples Liberation Army or PLA, Kuki National Army or KNA, Zomi Revolutionary Army or ZRA) and their increasing rebellious activities along with the shootings, killings, and atrocities committed by government security forces further deteriorated the situation. Since 1980s, the ethnic rivalries between various groups (Kuki vs Nagas; Meiteis vs Pangals) alongside the enmity to government security forces have changed the overall conflict scenario into a “war within the war” phenomenon for Manipur (Nepram-Mentschel, 2007). Unlike Tripura, where the militant activities considerably conceded since 2003-04, militancy in Manipur has increased further. In 2006, *South Asia Intelligence Review* assessed Manipur as the most violent state of India – 280 casualties took place alone in Manipur, which accounts for 45 percent of the total fatalities that year in entire North East.

---

\(^1\) The Armed Forces Special Power Act or AFSPA 1958 was enacted by the Government of India to grant special powers to the Indian Armed Forces in the north eastern states of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. It allows extraordinary power to the army to combat disturbances (insurgencies), to use of lethal force, official right to detain and arrest suspected citizens and even the right to enter and search premises and households without a warrant. This act has been allegedly criticized for gross human rights violations by the Indian armed forces in connection with arbitrary killing, unwarranted arrests, tortures, cruelty, inhuman treatment to innocent civilians including enforced disappearances and fake encounters.
Unlike the Naga conflict or the conflict in Manipur where separatist movement began immediately after India’s independence, violent conflict in Assam erupted only after three decades of India’s independence. Assamese elites and the middle class thoroughly participated in India’s independence movement lead by Mahatma Gandhi and the National Congress against the British rule. They have also supported the nation building project by the Nehru government at the immediate aftermath of India’s independence and were considered as “Delhi’s most acceptable political subcontractor” in the northeast India (Bhaumik 2009, 115; Baruah 1999). However, the Indian government’s decision to reorganize the northeast or the greater Assam in 1972 by breaking it into several states has politically marginalized the Assamese and created the feeling of discontent and alienation among the Assamese elites and masses. There were discontents and oppositions among the Assamese elites and the middle class against the Indian government policies from the time of independence. During the partition of India-Pakistan, Assam was forced to accept the huge number of Bengali refugees (approximately 600,000 by 1961) from East Pakistan or Bangladesh (Bhaumik 2009, 115, Baruah 1999). The then chief minister of Assam, Gopinath Bordoloi was threatened by the Nehru Government with the denial of federal support and funds unless Assam agreed to share “India’s refugee burden” (Bhaumik 2009, 115; Mishra 2000). The ‘refugee burden’ Assam agreed to share under pressure from the central government immediately after the partition did not end in there; rather it steadily increased over the decades especially at the aftermath of the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. The Assamese masses were resentful of the changing demographics of the state due to the influx of illegal Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh and the subsequent landloss of agricultural land as
well as forest areas. They feared of being minority in their own state as the government took no steps to seal the porous Indo-Bangla border. Further, the state politics turned dirty as major political parties began using the illegal immigrant population as vote banks. Apart from the issue of illegal immigration, the lack of economic development has also fueled resentment among the people. Assam and the northeast India are rich in natural resources; however, these resources have not been “translated into economic growth and development” (Bhaumik 2009, 231). According to Tilottoma Misra (1980), Assam, despite being the largest producer of tea, oil, plywood, and other forest products, remained one of the poorest and industrially backward states in India. Alongside the issues of land alienation, economic deprivation and political marginalization also fueled the already perturbed psyche of the Assamese people. It found (political) expression in the form of civil movement known as the Assam movement during 1979-1985).

Although Assam Movement ended in 1985 as a result of mutual agreement between the then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi and the movement leaders, it was considered a failure as the authorities failed to address the structural issues such as resource control, greater power sharing, resolving illegal immigration problem and/or economic development (Mahanta 2013). The public discontent and resentment against the Indian state continued, and it has been perceived as an exploitation of Assam by the central governance. It became further tumultuous as the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) as well as other ethnic and tribal armed groups began armed conflicts against the Indian state since 1980s onward. The hill districts of Assam namely the Karbi Along and the North Kachar Hills have been witnessing armed militant groups such a United Peoples’ Democratic solidarity (UPDS) and Dima Halam Daogah since the 1990s. The Bodo inhibited areas of
Assam, are plagued by Bodo armed groups such as National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) since 1986.

*The Conflict in Assam*

The conflict in Assam began in 1970s primarily centered round the issues of illegal immigration from Bangladesh and the subsequent economic and political deprivation of Assam. Unlike other north eastern states, Assamese elite and middle class were much involved in the Indian Nationalist Movement and maintained their political relationship with Delhi (the then ruling Congress government) after the independence. However, the decision to impose the Bengali Hindu refugees (more than 600,000) from the (then) East Pakistan on Assam in 1961 by the Central government and the political reorganization of the greater Assam in 1972 did strain the political trust and cooperative relationship between Assamese leadership, masses and the central authority in Delhi. The feelings of political exploitation and resentment were aggravated by the economic deprivation of the state of its natural resources especially oil and natural gas when the Union government decided to set up the oil refinery at Barauni in Bihar to process crude oil from Assam. Same was the case with tea and other natural resources for which the state didn’t get its due share of tax revenues as the respective corporate offices were set up outside Assam. To this feeling of economic deprivation, is added the feeling of neglect when Nehru left Assam ‘to its fate’ during the Chinese aggression of 1962. It made the Assamese masses as well as elites feel “they were expendable during crisis” (Bhaumik 2009, 117). The dissatisfaction and resentment towards Delhi was further aggravated as the political fragmentation of Assam took place in 1972 despite the large-scale protests in Brahmaputra valley. Towards the later parts of 1960’s and early 70’s Assam has
witnessed a spate of agitations over various issues, such as language, food, refinery, economic development and so on. However, all of these were kind of dress rehearsal for what was to follow “the mother of all agitations” (Bhaumik 2009, 117) known as the Assam Movement of 1979-1985.

The feeling of political alienation, economic exploitation gravitated deeper with the reports of continuing illegal immigration from Bangladesh. During the by-election of the Mangaldoi assembly constituency in 1979, the electoral tribunal reported 45,000 illegal immigrants in the constituency (Bhaumik 2009, 117). It immediately sparked the feeling of resentment against the (illegal) immigration policy of the Government. According to the leaders of the Assam Movement, the illegal immigrants during 1947-1971 constitute 31 percent to 34 percent of the total population in the state of Assam in 1971 (Baruah 1986). Pointing out the fallacy of exaggeration about such large number, Baruah mentions the lowest possible (projected) estimate of 1.6 million foreign nationals in 1971, which is 13% of the total population of the state (Baruah 1986). There were also news of malpractice of voter lists as thousands of illegal immigrant voters were added in the lists prior to the election of 1979. Opposing such malpractices in the electoral procedures, AASU called for a state wide twelve-hour general strike (or bandh as it is most commonly called in Assam) on 8 June, 1979. They demanded the “detention, disenfranchisement, and deportation” of all illegal immigrants. This initiative immediately gained support and attention from other civil society organizations, most notably Asom Sahitya Sabha, youth organizations, ethnic as well as regional political parties. On August 26, 1979, a coalition group, All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (Committee for the Assamese People’s Struggle), was formed to spearhead the statewide
campaign. The primary demand raised by the AASU was to rectify the flawed voter registration policy and determine Indian citizenship of all those living in Assam based on the 1951 National register of Citizens and deport the illegal immigrants. The political, civil conflict, most commonly called as the Assam Movement, continued for the next six years (1979-1985). It was sustained by a high level of ‘cross ethnic participation, across political affiliation and age groups’ and was perhaps the “most powerful and sustained mass agitation after independence” (Bhaumik 2011, 117). The movement leaders gained unprecedented mass support cutting across ethnic boundaries, political affiliations and age groups and soon nullified the importance of established political parties and state government resisting any future elections to be held prior to sorting out the issues of illegal immigration and electoral rolls. The civil disobedience programs such as sit-ins, road blocks, economic blockades, strikes, rallies, and marches were observed in front of government offices and public places paralyzed the administration as well as social life of the people throughout the state. Slogans such as ‘Jai Aai Asom’ (Long Live Mother Assam), ‘More Asom, jiye kon, Jiye Asom, more kon’ (If Assam dies who will live, If Assam lives none will die), ‘Jadi nahua Asomiya, Asom eri gusi jua’ (If you are not an Assamese, Please leave Assam) were the most commonplace statements which describe the tone and angst of the movement supporters. Although the movement gained greater public support, there were also spats of violent attacks, hostilities and social alienation targeted on various linguistic and minority groups most notably on the Assamese Muslims. The Nellie massacre where nearly 2000 Muslim people were murdered by Lalung tribesmen in February 18, 1983 was a burning example of ethnic violence and hatred during the Assam Movement. The agitation also met with the heavy handed state
response especially during the 1983 state election. Nearly 130 civilian causalities took place in various police firings within the month of election (Bhaumik 2011, 118). The illegal voting of the same election also provoked the agitation from Assamese civil society. While the civil unrest under the leadership of AASU continued with mass participation, a group of young activists including students and young leaders formed an armed group named United Liberation Front of Assam or ULFA on 7 April, 1979 at Ranghar in Sivsagar, a sight of historical significance since the Ahom rule². The rise of ULFA has a direct connection to Assam movement. It was formed prior to the first state wide strike by AASU in 1979; but it remained dormant till the end of Assam Movement. Throughout the period of Assam Movement, ULFA continued recruiting disoriented youths, movement participants and activists. The flawed voter lists with illegal voters and the political mishandling of the election process have already angered the majority of Assamese youths. Moreover, the heavy handed repression of the state and the law enforcement agencies towards the non-violent protesters further fueled this resentment and distrust among the youths. An armed revolution against the Indian state seemed to be the logical way to attaining justice and self-determination for the people of Assam. In midst of such political turmoil a group of self-righteous men formed the United Liberation Front of Assam or ULFA in 1979. ULFA came into force during the tenure of Assam Gana Parisad (AGP) government, soon after the Assam Movement and continued its armed rebellion for more than three decades.

² Ahoms arrived in Assam in 1228A.D. and ruled Assam till the British Colonial Powers took control in 1826
The Assam movement officially ended in 1985 with the signing of an agreement known as the Assam Accord between the AASU leaders and the Government of India. However, it has set the stage for ‘considerable violence, displacement and killing’ in the following decades (C-Nes Report 2011, 29). It has also shaped the ‘sub-nationalist’ (Baruah, 1999, 6) spirit of Assamese people against the economic, political, and cultural alienation from India leading to the armed rebellion by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). The rise of ULFA at the backdrop of Assam Movement has many connotations. On one hand, the Assam Movement was the backdrop of numerous conflicts, civil strikes, and self-determination movements in Assam in post 1980s. The issues of illegal immigrations and flawed voter lists further raised the fear of demographic change among various tribal and non-tribal communities.

Since 1980s, Assam has witnessed numerous conflicts - civil strife, armed conflicts based on the issues of immigration and the subsequent fear of demographic change in the state. The influx of immigrant population into different parts of Assam, especially in the tribal majority areas has instilled a sense of fear and insecurity in the minds of the native population. The fear of land loss to the illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, the use and control of natural resources, and the rising competition of securing power over resources have ultimately led to the polarization of Assamese society at different levels and its polity.

Two major armed conflicts in Assam which have been taken into consideration for the purpose of the present research are the separatist armed movement by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the Bodo insurgency by the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT).
The Armed Conflict by ULFA. ULFA was founded in April 7, 1979 by a group of young Assamese led by Paresh Barua and Arabinda Rajkhowa with the sole aim of securing sovereignty for the state of Assam through armed rebellion against the state of India. ULFA remained dormant until 1985. The same year, the Assam movement ended with the Assam Accord and ULFA began its years of violent rebellion against the Indian state initially with a number of bank robbery (Talukdar and Kalita 2011). It soon became the bloodiest and long lasting armed conflict in the state. The Indian state counter resisted ULFA’s armed rebellion by deploying the Indian army to the state during 1990-1992 and 2003. For nearly three decades, Assamese civil society faced the brunt of the armed conflict between ULFA and the state machinery. During 1990-91, the Indian Government deployed successive military operations known as Operation Bajrang and Operation Rhino against ULFA, killing and capturing many of the senior ULFA leaders alongside targeting innocent civilians. While the political wing of ULFA under the leadership of Arabinda Rajkhowa, Pradip Chetia were interested in political dialogue, the military wing under the command of Paresh Barua rejected the negotiation and continued the armed rebellion. The Indian Government responded with ruthless counter insurgency action using military forces against ULFA. During these counter insurgency operations a large number of civilians including members and relatives of the ULFA members were also subjected to armed violence. The ULFA leaders, like Swadhinata Phukan, were killed in fake encounters; family members of leaders, like Mithinga Daimary, were murdered by surrendered militants with indirect support from the Assam police and Indian Army. Innocent civilians, including women were harassed, interrogated, physically and psychologically abused by members of Indian Army. Numerous accounts of ‘secret
killing’ or *gupto hatya* as it was most commonly called took place throughout the state violating the basic human rights of the citizens (Talukdar and Kalita 2011; Mahanta 2013). In return, ULFA resorted to greater violence and terror; attacked railways, oil installations, important business hubs; kidnapping, extortions, bombing alongside guerrilla attacks were targeted on military personals, government officials, prominent leaders as well as foreign nationals. During 1985-90 ULFA ran a parallel government in the state (Bhaumik 2009, 122); they set up a strong organizational base and also gained access to capital through their close connection with various members of the then ruling state government. The ULFA also received Rs 3 millions from the chief minister’s fund (Bhaumik 2009, 120). The breakdown of law and order and the lack of control of the state government led the Indian government to declare the state of emergency and the subsequent president’s rule in Assam in 1990. The Indian government banned ULFA under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and classified it as a terror group in 1990 and deployed successive military operations against it. During the operation Bajrang, the Indian army arrested more than 1100 ULFA rebels and killed many during the encounters including few top level leaders. They have also raided several ULFA camps and hideouts especially in the Lakshipathar forest range and discovered mass graves which sent shockwaves to the people of Assam. Many of the ULFA rebels also surrendered including a few top leaders and showed their interest in peaceful solutions to end the conflict. However top ULFA leaders especially its military chief, Paresh Barua, was against the peace talks and the group retorted to further violence against the security forces as well as other prominent civilians, officials, businessmen and common men (Bhaumik 2009); killing and kidnapping along with series of bomb blasts, damaging and
destroying public property throughout the state turned it into a violent, insecure state. The kidnapping of 15 high profile officials on July 1st, 1991 including the Soviet Russian national, Sergei Gritchenko was one of the harrowing examples of insecurity and lawlessness that pervaded the state. The subsequent killing of Soviet coal engineer Sergei Gritchenko created statewide and national uproar against ULFA (Talukdar and Kalita 2011). It was soon followed by a series of bomb blasts in the state. The killing of journalist Parag Kumar Das, one of the top cabinet ministers of the state assembly Mr Nagen Sarma; violent attack on the then chief minister of the state Mr. Prafulla Mahanta were another few examples of the gun violence and terror attacks by ULFA (Mahanta 2013). The gun violence and unrest continued throughout the 1990s and 2000s creating insurmountable insecurities, suffering, and terror throughout the state and the civilians become the scapegoat between the Indian Army and ULFA. The law and security situation further worsened due to the armed violence caused by the surrendered ULFA or SULFA members who had easy access to arms and also enjoyed patronage of the state machinery. The surrendered ULFA or members secretly targeted friends and family members of the ULFA members, political leaders, and prominent citizens and hence caused an era of social unrest, insecurity and political violence throughout the state. In 2003, ULFA faced the major setback in the form of ‘Operation All Clear’ – a military operation launched by the Royal Bhutanese army against ULFA camps in the Assam-Bhutan international border with the logistical support and assistance from the Indian Army across the border. A number of top ULFA commanders were killed in the encounter along with a great number of civilians and their family members were either attacked or drove away. This was soon followed by the gruesome bomb blast on August
15, 2004 in Dhemaji town during the Independence Day celebration. It killed 17 innocent school children, including 9 girls and left as many as 40 wounded, most of which were women accompanying their children for the parade (Talukdar 2004; Talukdar and Kalita 2011). This sent shock waves throughout the state as common people lost trust on government law enforcement and also on the motives of the separatist group. In 2005, an initiative was taken by a group of prominent citizens from Assamese civil society, local media and pro-ULFA political groups. This group, as called the People’s Consultative Group (PCG), mediated a few rounds of talks between the Indian government and the militants. It was important to note that the PCG was headed by well-known Assamese women novelist Dr. Mamoni Roisom Goswami and it was held with greater hopes and positivity by the Assamese civil society. However, in spite of her best efforts, the peace talk became sidelined by the end of 2006 as both ULFA and the Indian army refused a ceasefire and continued violence and counter insurgency. The ULFA rejected compromise on the sovereignty question of Assam and the Indian government was not willing to accept their demands on sovereignty. With the arrest of several senior leaders of ULFA in Bangladesh in 2009 and the subsequent division of ULFA into two groups – one in favor of peace process and the other strongly adhering to the question of sovereignty under the commander in chief Paresh Barua, the conflict still continues. The years of continuing armed violence by ULFA the Indian army along with the practice of special laws like AFSPA have not only devastated the socio-political and economic stability of the state; but have also shaken the socio-cultural life of the community, ushering in violence, lawlessness and insecurity as part of life. It has weakened the
institutions of democratic governance, polarized the entire population on the dividing lines of ethnic, religious or linguistic divisions affecting civilian security.

The Bodo Conflict. Alongside ULFA, there also emerged numerous other civil and armed insurgencies in Assam, most importantly by the Bodos\(^3\) in demand for a separate state of ‘Bodoland’ within the Indian union. Although the violent mobilization for a separate Bodoland was in place only after 1987-88, the civil and cultural activism by the Bodos as a distinct ethnic community was apparently visible since the 1960s. The Bodo nationalists led by PTCA (Plaints Tribal Council of Assam) and the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) demanded for a separate autonomous territorial unit called as Udayachal as early as 1967 (Baruah 1999, 187; George 1994). The cultural and political activism of the distinct Bodo identity has been politicized and polarized since 1986.

The Bodos or commonly known as the Bodo-Kacharis belonged to the Indo-Mongoloid race and share their linguistic origin in the Tibeto-Burman group of languages. The Bodos consider themselves as the aboriginal inhabitants of Assam and historically have enjoyed their political freedom and territorial power since the pre-Indic period of ancient Assam. Their political and territorial ruling power was drastically reduced during the Ahom rule in Assam. During the British rule in India, the Bodos were categorized as the ‘backward, aboriginal tribes’ and were put under the Inner Line Regulation Act of 1873 along with other minority tribes and hence indirectly excluding the tribal dominated areas from the direct British administrative rule and also restricting

---

\(^3\) Bodo is the largest group of Assam’s plains tribes. The Bodos under the leadership of All Bodo Students Union or ABSU demanded a separate state citing the relative deprivation of the Bodo people within the state of Assam. In 1993 the Bodos were given territorial autonomy within the state of Assam by the Government of India.
the entry of the non-tribal communities into these areas. The exclusion of tribal areas from the otherwise ruling provisions for the other non-tribal areas strengthened their homogeneous tribal identity in terms of language, religious practices and cultural traits. The political mobilization of ethnic Bodo identity and cultural activism, however, took shape during the 1960s-70s with the PTCA demanding ‘Udayachal’ a separate state similar to the states of Nagaland, Mizoram, or Meghalaya. It was followed by the demand for the official adoption of the roman script for written Bodo language in place of Assamese script by the Bodo literary society, more popularly known as Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) and launched mass agitation during 1974-75. However, on behest of the central government, the Sahitya Sabha accepted the Devnageri script - the hidden agenda behind this was to somehow maintain the pan-Indian influence over tribal languages and hence, on the native Bodo speakers. The Devnageri is the parent script for many northern Indian languages including Sanskrit and Hindi. The conflict over the script continued along with the stirred sense of asserting Bodo cultural identity, socio-political space, and the need for political recognition and socio-economic progress of the Bodos finally vent through the mass agitation organized by the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) under the leadership of Upendra Nath Brahma in 1987. It is important to note that the demand for a separate homeland for the Bodos (“Divide Assam 50-50”) by the ABSU leaders came immediately after the Assam Movement (the anti-immigration movement by the AASU) under the newly formed state government by the former AASU leaders. As Monirul Hussain (1987, 1332) observes, the success of the Assam Movement was a reference point for the ABSU leaders to mobilize a similar political campaign for power sharing. Although the movement for a separate Bodoland began in a democratic
manner, it was soon radicalized by underground armed groups who opted for violent tactics such as extortion, kidnapping, explosions, gun violence among Bodos and non-Bodos.

Primarily, the Bodo insurgency began with the formation of National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) in October 3, 1986 under the leadership of Ranjan Daimary. It was soon followed by other militant groups such as the Bodo Volunteer Forces (BVF) – the underground military wing of the ABSU. These militant groups targeted civilians from both Bodo and non-Bodo communities, security personnel with the hidden agenda of creating a homogeneous Bodoland which often looks similar to an ethnic cleansing campaign (Baruah 1999, 194). The gruesome nature of political violence, parallel to the civil disobedience by the ABSU paralyzed the law and order in the Bodo inhibited areas especially in the Kokrajhar district and other Bodo majority areas on the north bank of the Brahmaputra valley. “Incidents of arson, killing, explosions and destructions of life and public property became a part of the intensified movement” (Saikia 2011, 68). There were also reports of extortion, targeted violence and indiscriminate killings non-Bodo people especially people from Santhalis, Nepalis, Muslims and tea tribes communities by Bodo extremists; followed by retaliatory killings of Bodos by non Bodos at many places (Saikia 201, 68). The continuing cycle of violent attacks and counter attacks between the Bodo and the non-Bodos severely affected the law and order in the state, affecting hundreds of people displaced from their homes and communities. The state government with the help of the central government deployed Indian army and paramilitary forces in the Bodo inhibited areas and used repressive measures to control and undermine the civil movement as well as the gun violence. The enactment of anti-terrorist legislations such as
the Terrorists and Disruptive Activities (Prevention Act) 1987 (TADA)\(^4\). Assam Disturbed Area Act were enforced in 1989 leading to a series of arrests, imprisonment along with police raids, army operations by law enforcements in the Bodo inhibited villages. The dissenters responded by intense protests and violent measures by blowing up public offices, bridges, blocking and disrupting roads and railways. Incidence of gun violence, gang-rapes, torture and killing of innocent civilians especially in places like Bhumka in Kokrajhar district, Baghmara in Barpeta district escalate the fear, anxiety and antagonism against police/army as well as between Bodo and non-Bodo communities.

In February 20, 1993, the ABSU leadership and the All Bodo People’s Action Committee (BPAC) jointly signed the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) accord with the central government and the Assam state government to end the violent conflict. The BAC Accord aimed to defuse the tension by democratically assigning autonomous power to the BAC in terms of governance and use of natural resources such as land, forest land in Bodo dominated areas of the state. The negotiation, however, failed as the Bodo leaders demanded further extension of BAC area especially the villages with majority of non-Bodo population. The non-Bodo communities especially the Muslims, the Adivasis or tea tribes living within the BAC areas opposed the proposition and staged grave opposition. This hindered the success of the agreement and stalled the overall accommodation process.

\(^4\) Terrorists and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act 1987 or TADA was adopted by the Indian government to define and counter terrorist activities against the back drop of violent insurgency in Punjab in 1987. This act permits special powers to the law enforcement agencies to deal with terrorist and socially disruptive activities. The accused person under TADA can be held under police custody for 24 hours to 1 year without producing before the judicial magistrate. The law enforcement can accuse any person and arrest on the basis of suspicion and the accused has to bear the ‘burden of proof’ to prove his/her innocence. The act has been severely criticized by the human rights organizations and various political parties for gross violations of democratic as well as human rights.
The failure of the BAC 1993 accord ushered another era of violent mobilization and militancy in the state, especially in the Bodo inhibited areas (See Map in the Appendix). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, NDFB along with another armed group, Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), caused mass violence, disruption and killing. The Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) was formed in 1996 by Prem Singh Brahma with unofficial support and endorsement from the ABSU- BPAC to further intensify the demand for an autonomous state. While NDFB is more radicalized and harbored a secessionist agenda for a separate Bodoland outside the territorial boundary of Indian state; BLT stood for an autonomous Bodoland within the Indian state. However, both groups used extreme violent tactics against the government forces targeting police, government officials, important infrastructures such as railways, bridges, buildings. More gruesome was the systematic violence targeted at the non-Bodo people residing in the Bodo dominated areas especially the Adivasis and the Muslims. After the failure of the 1993 accord, various episodes of violence took place between the Bodo and the Adivasis or Santhals and the Muslims in 1994, 1996, and 1998 killing hundreds of people, destroying villages, and leaving huge number people displaced from their homes and communities. In 1994, in separate events Bodo extremists targeted the immigrant Muslim villages driving nearly 10,000 people from their homes and causing nearly 100 casualties in Kokrajhar and Barpeta districts (Saikia 2011, 114). According to the report by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, Norway (2008, 50), nearly 250,000 persons were displaced due to the Bodo attacks on Santhals in 1996. In 1998, more than 110,000 people took shelter in the relief camps. According to the government record only 33,363 people in Kokrajhar district and 74,123 persons in the Gosaigaon were in the refugee
camps by 2005, although the unofficial number is higher (IDMC Report 2008). In 2008, violent clashes between the Bodo and the Muslims left nearly 150,000 displaced and hundreds killed and injured (IDMC Report on India 2008, 52). Following the large scale violence and intense socio-political hostility, the BLT and the central government signed a new memorandum in the presence of the state government representative. More than 2000 BLT cadres surrendered their arms and a Bodo territorial council was formed and took charge of the powers of administration in the Bodo dominated areas (Saikia 2011, 75). The NDFB remained critical of this power sharing arrangement and continued their fight for a sovereign Bodo state. The stream of violence, killing and kidnapping continued. NDFB initiated a series of serious bomb blasts in Oct 30, 2008 killing close to 100 civilians and injuring 545 civilians (Das 2008; The Hindu 2013). A large number of NDFB members were arrested and the group split up into two factions. Ranjan Daimary, the chief of NDFB was later arrested in Bangladesh in 2010. Factional feuds, hostilities, armed violence within the Bodo armed groups and also between the Bodo and non-Bodo groups are still continuing in the BTC area and the security for common people still remains as an allusive dream.

Similar to the Bodos, other tribal communities such as Karbi, Dimasa, Mising, Koch Rajbanshis have also resorted to ethnic mobilization and demanded their own homelands. Some groups have followed civilian protests with peaceful means, many have taken up armed violence for assertion of their ethnic identity and demand political recognition and rearrangement of territorial boundaries in their favor.
In the traditional societies of Assam and the northeast India, women used to enjoy a fairly better position in terms of respectability and social space as compared to their counterparts in other parts of India (Fernandes and Borbora 2002; Goswami, Sreekala and Goswasmi 2005; Mukhim 2009). The common practice of dowry in most parts of India was absent in the traditional societies of Assam and northeast India. On the contrary, there were systems of ‘bride prices’ among the tribal communities which is to be paid by the groom or his family as an indication of their status/responsibility to have a wife. The available data on sex ratios as early as in 1921 and 1951 indicates that northeast India had been better than the rest of India (Das 2008). The prevalence of matrilineal systems in some states of northeast India as well as the active involvement of women in the economic and social activities of the tribal societies in the region are imperatives for the relatively better status of women in northeast India (Das 2008). However, the ongoing conflicts in past few decades have altered the scenario limiting women’s once liberated space as well as their basic rights and choices. Throughout the years of conflict, women in Assam are being victimized both directly and indirectly. Similar to their many counterparts in the conflict ridden societies, they are subjected to physical and psychological abuse; the sexual violations of rape, molestations, as well as killing along with the emotional and economic burden of losing their near and dear ones have deeply affected the women of the entire state (Dutta and Sengupta 2011; C-NES Report 2011; Banerjee 2010). The loss of family members (parents, husband, brother-sister, children, and relatives) has long term psychological, economic as well as social
effects on women. The sufferings endured by women as caretakers of the family and the community during and after the conflict results in terrible emotional and mental stress (C-NES Report 2011). The loss of the male family members puts economic burdens on women and since they are the ones who are to “pick up the pieces” during or aftermath of conflict, they undergo tremendous emotional and economic pressures. In rural areas of Assam, the majority of women are illiterate and ill equipped to take up formal employment, making it harder to carry out the financial responsibility of the family and also to head the household in the absence of husband or father or the nearest family member. Women have also become easy targets for various atrocities and killings both by the insurgents as well as government security forces. During the counter-insurgency operations of Indian Army against the ULFA – the operation Bajrang 1990 and Operations Rhino 1992- Assamese women became the scapegoats between the security forces and the insurgent groups; their minds and bodies became the battlefield as they were subjected to various atrocities, threat, abductions, verbal and physical abuses, molestation, rape and even killing by army personnel (Goswami, Sreekala and Goswasmi 2005; Talukdar and Kalita 2011). Women’s individual choices and gender rights have also been restricted by the rebels, the self- proclaimed protectors of ethnicity citing the cause of cultural preservation and ethnic identities (Banerjee 2010). However, their victimhood has not stopped them from their struggle for freedom and justice.

Assam has a long history of women’s activism (Banerjee 2010, 144). During the Indian freedom movement period, Assamese women actively participated in non-violent protests, marches, sit-ins, and boycotts alongside their male counterparts under the legendary leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. In the 1942 ‘Quit India’ movement more than
a dozen of Assamese women including Kanaklata Barua, Bhogeswari Phukanani, Rabati Lahon, Golapi Chutiyani and others have scarified their lives at the hands of the British forces and many were arrested and jailed for their full participation in the movement (Das 2011). Encouraged by the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence and social activism, a group of educated Assamese women, formed the first of its kind women’s organization known as the *Mahila Samiti* as early as 1915 (Banerjee 2010). Few prominent women activists behind this historic venture were Chandraprova Saikiani, Hemoprava Das, Amalprava Das, Punyaprava Das along with the women members of a few well-known families such as the Agarwala family from Tezpur and the Chaliha family from Sibsagar, who believed deeply in the cause of women’s liberation and social change. Under the leadership of Chandraprava Saikiani, the *Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti* was born in 1926 to bring women of all caste and creed and also various women’s organizations throughout the state under a singular entity. In the due course of time the *Samiti* successfully spread out its branches throughout the state- integrated other *Mahila Samities* and spearheaded the issues of women’s education, self-employment and prevention of child marriage, social discrimination. It is under the aegis of the *Mahila Samiti* that women’s empowerment and equality became strong issues as early as the independence era. Chandraprava Saikiani, one of the leading woman activists, even broke

---

5 The first *Mahila Samiti* or Women’s Organization was established in Dibrugarh in 1915 and the *Tezpur Mahila Samiti* or the Tezpur Women’s Organization was established in 1921. The *Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti* was set up in 1926 as the state level women’s organization. The *Tezpur District Mahila Samiti* became its member organization in 1947.

6 The *Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti* is the state level apex body of Women’s Organizations. It was set up in 1926 by Chandraprava Saikiani and her associates under the aegis of Assam Sahitya Sabha, the highest body of Assamese civil society for the promotion/preservation of Assamese literature, art and culture. This is a non-governmental women’s organization with an aim to organize and mobilize women under one platform and create awareness about women’s rights and social development. At present, The Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti acts as a governing body to coordinate and assist different district level/local level Mahila Samitis. It is a collective platform and a civil society organization of Assamese women.
the social barrier of segregated sitting arrangements for men and women during the Nagaon Session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha in 1925. She was also the first Assamese women to assert the need for women’s political-participation by contesting for the state legislative assembly elections. In the post- independence period, Assam Mahila Samiti has become a mammoth organization spreading over the entire state, working for the development of women and children and demanding social justice for women. During the long years of conflict, Assam Mahila Samitis along with many other civil society organizations have spoken out against the conspicuous environment of militarization and insecurity throughout the state. They have organized protest-marches; sit-ins against incidents of armed violence, killing or kidnapping and arson and have criticized the role of government as well the insurgent groups. At the time of Sanjay Ghosh’s kidnapping by the ULFA, Tezpur District Mahila Samiti, was in the forefront along with other NGOs and civilian groups to submit a petition for his release and publicly took a stand against the insurgent group. They have brought into the light the grievances of women, the insecurities women face due to the innumerable acts of violence from law-enforcement as well as the insurgents groups. Similar to the Tezpur District Mahila Samiti, other branches of Mahila Samiti and other women’s groups also played commendable roles in mobilizing public demand for peace and justice. In the aftermath of the army operations in 1989 and 1991, a group of women formed Matri Manch in Guwahati and initiated a grass root peace campaign (Banerjee 2010). They rallied against the atrocities committed by the state police and the army and also demanded a probe for missing people. This group became a platform for the mothers who have lost their sons or whose sons were disappeared during the pick of ULFA insurgency and counter insurgency period.
(Banerjee 2010). They also took up the issues of sexual abuse, gender discrimination and violence against women by both state army and insurgent groups. As their protests gained momentum they were threatened by the insurgents and also ignored by the state authorities. Other organizations such as the Kasturba Gandhi Memorial Trust, the Sajagota Samitis have also done commendable work to spread the message of nonviolence and peace through women’s activism. In 1997, a regional women’s convention was successfully held in Guwahati, Assam with the slogan ‘women for peace and progress’. Nearly 1500 participants from 100 tribal villages of north eastern states participated in this event (Banerjee 2010). As these groups began mobilizing against continuing violence, killing and kidnapping, they have also brought into focus the issues of marginalization of women due to their gender and the innumerable insecurities’ women face in the conflict-torn societies. Women’s rights and empowerment have become crucial themes as these groups engage in rebuilding communities, and voicing their demand for peaceful solutions to the conflicts. Mahila Shanti Sena (MSS), another women’s group, based in the rural Kumarikata area of Assam, has taken up women’s empowerment as the key to build peaceful and strong societies. Inspired by the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence and self-help, MSS has been actively engaged in capacity building through self-help groups, micro financing and skills development among rural women. They are also engaged in promoting participatory democracy through knowledge sharing, creating awareness and building peaceful neighborhoods through crisis intervention, dispute negotiations within the community.

Women’s activism, with regards to peace building in the other north eastern states especially in Nagaland and Manipur, has already gained greater attention in the academia
as well as in the media. Rita Manchanda (2005) has discussed the efforts of Naga Mothers Association (NMA) and Naga Women’s Union of Manipur (NWUM) towards Naga peace process. Namrata Gaikwad (2009) explains the symbolic protest staged by the members of Meira Paibi, a women’s organization in Manipur, whose members stripped naked and marched in front of the Indian Army Headquarters demanding justice against the army brutalities committed against women. Similarly, the case of Irom Sharmila, a Manipuri women peace activist who has been on hunger strike since 2000 against the undemocratic Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) law has been well documented in the media (Joshi 2007; Mehrotra 2011; Laithangbam 2015). The case of Irom Sharmila, the iron lady of Manipur has been a glaring example of activism and passion for peace against state suppression and gross violation of human rights.

Aim of the Study

_The Need to Look into Women’s Security_

At the backdrop of continuing militarization, violence and power struggle in Assam, civilian security is always at stake. As evidenced in many conflict ridden societies, civil society in Assam, especially the women, have been facing enormous security challenges with regard to their physical, economic, psychological, family and social security. There has been raising concerns and questions regarding civilians’ security during the conflict and its aftermath. However, there have been little or no specific attempts to examine women’s security concerns in Assam, neither at the time of conflict nor at its aftermath. The questions of women’s security in this regard has either been overlooked or buried under the common blanket of civilian security.
The present study aims to look into the security concerns and challenges of women during the past three decades of conflict in Assam. The study focuses on the period from 1979-2015 as the historical timeframe for discussion of events and women’s security issues. The year 1979 is a reference point as it marks the beginning of the 6-year-long anti-foreigner movement known as the Assam movement (1979-1985). It is also the beginning of the separatist armed movement by the ULFA (1979- present). Since 1979, the socio–political history of Assam is filled with the rise and dissemination of various dissenting voices, armed groups and political parties based on ethnic, tribal or regional lines. Therefore, the period since 1979 seems to be a relevant timeframe for the context of the present study.

Role of Women’s Groups in Conflict Prevention and Peace Building

At the backdrop of continuous militarization, various civilian groups and women’s organizations in the north east India have been playing active roles in rebuilding communities, developing social understanding, awareness and trust and hence, an informal ground for peace building among the masses. These civilian women’s groups have often been discussed as crucial players to develop informal grounds for peace building. A few women’s groups, especially in the states of Nagaland and Manipur, have put forward unprecedented efforts towards community building, repairing relations, and renewing communications which have caught greater attentions from the media as well as academic/policy practitioners. There are various women’s organizations in different parts of Assam which have been involved in similar peace building activities at the community level. However, there has been very little discussion or research done on those groups in Assam. Therefore, the present study aims to primarily focus on Assam and a few
women’s groups actively engaged in similar activities in the state of Assam. It aims to examine whether women’s activism at the local level has indeed contributed towards the grassroots peace building. Also it will examine the meaning of security/insecurity, conflict and peace from the perspective of women and whether their understanding of security has influenced their activism towards peace building.

The Plan of Study

Chapter I is the introductory chapter of the study of women, security and peace building in Assam. It briefly discusses the issue of women’s security and women’s involvement in peace building process. It also presents the background and history of Assam and North East India and the prevailing conflicts in the region. It also presents the specific aim of the study and its importance in the context of the study region. Chapter II presents a detailed literature review on women, security and peace building. It discusses the theoretical proposition of feminist International Relations theory and social capital theory which is applied as the theoretical framework for the present study. Chapter III presents the methodology and rationale for the study. It includes the research questions and the research expectations and the research design of the study. It also discusses the limitations and challenges involved in the study. Chapter IV presents the results and analysis on women and security in the state of Assam. It includes the survey findings as well as the interview findings on women and security. Chapter V presents the findings and analysis on women group activism and social capital. It discusses in detail the survey findings and the interview findings on women’s activism and social capital and the grassroots peace building. Chapter VI is the concluding chapter. It presents the summary of the study. It discusses the research questions and the study hypotheses in the light of
the research findings presented in the previous chapters and conclude the study with future recommendations. It also discusses the limitations of the study.
CHAPTER II – REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter presents a detailed discussion of the notions of war/conflict, security/insecurity and peace within the realm of international relations (IR), peace and conflict studies. These are the core concepts of international relations studies and in order to understand the prospect for peace in international relations one must pay attention to why war is such a recurrent event in the history of nation states and also the nature of international affairs and the determining factors between the states. The literature on the nature, causes and consequences of war and security within the field of IR alone is vast, “diverse and without a sense of consensus” (Sjoberg 2013, 15). Same can be said of the concept of peace as it is directly and indirectly intertwined with war and security/insecurity. Since the establishment of the nation states in the 16th century the question of security, freedom and peace along with the establishment of state have become the central theme of political discourse and debate. At the core of the theories of IR lies the philosophical questions associated with such issues. Therefore, it is important to ponder into these notions from the perspective of those theories that have emanated from the philosophical debates of these issues. It is also important to understand these notions from the perspectives of traditional schools of IR prior to understanding the underlying link between women, security/insecurity and peace building explained in this study.

Until recently war and the question of security within the realm of traditional IR studies has been observed only as between the states and with the use of force or military might. However, the idea of war and peace based on the modern nation-state concept is subject to scrutiny in recent years by a new group of IR scholars. Most scholars of war
studies and security studies agree that war by definition is violent (Levy and Thomson 2010); violence with regards to war is different from the everyday violence; rather it means “the use of force to kill, and injure people and destroy military and economic resources” (As quoted in Sjoberg 2013, 16). War is most commonly fought between two or more political groups and not between individuals. While the war studies and security studies scholars until recently have been thinking of war between states, it is important to note that historically wars have actually been fought between political groups or actors (nation-state being one of the recent actors as the birth of modern nation state is accepted since the post Westphalia Treaty). The realist IR scholars view of war occurring only between the states has, however, been objected by contemporary scholars who recognize that wars occur within states as well as across states. This marks a greater shift in understanding and accepting war in a broader framework. Broadening the definition and scope of war and its actors, Clausewitz defines war as “politics by other means” (as quoted by Sjoberg 2013, 16) and it is fought in terms of interests, resources and relative power. Hence, it is questionable to think of war only in terms of the nation-state.

Moreover, the nature of war has also changed since the World War II; the increasing shift from interstate wars to civil wars has made scholars question the relevance of ‘Westphalian model’ of warfare (Levy and Thompson 2010, 13). The increasing number of intra-state conflicts based on ethnic lines, religious divides or political power has also changed the nature of wars and warring parties driven by their pursuit of power, identity, political or economic security or other interests (Horowitz 1985; Gur and Harff 1994; Levy and Thompson 2010). The changing nature of warfare has also challenged the notions of security, and peace. Security in traditional IR is understood as ‘national
security’ of the sovereign state and the state is responsible to defend its security through its military might. The contemporary IR feminist scholars consider this notion of security rather debatable. In the following sections we will discuss the concepts of war, security and peace as analyzed by the three levels of analysis of IR and also its critics why these theories seem inadequate to help explain the question of security for women and women’s effort towards peace building.

Within the field of international relations we find three broad levels of analysis – the system level, the state level and the individual level which provide a broad analysis of conflict/war, security and peace. This chapter, in broad, discusses the literature on war, security and peace. It is divided into a few sections for the clarity of thought, presentation and organizational design. The first section deals with the traditional IR theories of war and peace based on the system level analysis which focuses war and security at the international level. The next section presents the state level analysis of war, security and peace and the third section deals with the individual level of analysis on the same. Following the three levels of analysis we present the feminist analysis of war, conflict and security and how the feminist perspective of war and security is different from the concept of war and security offered so far by the three levels of analysis in traditional IR theories. This is followed by a review of literature on women, conflict and peace building. Women’s experience of conflict and violence shapes their agency to take actions towards rebuilding societies, social networks and community peace. We discuss the hidden link between women’s activism and social capital which in turn contributes to peace building. This leads us to review the literature on social capital theory and how and why is it relevant in the case of this study.
The System-Level Analysis of War, Security, and Peace

The system level analysis on war, security and peace largely encompasses the realist IR paradigm which is further divided into various branches of realism. According to the realists’ schools of IR, states are at the centrality of war and security discourse. Grounded on the philosophy of Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes on war, politics and human nature, the classical realist school strongly ascertain the central role of state in the world politics. The classical realists view the possibility of war/conflict as natural and hence, states are driven by their security interests, security in this sense means primarily ‘national security’.

As mentioned in the *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes’, politics and war are rooted in the pre-social state of human nature as based on the three simple assumptions—a. men are equal (and hence each had equal chance of killing each other) b. they interact in anarchy and c. men are driven by competition, diffidence and glory. Without a common power to bind man with one another, man will always be in the condition of war and insecurity; unless there is a counter balance by other forces such as hierarchical order to mitigate conflict and violence. Developing on this thesis, Hans Morgenthau (1946) developed his six principles of political realism in his most seminal work “Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace”. His theory of political realism remained the basis of realists’ interpretations of war/conflict, security and peace. It was further adapted, modified, and interpreted by other exemplary realist scholars -Kenneth Waltz, Stephen Walt, Robert Jervis, John Mearsheimer and many others.

According to Morgenthau (1948), the state is the central actor in the world politics and is primarily responsible for peace and security of the state; security, in this context, is
understood as the ‘national security’ of the state. In absence of any legal, hierarchical authority to bind the states at the international levels, states are driven by their own interests of power (Morgenthau 1948). They interact with one another in a condition of anarchy at the international level; anarchy, as he means, is a natural state of international politics. It is not in the sense of all pervading war with one another, but it is in the sense that there is no legal, hierarchical authority to bind the states together and hence, states must guard their own security. All states seek to maximize their power, and their thirst for power is driven by the intrinsic nature of their political leaders, actors who control the states. States, in their pursuit of security and power, behave within a rational framework in terms of adopting policies, performing political actions. Finally, Morgenthau believed that states have the sovereign power on their use of force; the ability and willingness to use force against perceived threat or necessity is in the hands of the states. Thus, force or use of force is an integral part of statehood. Morgenthau has discussed the possibility of peace in midst of anarchy. He has presented detailed discussions of the problem of peace at national and international level. In the absence of authority at the international realm, peace is not easily attainable as compared to the domestic peace within the territorial jurisdiction of a sovereign state. The popularly known devices of disarmament, collective security, international police force, judicial settlement, international organizations such as United Nations are not enough to make international peace happen. Morgenthau did not negate the importance of international organizations, conventions, treaties or other nongovernmental organizations altogether, but he did not find them effective enough to influence the interests of the sovereign states in their constant struggle for power and hence, security. He asserts that the process demands higher level of diplomacy,
negotiations, persuasion and political pressure since the states continue to struggle for power and gain status-quo.

Following Morgenthau’s principles, Kenneth Waltz, further advances the notion of structural realist theory (neo-realism) based on the international structure. According to Waltz, it is the anarchical structure of the international system that determines the behavior of the states (Waltz 1979) and not the deliberate actions of men and women in control of the state. War is the result of competition between the states/actors as they are faced with the unpredictability of each other’s behavior in the state of anarchy at the international arena. States, being the constituent units of the international system are bound to collaborate with one another in order to fulfill their pursuit of power and national security. Waltz discusses the balance of power theory as a way how states can achieve a balance against their rivals by internal and external efforts. Internal efforts include increasing economic and military strengths while external factors emphasize on alliance formation with other states (Waltz 1979, 118).

Following Waltz’ proposition, other realist scholars have refined and advanced the neo-realist stand, leading to two strands most commonly known as defensive and offensive realism. Defensive realists hold the view the anarchical nature of the international system does create the potential security threats. However, survival and security are the primary pursuits of states’ behavior. Security and survival are best achieved by the states through balancing and avoiding gaps among themselves (Mastanduno 1991). The potential security threats only materialize when states seek expansion and not otherwise (Walt 1987; Van Evera 1999). Defensive realism values
domestic level variables such as hostile regimes, malicious leaders, and broken links in the states’ decision-making processes (Snyder 1991; Glaser 1997).

Unlike the defensive realists, offensive realists do not see international system creating positive incentives for state behavior. Proponents of offensive realism such as John Mearsheimer (1990, 12) suggest that states are not satisfied with a given amount of power and rather they seek hegemony within the international system: “States seek to survive under anarchy by maximizing their power relative to other states”. Hence, the international system will always be dominated by opportunistic states who view other states as potential or actual competitor. Thus offensive realism focuses on the system-level variables rather than domestic –level variables as primarily responsible for such state behavior in the international system. Further, offensive realism holds that states, even in the absence of any direct threat, must continuously seek to strengthen themselves and their positions. Thus, states’ aggressive behavior is strategic in seeking security and asserting hegemony. States are in this sense ‘short term power maximizers’ (Mearsheimer 1994). Similar to Waltz, Mearsheimer also have little faith in the international institutions as capable of preventing war and foster peace. Mearsheimer (2001) argues that the international institutions such as the United Nations (UN) have been created by the states and hence, are bound by states.

Both offensive and defensive realism offer useful guide to analyze/interpret policy and state behaviors with regards to war, security and peace at international level. Other strands of realism, however, are concerned with the lack of construction that structural realism pays to “both the influence of and the potential to influence variables” at the domestic level (Sjoberg 2013, 19). The neoclassical realists, while holding on to the neo-
realists’ concept of balance of power in the anarchical international system, further approaches domestic level variables to explain the power –politics and decision making in the foreign policy. Other approaches of realist schools with regards to war and security have either interact or overlap with the classical, offensive, defensive or neo classical realism. While different realist theorists mean different things by “power”, and interpret “balance of power” in varied ways; the key concept of the realist school is that power-balancing is a key strategy of the states for achieving security and also a key feature of a peaceful international system (Sjoberg 2013, 19). Apart from the realists, other liberal theorists such a David Lake have also discussed states as units functioning as firms producing security in making decisions how to interact with other states or firms towards “manufacturing security” on the basis of opportunity costs and governance (Lake 1996, 2009; Sjoberg 2013, 20). Realists’ interpretation of the international structure is heavily laden with the study of war and state behaviors as leading forces of war. However, it has fallen short on analyzing war as a mixed phenomenon of people, state rationalities and irrationalities along with the national interests of other states and people too.

Realist theory prioritizes national security and national interests over ideology, moral values and social constructions. They believe that anarchy is the state of the international system and although cooperation among states is possible, it is not genuine simply because it is a mere means for survival and security. “For the realists, the central problem of international politics is war and the use of force, and the central actors are states” (Keohane and Nye 1977, 4). The realists do not see much hope for the prospect of world peace; neither do they pay much attention to the non-state actors such as political
groups. This theory also implies that man is an instinctive animal with the objective of surviving and procreating and states are formed as a means for cooperative competition for survival.

State-Level or Domestic-Level Analysis of War, Security and Peace

This section presents the state level or domestic level analysis of war, security and peace propounded primarily by the liberal theories of International Relations studies. To understand the issues of war and security and the prospect for peace in international politics, liberal scholars look into the history of the nation why wars have been ever present in the history of mankind. The liberal theories of international relations have gained momentum especially with the end of cold war. With the ending of the cold war era, the world changes from a bi-polar world to a more globalized world. The opening up of market economies, liberal framework of capitalism, cooperation and interdependence along with developing democratic practices strongly suggest the possibility for peace and prosperity for all human kind. According to Fukuyama (1992), the end of cold war indicated the triumph of ‘ideal state’ and liberal capitalist democracy is the remedy for ending global conflict and hence, to end the struggle for power and security at international and domestic level. Liberal scholars held the view that with the spread of “legitimate domestic political orders” the domestic and international conflicts would soon cease to an end and the prospect for a peaceful world order would unfold.

What Waltz called as the “second image” or the domestic factors—political institutions, interest groups, political actors, economy, public opinion, - become of particular importance for the liberal scholars to understanding and explaining state behavior in the international relations and foreign policy practices. Without denying the
centrality of the state in the international state of real politics, liberal scholars hold the view that free trade and democracy is the way to eradicate conflicts and promote peace among the citizens of the whole world. Liberal scholars while accept the anarchical structure of the international system propound by the neo-realist school, however, disprove it as the prime cause of war and insecurity. Liberals believe in an inherently peaceful world order and postulate that the primary causes of war lies within and/or among the states.

Founded on the philosophical traditions of Kant, Rousseau and Cobden, liberal tradition believes that war is the product of militaristic and undemocratic governments to fulfill their own vested interests. Wars were engineered by the “warrior class” to maintain their power over common men and quench their thirst for power and territory. On the pretext of war, governments raise taxes, expand their bureaucratic power and control over the population. The common men, however, are ‘peace-loving by nature’ and forced into war and conflict by their rulers (Burchill 2001, 59). For liberals like Schumpeter, war is the product of the ‘unrepresentative elite class’ to fulfill their aggressive instinct for power and wealth (Schumpeter 1942, 19). These elites compel the common men to take part in violent conflicts, which benefit the warring class. According to Kant, war was the outcome of the minority rule. As liberal states are founded on the primary tenets of individualism, equality, freedom of speech, freedom from authority, civil rights and democratic governance, they would not engage in war and conflict; rather liberal states would treat its citizens and others as “ethical subjects” (Doyle 1983, 206-207; Fukuyama 1992, 42). Peace can be achieved through establishing legitimate domestic political order within the states. According to Doyle, “(W)hen the citizens who bear the burdens of war
elect their governments, wars become impossible” (Doyle 1986, 1151). Further, liberal democratic states willfully join and co-operate with other democratic states to establish or maintain mutual peace based on their foundational principles of democratic rights and institutions (Doyle 1986; Fukuyama 1992).

Liberal scholars attribute a number of causes for conflict and war among states and other warring parties – rivalry, regime type and economic interaction. The proponents of rivalry as the key causes of war, point out that there is only a relatively small number of states that go to war and not all states were involved in war. “the historic pattern of warfare is such that, at any given point in time, most states are not involved in war… there is relatively small group of states that go to war and often do so repetitively with the same opponents” (Thomson and Levy 2010, 56). The cause of rivalry may be different ranging from conflict patterns between the states, or strategic rivalries or perceived threats. Other scholars ponder onto war as a process pointing at the various issues states go to war with one another such as territorial disputes or bargain of cost and gain (Levy and Thompson 2010; Fearon 1995). Another group of liberal theorists, however, argues that neither alliance nor disputes or rivalries really indicate if states go to war, rather it depends on their trade interdependence. The states that are dependent on each other for trade are less likely to fight with each other. This has its roots in the works of early liberals like Adam Smith and David Ricardo who viewed trade as a pathway toward peace and cooperation among nations. Various studies have indicated positive correlation between trade interdependence and peaceful states (McDonald 2009). Liberal scholars also argue that capitalist/industrialist countries harbor an interest in maintaining peace and economic gains (Gartzke 2007).
Another strand of liberal IR scholars proposes the concept of ‘democratic peace’. Based on the Kantian philosophy of international politics, this group of scholars argues in favor of liberal democracies: “liberal democracies do not fight each other, even when they are not generally more peaceful than non-democracies” (Mansfield and Snyder 1995; Rummel 1996 as quoted in Sjoberg 2013, 23). One variant of democratic peace theorists believe that democratic states have political organizations and institutions based on the democratic values which guide their foreign policy and external behavior. The relationship between democratic states is based on the essence of peace and not aggression and power. Another strand believes that it is the structure of the democratic states that hinders them from fighting one another since the elected leaders have to gain support from their citizens to legitimize their cry for war and democratic citizens are not likely to support war against other democracies. Critics of the democratic peace theory point out other commonalities - common interests among states, coalition and collective security among liberal democracies as powerful assets to have contributed to peaceful order (Gartzke 2000). Erik Gartzke (2000) points out that “democracies fight each other less often because they disagree less often or less intensely and thus have less about which to fight.” According to David Lake (1992), “democratic peace is the result of powerful democratic states” (as quoted by Sjoberg 2013, 25). Critics also point out that it is the liberal values and not the democracy per se that made the democratic states to maintain peace and security; further it is the secured states that have become successful as democracies and not otherwise (Rosato 2003; Layne 1994; Owen 1994). Critics of democratic peace also point out that violence is associated with the process of democratization and promotions of democracy through war and aggression.
Another strand of state-level analysis which focuses on the domestic or state level factors is the Marxist theory of war. It argues in favor of the socialism to end conflict between the states. Other theories on domestic level politics center on culture, ethnicity, nationalism, religion and ideology in order to explain/understand the question of security and peace in the contemporary world.

Unlike the liberal focus on capitalism and democratic peace, proponents of Marxist-Leninist theories criticize the capitalist class and their practice of imperialism - their control over the production and operations including their decision to wage war. Focusing their attention on the economic aspect rather than the political organization of the state, they believe that socialist states based on classless societies would minimize the threat of war and increase the possibility of peaceful world order. The proponents of Marxist Leninist theory of war, security/insecurity and peace argue that, “modern war arises from the economic imperatives of capitalist societies and the inequitable distributions of wealth within them” (Levy and Thompson 2010, 83). According to Karl Marx, economic struggles between the means of production and distribution determine the social and political structures in capitalist societies. In other words, it is the class struggle between the capitalists and the proletariat which is the driving force of history (Levy and Thompson 2010, 86). The capitalist class uses war as a tool to expand their interests - to expand new markets, to gain control and access to raw materials and earn profits. They view capitalism and globalization as forces that brought distant societies together and their needs and wants are internationalized and globalized. However, while the working class or proletariats are pitted against each other for same resources, the ruling or the capitalist class reap the benefits of surplus capital. They use capitalism and
imperialism as tools to advance their own interests (Levy and Thompson 2010; Linklater 2001). Marxist-Leninist strands stress relationships between the domestic politics and war and the capitalist class. Following the Marxist analysis various accounts of war and factors associated with the state’s decision making have been proposed by various IR scholars. Scholars have pointed out the coalition among the states and maintained that war benefits the elites class while the cost of wars falls on the society as a whole (Snyder 1991). Another strand of coalitional theory finds that the ruling class exaggerates the fears of foreign threats and the importance of economic and political values before the masses (Sjoberg 2013, 27). While Marxist-Leninist theories offer greater understandings of capitalist globalism, class division, production and wealth distribution, and its link to the international politics and policy making, these theories have also been subjected to criticism by the realists, liberalist and feminist scholars. Liberals argue that it is the military/political class and not the economic elites who lead states to wage war. Further economic globalization is a shield against the power conflicts among states. Feminists’ scholars negate the Marxist division of production and capital and the formation of elite vs. proletarian class dominance. They point out the failure of Marxist theory to distinguish production from reproduction and exclusion of women’s household work from the economic mode of production.

Other approaches of the state level or domestic analysis of IR and war and security focuses on culture, ethnic nationalism, religion or ideology. One of the most debating explanations of culture and war is put forward by Samuel Huntington in his *Clash of Civilizations* (1996) where he distinguished seven or eight civilizations and argues that “fault lines between the civilizations will be the battle lines of the future”
(1996). He defined civilizations as “the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of identity people have...” and argues that the conflicts in the post-cold war period would primarily be based on cultures, mostly defined by religion and specifically between the West and non-West. He also predicted the rise of conflicts based on the fault lines within states that contain people from different civilization groups. Huntington’s thesis has been criticized by various scholars on several accounts. Negating the importance of culture and reinstating the importance of sovereignty, realists argue that nation states and the politics of anarchy will still remain the primary force behind the state’s desire to go to war. While culture is important, it is dynamic and most conflicts will occur between members of the same civilizations (Hunter 1998) and there are other important phenomena which might influence conflict such as the world-wide trend towards secularism and democracy (Ajami 1993; Gray 1998), growth of information technology and economic development (Barber 1997/1998; Nussbaum 1997; Rosencrance 1997; Hunter 1998). Scholars on the role of culture and identity in connection with conflict and security are divided into various groups. Some point out the role of religion on war (Little 1996) while others focus on ideology (Lebow 2008, Wendt 1999) or social factors that shape the foreign policy of the states (Wendt 1999). Scholars like Fearon and Laitin (2003) move away from the theory of anarchy and bi-polar balance of power theory to propose the insurgency theory of conflict. They argue that the rise of civil wars since 1990s results from a gradual accumulation of conflicts since WWII. Most of the civil conflicts during 1990s and afterwards have been insurgencies characterized by “small-scale guerrilla warfare” committed by small armed groups from rural base.
Individual-Level Analysis of War, Security and Peace

The third level of analysis in the field of IR studies is the individual level theories which hold the individual as responsible for the making decisions of war, security and peace. Focusing on humans, these theories primarily seek to understand how the decision making process of certain individuals such as political leaders or influential individuals, either individually or in groups, leads to states’ policy making which influences the decisions of war and security at national/international level. These theories focus on the choices, the personalities and the perceptions of these individuals and groups in order to understand and explain the decision making process of global politics. According to Byman and Pollack (2001), the understanding of the global politics of the twentieth century would not be possible if one were to exclude the decision making capacities of the leaders like Adolf Hitler, Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong, Stalin, Ronald Reagan or Mikhail Gorbachev. Their capacities and prowess in making decisions of war and security and carrying out policies towards implementing those decisions at state/international levels influenced the course of global politics in the twentieth century. The individual level theories approach human nature broadly from three different perspectives- a. some focus on the fundamental human nature – how decisions ought to be made based on the rational human behavior; b. others focus their attention on how people in decision-making act in organizations or groups (Jervis 1988; Holsti 1967) c. the third approach focuses on the motivations and actions of specific persons, their individual beliefs and practices, misperceptions of facts and others behavior which directly or indirectly influence their decisions of war (Hermann 2001). Analyzing the methods how decision makers process information and form or change
their beliefs about the international politics and other actors, Robert Jervis (1976, Van Evera 1999) discusses the common misconceptions of decision makers and how states face great dangers when these misconceptions leads to aggression and war. Other scholars have analyzed the decision making habits of groups and how state’s policies, decision’s to wage war with another state or bargain for peace or sign are determined by such groups of decision makers (Allison and Zelikow 1999; Levy and Thompson 2010). Proponents of organizational decision-making approach focus on bureaucratic politics among the executive branches of the government while the operating procedures focus within the decision-making groups (Levy and Thompson 2010).

The individual level theories have offered critical perspectives to the study of war and peace. However, they have also been criticized as inconclusive to explain the critical issues and dilemmas associated with war, peace and security. Structural theorists like Waltz and Wendt find the individual level analysis having less explanatory power to analyze the anarchical nature of the world system and explain the nature of international politics (Waltz 1996; Wendt 1999). Although, they admit that these theories have offered newer perspectives to the field of war and security studies.

Apart from the three levels of analysis in the realm of IR studies, there are various approaches which critically examine the war and security issues. These approaches have roots in the age of enlightenment; and have shaped by the proponents of Frankfurt School (Jay 1973, Wyn Jones 2001) in the writings of Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Lowenthal and most importantly Jurgen Habermas (Devetak 2001). Critical theories criticize the traditional state centric notions of war and security and focus its attention on society (and state) as political community and its historic, social
and political developments with “an expansionist agenda which, with the end of cold war,
sought to replace the emphasis on the state and the threat or use of force with a broad
array of referent objects and sources of insecurity” (As quoted in Sjoberg 2013, 36).
Unlike the realists’ emphasis on threat or military force, the critical theories look into
security from different angles - as a representation, as praxis or as speech acts and
demand a broader understanding of security against the narrow definition of national
security or economic security. War is part of the greater schema of violence, oppression,
and insecurity which needs to be changed for the emancipation of people.

Feminist Understanding of War, Security and Peace

The feminists’ scholars have challenged the notions of war, security and peace in
IR and how it is being analyzed by the three levels of analysis. They have brought into
discussion the concept of gender and the missing link of gender and war, peace and
violence. Since 1980s feminists became more concerned about the issues of war, security
and how it affects women and others at the margins. Pondering into the issues of war and
security and the absence of women in the domain of IR field, Rebecca Grant rightly
questioned if the inclusion of women in the IR would pose a challenge to the discussion
of war and security theories (Grant 1991). Grant observes that “the definition of what
constitute the security for a state does not necessarily reflect the concerns of all the states’
population.” (Grant 1991, 16). Grant’s observation was further inquired by the feminist
scholars during the 1990s and 2000s – especially by J. Ann Tickner, Cynthia Enloe,
Christine Sylvester, Annick Wibben, Laura Sjoberg - who shape the course of
contemporary feminist IR theories. The emergence of feminist theories in IR during
1990s has brought new perspectives on the issues of war, security and global politics.
They have shifted the notions of security away from the nation states toward an analysis of transnational actors and structures. They have broaden the concept of security to non-state actors especially the marginalized peoples and offered an alternative analysis of power and structure in global politics and thereby offering an alternative pathways towards conflict resolution and peace building. This section begins with a discussion of feminist IR scholars’ assessment of security, war and peace and it will be followed by an overview of literature on women, war and peace which are not feminist IR per say, but influenced by the feminist IR’s concept of security and notions of peace building and vise versa.

J. Ann Tickner’s “Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security” (1992) shifted the focus on national security to global security and brought into light the feminist understanding of security. She criticizes the realists’ notion of national security as military security which does not address the security of the individuals. Tickner points out that Morgenthau’s notion of security in terms of power maximization presents a world full of warring parties. She also criticizes Waltz’ notion of security in terms of structure and self help in midst of anarchic world order and mutual distrust among states as a portrayal of a world full of warring states and their propensity for war and conflict through military means. The levels of analysis used by realist scholars to analyze war and national security and interstate relations, indicate the importance of ‘war-capable states’ and their ‘masculine warrior-citizens’. A peaceful world order, for the realists, is a utopia. The realists do not recognize the non-power seeking states; neither do they take into account the non-warrior citizens for the reproduction of the state. Tickner (1992) finds the three-tiered analysis gendered as it
depicts the political man, the military state and a world system which privileges conflict and war while silencing the role of the individuals and groups and other alternatives.

It has been the starting point of feminist security studies. Questioning the prevailing notions of security in IR studies, Tickner raises (1992, 55) concerns that the prevailing IR theories of war and security only centers round the activities of great powers at the international system; “(but) little attention has been paid either to gender issues or to women’s particular needs with respect to security or to their contributions toward its achievements”. Tickner points out that woman are often at the margins of society and international politics. They are victimized in multiple ways and not just during the war. The depiction of women as passive victims as mothers or wives or daughters mourning for their lost sons or husbands or fathers at the battlefield, is rather an incomplete picture of women’s victimhood. It does not recount the in-depth understanding of their victimhood, the myriad ways their lives are threatened during the war zones and at the time of peace. It does not recount the gendered aspect of war and violence and the insecurities women face during war as well as in conflict societies. Exploring the meaning of security from women’s perspective, Tickner) further explains that security from women’s perspective may be varied, “…depending on the most immediate threats to their survival; security meant safe working conditions and freedom from the threat of war or unemployment or the economic squeeze of foreign debt” (Tickner 1992, 54) and can offer new insights to understand the behavior of the states. Insecurities stems from self-destructive nationalism, nuclear power, internationalism, structural violence as well as the relationship between war and violence against women. The multidimensional nature of security does not permit a singular definition of peace
either. Drawing her attention to economic and environmental issues and its connection to security, Tickner demanded a redefinition of the concept of ‘national security’. She argues that “security meant nothing if it was built on other’s insecurity” (1992, 55). She points out that violence is not only physical and structural; but also ecological. She explains that the feminist understanding of peace and security encompasses issues and concerns seldom taken into considerations by the individual, the state and the international system level theories. Criticizing the realists’ understanding of war, peace and security Tickner writes “The way in which realists describe the individual, the state and the international system are profoundly gendered; each is constructed in terms of …idealized or hegemonic masculinity...In the name of universality realists have constructed a worldview based on the experiences of certain men; It is therefore a worldview that offers us only a partial view of reality” (Tickner 2001, 29). She further asserts that the realists deliberately miss the aspect of ‘gender’ in their discussions of war, peace and security. Unlike the realists’, Tickner’s definition of security is based the ideas of justice and emancipation as contrary to the Realists’ interpretation of national security and order.

Prior to Tickner, eminent scholars such as Cynthia Enloe (1989), Jean Bethke Elshtain (1987, 1995) have also questioned the role and representation of women in the IR field. Elshtain, first brought into notice that women’s experience of war matters. Contradicting the Hegelian distinction of men as just warriors and women as the beautiful souls, Elshtain pointed out how women within the spheres of home and family have similar experiences as soldiers – their roles actually conjoin as opposed to the commonplace gender separation between the two (Sylvester 2013, 41). Elshtain (1987)
has been criticized by the current generation of feminist scholars for her later stance on US-led wars. However, her evaluation of women and war from the base of feminist maternal thinking is noteworthy as it allowed a shift of focus into the private/domestic space traditionally dominated by women (Sylvester 2013, 42). Unlike Elshtain, Enloe probes into the international areas of war, militarism and security and exposes how women’s everyday life is intertwined with the international politics (1989, 1990). In her pioneering book “Bananas, Beaches and Bases” (Enloe 1989, 133) Enloe elaborates how the international politics of security, war and peace frequently involves personal relationships, identities, private lives and informal politics involving diplomats wives, marital contracts which remain invisible in public eyes as well as IR scholars. Enloe raises the question “where are the women?” in international politics (1989, 133) and pointed out the lack of gender perspective in the prevailing political theories. Enloe further discusses how the growth of nationalist movements and interstate wars especially in the post-cold war period has impacted women. On one hand the nationalist movements often use women’s experience as the “rallying cry” to strengthen their claims and often promise to promote women’s interests during their struggle for freedom or power sharing (1989, 44); however, this does not translate into action at the end of the nationalist wars either because such wars either never end (such as Palestinian conflict) or end with another oppressive regime (e.g. Afghanistan) and the abusive gender practices continues and/or further strengthen. Her focus on war and international politics and how it impacts common people especially women have led her to critically review the process of militarization of gender. According to her militarization is a “step by step process by which a person or a thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military or
comes to depend for its well-being on militaristic idea” (Enloe 2000, 3). Men are not “natural” soldiers; rather they are socialized into “believing that that military activities are manly or honorable, and military solutions to intractable political disagreements makes sense” (Sylvestor 2013, 43). Men in the battlefield are honored as heroes, good citizens and protectors. Enloe considers such depiction of masculinity as militarized. On the other hand, women are also militarized through the media, and popular culture such as movies, where violence and masculinity are synonymous and women are portrayed to adore such traits of masculinity. Enloe, further, explained that such gendered notions of masculinity and femininity in the prevailing IR theories of security, war and peace bear the problem of dualism and therefore inadequate to offer an inclusive definition of security and peace for individuals and communities. The state-centric/male-centric notions of masculinity as warrior/protector/conqueror; femininity as victim/protected/conquered/submissive; and security in terms of national security based on the power of the military have been flawed and gender biased.

Raising the gender question in IR, feminist IR scholar Christine Sylvester (1994, 2002) pondered into the three epoch making debates that characterized the theoretical ground of IR and advocated in favor of a gender–inclusive discourse. In her book “Feminist Theory and International Relations in a Postmodern Era” (1994), Sylvester challenged the realists’ preoccupation with states, national security and conflict and elaborates how the IR’s first debate between ‘Realism against Idealism’ realists win over the idealist- the realists reject the importance of households, cooperation and interdependence. In the second debate, Sylvester elaborates on how the positivist rationalism of neoliberal institutionalism accepts the importance of cooperation and
interdependence, but fails to acknowledge their gendered structure and meaning. IR’s third debate also known as ‘post-positivist’ debate seemingly opened the field to marginalized and plural voices. It incorporates the epistemological growth of the postmodern era most notably the challenged posed by the feminist IR. Sylvester examines the bases of empiricist, standpoint and postmodern feminism in the context of the three debates. Feminist empiricism, Sylvester notes, creates space for women and other marginalized voices to be heard within the scientifically based fields while standpoint feminism paves the way for women as ‘agents of knowledge and theory’. The postmodern feminists critically examine the acquired space and its meaning, and its political implications in IR field. Sylvester suggested ‘empathetic cooperation’ as a feminist IR methodology to study security and peace-building (1994, 2002).

Similar to Ticker and Sylvester, V. Spike Peterson (1992, 1999) has also pondered into gender in international relations and international political economy. In the book “Global Gender Issues” (1999, 2013) Peterson and Runyan have examined the nation-state structure of IR and also the interactions among states. They have critically analyzed the exclusions of women and women’s experiences from the core concepts of IR – state, security, and the economy. They have discussed the binary opposite of men vs. women in IR and the assigned values of masculinity and femininity associated therewith. By using the gender lens, Peterson and Runyan have explained the gender relations in IR:

“Through a gender sensitive lens, we can see how constructions of masculinity are not independent, but dependent upon, opposing constructions of femininity. In a sense, the presence of men depends on the absence of women. Because of this interdependence, a gender analysis of women’s lives and experiences does not simply “add something” about women but transforms what we know about men and the activities they undertake.” (1999, 7-8)
Following Enloe, Tickner, Sylvester, Peterson, a group of feminist IR scholars have begun to scrutinize the prevailing literature on women, war, security and peace through a gender perspective. This new groups of scholars have contributed to shape up the feminist notion of security in IR as well as a separate branch of inquiry - feminist security studies which primarily focus the gender aspect in discussing war, conflict and peace and also assess the role of women in the context of war, conflict and peace.

The feminists’ engagement with the security debate in the mainstream IR has brought into forefront few critical aspects of security and peace with regards to women. Firstly, they have brought into light the key question of what security means to whom. Secondly, they have pointed out the absence and exclusion of women and gender in the mainstream discourses of war, security and peace. The omission of women and gender in the discussions of war, security and peace by the mainstream IR theories especially the realist theories and liberal theories render them insufficient to explain those issues.

Feminist scholarship has also pointed out that when women and gender were discussed within the context of conflict, security and peace, it was mostly done in gendered terms: women as vulnerable, passive victims and/or peace makers or pacifier (Kaufman and Williams 2011). Such depiction of women emphasizes the underlying gender order – woman/femininity is subordinate to man and masculinity. Feminist security scholars criticize the mainstream IR studies for confusing women with gender. Gender in feminist security studies, is understood as a social construct and not based on the biological sex difference of men and women. According to feminist school of thought, sex of a ‘man’ or ‘a woman’ is not an indicator of gender; but ‘masculinities or femininities’ are genders and produces gendering. “Women” can be masculine and “men” can be feminine: men
or women can be masculinized or feminized. Individuals can be gendered, but so can institutions, organizations, and even states” (Sjoberg 2013, 46).

Since the development of the modern state in the West, the participation of women in the public spheres was limited; women were relegated to the domestic/private spheres while men were allowed to the public spheres of running the state and polity. The concept of security since the inception of modern state was heavily reliant on the nation state and the military power, the need to protect the state, its borders and citizens. The men were entrusted with the security – to protect the state and civilians especially women and children from the ravages of war. However, with the changing notions of warfare, especially in the post-cold war period with the rise of ethnic nationalists’ movements and small wars around the world, women have become the target of greater war-time violence.

For feminist security scholars, the notion of men or masculinity protecting women or femininity under the ‘immunity principle’ is nothing but a ‘protection racket’ (Sjoberg and Peet 2011). In reality it does not protect women; rather it is a means to justify wars in the name of protecting women, also to justify the “social dominance of masculinity, a requirement for war-fighting” (Sjoberg and Peet 2011). According to Catia Fofortini (2006), “the links between military service, citizenship, and the modern states establish a connection between violence, citizenship and hegemonic masculinity.” The new group of feminist IR scholars view gender as an “expression of power” and an “organizing principle for war and politics” in general (Sjoberg 2013, Wilcox 2009). Gender as an expression of power relation helps to understand the gender subordination and the hegemonic masculinity of the states. Hegemonic masculinity according to feminist
security scholars recounts the gender influence on state identity as compared to subordinated masculinities. According to Zalewski (1995), “the driving force of feminism is its attention to gender and not simply women… the concept, nature, and practice of gender are key” (as quoted by Sjoberg 2013, 47). Although feminist’ security scholars agree on gender lens as an analytical tool to understand/interpret security paradigm, they are rather skeptical to advocate for a single feminist theory of security; instead, they advocate for variety of approaches to security studies. Same can be said to the feminist approaches to peace and peace building. However, they all agree on a few aspects; they reject the narrow focus of state centric security advocated by the mainstream IR theories and demand an inclusive definition of security. They question the “nonexistence and irrelevance of women in international security politics” (Blanchard 2003, 1290). They have also broadened the meaning of security to individuals, to communities, to the state and international organizations. According to feminists, security threats should include not only war and war time violence, but also domestic violence, physical and psychological abuse including rape and other violations committed within the domestic sphere as well as under the dominance of patriarchal norm. The gender subordination prevailing under the curtain of patriarchal/cultural norms should also be subject to scrutiny when exploring the meaning of security. Thus, with the feminist security studies the concept of security and its understanding have changed from the military security to that of personal security.

The nature of war and conflict has also changed in the post-cold war period and so are the war strategies and tactics. With the changing nature of warfare in the post-cold war period, more intrastate and ethnic nationalist conflicts have risen and there is
increased risk of civilian security. Women and children have become the targets of greater war time violence. The role of state as the protector of civilian security has become dubious. The feminist security theory, questions the mainstream IR construct of state as the protector of civilians’ security especially women during war and peace. The feminist security theory also critically reviews the notions that associate women with peace and men with violence. Pointing out to the multiple roles women play in the conflict zones such as combatants, perpetrators, human bombers, caregivers, spies, feminist scholars reject the prevailed notions of women simply as victim and/or peaceful as most commonly portrayed in the dominant discourse of war and peace (Denov and Gervais 2007; El Bushra 2004; Parashar 2010, Sjoberg 2013, Sylvester 2013).

In this study, we are interested in understanding women’s perspectives on security, and how their activism contributes to lessen those insecurities and promote peace amidst conflict and violence. The feminist security theories offer broad understanding of security from multiple perspectives especially the experience of security from the margins. This study, therefore, heavily relies on the feminist security scholarship for its methodological orientation and theoretical framework.

The following section presents an overview of literature on women, conflict and peace – the role of women in conflict regions, in conflict prevention and peace building. These literatures are not uniform in their theme and methodology and fall largely outside the IR field. They may or may not be grounded in feminist IR theory per se; however, they focus on women, war and peace and present the picture of women within the context of war, and discuss the multiple ways women make amends in the conflict zones. This
offers a broader understanding of the theme of present study -women, conflict and peace building. It also discusses the existing gaps in the prevailing literature.

Women, Conflict and Peace: Victims, Role Players and Victors

Literature outside the IR field has also focused on women, conflict and peace. A large body of literature on conflict and peace has brought the question of women’s security and its role in the context of intrastate conflicts especially in the Post-Cold war period. A handful of the literature has also depicted women’s capacities as active participants in the areas of conflict resolution and peace process. Women in conflict zones fall into various roles such as victims, perpetrators, slaves, spies, human shields, actors, care providers and negotiators, mediators and so on (Denov and Gervais 2007; El Bushra 2004; Parashar 2010). The multiplicity of their roles require women to continuously negotiate and renegotiate their safety, security, and wellbeing (Moser and Clark 2001; Denov and Gervais 2007). The meaning of security and peace with regards to women are not same in all conflict situations and demands greater scrutiny with respect to the specificities involved in each context. The following section discusses some of the literature on women and conflict – how conflict and violence have impacted women. In the next section we are discussing the role of women in conflict and peace building. This section will consider the issues of women’s activism and peace building and its importance. The next section highlights some of the international conventions and mandates on women, conflict and security.

Women in Conflict - Violence and Peace

Since the end of cold war, there is an unparalleled increase of armed conflicts especially intrastate civil conflict and armed ethno-nationalist conflict in the world. The
rise of civil wars and armed ethnic conflicts has overwhelming impact on women and children. During the 1990s, the civil wars and armed conflicts in former Yugoslavia, Rwanda affected tens and thousands of women and girl children (Kumar 2001; Skjelsbak 2011). Women are subjected to different forms of war-time violence – physical abuses, sexual slavery, mutilations, rape and murder. The establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (1993) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (1994) by the United Nations indicate the gruesome nature of wartime violence against women in those conflict regions. The study “Women and Civil War” (2001) directed by Krishna Kumar has discussed the impact of civil wars on women in Bosnia, Cambodia, El Salvador, Georgia and Guatemala. Based on the USAID’s fieldwork in these conflict zones, the study meticulously points outs how women become the victims of conflict in multiple ways – subjected to social and psychological threats, economic and political pressures in direct and indirect ways. The fear of violence and sexual abuse from the security personnel or rebels restricts women’s movement- to collect firewood or go to the firms or nearby areas. The psychological trauma of losing someone or being separated from family members, forced migration or slavery also impact women gravely resulting in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In Bosnia, Herzegovina, Guatemala, Rwanda and most recently in Nigeria women and children are targeted for sexual violations and slavery. Rape and sexual violations have become tactics of warfare in many civil wars and ethno-nationalist conflicts. In Bosnia, Herzegovina and Rwanda, mass rape and violations were used as a tactic to ‘humiliate and terrorize members of particular ethnic groups’ (Kumar 2001, 11).
Although conflict and violence are synonymous, violence for women in conflict ridden societies are “much more complex and multifaceted phenomena” (Aolain, Haynes and Cahn 2012, 45). It ranges from physical violence to psychological; in the public as well as private spheres. The spectrum of gendered violence women undergo in conflict and post conflict societies often go unnoticed and unreported. Women and girls face sexual and gender based violence from all sides – armed soldiers, rebels, family members, spouse, associates as well as strangers. The research report “Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict” by Bastick, Grimm and Kunz (2007) have documented the extent and magnitude of sexual violence in 51 conflict ridden countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, Middle East and Latin America. Sexual violence in conflict “is an act of domination, grounded in a complex web of cultural preconceptions, in particular as regards gender roles” (Bastick, Grimm and Kunz 2007, 9). It also carries grave health implications-physical and psychological threats including the spread of HIV/AIDS. The implications of sexual and gender based violence during conflict deepens further due to the social stigma attached to such acts. The rape victims are often marginalized within their communities and face socio-economic hardships and exploitations and trafficking. Its impact is also visible in social space and gender relations (Kumar 2001, Aolain, Haynes and Cahn 2012). The rate of domestic violence also increases in many conflict ridden countries. “The conflicts generated a subculture of violence – one that condoned violence and viewed violent behavior as normal” (Kumar 2001, 14).

Talking about wartime violence, the concept of structural violence by Johann Galtung, needs special attention. According to Galtung, structural violence is “built into the structure and it shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances”
Following Galtungs concepts, Tickner talks of the everyday realities women face and violence which results in insecurity. Cynthia Cockburn (2007, 2012) has also mentioned the connection of economic disparities and political violence which further exacerbates during conflict and its aftermath. Cockburn discusses the continuum of violence perpetrated by governments as well as religious institutions. She has pointed out how the decline of economic conditions negatively impact women especially the (single) women headed households. According to Catia Confortini (2006, 337), “violence is deeply implicated in the construction and reproduction of gender relations and in particular in the construction and reproduction of hegemonic masculinity”. She points out that the cycle of violence in domestic violence is similar to that of the time gap between violence and peace among states – although the act of violence is absent, it is crucial to build up the tension that leads to another violent act. She argues that “when [mainstream] IR scholars talk about peace they ignore the wars going on inside the home, in the form of domestic violence…” The feminist scholars, Confortini (2006, 346) refers, have shown that “far from being strictly domestic or private matters, instances of violence against women are often related to international relations in unsuspected ways”. In this sense war, gender violence and militarism are omnipresent in society even if there is not any armed conflict. Therefore the meaning of peace as the absence of violence or war is paradoxical and unconvincing.

Galtung rejects the notion of peace as simply the absence of violence or war. According to him, peace as absence of war and violence would only mean negative peace. Positive peace, according to Galtung (1964, 2) is “the integration of human society”. Galtung (1976, 2004) further elaborated the concept of positive peace in terms
of absence of all forms of violence including structural violence and promotion of sustainable peace - a nonviolent conflict transformation in terms of equality and universal human rights. Galtung’s concept of positive peace means sustainable peace by addressing the root causes of conflicts and development of a peaceful society in terms of socio-economic security, equal rights and participation and gender equality. Galtung (2004) has also distinguished peace-building from peace-making as it consists of an infrastructure within and between nations that offers an alternative to and removes to root causes of war. Galtung’s notion of structural violence and peace has created a connection between conflict theory and peace building and development research. Drawing on the notions of negative and positive peace, many feminist scholars also argue in favor sustainable peace as opposed to peace as the absence of war and direct violence. Feminist scholars point out that peace that emerges as a result of conflict resolution treaty or agreement is not sustainable peace, rather it is gendered peace. As Donna Pankhurst (2008) has pointed out, in gendered peace women often “suffer a backlash against any new found freedoms, as they are forced ‘back’ into kitchens and the fields” (as quoted by Kaufman and Williams 2013, 10). Pankhurst’s (1999) understanding of peace includes fulfilling everyday needs of security, social, political and economics, justice, and equality. Feminists view peace as “the elimination of insecurity and danger” and “the enjoyment of economic and social justice, equality, and the entire range of human rights and fundamental freedom” (Jacobi as quoted by Kaufman and Williams 2013, 11).

Keeping in mind the concept of peace, violence and peace building, we are now moving towards the discussion of the role of women in conflict and peace building in the following section.
Role of Women in Conflict and Peace Building

As the geo-political landscape of post-cold war period changes, so is the perception of women in conflict. Women in war are no longer viewed only as victims, rather their roles and involvement become manifold subjected to greater scrutiny and debate. In the contemporary armed conflicts women play the roles of combatants, messengers, spies, porters and well as “wives”. They play crucial roles in supporting and perpetuating violence and at the same time become crusaders of hope and peace within their family and their respective communities. Various studies and research reports have discussed and documented the multiple roles and responsibilities women take up during conflict and post conflict period.

The study “Women and Civil War” (2001) by Krishna Kumar has brought into focus that women, unlike the popular stereotype, are not the passive victims or spectators in civil wars and ethnic conflicts. Rather they become active participants; in the conflict zones of Bosnia, Herzegovina, Rwanda, El Salvador Guatemala, women have also taken up new roles and responsibilities during and after the conflict. They take the economic burden of the family as well as the military operations on both sides. Kumar’s study indicates how women’s lives and traditional roles change as a result of the conflict and its traumatic experiences – in Bosnia, Herzegovina and Rwanda women took part in ethnic cleansing; in El Salvador women participated in armed forces on both sides. In Cambodia, Guatemala women’s participation in labor forces increased due to the economic need to support and survive. Many women have also survived the horrors and joined their hands against the insecurities and atrocities of armed conflict. Kumar’s (2001) study discusses the role and activities of various women’s organizations in
Cambodia, Herzegovina, Rwanda, Georgia to bring women’s empowerment in post conflict period. Similar to Kumar’s study, other studies have also examined the role of women in conflict prevention and reconstruction process (Conway 2006; Marshal 2000). Marshall (Marshal 2000) has pointed out the various roles women play as care giver, nurse, community leaders at the conflict zones in Colombia, Somalia, Israel, and Palestine which have positive impact on the reconstruction and stabilization process. In their report on women, war and peace, Rehn and Sirleaf (2002) has discussed the positive role women activists and groups have played in conflict regions in Sierra Leone, Guinea, Liberia, East Timor, Congo, the Balkans, and Latin America. The role of women’s groups such as Liberian Women’s Initiative (LWI) and Women in Peace Network (WIPNET) have been successful in mobilizing mass awareness, participation networks and large scale peace campaigns to pressure the government to negotiate peace agreements. Their demand for peace and their unprecedented role in mass mobilization for peace at the grass roots level have been well recognized at the regional and international levels. Pointing out the role women play in conflict resolution and peace negotiations during and the aftermath of conflict, Peterson and Runyan (1999, 179) have remarked that (women) “have long been involved in analyzing how to stop war and how to create peace, though they have received no attention for these activities in past and most contemporary international relations literature. Instead, their peace efforts have been ignored or trivialized – largely by men who stereotype women as soft-headed, irrational pacifists. This characterization is political because it excludes women’s perspectives from the study of war and peace”.

74
In a World Bank study by Bouta, Frerks and Bannon (2005), the gender dimensions of conflicts especially the sexual violence and its impact on gender relations have brought into focus. It also explores the formal and informal peace process and its implications for women and how policy planners can use such changing dynamics to create pathways for gender inclusive development. Former US Ambassador Swanee Hunt has also pointed out the innumerable costs women have paid during conflict and post conflict period and their positive role in building peace (Hunt 1997, Hunt and Posa 2001, Hunt 2011). In “Woman Waging Peace”, Hunt and Posa point out the problems of exclusion of women in the peace negotiations and formal peace agreements in Balkan and Eastern Europe (Hunt and Posa 2001). Pointing at the successful peace campaigns and grassroots awareness building of many women’s groups in the regions of Balkan and Eastern Europe, Hunt and Posa (2001) have advocated for an “inclusive security” discourse to recognize the active role and capacities of women’s’ agencies behind formal peace agreement. Hunt has also discussed the lack of representation of women’s groups in the peace negotiations in Eastern Europe during 1990s. The lack of representation of women in those negotiations, Hunt believes, has a direct link with the failure of such negotiations to achieve sustainable peace in the region (Hunt 1997).

Marshall’s discussion on women, war and peace building points out the lack of women’s representation in the negotiations of war and conflict (Marshall 2000). She argues that during war and conflict women bear the brunt of violence and loss as much as their male counterparts, but they “are not often at the center of the decision to go to war, nor are their perspectives and legitimate concerns often integrated at the official level” (Marshall 2000, 9). Conaway (2006) also points out the existing gaps in the U.S. policy and practice
towards institutionalizing the role of women in stabilization and reconstruction operations under U.S. directives. Anderlini has discussed the importance of involvement of women’s groups in the formal peace process (Anderlini 2000). Another study by Ann Jordan also presents evidence of ordinary women working behind the scenes to achieve gender justice and equality and thereby advocating for lasting peace (Jordan 2003, 1-14). In the process, they also challenge the traditional hierarchy, societal beliefs and values and transcend beyond the traditional ideologies and structures. They have also become crusaders of hope and perseverance within and outside their respective communities.

In the context of South Asia, various scholars and researchers have also discussed and documented the role of women in conflict and peace. The book “Women, War and Peace in South Asia” (2001) edited by Rita Manchanda presents an in depth analysis of women as victims of violence as well as survivors and activists in the context of various intra-state conflicts in South Asia. This volume brings into light how women in the conflicts zones in South Asia – Nepal, Jammu and Kashmir, Sri Lanka – use their traditional spaces and roles to assert themselves politically, to perpetrate violence as well as bandwagon for conflict resolution and peace building. Rita Manchanda has also criticized the patriarchal power structures of many South Asian societies and pointed out the patriarchal power structure is also at play when many women opt for the various roles in non-state armed groups such as combatant, messenger or suicide bomber, porter, cook or nurse. Maneshka Eliatamby (2011) has explored the cases of women’s involvement in the revolutionary groups in Sri Lanka and Nepal to understand the role of culture and power relations especially social inequalities that drive many women to take part in armed violence and even in suicide missions. Manchanda (2001) has discussed the ways
how women intervene in intra-state conflicts. Through community networking, open
dialogue and informal mediation a number of women’s groups in northeast India have
been successful to initiate community peace and formal/informal peace talks between the
revolutionaries and the administration at the local level. The protracted conflict and
post-conflict period also opens up opportunities for women’s involvement and activism
to challenge gender hierarchies and power relations. Eliatamby (2011b.) discusses the
role of 12,000 soldier mothers who created a sustainable grassroots peace movement in
Sri Lanka and challenged the authorities as well as the revolutionary group Liberation
Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) to account for the loss of lives. Women’s activism in peace
building although is taking place; these women are yet to be formally involved in the
official decision-making and peace building process.

*International Conventions and Documents on Women, Peace and Security*

International conventions and documents have also highlighted various issue
areas involving women and peace, security and justice. One of the earliest efforts to
address women in armed conflict was the Declaration of the Protection of Women and
Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict by the United Nations General Assembly in
1974 (Mazurana et al. 2005). It discussed the risk of women and children in conflict. The
United Nations also declared the decade 1976-1985 as the International Decade of
Women focusing on the themes of equality, development and peace, However, it is
during the 1990s, the United Nations became more concerned about the impact of war on
women and children especially war-time violence targeted to women. During the 1990s,
the civil wars and armed conflicts in former Yugoslavia, Rwanda affected tens and
thousands of women and girls and children. Women were subjected to different forms of
war-time violence - sexual slavery, mutilations, torture and even mass rape. The alarm raised largely by the efforts of the NGO community have led to the establishment of the International Criminal Tribune for the Former Yugoslavia (1993) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (1994) by the United Nations.

The Human Security Approach: In its human development report in 1994, United Nations adopted a human security framework which primarily focuses on the individual as opposed to the traditional thrust on state and national security. It has shifted the focus from the state to the individual and incorporated a multidisciplinary perspective. It also advocates the notions of “freedom from fear” and “freedom from want” for all citizens to ensure global security. It is further defined by the seven categories of security: economic, environmental, food, health, personal, community and political. The human security approach has its roots in Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum’s capability approach. Originally hailed as a momentous concept, the human security approach is, however, being criticized by scholars – feminists and non-feminists for being “indeterminate and atheoretical” (Sjoberg 2013). It still remains as an important concept to understand security especially in terms of human needs.

It was soon followed by the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. The Beijing Platform recognized the effects of war/armed conflict on women. It recognized that women and children are primarily victimized in armed conflict/war and civilian casualties often outnumber military casualties. It also demanded its member governments, civil society and the international community’s to take actions against such
crimes and ensure women’s participation in decision making and peace process. The Beijing Declaration and Platform was an important milestone in terms of incorporating the gender perspective into security and peace discussions among the global communities. It was followed by the adoption of the Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000 (UNSCR1325 2000, 1-4). The SCR 1325 is a historic document in the field of women, conflict, and peace building as it reiterates the need for incorporating gender perspectives in all areas of conflict resolution and peace process especially during the disarmament, demobilization and rehabilitation process (UNSCR1325 2000, 1-4) mandated by the United Nations. It stresses the need to safeguard women’s and girls’ human rights and calls for an end to violence against women. The UNSCR1325 bears the significance of women’s involvement in peace and security (UN Report 2000; UNSCR1820 2008, 1-5). In yet another historic mandate UN Security Council has passed Resolution 1820 in 2008 which recognizes that sexual violence is used as a tactic of warfare in conflict zones and it jeopardizes international security and peace. It declares that systematic sexual violence exacerbates conflicts and has long-term negative impact on local, regional or international peace and security. Asserting a zero tolerance principle in peace operations towards sexual exploitation and abuse, it calls for measures to prevent sexual violence including the recognition of women’s role in conflict prevention and peace-building. The various UN initiatives for the promotion of women’s involvement in reconstruction and peace building as well as recognition of sexual violence a strategy of war have impacted the policy planning and functions of the member states as well as groups and organizations to incorporate women centric policies.

Women’s Activism, Social Capital and Peace Building

As we have discussed in the previous sections, women’s groups have been actively engaged in activities related to conflict resolution, post conflict reconstruction and peace building activities in many conflict areas in the world. The examples are abundant. Although women are often missing from the decision making process of war and peace, in reality, they are directly or indirectly affected and become part of the war and conflict. In other words, women become part of the war and peace, either by choice or by circumstances simply by being present within the conflict zone. According to Punkhurst (1999), “Where there is no front line, as conflict is fought out in people’s homes, with light weapons, and where the reason for fighting is the very existence, or at least presence, of people with a differently defined identity (usually ethnic), women have been placed on one side or another whether they actively choose this or not.” Women are not passive bystanders in conflict and war societies, rather they are the active participants and their participation is often channelized through their agency. According to Maud Eduards (1994, 181), “all human beings by nature, have agency, the capacity to initiate change, to commit oneself to a certain transformative course of action, independently of historical circumstances.” The idea of women’s agency is also discussed by Jennifer Leigh Disney (2008, 41), “the importance of ‘re-presenting’ women not as victims or dependents but as agents of their own life”. She further elaborated that “while not all women’s activism may be explicitly feminist, much of women’s activism around class, gender, economics, sexuality, violence, culture, ideology, and materiality in the productive and reproductive spheres of life does involve the exercise of feminist agency”. Kaufman and Williams (2013) have discussed feminist agency as “an attempt by women
and women’s organization to overturn patriarchy and political, economic, and social structures of male dominance and women’s subordination. “Feminist agency, as Disney observes is a transformative process ‘from mobilization, to participation to organization.”

Taking into consideration that women’s agency (feminist or not) has certain roles to play in conflict zones, we now look into the social capital theory and the underlying link between gender and social capital which supports the thesis of women’s agency in peace building. Social capital theory is used widely in both economics and sociological fields to examine the social activities or collective action by groups. The origin of social capital is found in the works of Gary Becker and Robert Putnam, who consider it as a particular type of human capital. According to Becker, human capital focuses on a person, his/her knowledge and skills while social capital focuses on a person’s link to other individuals. It is a form of human capital since it involves the connection among individuals (Becker, 1996). Robert Putnam (1995), one of the most influential contributors of social capital theory has asserted that the adequate stock of social capital is crucial for the development and survival of democracy, economy and even health and happiness. According to Putnam (1995, 19), social capital “refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.” It is the working product of interpersonal networks, contacts, knowledge, and related human resources. These are valuable assets that individuals or groups can use to address wide range of needs and interests such as negative effects of globalization, crime, substance abuse, uneven access to information, resources and power etc. (Alfred 2009). Fukuyama (2000) also describes social capital as “instantiated set of values or norms shared among members of a group that permits them to cooperate with one
another” and it is based on trust, cooperation, reciprocity which allows the group members to band together and defend their interests and causes. Discussing the link between women and social capital, Franklin (2005) suggests that women are rich in these valuable assets, which often manifest in group solidarity and a shared identity, brought about by exploitation, discrimination, or exclusion from key civic roles and hierarchical positions. Putnam has also pointed out that women have played an important role in ‘creating and sustaining stocks of social capital’ especially in the democratic development of United States. Social capital among women varies from small initiatives within communities to address life’s daily challenges and threats, to women’s empowerment or social and political movements that address women’s rights, both in local and global contexts. However most of the social capital research has so far been focused on men and male-dominated areas. The relative silence of the social capital scholarship on the link between gender and social capital is being analysed by various scholars in recent years (Lowndes 2004, Kovalainen 2004, O’Neill and Gidengil 2006). Underscoring the general tendency of the social capital scholarship to focus more on men or male-dominated activities, Lowndes (2004, 2006) brought into attention the presence of social capital in women’s activities such as child caring, after school clubs, community volunteering and similar gender-specific patterns of community engagement. Such activities although often relegated to domestic spheres have the potential relevance in terms of building community dialogue and political engagement to resolve issues or collective problems. Taking a feminist approach, Lister (2005) highlights the role of agency in women’s access to social capital. She points out women’s agency is crucial in decision making especially how they make use of the resources in such networks for
social and political transformation. On the discussions of women’s participation and activism researchers have pointed out that women’s participation is more visible in non-institutionalized activism (Lowndes 2004; Stevens 2007). Non-institutionalized activism by women takes place in multiple ways as well as in a multiplicity of groups and most commonly through the modes of grassroots and small scale participation (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Lowndes 2004). Various studies have also supported the positive link between social capital, development and peace building (Coleman1988; Cox, 2010; Grootaet and Bastelaer 2002). Woolcock and Narayan (2000) have discussed social capital from the perspective of community development and income generation. According to them social capital comprises the norms and attitudes that enable people to work collectively and often resulting in increasing economic resources. The social capital approach marks a departure from the traditional political schools of thought in the sense that it emphasizes on social relations and connections among citizens and the potential outcomes of political engagement. Hence, it attempts “to bring the ‘social’ back into the study of politics, a similar attempt have been made by the feminist IR scholars to bring the individual, the community into the study of world politics and foreign policy. At the empirical level, social capital expands the boundaries of the “political” beyond the formal arenas of politics to include the informal domains of community activism” (O’Neill and Gidengil 2006, 7). Social capital can be crucial to connecting the ‘missing’ link between women and political activism. In understanding the less visibility of women’s political participation and activism, it is to be noted that women are engaged in the kind of social interactions which are often overlooked for their potential to contribute to political discourse as for example nurturing the family, supporting children and community
activities. These areas are often associated with stereo-typed gender roles and therefore, overlooked for their potential to contribute to (democratic) polity (Lowndes 2006). However, as feminist scholars have pointed out, women’s personal space within the domestic and community boundary is also a high ground for political engagement (Enloe 1989, Tickner 1992). Hence, women’s activism within the spheres of domesticity or neighborhood or community is interlinked to social capital. Research on gender and social capital indicates that there is a gender difference in the issues of concern – women tend to prioritize social and economic and environmental issues and policies that benefit the marginally disadvantaged or the community. Women are also more supportive than men towards civil rights and affirmative action. Research on women’s activism also indicates that women are more likely to dedicate their time and energy towards issues like education and community welfare than men. Women may be less visible in the formal politics and political institutions, but they are more likely to have civic engagement – to know their neighbor or to attend the church meetings (O’Neill and Gidengil 2006). Women’s attitudes, values, and the types of engagements through care-based trust networks influence their use and building of social capital as well.

Research on social capital, women’s activism and peace building indicate an underlying connection. As we have observed, women’s activism and social capital is interlinked. Social capital is recognized to be a critical asset in sustainable development and democratic practices. Putnam (1993) has explained that the size and density of social networks and institutions and the interpersonal interactions have considerable impact on the sustainable development processes. In the conflict societies, violence reduces social capital (Moser 1998; Moser and Holland 1997). As conflict and violence escalates, it
reduced the level of trust and cooperation among citizens, also within the formal and informal social organizations. It also erodes the faith and reciprocity among members at the community level and also impacts the households as there is increased unemployment, domestic violence, alcohol and drug use. These factors reduce the households’ capacity to function as a stable social unit. Also in many conflict zones, a large number of people become displaced and migrants which negatively impacts the social capital. During prolonged conflict, continued killing and violence reduces the trust between neighbors and communities throughout the country and hence reduces the level of social capital across the country. Development practitioners and researchers strongly emphasize the importance of creating or rebuilding social capital as part of the conflict resolution and sustainable development process. Gender specialists often highlight the need to include women and gender inclusive policies as part of the conflict resolution and post conflict reconstruction process (Kumar 2001).

Taking into account women’s activism, social capital and peace building, it has been observed that women activists in their effort towards peace building are often engaged in group activities which lead to networking, awareness building, mobilizing and organizing among members as well as engaging the civic community. As for example, the women’s groups such as Liberian Women’s Initiative (LWI) and the Women in Peace Network (WIPNET) in Liberia, the Women in Black in Israel have successfully mobilized and demonstrated themselves in public and hence garnered public support and awareness in favor of peace. These are the manifestations of social capital. In Northern Ireland, women’s activism for peace leads women to network and organize within the community across the Catholic/Protestant divide as well as at the national level by taking
part in the formal political process by forming the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition Party (Kaufman and Williams 2013). At the community level, women’s activism creates awareness, bridges the gaps created by the Catholic/Protestant divide; it ensures mutual understanding, and mediation across the religious divide. At the formal political level, women participated in the decision making process to voice for women’s rights and to end violence and restore the order and stability. Eliatamby (2011b) illustrates how the role of women’s groups such as Parents of Serviceman Missing in Action (PSMIA) and the Association for War affected Women (AWAW) were crucial to create awareness against the futilities and loss of lives in the three decade long Sri Lankan conflict. Their activism against violence has mobilized public concerns and also re-humanized the conflict addressing the grievances on both sides.

These studies suggest that women’s activism against violence has a strong connection between women’s activism, social capital and peace building. Women’s activism for peace and/or to end violence purports to the idea of including the informal domains of community activism within the formal domains of politics. Women’s group activism channelize cooperation, increases shared knowledge and understanding as well as networking. It also promotes women’s political participation. These are the building blocks of social capital as well as the markers of sustainable peace and development.

The present study is based on the argument: women’s activism against violence and insecurity increases social capital; social capital in this regard means social relations of mutual benefit characterized by norms of trust, cooperation and reciprocity which are the building blocks of peace and community development. If women’s group activism creates social capital, i.e. a sense of trust, cooperation, mutual feeling of love and respect,
bonding and bridging among its members; it is indicative of a peaceful community in creation. Creation of social capital eliminates fear, distrust among members of the community, and indirectly reduces social tensions; it increases trust among neighbors, within the civil society and institutions. Hence it instills positivity and hope for sustainable socio-economic and political growth. Women’s access to strong social capital harbors positive avenues for grassroots peace building. Therefore, using social capital theory seems to be a viable option to examine women’s contribution to peace building efforts in the proposed study area - North East India. The following chapter (Chapter III) will present a detailed discussion on the research questions and expectations and the relevant methodology.
CHAPTER III - RATIONAL AND METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I present the methodological orientation and the theoretical framework of the study on women, security and peace building in Assam, India. It also presents my rational behind this research exploration. It explains the theoretical standpoint I am taking to explore the research questions and results. As discussed in the previous chapter (II) this study relies on feminist IR literature and feminist security studies as a theoretical framework. As feminist IR and feminist security studies suggest, ‘gender’ here, is used as an analytical category to examine women’s experience of security and insecurity in conflict scenarios. It also relies on (feminist) social capital theory to examine women’s contribution to peace and capacity building. The first section presents the research question and the research expectations. The next section discusses the rationale behind the study proposition, the key theoretical and methodological propositions associated with feminist security studies and social capital theory. This section explains why the particular theoretical/methodological framework is important with regards to the research questions and the hypothesis. The following section explains the methods for data collection, and data analysis. Each research project has its own account of data collection; it involves particular challenges and understanding each challenge and resolving it to access the relevant data makes data collection process an arduous task. This section presents an elaborate discussion of each of the data collection methods – interviews, participant selection, surveys, selection of survey participant and field observation used for this study. It also presents a detailed discussion of the data analysis process for this study.
Research Question and Expectation

As we have discussed in Chapter I, Assam and the entire northeast India has been the hotbed of conflicts since 1950s. It is only in recent years research has begun to look into the issues of conflict and concerns from different perspectives and analysis. Women in Assam have been politically active since the time of the freedom movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. However, being at the margins, Assamese women are yet to be at the center of a research focus, especially in conflict and peace building research in this region. In the previous chapter on women, security and peace building, we have pondered into the issues and challenges women (in general) face in the conflict region for just being women. We have also discussed the available literature on women’s activism towards peace building in many conflict regions such as Liberia, Northern Ireland, and Sierra Leone etc. However, the initial inquiry on women and conflict in Assam and northeast India has revealed that there has been a lack of scholarly research on this regard. This study particularly focuses on the state of Assam in northeast India and aims to explore the security question from women’s point of view. It also aims to assess women’s activism towards grassroots peace building.

This research began with a set of preliminary inquiries into women’s experience of conflict and their understanding of security/insecurity and the meaning of peace. It also ponders into the role of women in conflict zones, especially the involvement of women’s groups towards peace and capacity building during and after the conflicts in Assam. The preliminary literature review on women and conflict, peace and security was crucial to develop better understanding of the issues especially its relevance in the
context of the study region and also its inherent particularities. After the preliminary literature review and field inquiry the following research questions have been formulated:

RQ1:

*How do women in Assam experience conflict?*

RQ2:

*Does their experience of conflict as women change/shape their perspective of security/insecurity and peace?*

In other words, what is the meaning of security/insecurity for women in the conflict zones in Assam? As the research questions indicate, this study seeks to examine/reexamine the meaning of security and peace from the perspective of women in Assam in northeast India. During the long years of armed conflicts in Assam, women have faced the security challenge in many different ways. We have briefly discussed the conflict and security scenario in Assam and in any conflict zones in the previous chapters (Chapter I and II). After a preliminary literature review on women, security and conflict in many conflict zones, it becomes apparent that women face security challenge in multiple ways and gender difference is an important aspect to it. A preliminary inquiry into the conflicts in Assam and the literature review reveals a dearth of information on women and security and the underlying gender issues related to the issues. Based on the preliminary research questions, the following research expectations (RE) are developed:

RE1:

*As women’s experience with conflict in Assam increased, women experienced conflict and insecurity differently than men.*
Increased experience with insecurity/conflict shaped women’s perspectives on security.

An initial inquiry into women, security and conflict in Assam have also brought into notice other possible avenues for further research explorations especially women’s activism and conflict resolution in Assam. As we have discussed in Chapter I and II, women’s activism in many conflict zones is closely linked to conflict resolution and peace building. Many women’s groups in Assam have a long history of political and social activism in post-independence era. However, there is lack of academic research and information on Assamese women’s activism during the years of conflict and its aftermath especially in connection with peace and community building. As a step forward this research seeks to examine women’s experience and activism – whether and how women use their collective activism towards peace building in Assam. As in many conflict regions (Ghana, Liberia, Congo, and Eastern Europe) women through their activism has stood against violence for establishing peace and security. Keeping in mind the capability and possibility that women’s activism brings to a conflict scenario, this research examines if women’s activism in Assam have had any contribution towards peace building. It began with the following research question and hypothesis in mind:

RQ3:

Does women’s activism contribute towards peace building in Assam?
The research expectation based on the initial literature review is:

RE3:

\textit{The increase in women’s activism contributes to an increase in social capital and peace building in Assam.}

This is further narrowed down to the following:

RE3(a): An increase in women’s group activism creates trust and solidarity.
RE3(b): An increase in women’s group activism results in cooperation and collective action.
RE3(c): An increase in women’s group activism creates communication and knowledge/information sharing.
RE3(d): An increase in women’s group activism increases networking.
RE3(e): An increase in women’s group activism increases a feeling of inclusion.
RE3(f): An increase in women’s group activism increases empowerment and political action.

These research questions and expectations will be further discussed in the following sections along with relevant theoretical perspectives and methodologies.

Rationale

There is no denial that women and children are the primary victims in any conflict situations. This is also evident from the research done in conflict regions of Africa, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. As discussed in the previous chapter a great body of academic and non-academic research literature supports that women are affected by armed conflict in multiple ways. Women are the worst sufferers in any conflict. The impact of armed conflict on women goes further impacting the social, economic and
private spaces of civil society for years to come. It is particularly true for the ‘gender based violence’ committed in the conflict ridden countries like Rwanda, Bosnia and Herzegovina. However the gendered nature of armed violence and conflict often goes unnoticed and understudied in many small scale ethnic conflicts and minority clashes. Also literatures on ethnic conflict and small scale armed conflicts often miss out on the gender aspect of such conflicts and how it impacts women’s victimhood and security challenges. Women in conflict zones face security challenges in multiple ways – in both public and private lives. As discussed in the literature review women's experience of conflict and security is unique and needs special attention to bring it into public. Same is true for the women in Assam. Since 1980 Assam has been the hot bed of conflict – civil as well as armed insurgencies and women are at the center –stage of this political upheaval. Yet, there is hardly any documentation or research done on women’s experience of security in Assam in the past 35 years. My preliminary literature review on women, conflict, and peace in Assam have resulted in only a few works on this subject. The research report by C-nes (2011), “Bearing Witness: A Report on the Impact of Conflict on Women in Nagaland and Assam” have particularly focused on the impact of conflict on women in Assam and Nagaland. This report is limited in its scope and it measures the impact of conflict on women’s health (physical and psychological) and family and community life. Another study by Anuradha Dutta and Urmimala Sengupta (2011) discusses the causes of conflict in the Bodoland area and measure the impact of conflict on the people in the relief camps. Another compiled study by Anuradha Dutta and Ratna Bharali (2007) “Genesis of Conflict and Peace” presents an overview of peace and conflict issues in the region and the role of women and the future possibilities of
involving women in peace process. These literatures, however, do not present a comprehensive understanding of the role of women in peace and capacity building in Assam. The dearth of literature and the lack of research focus into the Assamese women’s world have caught up my attention and the urgency to carry out this research. As feminist IR scholars such as Enloe, Tickner have pointed out, women’s private/personal space is also political battle fields and it needs greater scrutiny to bring into light the political issues of individual lives on the margins. Women in Assam have been facing the security challenge throughout the years of conflict – their public and personal space is being politicized during the course of conflict. On the personal front, being born and brought up in Assam at a time of the political strife and armed conflicts during the 80’s and 90’s have always puzzled me like many others and made me curious and concerned of the many “whys”, “how’s”. It has also been a personal commitment to look into some of those unanswered “how’s” and “why’s” with the academic rigor and training. This helps to arrive at a better understanding of my life and the world I have grown up with.

My inquiry does not end in seeking just answers to the question how women experience conflict and insecurity. I am also looking at how women in Assam play active roles to bring positivity into the conflict ridden society. Various studies have also pointed out that women in conflict zones deal with challenges in various ways; they utilize the scope and space to negotiate and renegotiate their security challenges. Women and young girls take up family responsibility; they venture into various employment opportunities to take up the financial burden; they also cross the traditional boundaries of male-female work space and even join the armed rebels in the process of seeking security
and rebuilding their lives. Women’s role in capacity building, creating pathways for peace at grassroots level has been a new area of academic and policy research in recent years. In many conflict areas (as for example in Rwanda, Liberia, Sierra Leon, Cambodia) women are successful in rebuilding their family and community life during and after the conflict. They are taking family responsibility, repairing relations within community; channel informal mediation and healing; hence they are paving way for reconciliation and supporting the peace process in varied ways. Such activities, however, informal those may be, directly/indirectly contribute towards restoration of social order, security and peace at local level. Focusing on women’s capacity towards grassroots peace building is an untapped area of research and also an important one from the policy perspectives as it holds greater possibilities for developing sustainable peace. In the broader sense, women’s participation and perspective is particularly important to create gender sensitive policies and programs to end violence and create pathways for a more peaceful society at the aftermath of any conflict. Therefore, it is particularly important to focus on ‘women as actors’ (if there is any) alongside the study of women as victim in studying women in conflict. This is the thesis behind my inquiry into women’s group activism and grassroots peace building in Assam. I am using social capital theory to assess women groups’ contribution towards grassroots peace building. As discussed in the literature review social capital is positively correlated to peace and sustainable development.

The present study bears similarities with the studies done in different conflict regions. However, the particularities associated with the region (Assam, northeast India) with its myriad the ethnic dimension and the inadequacy of academic research on women,
security and peace building in this region makes it an important subject of research. The following section presents the research design and methodology used in this study along with the relevant theoretical perspectives. It is followed by the discussion of the methods used for data collection and the data analysis procedures.

Research Design and Methodology

Research design, according to De Vaus is the whole structure of inquiry. “A research design is not just a work plan. ...The function of a research design is to ensure that the evidence obtained enables us to answer the initial question as unambiguously as possible” (De Vaus 2001, 9). According to Yin (1989, 29) research design “deals with a logical problem and not a logistical problem.” It begins with the initial set of inquiry and encompasses the whole structure - allowing the researcher to minimize the errors of incorrect causal inferences from the data. Methods of data collection are just one part of the entire research design. The research design of the present study began with the initial inquiry into women’s experience of insecurity in conflict zone and how their group activism against insecurity further contributes to grassroots peace building. The exploring nature of the research questions leads us to choose an explanatory research design. In explanatory research design, one focuses on a causal relationship and chooses relevant methods to collect relevant data to examine that relationship. The present study focuses on women and their experience of security in the first phase of research and in the second phase, it pays attention to women’s group activism and peace building. The first section relies on the feminist theoretical framework for its thesis: gender difference creates different experience of security for women in conflict zones in Assam. The second part of my study relies on (feminist) social capital theory and it posits that women’s group...
activism creates social capital: increased social capital creates trust, bonding and bridging, sense of belonging in the community, networking and knowledge sharing and hence, contributes to grassroots peace building. The following sections will present a discussion of feminist methodology and social capital theory.

**Feminist Methodology**

In order to understand women’s experience of conflict and their perspectives of security/insecurity and peace this research relies on the theoretical framework of feminist IR and peace studies and ‘feminist’ social capital theory. In past few decades, feminist research has been critically engaged in developing a broader understanding of women’s experience and involvement at the conflict regions. Feminists’ use of the gender lens in conflict analysis and resolution as well as peace studies has opened new avenues for research and policy practices. Its implication is seen in various United Nations resolutions, policy making and foreign policy practice by different states. Using the gender lens as a framework to study women’s experience of security/insecurity allows scope for addressing/observing the issues from the pre-existing social inequality between men and women in Assamese society. Assam being located in South Asian subcontinent is no exception to the dominant patriarchal social power structure and gender biasness prevalent in the region, although there might be a difference in the degree\(^8\).

---

\(^8\) The patriarchal structure and gender-biasness is less prominent in many of the tribal societies of North East India. Due to the close proximity to the tribal states in North East India, many believe that women are held highly in Assamese culture and society. Moreover, some practices such as dowry, female feticides and sex selective abortion are rare in Assam and the North East India unlike the rest of India which hints at a higher social status of women in this region.
Using Feminist Framework

The theoretical framework suggested by the feminists’ scholarship uses gender as a category of analysis. In feminist studies, gender is defined as a set of variables, with socially and culturally constructed characteristics (Tickner 1997, 614) such as power, autonomy, rationality. Power, autonomy, rationality are stereotypically associated with masculinity and public while their opposites- weakness, dependence, emotions- are associated with femininity and private (Tickner 1997, 614). The symbolic system represented by gender and its inherent meaning has effect on men and women in their cultural context and their understanding and interpretations of the world around. Historically, it is also evident that women have had less access to the instruments of coercion and military power and thus excluded from having power. Such exclusions from power (within household as well as in public sphere) have allowed women to understand inequalities, discriminations differently and to recognize and accept differences and hence a more comprehensive notions of security. Feminist as well as peace studies also support the thesis that women along with children are the worst affected parties in any conflict situations. Women being the worst sufferers of militarized violence experience insecurity, violence differently than men (Tickner 1992, Sylvester 2013). The insights developed from their unique experiences allow women to look for alternatives to negotiate security and peace in midst of violent conflict. Christine Sylvester (2002) has discussed the idea of “empathetic cooperation” as a feminist method for bottom up peace building process. Feminist ethics of care concept has its roots in the works of feminist scholars such as Carol Gilligan (1982), Nel Noddings (1984) and Sara Ruddick (1989) who discussed the importance of women’s ethical concerns of care as compared to men’s
ethical concern of justice. Following the idea of empathetic cooperation, Porter (2007) emphasizes on the concept of feminist ethics as a framework to address and incorporate women’s perspective of peace and security. Peace building, according to Porter is a continuous process which includes all processes that promotes positive relationship, healing and reconciliation, restoring rights and respect, meeting the basic needs, security and equality (Porter 2007, 33). “The meanings and practices of peace building are culturally specific. To build peace requires culturally meaningful dialogue and reflection on what constitute peace and security within different cultures, nationalities and for different groups of people including men and women” (Porter 2007, 33). Donna Pankhurst (1999) has also talked about peace in terms of fulfilling everyday needs of security, social, political and economic, justice, and equality. This present study focuses on women, security and peace building in Assam, North East India. These feminist perspectives of gender and ethics of care are of particular importance to understand the issues of violence, insecurity and peace building.

Current generation feminist scholars such as Miranda Allison (2009), Annick Wibben (2011), Christine Sylvester (2013), and Megan Mckenzie (2013) on women, peace and security have also heavily relied on the concept of feminist ethics. Annick Wibben (2011) used narratives as a method to probe into women’s understanding of security and war. She rejects the dominant IR discourse on security and focuses on how the meanings of security are constructed in the everyday realities of women’s lives. She also discusses those critical theoretical standpoints and their narrative approaches. Using a narrative analysis, Wibben recounts the experience of ordinary women at the backdrop of September 11 attack on USA which rocked the entire world. Using individual
women’s narratives about the 9/11 attack, Wibben unveils how women’s daily experiences of insecurities prevail over the grand abstractions of security debates dealt by the dominant IR theories. Her use of narrative analysis to research women and war offers an alternative to traditional IR method. “Staying attuned to varied experiences, through the telling of stories in this case, is central to feminists’ resistance to abstraction” (Wibben 2011, 2). Miranda Allison (2009), another feminist scholar who has explored the experience of women combatants of armed nationalist groups in Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland have used in-depth interviews as part of her research based on feminist thinking and feminist methodology. She presents a detailed discussion of feminists’ stance on war, security and the methodological ground of the feminist scholarship that values experiences over theoretical order of war, security and peace. Similar to Allison, Mackenzie (2013) explores the experiences of ordinary women in the post-conflict state of Sierra Leon. Unlike Allison, she avoids the detailed theoretical, methodological discussions of prevailing IR theories and feminist methodologies: rather she has focused on the context of the study (i.e the post conflict Sierra Leon) and the experience of war and post war through the eyes of her subjects.

These studies showcase the varied methodological approaches within the feminist methodological framework. This, however, doesn’t mean that feminist scholars use any particular feminist method. Rather they use similar methods as other researchers. However, depending on the approach, they adapt or adjust the existing methods to reflect the greater feminist concerns. It may involve incorporating gender issues, or adjusting the content to accommodate subjective concerns such as women’s life events or experiences and/or social contexts. In an effort to gain insights and understanding of their subjects,
many feminist scholars also incorporate different theories and their inter-sectionality and its influence on the research findings. Feminist researchers have also incorporated other innovative methods and/or techniques along with traditional methods of data collection to fulfill feminist research needs (Gottfried 1996). As for example, the use of archival research or setting up an archive for the research group(s) to develop greater knowledge of the subject group and similar women (Reinharz 1992; Nestle 1990). Feminist scholars have used content analysis of nontraditional research materials such as artwork or cultural artifacts (Gottfried 1996). Surveys and statistical analysis have also been part of feminist research to draw crucial understandings on gender issues and to develop gender sensitive public policies (Gottfried 1996). In the essay “Small happiness: the feminist struggle to integrate social research with social activism” Spalter-Roth and Hartmann (1996) have discussed the importance of using surveys and statistical analysis methods into their research on working women and welfare programs in order to redefine welfare policy from feminist perspective. Calling their attempt the “dual vision of feminist policy research,” they (1996, 211) argue that it “results from (our) efforts to conduct policy research that simultaneously puts women’s claims at the center and meets standards of mainstream social science research”. Reinharz (1992) regards such practice of feminist research as “feminist way of seeing” which harbors critical perspectives and also provides a way of “resolving the ambivalence of feminists toward the practices and arrangements of survey and other statistically based research” (Spalter-Roth and Hartmann 1996, 211). Spalter-Roth and Hartmann (1996, 211) considers their research practice situated at the juncture of mainstream social science research and feminist advocacy; their attempt is to maintain the credibility with mainstream research and
commitment to feminist activism by “redefining the welfare policy from a feminist perspective.”

The present study is grounded on the juncture of similar theoretical and methodological crossroads. It is situated at the intersection of feminist studies, peace and security studies. It is using feminist perspectives on security and peace. It has also used social capital theory and in particular the gender aspect of social capital theory to assess women’s contribution to grassroots peace building. As we have discussed earlier, feminist research advocates intersectionality; accommodates the use of multiple theories and methods including non-traditional types to reach out to diverse communities and issues. The present research uses interviews as well as surveys as methods of data collection. The primary aim of this research like many others is to explore the world of its subjects by using methods viable in social science research while maintaining the credibility with mainstream social research as well as feminist research agenda.

Feminist Social Capital Theory

The social capital theory is widely used in both Economics and Sociology to examine the social activities, collective actions by groups or communities. This research aims to examine the role of women’s group activism in grassroots peace building in the conflict ridden state of Assam in northeast India. Using social capital theory to assess women’s collective behavior at the local level allows scope for this research. Social capital is defined in terms of value sets or norms shared by group members, characterized by norms of trust, co-operation, reciprocity - bonding and bridging and networking. Strong presence of social capital allows the group members to band together and defend their interests. Social capital harbors interpersonal networks, contact, knowledge, and
related human resources which are crucial to rebuild society, community especially in the context of conflict. As discussed earlier, there is a strong correlation between women and social capital. Franklin (2005) suggests that women are rich in these valuable assets, which is often visible in group solidarity and identity against the shared experience of exploitation, discrimination, or exclusion from key civic roles and hierarchical positions. Social capital among women may vary from small initiatives within groups to address the everyday challenges and threats of life to broader issues such as women’s rights or empowerment in local or global contexts. Franklin also critically reviews the feminist engagement with social capital theory. She has pointed out that the mainstream research on social capital theory focus more on consensus building than on negotiating differences. Some feminist scholars are critical of the ‘consensus building’ aspect of social capital as it may undermine the voice of the marginalized or women in the larger social context. Other feminist scholars, as Franklin observes, adopt the social capital concept and adapt it to incorporate women’s agency and gender aspect. Alfred (2009) also supports that the theoretical framework of social capital theory needs to be critically reviewed to avoid any possible gender bias before placing women within its framework. Feminist researchers such as Bruegel (2005), Lister (2005), however, have highlighted the political and transformative potential of social capital of women’s groups.

Taking a feminist approach Lister (2005), discusses the role of agency in women’s access to social capital and how they make use of the resources inherent in such networks for social and political transformation. On the discussions of women’s participation and activism researchers have pointed out that women’s participation is more visible in non-institutionalized forms such as community volunteering, child caring,

Such forms of social capital take place in multiple ways as well as in multiplicity of groups and most commonly through the modes of grassroots and small scale participation (Lowndes 2004). Such patterns of community engagement or group participation harbor the scope and potential for building community dialogue, collective voice, and political engagement against violence, insecurities. Studies have also supported the positive link between social capital, development and peace building (Coleman1988; Cox, 2010; Grootaet and Bastelaer 2002).

These studies support our thesis on women’s activism, social capital and peace building. We argue that women’s activism against insecurity and violence increases social capital; increased social capital channels norms of trust, solidarity, knowledge sharing, networking, volunteering among members and hence contributes to peace at the grassroots level. Therefore, using social capital theory seems to be the viable option to examine women’s contribution to peace building efforts in the context of Assam (northeast India). The following section will present the methods – interviewing and survey research used for the purpose of data collection from the field. The next sections will present the data analysis and limitations of the study.

Methods

This study is primarily based on qualitative research. It uses a mix of methods approach using both interviewing and surveys for collection of primary data. In addition to the primary data collection procedures, secondary sources such as personal observation, field visits, books, regional newspaper articles, archival data, research papers, NGO data-bases were also used to collect secondary data. The use of secondary
sources helped to gain insights on a variety of issues related to the conflicts, the socio-political and historic background of the region, the field study locations, and the demographics of the subject population. Prior to the beginning of the research, contacts have been made with a few resource persons from the area. Preliminary consultations and preliminary field visits were made in order to understand the feasibility and challenges associated with the research and the proposed field visits. Secondary sources were used to choose the particular women’s groups for the survey research. Prior contacts, interactions with group members were established on personal initiative. It was helpful to establish rapport among the members of the groups. In the following section, I explain in detail the interview and the survey methods used for data collection and participant selection procedure. It will be followed by the data analysis and limitations of the study.

*In-Depth Interview*

Interview method is used as a primary data collection procedure in many disciplines of social science especially in feminist research, sociology, gender studies, and discourse analysis. This research involves women’s perception of peace, security and activism. It delves into the conflict scenario in Assam, the prospect of violence, lawlessness, violation of human rights and security as well as aspects of peace, women’s role as part of the critical inquiry. It involves the sensitivity on part of both the researcher and subjects. It also demanded the subjects’ personal understanding of the issues of violence, security, peace; her life experiences, willingness to share personal opinion. Personal interviewing, therefore, was the first choice for collection of such data.

*Interview Questionnaire.* A semi standard open ended interview questionnaire consisting of 12 questions was designed to elicit information from the participants (See
Appendix A). The questionnaire was prepared keeping in mind the aims and objectives of the study. At the preliminary stages of preparing the interview questionnaire, a set of 25-30 questions were prepared. However, after careful revisions and meticulous editing only a set of 12 questions were developed from the original set of 25-30 questions. These 12 questions were thought to be the most appropriate and invaluable to elicit information from the interview participants. Moreover, time commitment on part of the participants was another key issue for choosing a moderate length interview questionnaire. A set of 25-30 questions for an interview session demand longer time commitment on the part of the interview participants. In the case of the present study, the mock interviews with the initial set of 25-30 questions during the preparation stages of questionnaire development and study site selection lasted for nearly 2-3 hours. Requesting a time commitment for more than 3 hours from interview participants seemed unreasonable as it would create a time constraint on the part of the participants. It can also reduce the interest and enthusiasm of the average participants who participate voluntarily in the study. The resource books (Fink 2003) on how to conduct interviews and questionnaires also suggest in favor of preparing a moderate length questionnaire in order to maintain the voluntary interest of the participants in the process of capturing the most relevant information for the study purpose.

The first question is set on the overall understanding of the conflicts (The Bodo, the ULFA and the Karbi –Kuki for example) in Assam and how it has impacted civil society including women. Next three questions (Q2, 3, 4) are more specific; targeted to gather information on women’s safety and wellbeing during and after conflict in Assam. Women’s security in terms of physical/economic/educational/ emotional/ social/ has also
been addressed in the next question. The next question (Q4) further explores the various safety/security issues in terms of women’s daily life and activities. It especially focused on the security issues in family life, health, employment, income and career opportunity and other aspects of social development. The following three questions (Q5, Q6, Q7) target the role of government and the policies and provisions of laws available to address women’s safety/security needs and its effectiveness and (in) competence. Questions 8 and 10 inquire the role of women groups (Mahila Samiti, Mahila Santi Sena, ABWWF) in addressing women’s security issues/challenges and their role in grassroots community building. Question 9 is directed at how the participants’ view ‘peace’ and ‘peace-building’ with regards to community and the state. Question (Q11) further inquire the participants’ views and assessment of women groups’ activism with regards to a few key aspects of social capital formation such as awareness and trust building, creating social ties and solidarity by fighting social evils, promoting social values, consensus building, networking and information sharing. The final question addresses the participant’s viewpoint on women’s group activism with regards to grassroots peace building and its possibilities. This predesigned questionnaire has been instrumental to guide the in-depth interview process from the beginning to end. However, there are also questions and queries developed during the course of interviewing either to clarify or to further understand participants’ viewpoint on certain aspects or issues.

**Interview Participants.** The interview participants (men and women) were chosen from varied backgrounds including concerned citizens, academic professionals and researchers, activists, researchers from non-profit groups, independent researchers, women combatants and women victims. The interviews were conducted with prior
permission and consent from the interviewees as well as the prior approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB, USM). Prior to the interviewing, each participant was chosen through already established contacts within the groups. The participant selection process also involves consultations, suggestions and references available from the resource persons from various research fields, academic and non-profit organization, as was available to the researcher. As part of the participants’ selection process, certain minimum standards were set to select the interview participants. First, the researcher determines that participants should include individuals who have some kind of firsthand knowledge on the specific issue areas. Secondly, participants included in the study should be from various ethnic, religious, academic, social backgrounds. Although majority of the interview participants are women, it also includes male participants who share knowledge and understanding of the subject area. Some of them are active in similar fields of research and non-profit work. Among the women participants, there are women who are directly affected during the conflicts; academic researchers; university or college professors either working on women’s issues/ political/social conflicts; NGO worker; women combatant, women living in conflict regions and women leader. For the study purpose, I found it convenient to interview individuals belonging to different age groups, however, within the adult range of 20-65.

*Interview Timing, Locations and Use of Technology.* The time duration for most of the interviews varies between 60-90 minutes except for one or two cases, where it has extended to 2 hours or more due to the prolonged interest of the participant/researcher to continue the discussion or clarify certain points or elaborate on the issues. Altogether 45 interviews were conducted during the span of 2-3 months’ time period in the field. All the
interviews except two were recorded with a video device and later transcribed verbatim into a written form. The reasons the two interviews were not recorded were: a. in one case there was no power access to recharge the video device. In the other case, the women participant who was an ex-combatant didn’t want her interview to be recorded for personal reasons. This was transcribed on paper with permission from the interviewee’s permission. Most of the interviews were taken at the locations convenient to the participants. For the purpose of the study, the researcher has visited five different locations within the state including the state capital - Guwahati which is the hub of all sorts of activities -academic/ political/ administrative/intellectual- not only of Assam but also of the entire North East India. The other four locations were Diphu-Manja area in the Karbi Along District, Kokrajhar area in the Kokrajhar District, Tamulpur-Kumarikata area in the Nalbari District, and Tezpur area in the Sonitpur District of Assam. It is also to be noted that Kokrajhar, Tamulpur and Kumarikata are located under the Bodoland Territorial Administrative District (BTAD) where the Bodo conflict has taken place. Similarly Manja is the main location (Nearly 18 k.m. from Diphu, the District Headquarter of Karbi Anglong) where the Karbi-Kuki- Dimasa conflict took place. Tezpur is another important cultural and academic hub of Assam where the researcher had the opportunity to meet a few research scholars and social activists who shared their valuable insights and understanding on the research area. Prior to visiting the place, the researcher spent ample time in establishing contacts and rapport through phone, email or personal contacts. Prior appointments were made for the interview timing. In some cases, pre interview visits were necessary to establish rapport and ease out the interview.
process. In most occasions visits prior to the interview yielded in positive interaction and goodwill from the participants.

As part of the logistics, both long and short distance travelling, overnight or long time stay at the locations, maintaining phone-in communications – all have been pre-arranged and managed by the researcher with the help of contact persons or friends and family connection throughout the course of field study.

Survey Research

As part of the primary data collection process, the researcher also conducts survey research among women members in order to assess the aspect of security/insecurity among women as well as the social capital formation among members of women’s groups.

Survey Questionnaire. A survey instrument has been designed for this purpose. The questionnaire has two sections. The first section contains nine multiple choice questions related to women’s perspective on security/insecurity. The next section contains thirty two (32) questions; twenty nine (29) of those are multiple choice questions dealing with aspects of social capital formation and two (2) questions are open ended aiming to gain insights on women’s viewpoint on women’s group activism and peace building at local level.

In the first section (Section I- Measuring Security/Insecurity) questions are designed to assess information on a few areas: ‘safety and security within the community’; ‘effect of conflict on individual and day-today of life’; the ‘meaning of safety and wellbeing during conflict’; ‘social values’; ‘role of government authority/administration in providing security’. The second section of the survey focuses
on collecting data on mainly a few aspects of social capital. The questions were designed using the Integrated Questionnaire for the Measurement of Social Capital (SC-IQ) (Grootaert 2003; Woolcock and Narayan 2000). It was further scrutinized and modified keeping in mind the feminist perspectives of gender, power relations and social communication. The six modules of the SC-IQ questionnaire incorporate different forms of social capital: 1. groups and networks, 2. trust and solidarity, 3. collective action and cooperation, 4. information and communication, 5. social cohesion and inclusion, and 6. empowerment and political action. Although empowerment and political actions encompass many aspects well beyond of social capital (that is being measured in this research), this has to be taken into consideration as indicators of individual development and fulfillment of human rights. Empowerment in this regard is defined as the decision making ability in the individual’s day today activities and may change the course of one’s life (Grootaert 2003). Political action in this research includes activities the group members partake such as rallies, the sit-ins, protest march against killing, bomb blast, strikes and blockades, peace march which can lead to empowerment. The 31 questions used in the survey instrument (Section2 on Social Capital) are designed on the basis of these 6 modules. However certain modifications were made in order to suit the objectives and specificity of the research. These questions center round the core features of social capital such as group affiliation, trust, networking, volunteering, generalized norms, and neighborhood connections as reflected in the 6 modules (Grootaert 2003). These core features of measuring social capital are also found in other research by Narayan and Cassidy (1999) and Woolcock and Narayan (2000). The questions, hence, aim to find out whether women’s group activism (activities being member of certain groups) have
contributed towards creation of social capital. Social capital is defined as multi-dimensional in nature and is measured in terms of groups, networks, trust, norms which can be accessed by members in productive ways to make meaningful changes. The questions used in this survey can broadly be put into three dimensions of social capital – bonding, bridging and linking. Many feminists fear these aspects of social capital as ‘consensus building’ among men and women where women’s voice/interest is suppressed by the dominant male voice. However, this study is set to measure these aspects of social capital among members of women’s groups. Therefore, these concerns seem to be void in view of the greater potential of social capital among women. The last two questions (Q31 and Q32) in the survey are more subjective in the sense that they explore the participant’s perception of peace for family/community and her role in it.

Survey Participants. The participants of the survey primarily includes women members of a few groups who are actively working on the social/political/economic issues related to women, children and larger society. These groups were chosen after a strict preview of their work at the grassroots level and among women. As a part of the selection process, the researcher pays attention to the nature of their activity, their socio-political standpoint and status within the community and the civil society. As a part of the group selection process, the researcher has also inquired and consulted with other researchers, academicians, activists from non-profit organizations such as North East Network, Action Aid office (Guwahati, India) and important civil society members regarding the credibility of the selected women’s groups for the purpose of this study. After careful scrutiny, the researcher has chosen three groups – Tezpur District Mahila Samiti (TDMS) located at Tezpur, Mahila Santi Sena (MSS) at Tamulpur-Kumarikata
and All Bodo Women’s Welfare Federation (ABWWF) at Kokrajhar. These three groups have long been working on women’s issues related to women’s socio-political rights, gender justice, violence, empowerment and welfare. A brief introduction of the groups is given below.

*Tezpur District Mahila Samiti* (TDMS) is one of the most esteemed non-profit organizations of Assam and the entire North East India that focuses on women’s empowerment, education and development. Establishes in 1921 and officially registered in 1928 (Bhuyan 2007), TDMS has been actively working towards social development through women’s collective agency. At present, TDMS is constituted of 120 primary cells that include more than 10,000 women members. Based on the Gandhian philosophy of rural development and self-reliance, TDMS has been successfully campaigning for women education, reproductive health, gender justice, legal awareness and assistance, financial support, banking service along with organizing various skill development trainings such as weaving, knitting, food processing, jute processing workshops for women.

*The Mahila Shanti Sena* (MSS) or the Women Peace Corp at Kumarikata, Tamulpur was established as part of the Mahila Shanti Sena movement at the ‘Vaishali Sabha’ in 2002. It is a peace movement under the leadership of late Acharya Ramamurthi with an aim to empower women to build a peaceful and just society. Based on the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence, MSS aims to raise awareness among

---

9 The Vaishali Sabha or Vaishali Assembly in 2002 was jointly organized by Acharya Ramamurti of Shrambharati Ashram and the McMaster Center for Peace Studies, Canada and UNICEF, Bihar with a view to promote non-violence, peace and democracy among rural population especially women. Initially attended by only 109 women, it soon turned into a meeting place for thousands of women, many of whom have taken part in a public dialogue and training for the first time in their lives. The success of the meet laid the foundation for the Mahila Shanti Sena movement for rural women with a view to organize and mobilize women for peaceful community development.
women about their rights and responsibilities as citizens of a democratic country. It focuses primarily on women’s issues and challenges - violence, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and pertains various training on peace building, development and democratic rights among rural women. Hence, it creates a platform to engage and mobilize rural women towards constructive community building. In 2006 annual meeting, almost 5000 women took part and several trainings were being organized in different states of North East India especially in Manipur, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh. MSS, Kumarikata- Tamulpur is closely associated with the Tamulpur- Anchalik Gramdan Sangha, Kumarikata, another non-profit organization based on Gandhian philosophy of non-violence and economic empowerment of the rural communities. The core committee members of the MSS Kumarikata are also actively involved in a non-profit organization known as ‘Asha Darshan’. The core philosophy of the MSS and Asha Darshan is similar; although Asha Darshan encompasses further activism with regards to child education, women’s economic and political participation.

*All Bodo Women’s Welfare Federation (ABWWF)* is a Bodo women’s organization with an aim of working for women’s socio-economic/educational/political/legal rights. It aims to create a platform for all Bodo women, uniting them to fight for their rights and work towards social development. It was earlier known as the All Assam Tribal Women’s Welfare Federation (AATWWF). ATTWWF played a significant role in the political mobilization of Bodo civil society during the course of the Bodo movement by ABSU in 1980s. However, at the aftermath of Bodo Accord in February 1993, the AATWWF amended its constitution and changed its name into ABWWF and focused mainly on women’s development and rights through capacity building and
empowerment. With its head office in Kokrajhar, ABWWF has set up numerous weaving centers for Bodo women, held training camps for women and youth on income generation skills in areas of kitchen gardening, food processing, fishing, dairy farming, tailoring, and carpet making. ABWWF has also set up an orphanage named Alayaran at Kokrajhar in 2003 for the victimized children during the Bodo armed conflict. It also serves the children whose parents become victims of witch hunting practice – a form of social evil largely prevalent among the tribal communities. In past decade, it has played a strong role in the state, by publicly voicing for the (Bodo) women’s rights and myriad challenges. ABWWF is sometimes critically reviewed as strictly nationalistic/community centric within the Bodo community.

The number of women members from each group who took part in the survey procedure is: TDMS-17; ABWWF - 20 and MSS-23. Apart from the members of these groups, the survey participants also include women as members of the civil society (college student, housewives, and working women). They took part in the Section I of the survey in order to offer their views on women’s security issues. It is especially important to mention that the researcher had the opportunity to meet many women victims and eyewitnesses of the Karbi-Kuki-Dimas conflict in the Manja area of Karbi Along District (5 Karbi women; 3 Dimasa women and 3 Kuki women). This had been a unique experience to hear a firsthand account of the conflicts through the victims’ eyes and its impact on those women and their families/communities.

Survey Procedures. Most of the survey questionnaires were handed over to the participants by the researcher during the time of field visits. Key personnel, members in each group were also contacted prior to the field visits. The survey questionnaire was
explained to the participants either by the researcher or the contact/resource persons in the group. In most cases the questionnaires were verbally translated into native language, question by question by the researcher/contact person in order to avoid confusion and misunderstanding. It took 15-30 minutes for different participants to complete the survey based on their understanding of the questions or the level of English language proficiency. In some occasions, especially in the Tamulpur-Kumarikata locations, the researcher along with the contact person had to assist the participants by translating the questionnaire into the regional language and also to fill out the survey responses on behalf of the respondents as most of them had no formal/informal education. Only a few of them had the basic reading or writing skills in their native language or English. It was tiresome and time consuming; however, the enthusiasm and humbleness of the participants made it a memorable experience.

Apart from the survey data, the researcher also took extra care to take notes of personal stories, comments from the participants. Field notes, use of camera, and recording device were particularly useful to capture the ethnographic details and restore the memories of field visits and meetings.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data collection is done in varied ways. The diverse forms of qualitative data also challenge the researcher to choose the appropriate process of data analysis (Gibbs 2007). The most common form of data collection in qualitative research includes interviewing. The interview data analysis process includes transcription of the interview texts, translation if the participants speak in a language other than the one used by the researcher and thematic analysis. The thematic analysis involves interpretive
analysis of the transcribed texts from the interviews and coding (Saldana 2011; Miles, Huberman and Saldana 2014). The field notes, observations, contextual understandings are valuable in doing an accurate thematic analysis. In this research, in-depth interviews and surveys were used to collect the primary data. The data collected through in-depth interviewing were transcribed. In some cases, the interviews were first transcribed in native language by the researcher and then, translated into English. The transcribed/translated interviews were, then, analyzed using content analyses (Berg 2007; Gibbs 2007). The content analysis process involved systematically assigning codes to the transcribed texts. Coding is one of the important and critical step in the data analysis process (Saldana 2012). “To codify is to arrange things in a systematic order, to make something part of a system or classification, to categorize” (Saldana 2012, 8). After coding each transcribed interviews, the text data are segregated and then regrouped based on the assigned codes similarities. It helps to link the data based on meaning and explanation. A few thematic patterns emerge from the regrouped coded data. These thematic patterns and categories are then discussed and interpreted as research findings.

The content analysis of the transcribed interview data, in this research leads to uncover the underlying themes and patterns related to women’s security, and women’s activism in Assam. Following the qualitative methodological procedures, the data coding involved row-by-row, sentence-by-sentence and reading of all the transcribed/translated verbatim of the interviews. The coded data were then categorized under a few thematic groups. These thematic categories primarily emerged from the participants’ interview responses; themes with distinct meaning and significance were separated; repeated themes and ideas were merged together and reframed removing redundancies and
overlaps. These themes are, then refined and finalized to present the findings derived from the personal verbatim of the interviewees. Unlike the interview data, the survey data was first tabulated using Microsoft excel sheets. Using ‘one way tables,’ survey results were tabulated question by question for each group. The number of responses for each group was then calculated using percentage analysis.

In the next phase, each set of data were analyzed first by itself and then cross checked and supplemented by the other data set. For example, the interview data on women’s security/ insecurity was supplemented and cross-checked by the survey data on the same area. The same way, the survey data on women’s activism and social capital formation was supplemented, cross-examined with the individual interview responses on the same. This cross examination/supplementation of one set of data with another set is crucial in two important ways. It helps to reduce biasness and generalization of one set of data by the other. At the same time, it also strengthens the final result and enriches the interpretation and quality of research. Cross examination and /or supplementation of one set of data with another also provides the scope for further reflection and revisions in analysis and interpretation. In qualitative research, reflexivity is a crucial element to maintain the quality of research findings. In the next step, the findings were reported and interpreted by the researcher. At this stage the researcher looks into the research questions and hypotheses with which the research has begun at the first place. The findings are important to accept or reject the hypothesis of the study and for further research.
Limitations and Challenges

Throughout the research and the field study process, there are various challenges and limitations which need careful attention from the researcher. These are either resolved with necessary care and through decisions. Some of these need to be mentioned here to assess the strength and weakness of this research and possibility of generalization. Some of these are learning lessons for future research endeavors.

First of all, there are a few methodological challenges and limitations. 1. This study aims to understand two issues – women’s experience of security/insecurity in conflict zones and women’s capacity for social capital formation in Assam in North East India. This involves mainly two groups of women- a. how women in general or as individuals view the question of security/safety and b. women in groups – their collective response towards peace building at the group level. The researcher uses a mixed method approach to tackle the methodological challenges that may arise due to the individual and group characteristics in the target population. Both interview and survey methods have their own strengths and limitations. By using both methods, it was thought to maximize the authenticity of the research findings and minimize its weaknesses. 2. The nature of the research questions commended the use of one method more than the other – for example, the in-depth interviewing has been more useful to explore the issues of women’s security while the survey is more helpful to study women’s group activism. 3. Although the survey questions are formulated using the SC_IQ’s core questions, the questions are modified to adapt to the specific research objectives and context of the study. The researcher has taken special notice to retain the core elements of the SC_IQ questions and only minor changes are made to fit those into the context. 3. In-depth
interview participants as well as the survey participants are not randomly selected. The researcher has followed certain minimum standards of selection keeping in mind the purpose of the study and has paid attention to include representatives from as many sections of the target population as possible. The respondents of the survey questionnaire are from the three preselected women’s groups and hence not randomly selected. 4. In order to gain access to several interview participants, the researcher has to rely on other resource persons and researchers. As for example, to contact one of the ex-women combatants the researcher has to rely on a mutual acquaintance. On another occasion, contact with a hard-liner women activist who is a family member of a rebel leader is established through a community leader and respondent. The researcher has to use the personal connection of another respondent and establish initial rapport. While this may raise the question of biasness, the information gained through such interviews is otherwise hard to obtain due to confidentiality and risks associated with such meetings.

There were also challenges on part of the availability/arrangement of transportation and modes of communications such as phone services/internet connections during the course of field study. The poor quality of phone services/power services and lack of electricity/internet facility even in semi-urban locations has posed challenges and limitations during the field study period. Events of political and social unrest throughout the state have also posed certain challenges in terms of time management and scheduling. On one occasion during the field study at Kokrajhar, the researcher was scheduled to visit one of the refugee camps at a remote location with one of the NGO workers. The scheduled visit was cancelled at the last minute due to the sudden eruption of violence between the Bodos and Adivasis nearby the camp. There was communal tension and fear
of erupting further inter-community clashes. The contact person insisted on cancelling the trip because of the personal safety issues. There were also other occurrences of postponement or cancelation of meetings with resource persons, interviewees for various reasons. During the field visit to TDMS, Tezpur, the scheduled interviews/surveys with a few important members were postponed due to the sudden demise of a member of the group. The field visits and interview schedules were also affected due to the sudden calling of strikes, road blockade, bans and bandhs (unofficial shutdowns for a political cause) by various extremists groups, political parties, youth organizations either in protest of or demand for certain rights or powers.

This chapter presents a detailed discussion of the research design and methodology used in this research. The next chapter (IV) will present a detailed discussion of the research findings. It will be divided in two broad sections: a. women’s security and b. women’s activism and social capital building. It will then be followed by the concluding chapter.
CHAPTER IV – RESEARCH FINDING AND ANALYSIS: WOMEN AND THE SECURITY CHALLENGES

This chapter presents the research findings on women and security in the northeastern state of Assam, India. It presents the findings based on the results and analysis obtained through the surveys and personal interviews. As we have discussed in the previous chapter, interviewing and surveys have been used for data collection in this research. Data collection was primarily on two areas of research interest: women and security and women’s activism, social capital and peace building. The research findings from the interviews and survey data on ‘women and security’ are presented in this chapter. It presents the research findings and an analytical discussion on women’s security challenges in the context of conflict in Assam in past three decades. The following chapter presents the findings on women’s group activism and social capital and how it has contributed to grassroots peace building in Assam.

Women’s security has been a prime concern in the conflict ridden state of Assam. During the early years of conflict in Assam, there has been little concern about women’s security challenges. However, over the years, women’s security scenario has been deteriorated due to the growing violence, socio-political instability, and armed insurgencies. The security challenges women face in past three decades range from physical, socio-economic, psychological to health hazards. During the conflict period in Assam, women are easy targets of terror such as bombs, gun violence, rape and slavery. Women’s security challenges also emanate from economic distress caused by insurgency and instable law and order scenario. It is also exacerbated by the social practices and
(gender) stigmas deep-rooted in traditional patriarchal society which undermines women’s status lower than men.

This chapter presents the research findings based on women’s experience of security/ insecurity during and at the aftermath of conflict in the state of Assam. The key issues and themes regarding women’s security in Assam are identified and discussed at length with evidences from the field research. Both the interview findings and the survey findings are presented under various sections for better understanding and presentation. It tries to explore the otherwise unexplored meanings of security for the ordinary women in conflict situations in Assam. It also attempts to showcase how the notion of security for women in Assam is different from the state centric notions of security often dealt by the dominant IR theories. This also explains why the notions of individuals’ security presented by the feminist IR scholars are crucial in understanding the security challenges of women in Assam. This serves the purpose of linking up theory and practice. As we have discussed in the previous chapters feminist notions of security shifts attention from state centric security to non-state centric security – an alternate way of looking at the security from the margins.

The next chapter (V) presents the research findings based on women’s activism, social capital and peace building in Assam. It presents the research findings based on the survey and interview data available from the three women’s group chosen for this study. It indicates how women’s groups at local level have put their efforts to connect women, develop trust and bonding among members and band together to voice for their rights. They have also developed awareness and understandings of issues, women’s rights and responsibilities for social change. Thus, these groups are utilizing their social capital to
create pathways for rebuilding lives, neighborhoods and peaceful communities. In addition to the survey findings and interview findings, personal observations, field notes, relevant data from secondary sources are also used to supplement the research findings.

**Interview Findings: Women and the Security Challenges**

“(w)hat kind of security are you talking about? We were poor before (the conflict years)…in need of many things. But since the conflict has begun, things have gone from bad to worse. Now we are not even sure of our lives. We are not safe in the public places, neither in our houses…”

This section begins with the interview findings on women’s security challenges in Assam in the conflict scenario. It discusses the issues of security from women’s perspectives—especially from the experience of ordinary women in a militarized society. Women’s security challenges arise from different directions. As this research indicates, these challenges come from armed militancy as well as the state authorities such as law enforcement, state armed personnel amid political conflict and continuing violence and social chaos. Women in Assam, also face gender based security challenges emanating from the traditional socio-cultural practices. The following section on interview findings presents these findings in detail. It is followed by the survey findings. The survey findings supplement the interview findings. We have categorized the survey findings and interview findings under different subheading for better understanding, presentation and explanation of the issues.

---

10 Excerpt from the personal interview with a study participant. All the interviews are confidential and hence, not to be disclosed.
Three major thematic categories have emerged from the analysis of the interview data on women’s experience of security/ insecurity during and the aftermath of conflict in Assam. These are: a. Insecurity caused by insurgency and militarism b. Insecurity caused by the state or state sponsored parties c. Insecurities imbedded in the social-cultural practices. The first section presents how women’s security has been challenged by the militancy and insurgent activities. It discusses in detail how women being stakeholders and supporters in the initial stages of student movements and armed militancy became victims in the process. The second section also presents women’s security challenges in the hands of state authorities including law enforcement and judiciary. The third thematic category discusses women’s security challenges emanating from the gendered socio-cultural practices. As it happens in many conflict societies, the traditional gender roles and hierarchical practices are often challenged due to the impeding pressures on people’s economic, social and political lives. The dividing lines of masculinity/ femininity, gender roles are often challenged and the traditional societal order is broken when the society undergoes through a transition period. The same can be seen in the case women of Assam. The continuing militancy and socio-political disorder have challenged women to take up roles and responsibilities beyond the traditional roles. On one hand the conflict period has opened up possibilities for women to challenge the traditional gender norm and on the other hand it has affected women’s safety and security resulting in increasing cases of domestic violence, divorces, dowry deaths, trafficking as well as witch- hunting.

*Insurgency and Militarism Breeds Insecurity*

During the last three decades of socio-political disturbances and armed conflicts in Assam, women’s security question is probably the least explored and least inquired.
During this period women have suffered innumerable security challenges in personal as well as public front ranging from physical to psychological as well as socio-cultural and economic insecurities. Women were subjected to various sorts of physical and mental abuses and stress as a result of the prolonged years of militarism. The years of political instability and armed militancy have directly and indirectly affected women’s health, reproductive health, education, social and economic status, and opportunities. Many women have also been subjected to gun violence, bomb blasts, and have faced the horrors of torture, killing and kidnapping of their near and dear ones. Some are faced with incidents of extortion, and threats. Women’s security has also been challenged by communal violence and ethnic tensions and the fear of life, property, and personal safety associated with it. There were also other lesser known forms of security challenges in the forms of verbal abuses, eve teasing, public humiliations which have increased predominantly since 1980s alongside the increasing political instability, social unrest and armed militancy.

Involvement of Women in Students Movements and Armed Militancy. We began our inquiry into women’s security challenges with the understanding of women’s involvement and participation in the Assam Movement and the Bodo Movement led by the AASU and the ABSU respectively. We also looked into the involvement of women in armed militant groups and the related security challenges for women. The interview findings hint at a pattern of involvement of women in the students’ movements and also in armed militancy. As the conflict continued, women’s experience of conflict shifted from sheer enthusiasm and support to insightful scrutiny of the movement and of women’s victimization and suffering.
The interview-data reveal that women’s participation in the students movements especially led by the AASU and the ABSU during the 1980s were overwhelmingly large. The interview participants agreed that women’s participation and support for the movement were overwhelming positive during the initial and peak stages of these movements. During the period of Assam movement (1979-85) led by the AASU, a large number of women took part in the protests rallies, road blockade, and picketing or sit-in events. They were seen in the frontlines of the protest rallies and sit-ins. Being in the frontlines, these women were often subjected to police confrontation, tear gases, batons in the hands of law enforcement officers. Many interview participants believed that the leaders of the movement often strategically placed those women in the frontlines. It garnered public sympathy as well as media attention as women in the frontlines faced physical, abuse, batons in the hands of police and armed soldiers. Many women and girls face physical injuries and abuses in the police encounters and many women protesters were arrested and sexually harassed by the police during that period. Same is the case with the Bodo Movement led by ABSU. A large number of Bodo women took part in the protest marches, sit-ins, rallies, cultural vigils and silent marches organized by the ABSU in their quest for self-determination. The women protesters wearing the colorful ethnic Bodo dresses became a poignant sight of these protest rallies. As pointed out by many interview participants, it was a strategic decision by the movement leaders to revive a sense of ethnic identity and pride among the Bodos. Many interview participants also pointed out that by placing women in the front lines of protest, leaders created a barrier of human shield in front of law enforcement. The interview data revealed that at a critical time of the Bodo movement, Bodo women shouldered greater responsibilities and
security risks to revive and recharge the movement through their ‘under the radar’
networks. The women played the roles of caretakers, messengers, provided food and
hideouts to activists and armed rebels at the critical period of the movement. Many
interview participants also mentioned the widespread rumors of the alleged hand of a few
Bodo women in a gruesome bomb blast in the state capital during the peak of the
movement. By committing such an action these women risked their personal security to
challenge the state security. However, once the movement gained momentums, those
women activists were either sidelined or alienated by their male counterparts. In the post
movement period when the movement leaders joined/formed political parties and took
part in the governments or autonomous governing councils, very few women participants
were seen in the leadership positions. The interview data indicated this changing
dynamics of women’s participation in the earlier phases of the protest movements and
their absence in the later stages of decision making process and the governance. Unlike
the Assam movement or the Bodo movements, women’s participation in the armed
militancy was rather slim and covert. It is perhaps due to the underground nature of the
armed militancy or the intensity of violence associated with the armed operations.
Women’s experience with conflict and their growing security challenges, however, grew
in enumerable count since the student’s movements through the armed militancy. As
expressed by one of the interview participants,

“… both ASSU and ABSU have used women’s participation in the movement to
maximize their political gains. At the beginning and peak of the movement, we
see a large number of women, (school/college students, young and old,
married/unmarried women) participating in the protests; events such as rallies,
picketing, sit-ins. These women have also faced backlashes from police and government security forces including tear gas, and batons … As the AASU movement ended, the (male) student leaders formed the regional party government; the women became invisible…some of the prominent women leaders married their former colleagues, some resumed jobs…thus, were removed from public view... Same is the case in the Bodo Movement by ABSU, we don’t see many of the women leaders holding official portfolios in the post movement period…”

Another interview participant who served as a police superintendent during the Assam movement period and handled the law and order situation firsthand during the peak of the movement has recalled the participation and involvement of women and the associated security challenges in the following way,

“… Women’s participation, involvement was strategically used by the movement leaders. Many women participants were also wives, sisters or daughters of government officials, service men. They joined the ‘civic movement’ instead of their husbands, brothers or fathers. Their decision to participate was more political and carefully chosen… it’s not purely motivated by the sub-nationalist fervor… to show their solidarity, commitment to being Assamese…Their support and involvement were used (strategically)…These women were put in the front lines of protest rallies, road blockades during the Assam movements. Many women were harassed, verbally and physically... Many women were also humiliated publicly for not taking part in the events…”
Women are Soft Targets for Public Humiliation, Assault and Abuses. As in many conflict situations, women in Assam are often ‘soft targets’ for perpetrating acts of violence, psychological abuses. Perpetrators consider women as easy targets to verbally abuse, or assault, insult or humiliate in both public and private spaces. By doing so, they claim superiority or power over their opposing parties. The interview finding reveals that many women have also been the soft targets of such violence during the Assam movement and the armed insurgency period. During the Assam movement time, many women relatives (wives/daughters/close relatives) of the government officials or other political leaders were publicly ridiculed/humiliated by the movement supporters as an act of defiance. Such incidents often took place in public places such as shopping complexes, schools premises, movie halls, buses and trains in front of bystanders. In some cases common people raised their voice or reported such incidents; however, in most cases, these incidents went unreported due to fear of further damage or family honor. These cases were also sporadic.

Interview findings reveal that during the course of Assam movement, many women also suffered from psychological stress, trauma and social alienation due to the socio-political events and occurrences. There are many examples brought into notice by the study participants, which indicated that women in such situations of conflict faced various kinds of assault, insults humiliations, in public or private spaces. Such assaults and abuses often remained unreported as those were associated with family honor and pride. The perpetrators consider women as easy targets to assert their power, hatred and vengeance. Symbolically in a traditional society, violating a woman is considered an assault against the family she belongs. It breeds hatred and vengeance especially among
the male members of the family. During the time of the Assam movement and the Bodo Movement, many women relatives of the state police force or government officials were publicly humiliated by the movement supporters in defiance. Many families were socially boycotted and banned from participating in the neighborhood events or public events under the instructions of movement leaders. The ideological differences and disagreements between neighbors and community members also affected social relations. It also reduced the trust level as well as the respect for women. It resulted in verbal or physical abuse, targeted violence, and sexual slurs on women. Women and young girls from such families suffered the brunt of social alienation, trauma and public disdain. One of the interview participants also cited an incident with a Bodo girl whose clothes were stripped off by the alleged movement activists. During the peak of the Bodo movement, the movement leaders urged Bodo women to wear ethnic Bodo attire in public places. The victim in this case did not follow the dictum and was apprehended by the alleged activists leading to physical attack and stripping off her clothes.

“… her father was a police officer. Although they are from the Bodo community, she grew up in outside ... She was probably not accustomed to wearing the *dokhona chador* (Bodo ethnic dress). On that day, as she went to college wearing regular dress, some movement activists attacked her, assaulted her for not wearing the traditional dress, they stripped off her clothes…”

This indicates how women’s personal choices have also been curtailed during the movement period. The perpetrators considered it as a violation of norms set by the movement leaders and ‘not a matter of personal choice’. Many women faced verbal abuses, sexual slurs and public humiliation. Such incidents often took place in busy
public places such as shopping centers, school/college premises, movie halls, bus/train stations in the presence of general public. In some cases, common people did raise their concerns; however, most of these cases remained reported and the perpetrators went scot free. The occurrences of such incidents impacted on women’s movements and personal freedom. Parents and families barred young girls and women from going out alone especially after dark and also in public events. They were even discouraged to go out in their own neighborhoods after dark. In the personal account of an interview participant,

“The stress of being socially ostracized in our own neighborhoods, to face verbal abuses and ridicules by fellow students or neighborhood youths had such a negative impact on many of the girls of our time…”

Women within the Armed Groups Face Challenges and Insecurity. Although women’s participation in the armed militancy is not in the same in volume and magnitude as in the students’ movements, a considerable number of women did take part in the armed groups (ULFA, NDFB and BLT) alongside their male counterparts as active combatants. Some women joined the armed groups as active cadets while others participated indirectly; some women also got involved as a result of coercion or circumstances of the events. These women got involved with the armed groups as informants, messengers, caregivers, offering safe hideouts and in multiple ways working for the militants or their associates in their need.

As the interview findings reveal the women cadres in these organizations have also faced security concerns similar to their noncombatant sisters. Many women cadres joined armed groups at a very young age (during the senior years in high school or immediately after the high school); often they were motivated by the idealized norms and
beliefs of the armed groups. Some are also influenced by the charismatic leaders and voluntarily joined the armed groups. They believed in the idealized norms, the social and political cause of the groups to bring social change. However, there are also instances where women especially girls are involved in such activities because of coercion and circumstances. Many interview participants point out the fact that women living in villages close to the militant camps or training groups become involved in insurgents’ activities not by choice, but by their circumstances. In an informal discussion, one of the interview participants mentioned that there were occasions when armed rebels took shelter by force in households run by single women or a widow. They were forced to serve food and also to provide or pass information. Those women become subjects of army/ police interrogation and face all sorts of harassments and mental tortures in the hands of armed soldiers and police.

Young women who join the revolutionary groups by personal choice also face discriminations and security challenges. The interview findings reveal that although these women cadets receive same types of physical and armed trainings as their male counterparts, they are often discriminated at various levels. They are often underrated and assigned low level jobs such as recruiter, messengers, and caretakers while their male counterparts are assigned positions or duties deemed higher within the organizations. Male members often take charge of the field operations which were deemed as ‘masculine’ and hence, they are higher in position and more respectable than their female counterparts. One of the ex-combatants, in her interview, has mentioned that women were also assigned on jobs such as messengers, recruiters which involve risks and dangers of life. These types of responsibilities were deemed as ‘feminine’. There were
higher risks of getting caught and exposed. Moreover, there was no scope to rise up the ladder, especially in terms of decision-making and leadership positions. The women cadets felt discriminated, frustrated, and hopeless. In her own words:

“ The revolutionary ideology of ULFA- doing social good, bringing social justice and development – does not include women. The dream of ULFA – of creating “golden Assam” (xonor Axom) - did not include women… At the end you realize, it’s the male centric world they dream of and believe in…”

Women cadets were often barred from falling in love or having any physical, emotional relationship with anyone. Violators were either beaten up or physically tortured.

“…30-40 batons were most common for any minor violations. Girls were kept under strict vigilance and have to maintain strict codes of conduct…marriage, falling in love were banned and considered as crimes for the low level cadres, while the top leaders got married, have had family and children, they put their children in private boarding schools abroad.”

Another interview participant has also pointed out the gendered hierarchy of power within the organizational structure of the ULFA. Although there are a few successful women leaders in the ULFA, they are neither in the action squad nor in the decision making group. Rather, they are in charge of the cultural affairs or the publicity division. It hints at the patriarchal power hierarchy within the armed group. It can also be interpreted as a reflection of the patriarchal society where women are always placed at the lower level of the power hierarchy.
“…We hear the names of Paresh Barua, Mithinga Daimary, Anup Chetia as the top ULFA leaders and decision-makers, but we don’t hear the names of Kaberi Kochari or Pranati Deka Phukan in the same order. They are the top women leaders in ULFA; but they are holding positions as head of cultural affairs or communications … The organizational set up of these groups is also set in the prevailing patriarchal norms. Although the tribal communities didn’t have the same patriarchal hierarchy, the militant groups such as BLT, NDFB did not let their women cadets to rise to the top level. It hints that they are also becoming more male centric…”

Although the armed groups in Assam do not express any hostility or disrespect to women, it is not free from the inherent gender biasness. These groups are often set in the patriarchal hierarchical framework of the mainstream Assamese/Indian society and harbor similar patriarchal attitude towards women. It also emanates in their operational framework.

The interview findings also point out that most of these revolutionary groups and their support groups use women in various ways that challenge their personal security and dignity. Women cadets were assigned on duties that demanded physical involvement with their rivals. They were also used as arms carriers and human shields to cover up armed ambushes. Interview findings reveal the alleged use of women by armed groups for fund raising and revenues. Many interview participants have expressed their doubts on the involvement of one of the Bodo militant groups in illicit sex trade and small arms trade to collect funds for their operations. They have allegedly used their women cadets in such operations. There is no substantial evidence to confirm such allegations within the
limited scope of this study. However, it does indicate the level of corruption, lust and insecurity within these armed groups. The interview participants also cast doubts on the high level of corruption within the armed organizations and the use of money and sex for personal gratification. Low level women cadets were exploited by the leadership in the hierarchy and were at security risk. As recalled by an ex law enforcement officers, one of the armed groups in Assam have also been allegedly involved in using women and young girls in X-rated video productions and trafficking.

“With the rise of militancy, sex trafficking is also on the rise especially in the Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts. There is a huge market of Mongoloid looking girls outside Assam and India…Insurgency, poverty, degradation of social values and trust issues and also failed government apparatus to provide security. Many parties were involved; boys and girls were recruited for militant group or to be sent to the cities as domestic help. The middlemen take charge and hand them over to other parties or pimps in exchange of money…”

Many women cadets were used as human shields as well as arms carrier.

“Women were used for protection, often as human shield in encounters. Especially in the Bhutan- Assam border, when the Bhutanese Army attacked the ULFA camps, hundreds of women cadres and family members including children, were killed in the encounter…”

Women and Children are Easy Targets to Perpetrate Violence and Terror. As seen in many conflict regions, armed rebels in Assam target women and children to perpetrate violence and fear and thereby, to assert their brutalities and power. Many interview participants have mentioned the case of bomb blast at the Independence Day
celebration on August 15th in Dhemaji. Data from the secondary sources revealed that the powerful bomb blast conducted by ULFA killed 17 persons and left nearly 40 people seriously wounded. Most of the deceased were children including 9 girls and women who accompanied their children for the Independence Day parade. The Report Bearing Witness (2011, 37-38) has brought into focus several cases of the Dhemaji blast victims in first person narrative. The following is an excerpt of a narrative from the same report (2011, 38) by a women who lost her two daughters in the Dhemaji bomb blast.

“Both my daughters… They robbed them from me. They are not human beings, they are demons. Didn’t they too have brothers, sisters, fathers and mothers? …They killed my two lively daughters. Robbed them from my bosom... How could they have planned such sinister act without anybody’s notice? They killed my two promising daughters leaving a void at home.”

The agony and the anguish over the loss of young lives and especially girls have still registered fresh in the minds of many Assamese. Many interview participants have mentioned the incident during their interviews. The frustrations, anguish and sense of insecurity felt by the community still echo in their voices.

“It was such a shock… shocked to see the horrifying act of killing children and women…young girls among the many people killed that day….such a loss of life! (It) was a glaring example of the brutality on women and children….the women who lost their children are still burning silently for their loss…the militant group didn’t accept moral responsibility until 2009, but we all knew, who did it ….”

Another interview participant remembered the incident:
“…who can forget that terrible act? …It just showed their cruelty and insensitivity towards children and women… ULFA lost its credibility in the minds of many Assamese that day itself….ULFA’s armed struggle for the sovereign state (has) lost its meaning since the Dhemaji blast in 2004…”

In another case, the Bodo militants displayed a grueling act of violence by targeting a sixteen year old high school girl named Priya Basumatary in Dwimuguri in Chirang district\textsuperscript{11}. She was allegedly accused of being a police informant. The militants dragged her from her house in broad day light and shot her pointblank in a nearby field while her parents and villagers were forced to witness the gruesome act. This indicates the trauma and victimhood and the in-depth insecurity prevalent in a militarized society. In the voice of an interview participant,

“Losing a daughter or a neighborhood girl, and also be the witness to such violence indicates the pervading culture of violence in our society. It indicates the utter helplessness of the people and the pervading darkness, the lawlessness… women are no longer held in respectable positions as it used to be in our traditional (tribal) society, rather they are the scapegoats…”

\textit{Militancy, Internal Displacement and Sex Trafficking Exacerbate Women’s Insecurity}. During the conflict period, numerous violent clashes took places especially between the Bodos and the non-Bodo communities in Bodo dominated areas, the Karbis, the Kukis and the Dimasas in the Karbi Along and North Kachar District, Assamese Hindus and the Bengali speaking Muslims in different parts of Assam. These clashes


138
exacerbated women’s insecurities. Many women lost their family members and home and took shelter in relief camps. Many women were kidnapped and abducted and faced all kinds of abuses including rape, molestations and psychological trauma. According to the National Crimes Record Bureau Report (2015), Government of India, the registered number of cases of women’s kidnapping and abductions in 2001 were 1070 along with 817 cases of rape and 850 cases of assault (Table 1). These numbers have been increasing over the years. In 2012, 3360 cases of kidnapping and abductions were registered along with 1716 cases of rape and 1840 cases of molestation.

Table 1

Crime Against Women (2001-2012: Kidnapping and Abduction, Rape, and Molestation)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kidnapping &amp; Abduction</td>
<td>1070</td>
<td>1276</td>
<td>1351</td>
<td>1552</td>
<td>1456</td>
<td>1544</td>
<td>1471</td>
<td>1789</td>
<td>2092</td>
<td>2767</td>
<td>3192</td>
<td>3360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>817</td>
<td>970</td>
<td>1095</td>
<td>1171</td>
<td>1238</td>
<td>1244</td>
<td>1437</td>
<td>1438</td>
<td>1631</td>
<td>1721</td>
<td>1700</td>
<td>1716</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molestation</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>984</td>
<td>878</td>
<td>883</td>
<td>899</td>
<td>1290</td>
<td>789</td>
<td>1272</td>
<td>1342</td>
<td>1400</td>
<td>1193</td>
<td>1840</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the Bodo Movement and armed insurgency period, several ethnic clashes took place between the Bodos and other communities such as Adivasis, Muslims and Bengalis. The alleged insurgents targeted specific communities; attacked them physically, threatened and killed and looted, burnt and vandalized their homes and communities. Such incidents of communal violence resulted in loss of lives, homes and displacement of thousands of people within the BTC area. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, Norweigian Refugee Council on India Report (IDMC
Report 2008, 51), more than 200,000 people were displaced due to ethnic clashes in 1996. In 2008, violent clashes between the Bodo and the Muslims left nearly 150,000 displaced (IMDC Report 2008, 52) and hundreds killed and injured. A large number of people left their homes and neighborhoods, took shelter in the relief camps in school/college premises or temporary government shelters. Many of these internally displaced people including women and children are still living in the relief camps. Women and young girls from these communities bear the brunt of the communal violence both directly and indirectly. Many women lost their husbands, family members during the clashes in 1996-1998. While they feared for their lives to go back to their villages, they lived in dilapidated conditions. The camps did not have food supplies and lacked basic amenities (IDMC Report 2008, 164). As described by one of the interview participants,

…During the clash, these women lost almost everything, their homes or huts, the little valuables they possessed, clothes, the cooking utensils, water pots.... They hardly get govt. ration for 10-12 days per month. Many of them have small children….There is no health care facilities for women and children...

These relief camps are only partially funded by the government. They have very little or no amenities, in terms of safe drinking water, food supply, health care or sanitation system. The interview findings reveal that majority of the women victims are illiterate and hence, finding new employment is challenging. While the male members often disperse to cities or urban areas to find temporary income, women are struck inside the camps. Some women work as domestic help or construction worker while many are lured into sex slavery by middle men. Women who work as domestic help often face abuses. They do not get fair pays and the temporary nature of their employment adds
financial stress and uncertainty in their lives. Many women are forced to prostitution or early marriage and childbirth (IMDC Report 2008, 164). The lack of health services, food, and nutrition exacerbates health risks especially during pregnancies or childbirth. The lack of skill development programs for the women also exacerbates the unemployment among these women. Further, the lack of school facilities for young children also increases the challenges. One of the interview participants have pointed out how many of these displaced women have faced the insecurity posed by ethnic clashes and militancy:

…Many women were pregnant; some gave birth during the clashes. The pregnant women and the new mothers didn’t have food for days… they hardly got any medical treatment or assistance in childbirth. Many succumbed to death due to diseases like jaundice, diarrhea, malaria, and fever…There was no provision for clean water to drink or wash dirty clothes or maintain basic hygiene; there were no provision for sanitary napkins for women, women had to go to the edge of the camp or inside the nearby bushes to attend nature’s call….Women had to wait till dawn to do these things…

State Authorities Fuels Insecurity

During the movement period and the armed insurgency period, women’s security has also been arrested by the state authorities. In any democratic country, the primary responsibility of the state security agency or the law enforcement agency is to provide security to its citizens including women. However, in Assam, women’s security was also threatened in the hands of the state security agencies especially in the hands of the law
enforcement and army personals. In an attempt to control the growing militancy in the state, the government employed central armed forces in the state. This resulted in violations of citizen’s democratic rights in many ways as the army used repressive measures on innocent civilians especially on women.

**Women Are Targets of Physical, Sexual and Psychological Abuses.** The interview findings reveal that throughout the conflict and afterwards, the government authorities, (the state government/ federal government) have failed to provide security to its citizens, especially to the women. During the Assam Movement and the Bodo movement, many women protesters were subjected to tear gases, batons and arrests in many police encounters. Many women faced physical and psychological abuses in the police custody. Many women and young girls were also abused, molested and threatened by the law enforcement officials and armed personnel.

During the armed insurgency by ULFA, the government of India deployed the Indian army in the state multiple times especially in 1990 and 1992 under the name of ‘Operation Bajrang’ and ‘Operation Rhino’. During the time of ‘Operation Bajrang’ and ‘Operation Rhino,’ many women suffered the brunt of physical and psychological insecurity. During these counter-insurgency operations, the Indian armed forces have targeted ordinary women and violated their basic rights to security as the citizens of a democratic country. The armed soldiers have perpetrated various attacks on women and girls. They especially targeted the family members and close relatives of the armed rebels – mothers, sisters, wives, neighbors, relatives. Many of these women have suffered extreme physical, emotional, sexual abuses and tortures in the hands of armed guards and soldiers. During the search operations in targeted households, the armed soldiers would
ransack the households and take the male members or young men into custody for further interrogation or inquiry. In absence of the accused, the female members in the household would face the interrogation. Such interrogations often lead to physical, mental and sexual abuses. There are also innumerable incidents when armed soldiers forcefully entered the household, beat and rape women members of the household at gun point either in front of or in absence of their family members. One of the interview participants referred several examples from the research “Women in Conflict Situations” (2005) conducted by her fellow researchers.

The incident took place in Bongaon village, Chariduar, Sonitpur District. This women named XXX was beaten and gang raped by seven army men in front of her family members at gunpoint; she suffered severe wounds and heavy vaginal bleedings; her husband and father in-law was also taken into custody by the army men; eye witnesses and medical reports all confirmed the act. However, she did not get justice ... Her case remained pending in the court; her legal advisor, the doctor and the women activists who supported her case were also threatened someway or other by the higher authorities to withdraw their support from the case. Immediately after the incident, army also took several villagers especially the male members from the neighborhood including the husband of the secretary of the local women’s body and tortured and threatened them to maintain silence over the incident. (Goswami, Shreekala and Goswami 2005, 58)

In another narrative, the interview participant pointed out another case where a fourteen-year-old girl were subjected to army brutalities and lost her life (Goswami, Shreekala and Goswami 2005, 49).
...XXX Dutta (age 14) was raped and tortured to death by Army jawans in Khowdang village in North Lakhimpur District; the army jawans entered their house searching for her elder brother and tried to take away her younger brother in the army van. While her parents were out begging and praying for his release, couple of army men entered the house and committed the crime. The army also blocked the postmortem of the girl for three days...

During the ‘Operation All Clear’ conducted by Indian army in the border areas of Assam (India) and Bhutan in 2003, many civilians including women and children along with the ULFA insurgents were killed. In the process of using military/paramilitary forces against insurgent groups, the government has also affected civilian security; violated the democratic rights of its citizens.

During the Bodo movement, many Bodo women and young girls became victims of sexual abuse and rape by the police. In January 1988, ten Bodo women were allegedly raped by Assam Police personnel in Bhumka village in Kokrajhar District. This ignited the mass sentiment of the Bodo community against the police and the government. It also fueled communal hatred against other minority groups living within close proximity of the Bodo inhibited villages. In another incident in May 1988, a fifteen year old girl Helena Basumatary was shot dead by Assam Police Force in an incident of protest. Many interview participants have pointed out how these incidents instilled the fear, anxiety and insecurity among the people. The leaders of the movement used the ‘reactionary’ sentiment to unite the Bodos. They furthered the sentiment of wrath and anger against the law enforcement authority. It also fueled the feeling of hatred and mistrust among ethnic
groups especially between the Bodos and the Adivasis and fueled the ethnic clashes between the Bodos and the other minority groups in later years.

**Women face the Challenges of Social Injustice and lengthy Legal Procedures.**

During the conflict time women’s legal and constitutional rights to security were violated by the state authorities. The interview findings reveal that often the victims of rape, sexual assault did not get the necessary medical care and the legal help from the concerned state authorities. In addition, the lengthy legal procedures make it difficult for the victims to seek justice. It creates psychological and financial pressure on such victims. This leads to withdrawal of cases by many victims. It becomes further challenging for such victims if the perpetrators are from law enforcement agencies or government security forces. It involves the safety and security of their near and dear ones. In several rape/sexual violence cases committed by the law enforcement and government security forces, the victims were either blackmailed not to report or withdraw their cases by simply detaining their husbands, brothers or other family members into police or army custody.

The prevailing gender insensitivity in the institutional practices such as police department or court- systems poses challenge for women of rape or sexual assault to approach such institutions for help. As pointed out by many interview participants, women victims find it difficult to report such incidents of assaults to police or government authorities and access legal aid and protection. The social stigmas associated with such acts prevent victims or their families from seeking justice. It has been pointed out by many interview participants that often women victims of rape or sexual assault maintain silence or bar themselves from seeking justice due to the social stigma attached
A large volume of conflict literature agree that in conflict ridden societies, the dominant power structures and age-old socio-cultural practices often undergo drastic changes - often adversely affecting the prevailing gender relations and women’s position in the socio-cultural hierarchy. The changing socio-political scenario of militarized societies affects the established power relations. It challenges the age-old practices and socially accepted norms. It also opens up opportunities for women in terms of access to jobs or educational opportunity or property ownerships in the absence of the men. However, the backlashes of the age old cultural practices can also negatively impact women’s security. Krishna Kumar’s (2005) study on the conflict regions has revealed that women’s security challenges also sprung up from the socio-cultural practices and gender norms imbedded in the social structure of the conflict society.

**Insecurity Embedded in the Socio-Cultural Practices**

A large volume of conflict literature agree that in conflict ridden societies, the dominant power structures and age-old socio-cultural practices often undergo drastic changes - often adversely affecting the prevailing gender relations and women’s position in the socio-cultural hierarchy. The changing socio-political scenario of militarized societies affects the established power relations. It challenges the age-old practices and socially accepted norms. It also opens up opportunities for women in terms of access to jobs or educational opportunity or property ownerships in the absence of the men. However, the backlashes of the age old cultural practices can also negatively impact women’s security. Krishna Kumar’s (2005) study on the conflict regions has revealed that women’s security challenges also sprung up from the socio-cultural practices and gender norms imbedded in the social structure of the conflict society.
In the conflict scenario in Assam, women’s security has been challenged by the changing gender relations and the gendered socio-cultural practices. The changing socio-political milieus have influenced the traditional power relations within the families resulting in domestic abuses, alcoholism, divorces, trafficking and drug abuses. It has also been observed that certain cultural practices such as dowry, witchcraft have been resurfaced with the backdrop of the conflict adversely affecting women’s safety and security. The interview findings also reveal a few aspects of women’s insecurities related to family life and social practices. There are discussed in the following sections.

Domestic Violence. The interview findings indicate that there is an increase in domestic violence cases in the state. As evidenced in many conflict societies (Krishna Kumar 2005), the increase in the domestic violence is directly linked to the prolonged conflict, as it generated a “subculture of violence- one that condoned violence and viewed violent behavior as normal”. The prolonged years of conflict have psychologically impacted both men and women and gender relations in society. It has directly and indirectly affected family relations, trust and co-operation between spouses and extended family members, disturbing relationships and power structures. In the dominant patriarchal power structure of the Assamese society, women are at the lower levels of the power hierarchy and hence, are being subjected of all kinds of abuses and violence – physical, psychological during domestic spats. According to the Assam Police (2015), Government of Assam, records, 5,745 cases of crimes against women were registered under the category of ‘cruelty by husband and relatives’ in 2011 along with 2,011 rape cases, 1,446 molestation cases, and 2,998 cases of kidnapping of women and girls.
Table 2


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crime against Women</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cruelty by Husband</td>
<td>3000</td>
<td>3410</td>
<td>4355</td>
<td>5189</td>
<td>5745</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dowry Death</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The prolonged years of conflict has also negatively influenced the level of tolerance and abilities for adjustment and agreement on everyday affairs, impacting individuals’ family and community relations. The interview findings reveal that women’s status within the family has declined and women are becoming more susceptible to maltreatment by male members. As pointed out by many interview participants, the average consumption of alcohol, tobacco and other intoxicating herbs have also been on the rise. The increasing number of liquor stores and the government license and permit holders for selling alcohol also indicate the increase and popularity of its consumption in the state. This, as pointed out by many interview participants is one of the plausible causes of increasing domestic violence and growing family tensions. This has directly or indirectly linked to the increasing rates of divorce cases among the younger generations. While the official data for such cases are unavailable, the increasing trend of alcoholism, domestic violence, and divorces signal the insecurities permeating within the family relations and a changing social order. According to an interview participant,

…Domestic violence cases among the low income families have gone very high… These (low income) families survive on daily earnings… those who work as a rickshaw puller or a street vendor gets nothing if there is a ‘bandh’ (shut-
down) or strike, the protesters or extremists’ can threaten them easily, beat them up for violation … These men vent their frustrations and loss of income by reverting to alcoholism or fighting with their wives, beating them or the children… they live on the brink of poverty…

During the prolonged years of conflict, a large number of men went missing or hiding away from their families. In their absence, their wives, sisters or daughters took responsibility of their families. This brought a feeling of confidence, self-assessment and independence to many women once subdued by the patriarchal hierarchy. However, when the men return to take charge, the newly earned independence and space come under scrutiny. Some returning men resented such independence enjoyed by their counterparts resulting in domestic violence and assertion of male authority over their female counterparts. The interview with one of the ex-women combatant revealed that the challenge of being married to her ex comrade and bringing up her children. Her husband respected her involvement with the militants and her passion during their time as rebels. However, after their official surrender to authorities and marriage and births of their kids, he has resorted to domestic violence and abuses. He now condemns her past involvement with the militant groups and demands a rehearsal of ‘stereotyped’ traditional women.

Dowry Deaths, Witch Hunting. Assam and the entire northeast region has previously been regarded as the region free from the cultural ill practices of dowry, and other mistreatments to women and girl child as practiced in other parts of Indian subcontinent. However, the prolonged years of conflict and disturbing socio-political scenario of the state have reversed any such claims. The research findings indicate that
the cases related to dowry have been in steady increase in past few years. The interview findings and the related research reveal that there are 100 cases of dowry deaths in 2007, 159 in 2009 and 162 in 2011 in Assam (Table1). As many interview participants have pointed out, dowry deaths have been in the rise as a corollary to the rising domestic violence and the crumbing social order – the lack of trust, mutual respect, and lust for money and power. The prevailing culture of violence has crippled the social values and lessened the faith on human relations which have exacerbated women’s insecurities.

During the past few decades of political unrest and insurgency, incidents of witch-hunting have also been on the rise in Assam. Witchcraft is a deep rooted social practice in many parts of the world including northeast India. It is often understood as result of superstitious beliefs and practices of black magic. The recent rise of witch hunting cases in Assam can be seen in the light of gender violence. A majority of the witch-hunting victims are women- most commonly single mothers or widows without any male relatives or heirs to provide for and to protect. In recent years in Assam, many women in rural areas have been publicly denounced as ‘witches’ and subjected to violent beating, burning, banishing and killing by the community members. According to the Office of Assam State Commission for Women at least 65 cases of witch-hunting were reported during 2007-2012. The interview findings reveal that most of the witch-hunting cases are mixed results of superstition and gender discrimination at societal level. Once a woman is charged with allegations of practicing witchcraft or black magic, the community punishes her either by social boycott, expulsion or beating or burning her to

---

13 These data are received as part of the interview with the Member Secretary, the Office of Assam State Commission for Women, Guawahati, in August 2012.
death. These kinds of communal murders against the weak and vulnerable member of the
society indicate the level of insecurity faced by women and the low social status of
women within the community. The interview findings reveal that economic distress,
social inequality and gender discriminations all entwined with superstitious beliefs in
such cases to fuel communal hatred and violence against the victims. As one of the
interview participants have pointed out,

Women who are denounced as witches or ‘daini’ are often single mothers or
widows without a male member as protector. The witch hunting cases are more
complicated than just the superstitious beliefs; these are composite results of
superstition, gender inequality, social and economic challenges, lack of
educational opportunity. Those women victims are just ‘scapegoat.’ Often
jealousy, family rivalry, land and property disputes, conspiracy play important
parts in these cases. Those women are weak to defend themselves and their plot of
land…once accused as witches, they are socially boycotted, alienated at first,
leading to communal beating, burning and death...

The rise of witch hunting cases with the backdrop of conflict in Assam hints at the hidden
economic, social and political insecurities of rural communities as well as the
susceptibility of women in such conditions. In most of the cases of witch-hunting, the
community commits the crime and therefore, police investigations also fail to bring
justice to the victim or her family. As one of the interview participants points out,

… The whole community is involved, sometimes even the village heads…Police
can’t arrest the whole village…We have to understand that these communities
have no or little access to modern healthcare and education, they believe in the
‘bez’ or soothsayers or the sorcerer… there is rivalry, jealousy and greed between families, rivalry between the ‘bez’ or traditional healers as they compete for resources within the same community…

The interview findings have brought into focus the culture of violence perpetuated in Assamese society as a part of the continuous political conflict and armed militancy. The culture of violence as pointed out by many interview participants needs special attention with respect to women’s security challenges. The social, cultural and political milieu of Assamese society with the backdrop of student’s movements, militancy and government control has been that of victimhood and suppression. Women being at the lower end of social hierarchy face violence, abuses in every walk of life. In the words of one of the interview participants,

… past thirty years of Assam’s political history is the history of women’s suffering and insecurity- this has become an era of molestation, rape and assault and all types of insecurities for women in Assam. (I) consider 1979, as the marker of change in the political, social landscape in the state as well as the women’s security scenario. Women were targeted, violated during the past 30 years in Assam… There were many incidents during the Assam Movement where women were publicly humiliated, targeted…. Also the cases of eve teasing in public places becomes commonplace since Assam Movement time… a lot of women were targeted, got beaten, or violated. Women were also used as protection shield during the time of agitations, picketing, and mass public protests, by the leaders and agitators...

Another interview participant laments,
…our society has become immune to violence, lawlessness. I personally may not commit the crime or violence, but, we are silently participating in the process… being present in the celebration of violence… We hear the news of death and killing in the news hour, read the stories of death, and violence everyday…the news of protests marches, agitations, shut downs…these are part of our daily lives, We hear the cases of domestic violence, rape cases, child molestations, divorce cases - all point towards the culture of negativity and violence … We are getting immune to such happenings in our surroundings…

The interview findings present a detailed discussion of women’s security challenges in Assam during the conflict period and its aftermath. These findings are further supplemented by the survey findings gathered from the members of the three women’s groups in Assam. In the following sections the survey findings on women and security are presented. These are divided into various sections which closely reflect the security challenges of women with the backdrop of conflict it Assam. As discussed earlier in chapter (III) the survey findings are limited in its scope. The survey findings, however, complement the interview findings discussed above.

Survey Findings on Women and Security Challenges

The decades of continuing conflicts and armed insurgencies in Assam have affected people’s personal as well as public safety. It has impacted the overall security scenario in the state. Prior to 1980s the nature of political turmoil in Assam was in the form of civil disobedience and nonviolent protests. It turned to be predominantly violent since 1980s. The Assam movement (1979-85) has set the stage for future student
movements, armed militancy, violence and violations of law and order in all aspects. Regular incidents of killing, kidnapping, extortion, bomb blasts, gun violence severely constrains the safety and the law and order situation in the state. As discussed in the interview findings, the unofficial calls for shut-ins, mass protests also disrupt the public services especially the markets, public transportations, educational and medical services, disturbing safety and security at both personal and public level. Women and children are often the indirect victims in such scenario. Their personal and social mobility becomes restricted, their safety and security remain at risk. Many women have also experienced the direct impact of conflict as their near and dear ones have faced extortions, or subjected to violence or murder or have injured during the events of conflicts. The survey findings presents a few aspects of women’s security challenges especially on areas of personal safety and security, direct impact of conflict, general safety and wellbeing during the conflict from women’s point of view. It also presents women’s perspective of victims and sufferers in a conflict, the impact of conflict on social values and the role of government and administrations.

*Personal Safety and Wellbeing*

In order to understand women’s perspective of personal safety and security in such scenario, this survey focused on two aspects- women’s safety and security within the community and safety after the dark. The findings reveal that on average 92 percent women find their neighborhoods to be safe. 91 percent MSS women, 88 percent TDMS women and 95 percent ABWWF women consider their local communities to be safe. However, on the aspect of safety at night, only 62 percent women consider their neighborhoods safe to walk after dark. One third of women participant i.e. 33 percent still
finds it unsafe to walk after dark (Table 3). It reveals that 17 percent of MSS members, 29 percent of TDMS members find it unsafe to walk in their neighborhoods after dark. In the case of the ABWWF, a strikingly higher number of women are not ready to walk within their neighborhoods after dark i.e. 52 percent of Bodo women against the 48 percent who consider it safe after dark. This is in striking contrast since 95 percent of ABWWF women said they feel their neighborhoods are safe (Table 3). An understanding of the conflict scenario based on the interview findings helps to analyze this contradiction. Although most of the survey respondents consider their communities to be safe on average, they still fear for safety and security at night. It signals a sense of imminent danger and fear still looming large in their minds. It indicates the overall sense of insecurity women face in the conflict societies.

Table 3

*Personal Safety and Security within community*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Safety and Security within community</th>
<th>MSS (%) N=23</th>
<th>TDMS (%) N=17</th>
<th>ABWWF (%) N=21</th>
<th>Total Response (%) N= 61</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you now feel safe within your community?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. No</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Yes</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel safe walking down your street or neighborhood after dark?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. No</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Yes</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ty and wellbeing is critical in any conflict scenario. The long years of political turmoil and armed insurgencies have critically impacted the civilian safety and wellbeing in Assam. The incidents of harassments, extortions, bomb blasts, killing and kidnapping of innocent men, women and children, military encounters and factional fights all indicate the lack of general safety. It also indicates the lack of government control over the situations. The regular occurrences of armed encounters, gun violence along with bomb blasts, shut-ins, and protests have disrupted the normality of civil society. It has also severely impacted the economic security of the people. According to the survey findings, 89 percent of the respondents have agreed that their everyday life has been regularly disrupted (once in 1-3 months period) by the activities such as protest calls, marches, shutdowns, road blockades etc. (Table 4). 11 percent, however, believe that their everyday life have rarely been affected by such events. A close look into the survey results will show that 96 percent of MSS women and 90 percent of ABWWF women agree that safety and wellbeing are affected due to the conflict. On the perception of safety and wellbeing during the conflict period, majority of the women responded that they view safety and wellbeing in terms of protection of life and property (95 percent) and food and shelter (82 percent). It was followed by health care (59 percent), job security or employment (56 percent) and public safety (54 percent). Only a handful of women (18 percent) view security in terms of national security (Table 4).
### Table 4

**General Safety and Wellbeing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Safety and Wellbeing during conflict</th>
<th>MSS (%) N=23</th>
<th>TDMS (%) N=17</th>
<th>ABWWF (%) N=21</th>
<th>Total Response (%) N=61</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do you see your everyday life affected by the activities such as bandhs, protest march, rallies, road blockade etc.?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Not at all</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Rarely (once in 1-2 yrs.)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Regularly (once in 1-3 Months)</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you describe safety and wellbeing for you and family at the time of conflict?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Food and shelter</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Health care</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Protection of life and property</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Job security/</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Direct Impact of Conflict

Throughout the decades of conflicts, the incidents of shut-ins, blasts, gun violence, killings, kidnappings and extortions have directly and indirectly impacted many families. The survey results point out that almost all women have sensed and felt the direct impact of conflict in their everyday life. When asked if the respondents or their near and dear ones were directly affected by any acts of violence during conflict, 43 percent of MSS women, 65 percent of TDMS women and 62 percent of ABWWF women responded positively (Table 5). Regarding the direct impact of conflict on education, employment and property, 83 percent of MSS women, 76 percent of TDMS and 81 percent of ABWWF women responded that they were not impacted severely. In other words, the women responded positively, to some extent on these areas. The incidents of armed confrontations between the government security forces and the extremists groups, the factional fights between armed groups, communal clashes and tribal rivalries along with blasts, kidnappings, extortions and protests – all have challenged citizens’ safety and wellbeing. The rise of territorial groups based on the tribal, communal identity with demand for political power sharing, have also politicized the civil society. The impact of conflict on education, employment and property, was extreme for 17 percent of MSS
women, 12 percent of TDMS women and 14 percent of ABWWF women respectively (Table 5).

Table 5

Direct Impact of Conflict

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direct Impact of Conflict</th>
<th>MSS (%)</th>
<th>TDMS (%)</th>
<th>ABWWF (%)</th>
<th>Total Response (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N=23</td>
<td>N=17</td>
<td>N=21</td>
<td>N=61</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Are you or your near and dear ones directly affected by any acts of violence at the time of conflict?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>a. No</th>
<th>b. Yes</th>
<th>c. Not Sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MSS (%)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TDMS (%)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABWWF (%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Response (%)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Has the conflict affected the education, employment, property, residence of you or members of your family?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>a. No, not at all</th>
<th>b. Yes, to some extent</th>
<th>c. Yes, to a great extent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MSS (%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TDMS (%)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABWWF (%)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Response (%)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Victims and Sufferers of Conflict

Literatures on women and conflict (Kumar 2001, Aolain, Haynes and Cahn 2012) indicate that women are the worst sufferers in any conflict situations. The years of political turmoil and conflict in Assam have affected men, women and children. However, women and children have been significantly affected during the years of
conflict and its aftermath. As discussed in the interview findings, women are being victimized by both the militancy and the government security forces. They are also subjected to violence by the gendered social practices and norms. They also face economic vulnerability. However, as the conflict literatures indicate, women’s suffering and victimhood often go unnoticed or overshadowed in complex web of events in the conflict state. On being asked who the women consider to be the worst victim or sufferer during the conflict in Assam, 39 percent of women consider women and children to be the worst victims during the years of conflict (Table 6). The majority of the women (41 percent) believed that everyone in the society was being affected by the conflict. However, 23 percent respondents also consider women as the worst victims during the years of conflict (Table 6). These results indicate that a good number of women respondents have an understanding of women’s position in society and women’s suffering and victimization in conflict situations.

Table 6

*Victims and Sufferers of the Conflict*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Real Victims and sufferers of the conflict</th>
<th>MSS (% N=23)</th>
<th>TDMS (% N=17)</th>
<th>ABWWF (% N=21)</th>
<th>Total Response (% N= 61)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In any conflict/violent outbreak, who do you think suffers most?</td>
<td>a. Nobody</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Men</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

160
Throughout the years of conflict, the Assamese society has undergone tremendous change. As discussed in the interview findings, the old value system has crumbled down and society has been undergoing a social change. The lack of trust, fear and uncertainty has grappled social behavior of people especially within community relations. The change in socio–cultural milieu has affected individuals as well as their socio behavior and value system. As the survey findings indicate, 41 percent women believed that the social values have worsened as a result of the conflict while 59 percent believed that it has become worse only to some extent (Table 7). Among the TDMS members, almost 65 percent participants strongly believed that the social values have completely worsened due to the conflicts. This is significant as nearly 65 percent of the TDMS members have also suffered some kind of direct impact of conflict in their lives or through their family members (Table 5). 35 percent of the MSS members and 29 percent of the ABWWF women are also under the impression that social value system have gotten worst.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact of conflict on society as a whole</th>
<th>MSS (%)</th>
<th>TDMS (%)</th>
<th>ABWWF (%)</th>
<th>Total Response (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>c. Women</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Women and children</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Everybody</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Impact of Conflict on Society
Do you think social values have changed for the worst as a result of the conflict?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. No, not at all</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Yes, to some</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Role of Government and Administration**

In the interview findings we have discussed how the government authorities have also failed to secure law and order situation in Assam during the conflict. Many government agencies especially the law enforcement and the judiciary have failed to provide security for civilians especially the women. The survey results indicate how women have assessed the role of government and administrative bodies during the time of conflict. A majority of women respondents do not consider the government and administrative bodies to effectively maintaining the law and order during the conflict period. A total number of 58 percent respondents harbor the view that the state government and administration have failed to provide a safe and secure environment for the civilians (Table 8). Another 43 percent women also believe that government and local administration has been able to provide security to some extent.
The interview findings and survey findings present a detailed discussion on women’s security challenges in Assam during the conflict period. While the political conflict and armed militancy have ceased in past few years, the security scenario has not been improved, social values have eroded, violence against women and other security challenges have been continuing. Cases of domestic violence and gender-based crimes such as dowry-deaths, trafficking, witch-hunting as well as rape and kidnapping have been on the rise. However, women have also stepped forward to address their security challenges – by reporting cases, and seeking official and legal steps and demanding justice against such crimes. Such measures open up the space for inquiry and public scrutiny. It brings into focus the challenges women face in the conflict state.
This chapter (IV) has presented women’s security challenges during the conflict and its aftermath in Assam. In the following chapter (V), we are presenting the research findings on women, social capital and peace building – how a few women’s groups in Assam have been actively engaged in bringing a change through group activism. These women’s groups have been actively involved in rebuilding their lives and communities and hence creating pathways for peace at the grassroots level.
CHAPTER V – RESEARCH FINDING AND ANALYSIS: WOMEN’S ACTIVISM, SOCIAL CAPITAL, AND PEACE BUILDING

In the previous Chapter (IV) the research findings on women and security have been discussed. It is evident from the findings that as the conflict continued in Assam, women’s experience of conflict deepened and also their perspectives of security. Although men and women both have suffered during the conflict, men’s experience of insecurity and women’s experience of insecurity have significantly differed in certain aspects. For women, the conflict scenario has brought innumerable security challenges. Women’s security challenges have come from the state sponsored parties, the rebel groups as well as from ‘within’- the private, domestic spheres of home and neighborhoods as well as the socio-cultural practices. Thus, women’s security challenges arise in both public as well as private spheres. Against the backdrop of such a scenario, a few women’s groups in Assam are actively organizing and mobilizing women. They have put efforts to bring women together through trust building, networking and communications and in the process they are addressing the insecurities and the challenges. Through their activism, these women’s groups are creating social capital and increasing social capital is crucial to peace and development. This chapter focuses on the research findings on women’s activism and social capital. It is based on the findings from three women’s groups in Assam. These groups have been actively engaged in increasing social capital at the local level and hence building peace at the grassroots.

This chapter presents the survey findings and the interview findings on women’s group activism, social capital and peace building in Assam, India with a detailed analysis. It is based on the research done on the three women’s groups- Mahila Shanti Sena (MSS),
Tezpur District Mahila Samiti (TDMS) and All Bodo Women’s Welfare Association (ABWWF) in Assam. As discussed earlier, these three women’s groups have been chosen to examine how women’s activism has contributed towards building social capital and peace in the conflict state of Assam. The survey instrument was designed to find out the information on several aspects of social capital, most importantly on i. groups and networks, ii. trust and solidarity, iii. collective action and cooperation, iv. Information and communication, v. social cohesion and inclusion, and vi. empowerment and political action. Although these groups have been actively engaged in activities related to social capital and peace building, there has been little effort to measure their stock of social capital and their contributions in building peace at grassroots level. The survey instrument was designed using the integrated questionnaire for the measurement of Social Capital (SC_IQ). It was further modified to fit the aims and objectives of this study. This is done especially with reference to the study region, the target groups keeping in mind the specificities associated with gender, social dynamics and power structure in the context of the conflict scenario in Assam. Also it is important to note that this study does not include all aspects of social capital available in the literature on groups. Rather, it is used in a restrictive manner; the aspects of social capital measured in this study are specific to the activities of these three target groups. As for example, empowerment as an indicator of social capital in the context of this research only means the decision making ability of the group members in their everyday life and activities. Also political actions, in this regards, includes the activities the group members take part in, such as marches, sit-ins, rallies, protest vigils as well as taking part in awareness camps, meetings. Individuals’ decision to participate in such activities can lead to political action and
empowerment. However, within the limited scope of the study, the major aspects of social capital such as group affiliation, trust, norms, networking, cooperation and connectedness have all been taken into consideration. These core features of social capital are important to measure women’s collective actions towards peace and community building. It has been argued earlier that the strong presence of social capital in groups in terms of trust, co-operation, bridging, bonding and networking leads group members to band together, defend their interests, take the initiative and share the resources to rebuild peaceful families, neighborhoods and communities. Hence the presence of social capital positively correlates to building peaceful communities at the grassroots level. The primary aim of this research is to find out whether increasing women’s activism has made any contribution to grassroots peace building in Assam. It has been hypothesized that increasing women’s activism increases social capital and increasing social capital positively correlates to peace building at the grassroots level.

The following sections present the survey findings on women’s group activism and social capital. It is followed by the interview findings. Both the survey findings and interview findings are further categorized and presented under different subsections for better understanding, presentation and explanation of the issues.

Survey Findings: Women’s Activism and Social Capital

The aim of this survey research is to understand the connection between women’s activism, social capital and peace building in Assam, India. The survey findings indicate how members use their group connection to create social capital. In the following sections we are presenting the findings from the survey research on women’s activism and social capital and peace building. These are presented under different subsections for
better analysis and understanding. The first section of the survey data presents the finding on groups and networks. Group membership is an important feature of social capital building which foster participation, togetherness, networking and collective action. The next section discusses the findings on ‘trust and solidarity’. Increasing levels of trust and togetherness create unity; it helps to dispel misunderstandings, revolve arguments, doubts and strengthen mutual bond among group members. These are critical assets in conflict/post conflict scenario especially with regards to building/rebuilding relationships and safe communities. It is followed by another thematic feature of social capital ‘collective action and cooperation’. It presents the findings on members’ involvement in group activities such group meetings, volunteerism and support among members and agreement and mediation. The next theme is ‘information and communication’ which presents the findings on the aspects of information sharing, participation in collective actions, group programs, and political actions. Under the theme of ‘social cohesion and inclusion,’ the values of close friends, group identity, belongingness and general happiness are being discussed. The last thematic category is ‘empowerment and political action’ among the group members. This section presents the findings on group members’ decision making capacity within the family and their participation in social/ political events such as marches, camps and rallies within the community and outside.

The following sections present the detailed discussion of the findings on these thematic categories:

*Groups and Networks*

Group membership is an important feature of social capital building. It fosters participation, brings members together and develops trust and feelings of homogeneity
among the members. It fosters connections among members, develops communications resulting in networks and sociability among members. For the purpose of this study, we have surveyed the members from three women’s groups in Assam - MSS, TDMS and ABWWF. Preliminary research indicates that these groups have already established certain group norms through their participatory programs and community involvement.

The survey results on group characteristics indicate that majority of the women from the MSS, TDMS and ABWWF accept their affiliation to their respective groups (Table 9). The majority of them are also closely associated with other community groups. These women regularly take part in group meetings, events and other formal/informal gatherings organized by their groups and peers. Nearly 70 percent of MSS members, 76 percent of TDMS, and 29 percent of ABWWF members have responded that they regularly attend group meetings and events organized by the group. On average, 57 percent women have responded that they regularly attend meetings and events organized by their groups while 43 percent attend only occasionally. Group identity is another important aspect in measuring social capital. On average, 80 percent women indicate that they strongly value their group identity. Nearly 83 percent of MSS women, 88 percent of TDMS members and 72 percent of ABWWF members highly value their membership identity (Table 9).

In terms of networking, the survey focuses on the members’ interaction with people outside the group and community, their participation in meetings and events outside their local community and groups. 52 percent of MSS women said they regularly interacted with people outside their community while 48 percent agreed that they interacted with outsiders only occasionally. 53 percent of TDMS and 67 percent of
ABWWF members also agreed on occasional interactions with people and members outside their groups and communities. On average a total of 56 percent women members agreed to have some levels of interaction with people outside their groups and communities, while 41 percent agreed on having regular interaction with people outside their community. This is a positive sign at the backdrop of the political turmoil and violence in Assam as more than 50 percent of women members have had some kind of interactions with people outside their groups and communities. More than 40 percent women members also have regular interaction with people outside their own community and group. This indicates sociability and connectedness and networking capacity of the group members. This is also important since it indicates members’ participation in meetings, gathering outside their locality. An aggregate of 49 percent women have agreed on attending meetings, events outside their own communities while 43 percent of women have attended those only occasionally. Among the groups, 70 percent of MSS members, 47 percent of TDMS members have agreed on taking part in meetings, gathering outside their locality while 62 percent ABBWF members agreed on occasionally attending meetings and gathering outside their group and community. Participation in groups, meetings outside as well as interaction with others outside the community indicates positive sign. It signals the future prospect for developing connections, sociability and networking. Sociability and networking leads to exposure, understanding and knowledge sharing and possibility for benefits.
Table 9

Social Capital - Groups and Network

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Capital - Groups and Networks</th>
<th>MSS (%)</th>
<th>TDMS (%)</th>
<th>ABWWF (%)</th>
<th>Total Response (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=23</td>
<td>N=17</td>
<td>N=21</td>
<td>N=61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Groups Affiliation

Are you a member of any women’s group?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a. No</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>14</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b. Yes</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participation in Group Meetings / Networking

How often do you take part in your group meetings, gatherings?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a. Not at all</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b. Occasionally</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Regularly</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Importance of Group Identity

How do you value your group identity?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a. Not so much</th>
<th>17</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>29</th>
<th>20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b. Yes, very much</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interactions with others, Networking outside groups and community

Do you interact with people outside your community?

| a. No, not at all           | 0 | 6 | 5 | 3 |

171
b. Yes, sometimes  
   48  53  67  56

c. Yes, regularly 
   52  41  28  41

Interactions with others, Networking outside groups and community

Do you take part in meeting, gatherings outside your locality?

a. No  4  12  10  8

b. Yes, occasionally  26  41  62  43

c. Yes, regularly  70  47  28  49

Group association, Linking Women and Family/Community Security

Do you think women members play a role in safe keeping of the family and community?

a. No, not at all  0  0  0  0

b. Yes, somewhat  26  24  38  29

c. Yes, significantly  74  76  62  71

Trust and Solidarity

Trust and solidarity is another important feature of social capital (Coleman 1988; Putnam 1993; Fukuyama 1995). It is of great importance especially in the context of conflict societies. Conflict societies often exhibit lack of trust and unity at the individual, social and structural levels resulting in broken social relations, low levels of economic performance as well as political effectiveness. Increasing trust at the social, inter-personal level can result in deeper and sustainable social bonding. It can foster greater social interaction, cooperation and develops reciprocity. It reduces doubts, unpredictability in social and economic behaviors and strengthens social ties and economic interactions.
Thus, it strengthens social norms and contributes to developing social capital within the group. In this research, trust and solidarity among the members of the three women’s groups have been measured in terms of close friends, trustworthiness of people outside their neighborhoods, trust level within the neighborhood in order to gain information on social capital.

As the level of trust increases at the individual level so does the level of trust at the social level—in terms of economic activities, legal procedures and local administration. The survey results indicate that the members share a high level of trust and closeness (Table 2) within the groups. 51 percent of women on average have responded to have three to five close friends within their respective groups while 36 percent women have reported having more than five friends. This is significant as the number of close friends indicate a high level of trust and confidence among members. Among the MSS members, 48 percent of women said that they have more than three close friends while 26 percent said they either have one to two close friends or more than five close friends. As compared to MSS, 57 percent of the ABWWF members also agree to have three or more close friends while 33 percent have five or more close friends’ within their group. In comparison, 53 percent of TDMS members have five or more close friends. Having five or more close friends indicate strong bonds of friendship, reliability, and faith on people outside the family. It involves reciprocity, connectedness and shared feelings which are keys to foster positive relationships and interactions. These are crucial assets in conflict ridden societies especially in terms of creating personal security and peace at the local level. It also increases a sense of togetherness and unity against the social negativity, despair and insecurity. Overall, the survey findings indicate
high levels of trust among the members. However, the findings indicate a mixed result on
general trustworthiness of the people outside the community. Nearly 61 percent members
maintained a careful approach on the trustworthiness of people outside their
communities. On the other hand, 13 percent women said that they do not trust people
from outside their community. The group findings show that 61 percent MSS members
believe that people from outside can be fully trusted while 88 percent TDMS and 81
percent ABWWF members maintained a careful approach on the trustworthiness of
people outside their groups or communities. Keeping in mind the conflict scenario in
Assam, this result can be well understood and explained. During the conflict period, the
level of trust has been low among different communities and neighborhoods. The various
security challenges women have faced during the conflict period also reflects the low
level of trust among communities and within neighborhoods. Therefore, it is
understandable why women still harbors a careful stance on trusting people from outside
their own community.

A majority of women responded that their neighborhoods feel like home. This
indicates the feeling of security and trust within the neighborhoods. Overall, 90 percent
of women responded that their communities feel like home. Almost all the members of
MSS feel the same way about the community while 88 percent of TDMS and 90 percent
of ABWWF women agree on that note. Most of the members also agree that their group
activities, participations in events have contributed to create unity and solidarity among
themselves as well as in their communities. 87 percent of MSS women, 82 percent of
TDMS women, 67 percent of ABWWF women agree on this note (Table 10). This is
significant since it indicates strong presence of social capital among the group members.

Unity and solidarity are important features of group norms and increasing social capital.

Table 10

**Social Capital—Trust and Solidarity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Capital, Trust and Solidarity</th>
<th>MSS (%)</th>
<th>TDMS (%)</th>
<th>ABWW F (%)</th>
<th>Total Response (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N=23</td>
<td></td>
<td>N=17</td>
<td>N=21</td>
<td>N=61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close Friends</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have close friends within the group?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. None</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. One or two</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Three to five</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Between 5 – 50</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Trust Outside the Community Boundary</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think that people outside your community can be trusted?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. No, not at all</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Yes but one needs to be careful</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Yes most people can be trusted</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Solidarity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Does your local community feel like home?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>19</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Not at all</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Yes, definitely</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you think taking part in group activities increases unity and solidarity in the community?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. No way</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Yes, very much</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Not sure</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_Collective Action and Cooperation_

Another important indicator of social capital in connection with civic groups is collective action and cooperation. Collective action with regards to civic groups is only visible if there is a 'significant amount of social capital already available' in the community or group (Grootaert et al. 2004). It is important to note that all the three groups in this study show strong reliance on group activities that demands collective action. Preliminary research indicates that these groups educate and train their members on various areas especially on micro saving and credit through self-help groups, income generation schemes, women’s rights and so on. They also encourage their members to participate in meetings and activities related to awareness building on health, political rights, protest rallies, peace march etc. They also promote volunteerism based on previously established mutual trust and understanding among members. Educating rural women on political rights, health and economic benefits, and also uniting them to participate in meetings, political demonstrations demanding rights, legal/administrative
support, and resolution indicates strong presence of cooperation and collective action harbored by these groups.

In this research, collective action and cooperation is measured in the following terms: participation in group activities, participation in the different types of group activities such as public meetings, political protest rallies, awareness building meetings, public demonstrations against social evils etc.; help and support, volunteering among members, and mediation in case of disagreement. The survey results on each of these aspects reveal the nature of participation and whether it displays levels of collective action and cooperation. As the survey results indicate 57 percent of women members have responded that they regularly participate in group activities while 43 percent have responded to occasional participation in such events and meetings (Table 3). The regular participation rate in group activities is very high among the MSS and TDMS members—70 percent of MSS and 76 percent of TDMS members regularly participate in such events. However, the rate of regular participation by ABWWF members seem to be low (only 29 percent) as compared to the MSS and TDMS members. Among the ABWWF members, 71 percent have responded positively to occasional participation in group activities. With regards to the types of activities, 89 percent of women have participated in public meetings; 72 percent have participated in group activities related to awareness building; 56 percent have participated in peace march, 49 percent have participated in protest meetings, rallies etc.; 54 percent have participated in campaigns, public demonstrations against social evils such as domestic abuse, alcoholism; 43 percent have participated in activities such as shut-ins or bandhs and 34 percent have taken part in health awareness camps. Within the MSS group, a majority of women responded
positively on their participation in public meetings (96 percent), peace marches (83 percent), awareness building (74 percent), and public demonstrations against social evils such as domestic violence, alcoholism (78 percent), and health awareness activities (65 percent). Within TDMS, members’ participation is high in areas of public meetings (94 percent); protest rallies (53 percent) and awareness building programs related to educational opportunity, economic and livelihood prospects (82 percent) and other (59 percent). Among the ABWWF members, a high percentage of women i.e. 76 percent have participated in public meetings; 62 percent regularly attend programs related to awareness building on education, economic prospects. 43 percent women also take part in peace marches and 48 percent take part in similar activities related to protest rallies, as well as shut ins or unofficial bandhs. This indicates the type of collective actions the group members regularly take part in. The results also indicate that the majority of members from MSS, TDMS and ABWWF take part in public meetings. Apart from public meetings, members’ participation levels in other categories differ. While the majority of MSS members participate in peace marches, public demonstrations against social evils such as domestic abuse, alcoholism, the majority of TDMS and ABWWF members take part in awareness building campaigns regarding education, economic and other livelihood prospects. This is significant as MSS is situated within a heterogeneous community where domestic abuse, alcoholism cases are high in numbers. Another important aspect is that TDMS has a long history of working on women’s economic empowerment through participation. Secondary data sources reveal that TDMS have been engaged in activities related to income generation such as handloom production and marketing, annual and periodic exhibitions of handloom products, and arts and craft
products at its office premises. It organizes events, campaigns on education and gender sensitization and domestic violence and similar awareness building programs. These findings, therefore, are positively correlated.

In terms of help and support among members, 69 percent of women agree that they frequently get help from other members. 31 percent women also agree on receiving occasional help and support from other members. Within the groups, 78 percent MSS members, 77 percent TDMS members and 52 percent ABWWF members responded positively on getting regular help and support at the time of need especially with regards to childcare, family support, illness and emotional crisis. A high level of help and support among group members positively correlates to strong social connections, trust and helpfulness. It indicates the presence of increasing social capital. The social ties, helpfulness, and trustworthiness are group characteristics which are severely impacted during conflict times. During the time of students’ movements and the armed conflicts, the social ties and bonds of trust between people and communities have been severely damaged. Communities were divided on the lines of political ideology, religious affiliation, ethnicity as well as linguistic variation. Therefore, the increasing levels of trust, helpfulness and support among group members are positive indicators. It suggests increasing social capital fostered by group affiliation and activism.

Another key feature of social capital is volunteering. In stable communities, community members offer to volunteer at community events or charities for the cause of the greater good. It essentially indicates the intention of greater good and mutual benefit. The survey results indicate that on average, 67 percent women members have volunteered to help neighbors or community events while 33 percent have volunteered
regularly in such events. Among the MSS members, a higher number of women i.e. 48 percent agree that they regularly volunteer in their respective groups and neighborhoods. Among the TDMS and ABWWF, 76 percent of women seem to volunteer once in a while. In terms of mediation and cooperation, 76 percent group members have agreed that they would seek mediation if there is any disagreement between them and other members of the group or their neighbors. However, 16 percent women have also admitted that they will not seek for any mediation. In contrast, 8 percent women have mentioned that they would definitely seek mediation in case of any disagreement within the group.

Among the groups, 74 percent of MSS members, 76 percent of TDMS members, and 76 percent of ABWWF members are willing to seek mediation in similar situation. This is a positive note as members feel free to voice their opinion and to express their disagreements with other members and also seek for mediation. Among TDMS members, 12 percent women indicate strongly in favor of while in the case of ABWWF, 19 percent members will never seek mediation. Overall, the results suggest a positive picture of group dynamics and openness since a majority of women are in favor of mediation or seeking mediation in the case of any disagreement and conflict of ideas. It means group members’ agree to disagree and value the difference of opinion and ideas.

Table 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collective Action and Cooperation</th>
<th>MSS (%)</th>
<th>TDMS (%)</th>
<th>ABWWF (%)</th>
<th>Total Response (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N=23</td>
<td>N=17</td>
<td>N=21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Social Capital _Collective Action and Cooperation_
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation in Group Activities</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>N=61</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How often do you take part in group meetings, community gatherings?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Not at all</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Occasionally</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Regularly</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular participation of Group Activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What type of activities do you mostly take part as a group member? (Please circle as many as applies)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Public meetings</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Peace march</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Protest rallies, blockades</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Awareness building (educational/financial/livelihood prospect.)</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Public demonstrations against social evils (e.g. domestic abuse, alcoholism, trafficking)</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Shut-ins or Bandhs</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. Health awareness</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h. Other</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Help and Support among Members

Do you get help from other members at times of need like child care, supporting family, illness, and emotional disturbances?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>a. No, not at all</th>
<th>b. Yes, occasionally</th>
<th>c. Yes, frequently</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Volunteering

Do you help out your neighbors and/or your community as volunteer?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>a. No, not at all</th>
<th>b. Yes, every now and then</th>
<th>c. Yes, almost regularly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mediation and Cooperation

If you have a disagreement with your neighbors (or group members) are you willing to seek mediation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>a. No, not at all</th>
<th>b. Yes, sometimes</th>
<th>c. Yes, most often</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Communication, Information/Knowledge Sharing

Another key feature of social capital within groups or communities is communications and information sharing. Among rural communities lack of access to information and knowledge sharing especially in matters related to public services, markets, and health care, medical facilities hinder economic progress as well as social
development process. Woolcock and Narayan (2000) have discussed the role of social capital in community development and income generation. In their view, strong social capital among the poor communities, especially in terms of information sharing and communication can provide lasting benefits. As group members share information on economic resources, income opportunities, health and other public services with other members, the community as a whole reaps the benefits. Such information sharing fosters community development and well-being. It opens up economic opportunities, strengthens the social ties. It fosters positive interactions and a sense of community wellbeing against competition, suspicion and distrust. It builds trust, reciprocity and cohesion among community members. In this study, communication and information sharing through group activism is measured among the members of the three women’s groups – MSS, TDMS and ABWWF in three areas: information sharing among group members; awareness or knowledge building through participation in group activities such as meetings, rallies, marches or other group activities and communication and space for agreement and disagreement among members. The survey findings from the group members reveal the following results (Table 12).

On the part of information sharing on income opportunities, education and health programs, 54 percent of women have positively responded to sharing information frequently. 46 percent women members have responded that they share information occasionally. Among the MSS members, 78 percent women have agreed that they regularly share information on income generation, educational and health awareness while 22 percent women have responded positively on sharing information occasionally. Among the TDMS members, 59 percent women have agreed on sharing information on
income opportunities or health programs frequently while 41 percent women have agreed on occasionally sharing information on the same. This indicates that a majority of women are sharing information regularly. It is a positive sign as communication and information sharing are important aspects of social capital building. On the contrary, only 23 percent of ABWWF members agreed on sharing information frequently on income opportunities, health and education programs. However, 76 percent of ABWWF members responded positively on sharing such information occasionally.

On the part of developing awareness and knowledge on areas of political, legal or civil rights through participation in group activities, 74 percent of women have positively responded on gaining information, knowledge and broadening their understanding on such issues. On the other hand, 21 percent women have been ‘unsure’ about developing awareness and understanding and 5 percent women responded negatively. A close look at the findings reveals that the highest number of MSS members (87 percent) have agreed that their participation in group activities have increased their awareness and understanding on issues related to political, civil or legal rights. Among the TDMS and ABWWF members, 71 percent of TDMS and 62 percent of ABWWF women have also responded positively to awareness building through participation in group activism. However, among the ABWWF members, 9 percent women have responded negatively while 29 percent women have maintained uncertainty on awareness building through group participation. This indicates that the social capital in terms of information sharing, awareness building works differently and at different levels among members of each groups.
On the part of communications among the group members, space for agreement and disagreement is seen as a marker of positive communication. It is also an indicator of trust among members. If members are not free to voice differences of opinion or viewpoints, it indicates hidden fear or doubt and a low level of trust among the group members. In other words, it signals declining social capital. Therefore, it is important to check if group members feel free to express their disagreement on issues. The survey findings show that 66 percent of the members have responded to ‘occasionally’ disagree and voice their opinion within the group. On the contrary, 21 percent women have responded saying that they would definitely voice their disagreement, if any and 13 percent responded negatively to voicing their disagreement. This shows that the groups do harbor the space for agreement/disagreement. However, the members are cautious on voicing their disagreement (if any) over group decision making. Among the MSS, TDMS, and ABWWF members, 69 percent, 59 percent, and 67 percent women, respectively responded that they are willing to voicing their disagreement/opinion occasionally. Among the ABWWF, the percentage of women not interested to voicing their disagreement on group decision making is higher (19 percent) than the percentage of women willing to voice any disagreement (14 percent). On the contrary, within the MSS and TDMS, 22 percent and 29 percent members respectively responded to definitely voicing their disagreement on group decision making. Although the group dynamics differ from group to group, MSS and TDMS seem to harbor slightly better spaces for communications in terms of agreement or disagreement than the other group. This however, needs further inquiry. Overall, the findings indicate that the three groups do harbor some space for positive communication among their members.
Table 12

**Social Capital – Communication and Information Sharing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information and Communication</th>
<th>MSS (%)</th>
<th>TDMS (%)</th>
<th>ABWWF (%)</th>
<th>Total Response (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N=23</td>
<td>N=17</td>
<td>N=21</td>
<td>N=61</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Information Sharing**

Do group members share information on income opportunity, education, health programs etc.?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MSS</th>
<th>TDMS</th>
<th>ABWWF</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. No, not at all</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Yes, occasionally</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Yes, frequently</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Awareness/Knowledge Building through group activism**

Do you think taking part in activities such as meetings, rallies; march etc. increases your understanding and awareness of political, civil and legal rights and aids?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MSS</th>
<th>TDMS</th>
<th>ABWWF</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Not much</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Yes, definitely</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Not sure</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Communication and Space for Agreement/ Disagreement**

If you disagree with what everyone else agreed on, would you feel free to speak out?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MSS</th>
<th>TDMS</th>
<th>ABWWF</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. No, not at all</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Social cohesion is an important aspect of a stable and peaceful society. It is distinguished by congenial social relations, a sense of belonging, inclusion, participation and recognition and legitimacy (Jenson, 1998, 15). A sense of belongingness and inclusion are key features of social cohesion. The presence of strong social capital within groups or networks promotes the feeling of belongingness and inclusivity among its members. High levels of social capital in the community often results in ‘everyday social interactions’ in the form of participation in community events, friends circles and interaction with people within and outside community (Grootaert et al. 2004). This results in everyday sociability, reciprocity, and inclusivity. However, in conflict scenarios, the element of fear, violence and insecurity affect peoples’ everyday life and their social interactions. The level of trust, cooperation and togetherness among community members are lost during the conflict/post conflict period. It also impairs the understanding of shared goals as a community and the unspoken bond of solidarity and hence damages the social cohesiveness of the society.

Building social capital in conflict torn societies is of utmost necessity. However, building social capital in such societies is challenging and requires a long time. Building social capital means building trust, connections and social networks which slowly lead to developing a sense of belongingness, homogeneity and inclusion among members. In this research, we have studied three women’s groups and their activism to see if their group
activism enhances social capital among members. It aims to assess if participation in these groups have developed a feeling of belongingness, and inclusion among its members. The survey questionnaire includes a few aspects such as everyday sociability through close connections, trust level, sense of belonging, shared group identity as well as general happiness among members in order to check for the feeling of inclusion and social cohesion. A sense of belonging and trust are keys towards inclusion and to social cohesion. Although inclusion and social cohesion encompass broader aspects and requires in depth research, it has been used in a limited sense in this research. In-depth research on social cohesion and inclusion are beyond the scope of this research. Survey findings indicate that the group members harbor a strong sense of group identity and belongingness; hence signaling positive prospect for inclusion and social cohesion in future.

The survey findings reveal that group members harbor strong bonds of close friendship within the groups. Overall, 51 percent of members have responded to having three to five close friends within their respective groups while 36 percent of women have responded to having more than five close friends (Table 5). This is significant since close friendships are associated with a high level of trust, confidence and bonding among members. Within MSS, 48 percent women have responded positively to having more than three close friends while 26 percent have responded to having more than five close friends. As compared to MSS, 57 percent of ABWWF members also agree to have three to five close friends while 33 percent members have five or more close friends’ within their group. As compared, 53 percent of TDMS members have five or more close friends. Having five or more close friends indicates strong bonds of friendship, reliability and
faith in people outside family. It involves reciprocity, connectedness and shared feelings which signal positive relationship and togetherness. However, the findings indicate a mixed result on the issue of general trustworthiness of people outside the community. Overall, 61 percent women have responded that they are ‘more careful’ on the trustworthiness of people outside their communities while 13 percent have no trust on people outside their communities. On the contrary, 61 percent MSS members believed that people from outside or other communities can be trusted while 88 percent TDMS and 81 percent ABWWF members maintained a careful approach on the trustworthiness of people outside their groups or communities. The mixed results on trust outside the community boundary are to be understood in the context of conflicts in Assam. The levels of trust among the communities especially among the Bodos and the non Bodos, the Karbi and Kuki, Assamese Hindu and Bengali Muslims have already been negative. This has already been manifested in the communal violence and clashes took place during 1990s and 2000s. Therefore, a mixed response on the issue of trust indicates a positive note especially when the majority of the group members have agreed to trust people outside their community yet with careful eye. This is also understandable from the perspective of women. As we have discussed in the previous chapter (IV), women in Assam have faced greater security challenges in the past few decades. This has led women to be watchful on trusting people outside their own groups or communities.

The survey findings also indicate a strong sense of shared identity and belongingness among group members (Table 13). Overall, 80 percent of the members responded that they highly value their group identity. Within the groups, 83 percent MSS women, 88 percent TDMS women and 71 percent ABWWF women mentioned that they
highly value their respective group identities. On the part of community living, a majority of the women responded that their neighborhoods feel like home. Overall, 90 percent of women responded that their communities feel like home. Almost all the members of MSS feel the same way about the community while 88 percent of TDMS and 90 percent of ABWWF women agree to that note. This strongly indicates the feeling of security and trust among neighbors and community members. Most of the members also agree that their group activities, participation in events have contributed to create unity and solidarity among themselves as well as in their communities. 87 percent of MSS women, 82 percent of TDMS women, 67 percent of ABWWF women also agree that group participation have contribute to their unity and solidarity (Table 12). This is significant since it indicates strong presence of social capital among the group members. Unity and solidarity are important features of group norms and increasing social capital.

Another aspect of community living is reflected in general happiness. The survey results indicate that a majority of the group members consider themselves to be moderately happy even with the backdrop of continuing violence and conflict in the state. 91 percent of MSS members, 65 percent of TDMS and 86 percent of ABWWF members responded that they consider themselves to be moderately happy. Overall 82 percent women consider themselves to be moderately happy. This is significant especially with the backdrop of continuing militancy and violence throughout the state. This signals the positivity, satisfaction and shared hope among the group members against social negativity, despair and insecurity. These are crucial assets in conflict ridden societies especially in terms of creating individual and community security and peace at the local level.
### Table 13

**Social Capital – Inclusion and Social Cohesion**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inclusion and Social Cohesion</th>
<th>MSS (%)</th>
<th>TDMS (%)</th>
<th>ABWWF (%)</th>
<th>Total Response (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=23</td>
<td>N=17</td>
<td>N=21</td>
<td>N=61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Closeness in Social relationship

Do you have close friends within the group?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MSS</th>
<th>TDMS</th>
<th>ABWWF</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. None</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. One or two</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Three to five</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Between 5 – 50</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Trust outside the community

Do you think that people outside your community can be trusted?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MSS</th>
<th>TDMS</th>
<th>ABWWF</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. No, not at all</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Yes, with carefulness</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Yes most people can be trusted</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Belongingness, Shared Identity

How do you value your group identity?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MSS</th>
<th>TDMS</th>
<th>ABWWF</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Not so much</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Yes, very much</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Does your local community feel like home?
Do you think taking part in group activities increases unity and solidarity in the community?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>19</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Not at all</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Yes, definitely</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

General Happiness

Do you consider yourself to be happy?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>19</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. No, not at all</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Yes, moderately</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Yes, very happy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Not sure</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Political Action and Empowerment

According to Grootaert et al. (2004), a strong presence of social capital paves the way for political action and empowerment among community members. It allows individuals “a measure of control over the institutions and processes that directly affect their well-being” (Grootaert et al. 2004; World Bank 2002). Putnam (1995, 2000) has discussed how social capital facilitates political engagement through networks and resources and strengthens democratic development. He has pointed out that women have played an important role “in creating and sustaining stocks of social capital” especially in the democratic development of the United States. Research on women, social capital and...
political engagement suggests that women’s stock of social capital is often visible in local politics, social change and civic movement at the grassroots level than in the traditional spaces of political engagement at the state or national level. Women’s involvement in issues of social reforms or community development such as childcare, education, healthcare, environment etc. are often considered apolitical and outside the formal political structure. However, women’s involvement in social issues and their collective actions for greater social goods exhibits their political behavior. Furthermore, participation in local social events and causes can also direct a course for future political actions and movements centered on larger social and political issues. Feminist research on gender and social capital has pointed out how the meaning of political participation by men at the state and national levels is gendered and it is narrowly defined as public. Although women’s participation in local, informal politics is often considered private and apolitical, it exhibits the political behavior of women. As feminist research suggests, women’s private spaces are also political and women’s civil engagement even at the local level can provide space for involvement in greater political causes. It contributes to women’s self-transformation as citizens. Participation in social events, campaigns, meetings on social, political issues develop understandings of self, citizens’ rights, political and legal procedure, governance. Such experiences and understanding generates self-confidence, self-esteem for individual woman which leads to empowerment. There are numerous examples how woman’s engagement in local, social issues have transcended the boundaries of local informal politics to create a transformative impact at the national level politics. Women’s networks and group activism allows space for members to learn their rights and to voice their common concerns and needs; they can
use their stock of social capital to pressure local authorities, governments to take action on matters important to them and the community. It can be used to politically empower the otherwise marginalized rural women.

In this study we focused on three women’s groups and their stock of social capital. We have examined if increasing group activism has led to political engagement, action and empowerment for the group members. In an attempt to measure the social capital among the members of the three women’s groups in Assam, we focused on their political engagement and empowerment. Political engagement is assessed in terms of different types of participation in group activities within and outside the community boundary. Such activities include attending meetings, peace marches or protest rallies, observing calls for shut ins, participating in public demonstrations against social evils such as domestic abuse, alcoholism, human trafficking, attending awareness camps on education, financial prospects, health and wellness and so on. Empowerment is assessed in terms of member’s decision making power within the household, awareness on civil, political and legal rights through participatory engagements as well assessment of self. While empowerment encompasses greater meaning and space, we are using it in a rather restrictive sense. Empowerment, here, is seen as an expansion of the decision making capacity within the household especially on matters of child’s education, income generation, and household spending and volunteering in social activities. These are strategic choices made by individuals in their day today lives. Ability to make such choices signal the process of empowerment as it potentially broadens the “boundary of freedom of choice and action to shape one’s life” (Narayan 2002).
The survey findings reveal that the participation rate is very high among the members of all the three groups. The members participate in various activities such as group meetings, peace marches, and awareness building meetings on health, education and income generation opportunities as well as participate in public demonstrations, protest rallies on social issues such as domestic abuse, alcoholism, and human trafficking etc. On average 89 percent women participate in public meetings, 58 percent participate in peace march, 49 percent in protest rallies and blockades centered around social or political issues, 72 percent participate in awareness building camps; 54 percent participate in public demonstrations on social issues, 43 percent have observed bandhs and shut-ins called by political parties and groups; 34 percent attend awareness camps on health while 38 percent participate in similar other activities. Among the MSS members, a higher rate of participation is seen in the areas of public meetings (96 percent), peace marches (83 percent), and awareness building camps (74 percent), public demonstration (78 percent) and health awareness (65 percent). Among the TDMS members, the higher participation rate is seen in areas of public meetings (94 percent), awareness building activities (82 percent) followed by protest rallies, blockades (53 percent) and other (59 percent). Among the ABWWF members the participation rate is higher in public meetings (89 percent), awareness building activities (72 percent) and peace march (58 percent) and public demonstration activities (54 percent) followed by participation in protest rallies (49 percent). The higher rate of participation in group meetings on awareness building activities (related to income generation, education etc.), peace marches as well as public demonstrations centered on social issues indicate that the members of the respective groups are developing their understanding and awareness of
economic and social issues related to personal and community development. It suggests that their knowledge on greater political issues such as civil rights, legal and governmental procedures, economic prospects etc. Have expanded. This can bring a potential shift in the self-development process especially towards the development of a political self among the members. The newly developed political understanding and behavior may also facilitate collective political actions and activism in future. It can also impact the future electoral politics at the local level. The responses on developing collective awareness and activism also points out in the similar direction.

On being inquired whether participation in activities such as meetings, peace rallies, protest marches or awareness campaigns increases awareness and understanding of issues as well as individuals’ political, civil and legal rights, most members responded positively (74 percent: Table 14). Among the groups, 87 percent MSS members, 70 percent of TDMS members, and 62 percent of ABWWF members have agreed that their participation in group activities have increased their level of understanding and awareness on political, economic issues and women’s rights. On the contrary, 13 percent of MSS members, 23 percent of TDMS members and 28 percent of ABWWF members disagree to any changes in their understanding. In terms of activism outside their communities, 49 percent women agreed that they take part in meetings and similar activities on a regular basis while 43 percent women mentioned taking part in such events only occasionally. Among the groups, 70 percent of MSS and 47 percent of TDMS members have responded positively to regularly taking part in such activities while 62 percent of ABWWF members responded to occasional participation in such events outside their community. These results indicate a positive direction towards future
political actions and engagements for the members of the group. As the literature indicates, participation in activities centered on social issues and community development also opens up avenues for transformation of the individuals’ political self. In the context of the conflict society in Assam, this hints at a positive change at the grassroots level. The more women become involved in public activities and stay organized against social evils, the stronger will be the bond of community and solidarity. It will create space for greater political involvement and have transformative impact on government as well as policy making and practices.

On the part of decision making capacity within the household on important matters, the majority of women responded that they moderately enjoy the decision making power (Table 14). On average 67 percent of women responded to have some decision making capacity within their households. This suggests that they share the decision making power with their spouses or other members of the family. A relatively small number of women i.e. 17 percent of MSS members, 35 percent TDMS, and 25 percent of ABWWF members, however, consider themselves as primary decision makers in their respective households. On the contrary, 4 percent MSS, 6 percent of TDMS and 14 percent ABWWF members indicate that they do not have any decision making authority within their respective households. On the part of economic independence and self–dependence, 51 percent women consider themselves to be independent only to some extent against the 38 percent women who consider themselves as to be fully independent. These mixed results indicate a transitional scenario of household economics. It also signals a shift at the societal level. It suggests that women are taking important part in managing the household economy. Women are taking either primary or secondary
responsibility of providing the household finances. The traditional concept of man as the sole provider within the household is changing. Moreover, women are learning about their rights and also developing an understanding and awareness of social, economic and political processes through participation and group activism. Their (limited) capacity for decision making within the household and a sense of self dependence can be transformative for future empowerment. These findings point out that there is a change in the nature of political engagement among the members of these groups. These changes are necessary precursors for future political actions and empowerment.

Table 14

*Social Capital – Political Action and Empowerment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Empowerment and Political Action</th>
<th>MSS (%), N=23</th>
<th>TDMS (%), N=17</th>
<th>ABWWF (%), N=21</th>
<th>Total Response (%), N=61</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation in Group activities, political actions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What type of activities do you mostly take part as a group member?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Public meetings</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Peace march</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Protest rallies, blockades</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Awareness building (educational/financial/livelihood prospect etc.)</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Public demonstration against</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social evils (e.g. domestic abuse, alcoholism, human trafficking etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Bandhs or Shut ins</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. Health awareness</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h. Other</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Collective awareness and activism

Do you think taking part in activities such as rallies, protest march, strikes increases your understanding and awareness of political, civil and legal rights and aids?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a. Not much</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b. Yes, definitely</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Not sure</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participation in Social Activism outside community

Do you take part in meeting, gatherings outside your locality?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a. No</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b. Yes, occasionally</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Yes, regularly</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Decision Making Capacity within household

Do you have the authority to make decisions or take part in the decision making in your household?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a. No, not at all</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b. Yes, to some extent</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Yes, primarily</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Assessment of economic independence/ self-reliance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you consider yourself independent/self-sufficient?</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. No, not at all</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Yes, to some extent</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Yes, definitely</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This part of chapter V has presented the survey findings on women’s group activism and social capital from the three study groups from Assam. The survey findings were presented in six categories: groups and networks, trust and solidarity, cooperation and collective action, communication and information sharing, inclusion and social cohesion and political action and empowerment. The findings in each category indicates that the members of groups have developed group norms, some forms of networking capacity, trust and solidarity among group members as well as outside the core group. The findings also show positive results in areas of participation, cooperation and collective actions. The group members have also indicated increasing communications and information sharing among members especially through group meetings, participation in events related to income opportunities, health awareness, and knowledge on political and social issues. They have also developed a shared sense of belongingness and inclusion among themselves and within community as well as their understanding and knowledge on political issues, rights and hence some signs of political action at the local levels. The members have also exhibited positive signs of decision making capacity in matters related to their everyday life and household affairs and hence, a way towards empowerment. Such increasing social capital through their group activism holds
prospect for social transformation, especially transforming their social behaviors in terms of political, economic and personal relations and towards a stable community.

Interview Findings: Women’s Activism and Social Capital

In the previous sections we have discussed the survey findings on women’s group activism and social capital. This section presents the interview findings on women’s groups and social capital and peace building. These findings are presented in four different thematic categories: i. bonding and building, ii. bridging and linking, iii. learning and empowering, iv. towards peace and progress. These themes emerged from the personal interviews with the group members, associates and concerned civilians who are either closely associated with the groups or monitor their activities at the community level. These findings indicate important aspects of social capital related to bonding, bridging, linking and empowerment.

_Bonding and Building_

The interview findings reveal that members of the women’s groups share a strong connection with their respective groups and peers. A majority of the interview participants have mentioned how strongly they feel about their group connection and how they value their association with their group members as well as members of similar groups. They have developed strong bonds of friendship and sisterhood among their peers as well as with members of other groups. At the organizational level, each group has different layers; the village level units are the primary units and they are also the lowest in the ladder. The unit members are often from the same village and/or neighborhood. The neighborhood connections, their familiarity with one another are useful in developing initial trust and connectivity among the members at the unit levels.
and higher up. Besides, family connection, marital relations are also at work in strengthening member’s bond with the group. Many of the interview participants especially from TDMS, mentioned strong family connections and long term involvements with the organization.

First time I visited the TDMS was right after my marriage. My mother in law was an active member and it was more like a social visit (although with a difference!). She introduced me to other members, her close friends within the group. Over the years, I have seen her dedication and close involvement with TDMS. As I learned the core values and activities of TDMS, I developed great respect for the organization and the women involved in it. I felt an urge to get involved; (I) began volunteering… now I am actively working with TDMS… It gives me a sense of fulfillment, a purpose in life…

Another interview participant recounted her family connection with the group activism. Her multigenerational connection with TDMS is a source of motivation and commitment to the family values she learnt from her mother and grand-mother. This kind of multigenerational relationship indicates the capacity and strength of the organization – how it has successfully passed along the values and meaningfulness from one generation to the other and is still upholding its commitment towards social development.

I was a child volunteer in the mahila samiti. My mom was supervising the works of TDMS from our home. They didn’t have the office building back then. Weaving was the backbone of TDMS and my mother used to distribute the weaving materials from our home, she used our home as her
office and naturally I got involved; I saw her motivation, her dedication; I got motivated … I was also greatly influenced by my maternal grandmother who was also actively involved in the Tezpur Nagar Mahila Samiti. …it’s been going on through generations …they passed on the values, their commitments to us. I think of TDMS and I feel connected to my mother, my grandmother…

Another interview participant also echoed similar sentiment. She has been working in the weaving center run by the TDMS for more than forty years. She has been proud of her affiliation with TDMS. She has described how it has transformed her understandings of life and the world and most importantly, to develop her inner strength after the death of her husband. She took up the primary responsibility of her family since his death. The moral and emotional support she got from TDMS has boost up her self-confidence, a positive step towards empowerment. It also indicates her feeling of belongingness.

I have been with TDMS since 1967; Here, I learnt knitting, weaving in handloom, cutting and design…I now supervise the weaving center. I never left TDMS; when my marriage was arranged, I made it clear to my husband that he should let me continue working here, (and he did). Then my husband died and I had to support my family – my son. I managed with the little income I had from TDMS. It was a little money. But members of the TDMS family have supported me with their love and care…It is now an extension of my family. I have friends, acquaintances and a community through TDMS...
The sense of belongingness and bonding expressed here indicates strong presence of social capital within the group. Unlike TDMS, MSS and ABWWF are fairly recent organizations. The interview findings also reveal the presence of bonding and bridging social capital among members of MSS and ABWWF. Many MSS interview participants mentioned that they share strong bond of trust and reciprocity among their unit members as well as with members of other units. At the ground level, MSS is divided into small work-units. A work unit consists of five or ten women from the same village. They help and support each other on a daily basis especially in childcare, sickness and financial distress. They also share responsibility and commitment towards neighbors and members of other units. It creates a sense of solidarity and belongingness. As pointed out by an interview participant,

In MSS, we have primary work unit of five or ten women. We live in the same neighborhood. Prior to joining MSS, we used to quarrel over trivial matters; now we do things together… We attend meetings, processions, camps…we have learnt to trust each other, help each other…It’s easier to have a friend. Now, we share our sorrows and smiles, look after the children in need…After all, we have to help ourselves…

Among the three groups, TDMS is a more organized and well-structured group both at the village level and the district level. It shares established links with other district level mahila samities and the state mahila samities. The MSS (Kumarikata) also shares a good connection with other MSS groups in Northeast India. They also work closely with the Tamulpur Anchalik Gramdan Sangha (TAGS) and other non-profit groups in the area.
ABWWF was formally established in 1986, during the peak of the Bodo movement. The interview participants from ABWWF pointed out how the members took great responsibility to visit conflict areas to meet with people and discussed the challenges and problems. They organized formal and informal meetings with community members, village heads, ordinary men and women to initiate communication and informal peace talks in order to dispel the anger and hatred between groups and avoid possible ethnic clashes. They, thus, tried to rebuild trust and establish communication among people from different villages and groups. As expressed by the interview participants:

Many of us (from ABWWF) took great responsibility especially during the peak of movement; we went to different villages, talked to people, both men and women; learned their issues; explained them about the dangers of ethnic tensions, requested them to stay calm. Any local incident can create an unpleasant situation leading to ethnic clashes; a village dispute between a Bodo and a non-Bodo can be politicized and can mislead people. So we worked hard to maintain the trust and respect at the ground level…

…when a woman talks, nobody listens; But, when a group of women talk, the men (the headmen) usually listen…

In an effort to rebuild community, ABWWF has established a non-profit organization known as Alayaran in 2003. Alayaran focuses on the rehabilitation of victims of conflict, especially women and children orphaned by the conflict. It offers boarding facilities for women and manages a shelter home and a formal school facility for the child victims. As
mentioned by many ABWWF members, it concentrated on rebuilding the community during and the aftermath of the Bodo movement. It focused on community healing by convening meetings and group discussions on diverse issues: ethnicity, community harmony, peace and development. It also regularly organizes awareness building programs on health care, literacy, income opportunity, rights and political participation.

As one of the ABWWF member recounted:

...we worked day and night, to build awareness among people, to develop trust and unity among ourselves...We acted more like ‘watchdog’...Under the initiative of ABWWF, Alayaran (shelter home) was formed for the homeless children; it offered food and shelter and also free formal education for the affected children...We also supported many women victims during the conflict. We took initiative to set up self-help groups for Bodo women...offer them skill development trainings, handloom trainings...Roze-isansali is successful SHG ...

Bridging and Linking

The interview findings reveal that all the three groups –MSS, TDMS, and ABWWF have been engaged in bridging the knowledge gaps through information sharing and communication building among its members at different organizational levels. The members of the groups regularly attend group meetings, awareness building programs organized by their groups and share valuable information with other members on areas of income generation, health and hygiene, reproductive health, child care and educational opportunities for children. The interview participants indicate strong affiliations with their core unit members as well as the group. Each group has also
developed strong networking connections at both horizontal and vertical levels. They organize meetings, workshops and awareness camps for group members to develop connections, communications and information sharing among them and thereby, to create a platform for future plan of action. They also discuss everyday issues and challenges women face and focus in problem solving. As one of the interview participants have mentioned, on one occasion, a member brought into notice how she was being cheated on her share of “fair priced goods” by the store owner. They discussed the issue with other members and formed a team to inquire with the local authority to find out the ‘ration card allowance’ for each family. With the information in hand, they alerted the members and other card holders regarding their share of ‘fair priced” goods. They also intervened with the shopkeepers and stopped the ill practice. This is an example how women’s activism is bridging the information gap and also making the fair practice of government subsidies work effectively among the rural poor.

As a government rule, we are allowed to get some of the essential supplies like cooking oil, rice, sugar etc. at a subsidize rate from the fair priced shops…. However, those shop owners often keep our share and sell it at a higher price later. They especially cheated the illiterate ones, those who didn’t know how much their ration cards allow them to buy at the fair price. We discussed this matter in our unit meeting. Then we cross checked with members from neighborhood villages…some of us also inquired through the local administrative office… The right to information act was helpful... We informed all the members, checked their “ration cards” while buying the groceries. We demanded their due share at a fair
price...We even intervened in the stores and made sure that they gave us our fair share...

The interview data indicate that group members gain insights and understanding on issues of social and political development by taking part in such meetings and group actions. Many interview participants have pointed out how their participation in meetings, workshops, rallies, protest marches against social evils has influenced them. Such activities have made them self-conscious of women’s rights, social injustices and in the process, have developed their self-esteem as women. Being self-conscious and develop civic awareness of one’s social, political and legal rights is a step towards empowerment. The literatures on social capital and development indicate that strong presence of social capital positively correlates to empowerment and political actions among group members. Here is an excerpt from an interview participant that indicate how her participation in group activities developed her awareness.

“...As MSS member, I took part in the rallies and protest marches against alcoholism, domestic violence... being part of the meetings, rallies, listening to those women whose families are torn apart by alcoholism, I realized the ill effects of alcoholism in our community...”

Another participant pointed out how learning about domestic abuses, domestic violence act, and women’s rights is self- liberating experience for her. It has motivated her to take part in collective actions against domestic violence.

.... We have seen the fights between husbands and wives. Earlier, I thought that it was (incidents of domestic abuse) so normal. Now I know it’s against the law ... we have right to security, to live...I have learnt a lot
from these meetings... It gives me courage to fight back… I have also joined the protest marches against domestic violence…

This kind of progression from awareness building to participation in collective action on part of members, signals a positive change. It brings a ray of hope to the scenario of increasing domestic violence in the state, especially with the backdrop of conflict. Through participation and collective actions, these groups have been mobilizing women to be self-conscious of their rights and hence, take a step towards empowerment.

Interview data from the TDMS also indicate that it has been upholding the goal of women’s collective development as the key to community development from its inception as a group. It has its roots in the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence and socio-economic and spiritual empowerment. It has more than 120 primary or village Mahila Samities with more than 10,000 women members. It has prioritized women’s self-employment by engaging women in handloom and weaving, sericulture activities, and vegetable gardening. At the backdrop of conflict in Assam, TDMS has become more committed to women’s rights and social development. In 1992, TDMS has established a ‘legal cell’ to create legal awareness among women against violence. It also offers legal counseling and support to its members. It was set up with the financial support from the Global Fund for Women (USA), to address women’s legal challenges especially in the cases of domestic abuses, dowry and divorce cases, property rights and political rights. This legal cell coordinates with district administration and legal apparatus to bring justice for women victims at the grassroots level. One of the interview participants mentioned how she and her spouse got married with assistance from the TDMS Legal cell when their respective families were against it,
… we are from different castes and our families did not agree to our decision… With the help from TDMS legal cell, we got married legally… I had no knowledge of court procedures… The sisters in TDMS did all the arrangement, the paperwork and the lawyer…

Understanding that economic independence is key to rural women’s empowerment, TDMS began its micro-credit programs in 1994 with collaboration from Sakshi, a New Delhi based NGO. As part of the program, it has developed women’s awareness on income generation, micro savings, credit and investment. It has set up training camps and programs, mobilized rural women to take part in micro financing through self-help group formation. In 1994 TDMS, established a cooperative banking facility known as Mahila Sanchay Bharal to offer banking facilities to its members at a lower interest rate. It’s been running successfully for 20 years offering financial services to women and families. Throughout the years, TDMS has successfully networked with other organizations and government agencies, local administrations as well as development agencies. They have also established strong links with other development agencies and collaborated on several social development programs on child literacy, reproductive health, and women’s rights. These links and connections are critical assets that contribute to their stock of social capital.

…We (TDMS) have a long history of working for women’s socio-economic development. It began with Gandhiji’s idea of self-reliance through handloom and weaving. In recent decades, TDMS have broadened its scope and taken up new ventures in the areas of adult education, health and women’s rights…. It has also received support from other
organization. In 1994, we collaborated with Sakshi and initiated the microcredit cooperatives for women. During 2003-05 with support from Ford Foundation, we conducted an awareness campaign against gender discrimination and women’s reproductive health at both the village level and district level. During 1999-2004, TDMS took part in literary campaigns alongside the district administration. It was a successful program...

TDMS has been networking with nonprofit groups and organizations such as Saskhi, Ford Foundation etc. in their effort towards women’s empowerment and community development. They have played exceptional roles in building communications among women members from the village level to the state level. Through their participation in national as well as international conventions such as the Beijing Conference (1995), TDMS have channeled the flow of information sharing and communications from top to bottom and vice versa. By taking part in national and international conventions such as Beijing Conference (1995), TDMS has paved way for information and knowledge sharing between women at the grassroots and the international platform. The positive impact of such networking and knowledge sharing has also reflected in their approach to social justice especially in fighting against the prevailing social stigma and gender prejudices which have impeded women’s rights and empowerment. The interview data indicates how TDMS has intervened in cases of exclusion and gender discriminatory practices in their effort to end gender discriminations in society. As expressed by an interview participant,
On many occasions TDMS team has intervened …especially in a case where a single woman was ostracized by the community. The community accused her as ‘cursed’ and banned her from taking part in any social activity… She was so sad and lonely, and then she was forced to marry the holy book … We inquired the case, met with the headman, the victim and the men and women in the village. We talked to them, discussed and convinced them that being single is a choice and not curse …

Learning and Living

Another theme that emerged from the interview findings on women’s activism and social capital is the process of learning. As members take part in group activism and learn about socio-political and economic issues, the act of learning transforms their understanding of the world around them and influences their beliefs and activities. Learning about women’s rights, legal and economic provisions increases self-confidence and shapes their perception of self and identity. The interview findings reveal that the process of learning through activism leads to progression and empowerment. It transforms women’s social and political understanding of their rights such as voting rights and encourages them to participate in process. The act of learning enhances their understanding of social issues such as alcoholism, domestic violence. Learning about modern medicine, health and hygiene, pregnancy, and childcare empowers rural women to seek medical treatment and assistance during sickness, pregnancy, and childbirth. It eliminates their fears and dependence on soothsayers, faith healers. As they learn about self-help groups (SHGs), manage finances, micro savings and credits they make financial decisions at home as well as within groups. It brings change in their personal and family
life. It also influences their beliefs, and everyday values motivating them to make good choices for themselves and the community. Many interview participants have pointed out how learning about micro credits and financial transactions have been a positive experience for them and their families. Here are some excerpts from the interviews:

Being part of the group, we have learned many things…to form SHGs, save money, take a loan and use it for something good…We have set up a ‘mutual fund’ - we contribute a small amount of money monthly and every year, one member gets to loan….we take turns with the loan, depending on who needs it most …Helping each other makes us stronger…

…When I first joined the self-help group, my husband didn’t like it;

…Then, he saw the changes. It all began with a loan from our group. I took the loan, bought the raw rice and (I) made Chira and Moori (beaten rice and puffed rice) to sell it in the weekly market. I made some profit. I repaid the loan. I used some of my profit money to buy raw rice for the next batch and use the rest to buy necessary things for my family. It’s a financial support for him too. We can also eat puffed rice … I have been doing it for a few years now…

The interview findings reveal how awareness building on health, pregnancy, childcare and modern medicine has helped rural women to get rid of superstitious beliefs, fears and reduces their reliance on traditional healers, soothsayers or bez during illnesses and pregnancy. Learning about modern medicine, healthcare facilities, and illnesses builds trust and confidence on modern medicine and practices among women and they are more willing to seek for medical help at the time of illness or pregnancy.
As members learn about women’s rights, legal and economic provisions they feel liberated. It creates a positive impetus for better life. The interview findings indicate how members of these groups have learned about gender equality and the laws that guards gender equality. Participation in gender sensitization programs, workshop on domestic violence allows members to understand and analyze their personal lives and domestic affairs in the light of new knowledge. As the process of learning continues, it also challenges them and their values and practices. They make conscious decisions to change things like established rituals and practices in their everyday lives. As one of the interview participants have described her transformation after taking part in a program:

… During the (gender sensitization) program, I began to think about my life, my marriage, the rituals we follow in our daily life…In most of these social practices, the woman is considered unequal to the man; she is seen as weak, she has to follow the restrictions, rituals...Following the training, I felt a need to change, I stopped following certain rituals in my home, ….rituals related to menstruation, birth…

The process of conscience building through learning is a progression towards empowerment. It is linked to the process of personal development. As the members learn, they begin to examine themselves, inquire within and challenge themselves to change things at the personal level. In the process, they also influence and encourage others around them towards positive change. Such is the impact of activism on individuals’ personal lives – as it changes one member, it prepares another for change. As pointed out by an interview participant,
…being part of the MSS have helped us in many ways. We have met women from other villages and places. We shared our stories, listened to their stories. We all feel the same way; …we have similar challenges…We need opportunity… food for our children; education for our children….It brings us hope…

Through group activism many women have also learnt about women’s political and legal rights, the importance of voting and the overall process of political participation. The interview findings reveal that although women’s involvement is accepted in the grassroots, they remain excluded and unrecognized in the decision making process of formal politics. Many interview participants pointed out how ABWWF members despite being a crucial role player during the Bodo movement period remained largely absent in the formal decision making process in the post Bodo accord period. Their role as a civil society organization was not recognized by the movement leaders. On being asked about their distance from participating in the political governance process, one of the ABWWF members described it as a “learning experience”.

…It was a learning lesson. We were not part of the political process, but we remained as the ‘watchdog’…

Another member explained how it shaped their focus and future course of action in post conflict period especially in awareness building on women’s political rights and gender justice. Understanding that participation of a handful will not change the scenario; the group now focuses more on awareness building on political rights, human rights and participation at the grassroots level.
Participation of a few members in the administration will not ensure equality and rights for all women; women at the grassroots have to be aware of their political rights…we decided to build awareness on women’s rights, democratic participation. As women become aware of their political, economic and legal rights, there will be a change in the participation process…

…We have joined hands with other human rights groups, NGOs to educate women on political participation process, their rights and equality. We encourage women to vote; to participate in village councils; seek legal help to defend their rights on property… in other words, we are also learning...

Towards Peace and Progress

The interview findings also indicate an emerging shift in members’ understanding of security, peace and progress. As the women continue their group activism, they develop an in depth understanding of their shared identity and their social reality. Their participation in group activities contributes to developing a shared understanding of peaceful community. They also share their commitment and motivation to continue working as a group for the betterment of self and the community.

Many of the interview participants have mentioned how their understandings of security and peace have broadened as a result of their group activism. The interview findings reveal that members of the group consider security in terms of availability of food, economic opportunity, and access to medical facility and educational opportunity. Poverty and lack of basic amenities such as medical facilities, drinking water etc. in the
rural villages have impacted women’s lives security. As many interview participants have pointed out, lack of access to food and medical facility during child birth as well as infant care increases vulnerability and insecurity for new mothers and their children in rural areas.

Our security depends on many things: if we have food, an income, medical facilities, if our children have access to education; if we have roads and transportation we feel secure...There are no health centers in rural villages, so many women seek help from either mid-wives or quacks...many of them cannot afford to buy modern medicine, so they depend on herbs and traditional healing means during illness.... It's difficult to get the sick children to the town hospitals, especially during the flood season. The road conditions and public bus services are poor.

Another participant has described her changed perspective of security:

…Earlier, my understanding of security was limited… My participation in the group meetings on ‘women and security’ has opened my eyes…the government has enacted laws, but laws alone cannot provide security; it has to begin with the family, the community… many women are insecure in their own homes…Our society has to be free from prejudices and biased practices against women…

The interview findings reveal that women’s security in Assam is crucially depends on the effective execution of law and elimination of gendered social practices and prejudices such as dowry, black magic, witch-hunting. The gendered notions of femininity and masculinity in the traditional practices of marriage, death and other
lifecycle rituals have put women in the bottom of the power hierarchy and hence, compromising their safety and security. The emerging cases of witch-hunting, domestic abuses and dowry deaths are results of such beliefs and practices. As the interview participants have pointed out, it is important to create social awareness against such practices and develop understanding of women’s rights and social justice in this regards.

The interview findings indicate members’ understanding of peace and peaceful community. A majority of the interview participants have envisioned peace with the overall socio-political development – development of self, the community as well as the society. They have pointed out how the different political accords and power sharing provisions in the state have failed to provide security for the common people. These accords and political provisions have failed to ensure peace and progress for different communities in the state. In addition, the findings indicate that the resolution of a violent conflict does not bring peace to the community in itself; rather, it brings political, social divide between groups and communities based on ethnic, religious and communal lines and breeds discontent. It further challenges the possibility of communal harmony and peace and progress. As expressed by an interview participant,

…If everybody is safe and secured in all ways, then we can say that the region is peaceful…Security should not be confined to one community. If security for one community brings insecurity for others, then it’s not peaceful society...

Many interview participants believe that the civil society and the political leadership need to work in partnership to alleviate poverty, develop infrastructure and to ensure the social and political rights of the citizens, including women and children. Many
interview participants have pointed out how the lack of access to basic amenities such as food, primary education, medical care, transportation has caused the rural and urban divide. It has also created frustrations, confusion and intolerance among the youths leading them to become hostile, take up arms and other means of aggression. The interview findings reveal the importance of developing understanding, communication and co-operation among different communities. The role of community leaders and members in creating communal harmony alongside the government is seen to be critical. Such progression of the members’ understanding of peace and communal harmony is a positive note for future. In the voice of a few interview participants:

    Money cannot buy peace… It has to be achieved and we have to work for it. We have to secure our family, our community and the greater society from violence, hatred. The government cannot ensure security and peace, unless we are ready to work for it …
    
    ..If there is social development in all spheres - education, employment, safe environment - then, it can be defined as a peaceful society...
    
    ...Peace means satisfaction and happiness. It meaning living in harmony with neighbors - neighboring villages, groups…

The interview findings indicate a positive outlook and approach in their attitude towards life, community and group activism. They have displayed great strength and resilience in maintaining their family responsibility, neighborhood connections as well as their commitment to group activism. They exhibit great hope and optimism for the future. The shift in their attitudes from despair to hope and optimism bears great significance, especially, with the backdrop of armed conflict and violence in the state in
past three decades. As the members develop trust and positivity, they share it with members of the family and community. In the words of a few participants:

...We, women, play vital roles to maintain a happy peaceful family.

Women also plays great role in maintaining community life…”

“We are the managers of the family and the community, the balance and harmony in the family depends on the efficiency of the women…. If women are efficient and well organized, they can build a peaceful family, a neighborhood...

…Woman has a great role to play in the family as well as society. It depends, on the attitude- our willingness to learn and to commit… It depends on the group members… if they are serious about the problem and can work without biasness towards others. Then we can bring a change, and create a peaceful environment…

Their collective efforts and actions especially against militarism, violence, alcoholism, and domestic abuses have earned them greater acceptance and respect from other civil society groups and concerned citizens. Their cooperation and collaboration with local administration, non-profit groups and humanitarian groups on issues of gender equality, human rights have also been a positive sign towards social development and peace at the local level. This marks the success of women’s group activism at the grassroots level. The following excerpts from the concerned civilians, aides confirm their role and success in bringing a positive change at the grassroots.

MSS women have played a strong role in keeping the community at peace.

They are successful in their campaign against alcoholism around this
area… they took out rallies, intervened the addicts; confronted the local suppliers and owners of liquor stores; they demanded strict regulations on buying and selling of liquors… many MSS members faced verbal abuses and vandalism because of their stand on anti-alcoholism; but they earned respect from the villagers and the victims’ family...

Another concerned citizen has recounted the contributions of MSS in the locality:

These women worked very hard, some of them took great risks to make things work; they played a good role in local disputes, cases of domestic abuse; They have also rendered their services in building the (village) roads …. 

In the voice of a researcher who has closely reviewed the works of TDMS:

TDMS has its roots in Gandhian philosophy of women’s empowerment through self-reliance and voluntary social work. … In recent decades, it has transformed itself as a development agency. It now focuses on the development needs have all marginalized people in the district …It’s an epitome of women’s dedication, integrity and leadership...

This chapter presents the survey findings and interview findings on women’s group activism, social capital and peace building. The literature on women and social capital indicate that nonprofit organizations and groups, particularly women’s agencies, use conflict in a constructive way to advance social networking, consensus building and collaboration especially around the common issues of concerns. When women work together on similar issues in a group or groups, they leave out their differences, create dialogue and consensus among themselves and extend the possibilities for collaboration.
It forms the building blocks for social movements challenging public policies, social practices for positive change -- with regards to gender justice, inequalities, income disparity, and education. The constructive use of conflict, thus, helps to facilitate trust, mutual understanding and respect that minimizes the gaps between people and communities, and hence, creating peace at the grassroots level. The survey findings discussed above indicate how women’s group activism in Assam have contributed to increasing social capital in terms of trust building, group norms, co-operation, information sharing and networking. The findings also indicate positive developments towards empowerment and collective action among group members. The interview findings also supplement the survey findings. It presents detailed discussion of how group activism has helped members to building relations, family, and community. It has created bonding social capital through friendship and trust building among members. The findings also indicate the presence of bridging and linking social capital among members. As the group members communicate, they are creating dialogue and develop consensus leaving out their differences and hence, creating a collective voice and identity. Sharing communications and information among members on rights, political participation, leads to consensus building on social and political issues. It has also inspired members to stand together for social or political causes and has enhanced their capacity for empowerment at the grassroots level. The findings also exhibit the commitment of the group members for community development, peace and security. The increasing social capital through women’s activism, hence, positively correlates to peace and security building at the grassroots level. This research is limited in its focus on the group activism among its
members and social capital in Assam. The following chapter will summarize the research with final observation and concluding remarks.
CHAPTER VI – DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research begins with the inquiry on women’s security challenges in Assam and their activism to build peace and security at the grassroots level. In the conflict regions, women face multiple security challenges. The common portrayal of women in conflict and war is that of ‘passive’ victims who lose their husbands, sons or fathers. Their security challenges involve loss of family members, economic challenges, and emotional suffering. However, the gendered nature of present conflicts and the underlying socio-cultural practices of the conflict societies further exacerbate women’s insecurity during conflict period. Literature on conflict, women and security indicate how women’s security in the conflict zones of Eastern Europe, Cambodia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Syria are threatened by acts of mass rape, sexual violence, slavery and gender based atrocities. The gendered nature of the warfare has exacerbated women’s insecurity and put them at a critical juncture of experiencing and understanding war and peace differently than men. Their experience of conflict shapes their perspectives of security. The literature on women, conflict and peace studies have argued that women’s experience of conflict and security can offer critical perspectives in analyzing conflict and developing strategies towards peace and security studies. This research has looked into women’s security challenges in the conflict state of Assam- how women have experienced the conflict especially their security challenges during the conflict. It has also focused on whether women’s experience has shaped their perspectives on security. Further, the research has focused on a few women’s groups and their activism towards grassroots peace and community building in Assam. It has been discussed earlier that women in many conflict regions have been actively engaged in peace and community
building at the grassroots level. They are repairing relations through trust building, creating communications and co-operation among community members and thus, creating solidarity and a sense of belongingness among themselves. The literature on women, conflict and peace building also indicates that women’s groups in many conflict regions have been engaged in awareness building on social, economic, or political issues. Many women’s groups have been successful in developing communication and information sharing and organizing members for collective action for social change. Through activism these groups develop trust, communication and cooperation among their members, paving way for economic independence and empowerment. Thus, these groups contribute to building peace and security at community level (Rehn and Sirleaf 2003, Anderlini 2007).

Research Questions and Expectations

This study began with an inquiry into women’s security challenges in the state of Assam, with the backdrop of the movements and armed conflicts since 1980s. It began with the research question:

RQ 1: How do women in Assam experience conflict?

A second research question for the study is also considered:

RQ 2: Does women’s experience of insecurity and conflict change or shape their perspectives on security? After the preliminary research, the following research expectations are developed for the study:

RE1: As women’s experience with conflict in Assam increases, women experience (in) security and conflict differently than men.
RE 2: *Increased experience with insecurity/conflict shapes women’s perspectives on security (and peace).*

An initial inquiry into women, security and conflict in Assam has also brought into notice the role and potentialities of women’s groups in addressing insecurity and creating pathways for peace and security building through various means. Assam has a long history of women’s activism since the time of India’s freedom movement. During the Assam movement and the armed conflict since 1979, the role of women’s activism has changed. In many conflict areas, women’s groups are actively engaged in creating awareness, sharing information, and developing trust and solidarity among members; they are also creating networks, linking members and communities and leading them towards social and political empowerment. Such activism increases social capital and increasing social capital creates prospect for security and peace at societal level. There has been little research done on the role of women’s group activism towards grassroots peace and security building in Assam. Hence, this study seeks to find whether women’s groups in Assam have contributed to social capital formation and peace building at the grassroots level. It aims to assess women’s group activism to peace and security building in Assam at the aftermath of various movements and armed insurgencies since 1980s. For this purpose, a third set of research question and hypothesis was formulated for this study:

**RQ 3:** *How does women’s activism contribute to peace and security building in Assam?*

**RE 3:** *Increasing women’s activism contributes to an increase in social capital and peace building in Assam.*
A Review of the Theoretical Perspectives

With the research questions and expectations in mind, this study focuses on two primary issues: women and the security challenges and women’s activism and peace building at the grassroots level. The theoretical basis for this study lies at the intersection of feminist notions of security, peace, women’s activism, peace and conflict studies and (feminist) social capital theory. As discussed in the previous chapters, feminist concept of security stems from feminist IR scholarship and feminist security studies. Feminist scholarship indicates that woman’s security challenges in conflicts zones come from multiple directions and in both direct and indirect ways. The most visible and direct security challenges are physical suffering and victimhood due to war time violence and killing. Women’s security challenges also stem from economic and psychological and social spheres. The gendered nature of conflict exacerbates women’s insecurities in conflict societies. It deepens the structural violence against women. Broadening the meaning of security from military security to personal security for individuals and communities, feminist scholars argue that the security studies should not limit security threats for women only to war and war time violence. Security threats for women come from domestic violence, economic, physical and psychological abuses including rape, and other forms of violence within the domestic and social spheres. In this study we are interested in women’s experiences of conflict and security challenges and their perspective on security. It has also focused on women’s activism and how it contributes to address those insecurities and promote peace amidst violence and social instability.
The literature on women, peace and conflict indicate that focusing on women as actors and role players in conflict zones opens up greater possibilities for building peace and security at the grassroots level. It opens up possibilities for peace through bottom–up approaches. It has been pointed out in many peace and conflict literatures that ending of a violent conflict, signing treaties and making peace agreements do not guaranty sustainable peace in conflict societies. According to Galtung (1964, 1976, 2004), peace as absence of war and violence only means negative peace. Positive peace is the “integration of human society” (1964, 2). Positive peace needs to be developed through transformation by eliminating of all forms of violence including structural violence and promoting gender equality, universal human rights and socio-economic security. Peace building is different from peacemaking. Sustainable peace needs to be built through bottom up approaches. Feminist scholars have also argued in favor of sustainable peace as opposed to ‘gendered peace’ which emerges through a peace resolution at the end of a violent conflict. Women are further victimized during the time of gendered peace as it suppresses women to adhere to the gendered norms of pre-conflict period (Punkhurst 2008). Peace according to the feminist understanding means not only the end of violence, but includes equality, freedom, political rights and justice. Feminist scholarship views peace as ‘the elimination of insecurity and danger’ and the ‘enjoyment of economic and social justice, equality, and the entire range of human rights and fundamental freedom’ or ‘relations between peoples based on trust, cooperation, and recognition of interdependence and importance of common good and mutual interests of all peoples’ (Jacoby as quoted in Kaufman and Williams 2013, 11). According to feminist research (Pankhurst 2008, Kaufman and Williams 2013), it is important to examine the process
and potentialities of women’s activism to understanding of peace process at the grassroots level. Women’s agency, as discussed by many feminists’ scholars holds greater significance in terms of “representation of self” and also as “agents of their own lives” in the transformative process “from mobilization, to participation and organization.” (Disney as quoted in Kaufman and Williams 2013, 13-14). While all women’s activism cannot be termed as ‘feminist’ agency, Disney (2008, 34) argues, “Women’s activism around class, gender, economics, sexuality, violence, culture, ideology, and materiality in the productive and reproductive spheres of life does involve the exercise of feminist agency”. Taking into consideration that women have agency (feminist or not) and it holds greater significance in understanding the grassroots peace building in many conflict regions, this study looked into ‘feminist’ social capital theory in order to understand women’s role in grassroots peace building. As discussed in the previous chapters, social capital theory is widely used to measure economic progress, democratic development, health and happiness among communities and states. An adequate stock of social capital among groups is crucial for the development and survival of democracy, economic growth, health and wellbeing and social coherence (Becker 1996, Coleman 1988, Putnam 1995, Fukuyama 2000). Social capital is manifested in group norms, trust, connections and reciprocity. Women are rich in these assets. Studies on women and social capital indicate that women’s activism is interlinked to social capital (Franklin 2005, Lister 2005, Lowndes 2006). Although women’s activism is largely non-institutional and centers round communities or neighborhood networks, feminist studies consider these spaces as ‘high grounds for civil and political engagement’ (Enloe 1989, Tickner 1992) and support their credentials for creating social
capital. In conflict societies, violence and insecurity reduces social capital, in terms of low level of trust and reciprocity among community members. It negatively impacts social networks, communications and the feeling of inclusion. This study argues that women’s grassroots activism against violence, insecurity can increase social capital and increasing social capital is critical for peace building. Women’s access to social capital indicates prospects for peace and security. The following section presents the summary of the research findings and a review of the research expectations based on the study findings.

Discussion

Research Expectations 1 and 2

This study began with the inquiry into women’s experience of conflict and their security challenges in Assam since 1980s. The research expectations stated at the onset of this study are:

RE 1: As women’s experience with conflict in Assam increases, women experience (in) security and conflict differently than men.

RE 2: Increased experience with insecurity/conflict shapes women’s perspectives on security (and peace).

The study findings presented in the chapter IV on women and the security challenges in Assam supports the above theses. As the findings indicate, women in Assam have faced multiple security challenges. These challenges are discussed under three broad themes- insecurity caused by the militancy, insecurity caused by the state authorities and insecurity imbedded in the socio-cultural practices. During the years of political instability and violent militancy, women in Assam were subjected to violence,
physical and psychological abuses. Findings reveal how women were subjected to bomb blasts, gun violence, and communal violence, threats of killing, kidnapping and extortion. Feminist understandings of security and conflict indicate how such happenings in the conflict areas exacerbate insecurity not only for the victims, but also for all those living in the margins. During the movements and armed insurgencies in Assam, many women were also targets of lesser known forms of abuses such ‘eve teasing’, verbal abuses, sexual slurs and humiliations in public. The interview findings present a detailed discussion of such occurrences. The survey findings supplement how women are unwilling to go outside their own neighborhoods in the evening. Women were also targets of other lesser known forms of abuses such as verbal abuses, lewd comments, humiliations in the form of ‘eve teasing’. The direct security challenges women faced during the years of militancy and afterwards include rape and sexual abuses, molestation and human trafficking. According to National Crimes Report Bureau (NCRB), in 2001 the registered number of rape cases in Assam was 817 (Table 1, Chapter IV). It has increased to 1937 in 2013\(^4\). Similarly, the number of registered cases for kidnapping and abduction has increased from 1070 in 2001 to 4222 in 2013\(^5\). The registered number of cases for molestation has also increased from 850 in 2001 to 1840 in 2012 (Table 1, Chapter IV). This indicates an increasing trend of crime against women and hence, the related security challenges for women. Interestingly, this increasing trend is visible at a time when the armed insurgency and counter insurgency operations have ceased. One reasonable explanation for this is that during the peak of insurgency and counter-

---


\(^5\) Ibid.
insurgency period, many of these incidents were not reported to the authorities due to victims’ fear for life or family honor. The lack of trust of law enforcement and legal procedures during the period of insurgency is also another reason why many victims did not report such incidents. The lack of trust of law enforcement and security forces strengthens due to the incidents of rape and violations committed by the Assam Police personnel and soldiers of the Indian security forces during the conflict period. The interview findings reveal how women were targeted by the Assam Police personnel and soldiers of the Indian security forces during the counter insurgency operations such as ‘Operations Rhino’ or ‘Operation Bajrang’. The survey findings also corroborate the view that the government agencies and authorities were not in full control of law and order situation during this period. However, as the insurgency and counter insurgency operations ceased in recent decade, more women are coming forward to seek justice and legal help. The increasing trend could also be the aftereffect caused by the long lasting militarism and instability in the state. As the militarization continues, the gendered nature of social and cultural traditions of the Assamese society has also resurfaced resulting in growing incidents of domestic abuses, dowry deaths and witch hunting cases. The findings have indicated how women in Assam are being victimized by the cultural practices of dowry and witch hunting. Women’s insecurities are, thus, exacerbated within the private spheres of home. The increasing number of domestic violence cases especially the number of cases registered under the category ‘cruelty by husbands and relatives’ and ‘dowry related death’ indicate the critical security scenario for women in Assam (Table 2, Chapter IV). This is a direct result of the prolonged violence and militarization in Assam. The literature on conflict societies suggests a direct link between the increase in domestic
violence and prolonged militarization. According to Krishna Kumar, the prolonged militarization and conflict generates a “subculture of violence – one that condon (ed) violence and view (ed) violent behavior as normal” (Kumar 2005). It is important to look into the ‘subculture of violence’ in Assamese society especially in terms of women’s insecurity. It has directly and indirectly impacted family relations, social interactions causing greater security challenges for women in Assam. Further, the subculture of violence has also manifested in the increasing cases of dowry deaths and witch hunting. Following Galtung’s concept of structural violence and feminists’ understanding of gendered nature of conflict and violence, these gendered social practices discriminate women and highlight the unequal status of women in Assam. These ‘gendered’ social practices and traditions have resurfaced at the aftermath of violence and militarism and challenges women’s security in Assam. They also serve as a backlash to women’s new found freedom especially in terms of women’s participation and social mobility during and after the Assam movement and Bodo movement. According to feminist scholar Catia Confortini (2006, 336), this type of violence “is deeply implicated in the construction and reproduction of gender relations and, in particular, in the construction of and reproduction of hegemonic masculinity”. These findings support the stated hypothesis of the study: “As women’s experience with conflict increases in Assam, women experience insecurity and conflict differently than men”.

The findings also indicate a pattern of women’s involvement and participation in the conflict. At the beginning of the Assam movement and the Bodo movement, women overwhelmingly participated in the protest marches, picketing, and sit-ins. However, as the political movements and insurgencies continued, women experienced insurmountable
security challenges. Their increased experience with movements and insurgency impacted their participation rates. Eventually, women’s support and involvement in the movement and armed insurgency declined. The study findings discussed in Chapter IV indicate how women were strategically placed at the frontlines of protest marches and picketing by the movement leaders. Many women became the targets of tear gas and batons. Many women were arrested and were physically and sexually abused by the police and security personnel. Women also faced the psychological trauma of rape, molestation, killing and kidnapping during the years of militancy. However, as the movements ended with formal agreements, women’s involvement in the process became minimal. They remained largely invisible in the decision making process especially in the subsequent government formation. According to a member of ABWWF, this was a learning experience for the group and it helped to shape their future course of activism focusing on women and community development (Chapter V). During the armed insurgency period, many women also joined the insurgent groups with revolutionary zeal and ideals of equality, freedom and justice. The interview findings reveal how women within the armed groups have faced the inherent gender bias and security challenges. Their experiences challenged their perception of freedom, equality and security for women.

As the armed insurgency continued, women and children became the soft targets for perpetrating violence and terror. Women were direct targets of violence and terror in many terror attacks such as the Dhemaji bomb blast by the ULFA, the communal violence in the Bodoland area by the alleged Bodo insurgents. The killing of Priya Basumatary by the Bodo militia is another horrific example. As incidents of blasts,
communal clashes continued, women in Assam developed an increasing sense of insecurity brought upon by the militancy and counter insurgency measures. The findings reveal how women’s understanding of security and conflict at the aftermath of these events has changed. At the aftermath of movements and armed militancy, women now consider security in terms of availability of foods and basic amenities such as access to healthcare, drinking water, economic, and educational opportunities. The interview findings discussed in Chapter IV and Chapter V indicate women’s perspective of security and peace in terms of safety and wellbeing within the spheres of family, neighborhoods, and communities. It exhibits a perception of security within the domestic spheres of life. Their perception of security involves an end to violence and discrimination at all levels. As the interview participants pointed out, the violence and discrimination rooted in the socio-cultural practices of the traditional societies such as dowry and witch-hunting highly impacts women’s security. These are aspects of personal security which often go unnoticed in the ‘the mainstream’ discussion of peace, security and conflict. Feminist security theory discusses the concept of security based on the personal experiences at the margins. The personal is also political. Feminist understanding of security includes personal security along with “economic development, social justice and emancipation” (Sa’ar et al. as quoted by Kaufman and Williams 2013, 9). The study findings also reveal that women’s understanding of security and peace, further, includes the economic prospects, justice and empowerment for all. As evident from the interview findings (Chapter V), many women are now committed to self-help groups for economic security, legal awareness and empowerment. These findings support the second hypothesis of the
study: “Increased experience with insecurity/conflict shapes women’s perspectives on security (and peace)”.

**Research Expectation 3**

The third research question set for this study focused on women’s group activism and its contribution to peace and security building: *How does women’s activism contribute to peace and security building in Assam?* Based on this research question, a third research hypothesis was set for this study:

**RE 3:** Increasing women’s activism contributes to an increase in social capital and peace building in Assam.

This is further narrowed down to the following:

**RE 3(a):** An increase in women’s group activism creates trust and solidarity.

**RE 3(b):** An increase in women’s group activism results in cooperation and collective action.

**RE 3(c):** An increase in women’s group activism creates communication and knowledge/information sharing.

**RE 3(d):** An increase in women’s group activism increases networking.

**RE 3(e):** An increase in women’s group activism increases a feeling of inclusion.

**RE 3(f):** An increase in women’s group activism increases empowerment and political action.

This section reviews each of these expectations based on the study findings presented in Chapter V. This study focused on the three women’s groups namely MSS, TDMS, ABWWF and measured their stock of social capital in terms of trust and solidarity, group norms and networking, cooperation and collective action,
communication and information sharing, inclusion and empowerment and political action. These are the core features of social capital. These features of social capital are important to assess women’s groups’ contribution to grassroots peace building in Assam. It has been argued that the strong presence of social capital in groups in terms of trust, cooperation, connectedness, and networking leads group members to band together, take the initiative and share resources to (re)build families, peaceful neighborhoods and communities. It manifests in collective action, political action and empowerment. The following sections review each of the hypotheses on women’s group activism and the aspects of social capital in the light of the study findings discussed in the Chapter V.

RE 3(a): *An increase in women’s group activism creates trust and solidarity.*

The findings emerged from the surveys and interviews suggest high level of trust and closeness among the members of groups. The survey findings indicate 51 percent women on average have close friends “between three and five” and 36 percent women have “more than five friends”. The interview findings also support the evidence how members share a strong bond of friendship and sisterhood among themselves. The members are also in close contact with other members and neighborhood units and often meet regularly. The interview findings also reveal the life-long or multi-generational connections shared by many TDMS members. This is significant as it indicates solidarity and commitment to activism across generations. The survey findings indicate that a mixed result on members’ opinion on the trustworthiness of people outside their respective groups or communities. This can be understood in the light of the interview findings discussed in Chapter IV. Due to the many security challenges women faced during the armed insurgencies in Assam, women are still ‘careful’ in terms of trusting
people from other communities or groups. The findings indicate that members feel strongly about safety and unity within their neighborhoods. The findings also suggest that women’s association with their respective groups and their participation in group activities creates sense of unity and pride among themselves leading to solidarity. These results support the research expectation (3a) that increasing women’s activism increases trust and solidarity.

RE 3(b): *An increase in women’s group activism results in cooperation and collective action.*

The findings from the surveys and interviews support a positive correlation between increasing group activism and increasing levels of cooperation and collective actions among group members. The survey findings indicate that nearly 60 percent of women regularly participate and co-operate in group activities. While the regular participation rates among members of different groups vary, a few areas of collective activism are clearly evident. There are: public meetings, awareness building on income opportunities and finances, peace marches and public demonstrations for social causes. Interview findings support these findings. The interview findings further reveal how group members have developed an understanding on social issues such as domestic abuses and alcoholism and have formed local groups to demonstrate against such evils. Group members have also demonstrated high levels of co-operation and collective efforts to forming self-help groups, manage micro credit and saving. Survey findings indicate strong presence of ‘help and support’ among members of the groups especially in terms of child care, illness and disasters, emotional disturbance. The survey results indicate that on average, 67 percent women members have volunteered at least once to help
neighbors or in the community events while 33 percent have volunteered regularly in such events. The interview findings also supplement such evidence. The interview findings further elaborated on how members rely on each other for support and co-operation especially at times of need during illnesses, disasters and other occurrences. They organized protest rallies, interventions in cases of domestic abuses and alcoholism in their communities. Women also joined hands to fight social malpractices related to ‘fair priced goods’ and other local issues. These findings support the research expectation that an increase in women’s activism increases co-operation and collective action.

RE 3(c): An increase in women’s group activism creates communication and knowledge/ information sharing.

The study findings indicate that group activism by MSS, TDMS and ABWWF has created commutations and knowledge/information sharing among its members. The survey findings on three areas such as information sharing, awareness and knowledge building through group activities and participation, communication and space for agreement and disagreement among members support this thesis. The findings indicate that more than 50 percent of women members on average share information regularly. Among the groups, 78 percent MSS women and 59 percent of TDMS women have agreed on sharing information on income opportunities, educational and health programs. Findings also indicate how women members have gained understanding and knowledge on political issues, legal rights and civil rights through participation in group activities and events. According to the survey findings, the highest percentage of women (MSS 87, TDMS 71 and ABWWF 62 percent) has positively responded to gaining awareness
building and knowledge sharing through group activism. The survey findings also show positive results in terms of communications and space for agreement and disagreement among group members. The interview findings further support these claims. Personal interviews with members indicated how information sharing and awareness building have generated self-confidence and economic opportunities for many women. Participation in group meetings, events have broadened members’ understanding of political and legal rights especially in terms of voting rights, women’s property rights, and domestic safety and so on. Interview findings also reveal how members’ gained knowledge and understanding of micro credit/savings and formed ‘self-help groups’ to bring positive change to their families and communities. Awareness building on health, hygiene and modern medicine has been beneficial to members especially during sickness, pregnancy and childbirth. It also eliminates superstitious beliefs and practices and reduces their dependence on soothsayers and faith healers.

RE 3(d): *An increase in women’s group activism increases networking.*

The findings emerged from the surveys and the interviews indicate strong group norms and increasing level of networking among members of the women’s groups. The members of each group value their group identity. Interaction among members of different units and groups is evident. The survey findings indicate that 57 percent women members regularly attend meetings, events organized by their groups. These meetings/events are primary space for networking and communications among members of different units as well as central working group. Members also interact with other groups and members outside their own communities. The survey findings indicate that more than 50 percent of women have some level of interaction with people outside their
own communities and 41 percent women have agreed to have regular interaction with members from other groups and communities. An aggregate of 49 percent women have also agreed on attending meetings and events outside their own communities. This signals positive prospects for developing connections, sociability and networking. The interview findings indicate strong group affiliation among members and also positive networking across the unit members and with members of other groups and organizations. Among the three groups, TDMS has a long and established network with other non-profit organizations and government agencies in their commitment towards women’s development. They have also received grants and other formal/informal support from agencies such as the Ford Foundation and Sakshi and have collaborated with government agencies on various projects. Such interactions and collaborations offered scope for developing further networks. MSS has also exhibited strong working relationship with TAGS and other women’s groups especially other MSS groups from the northeast India. These findings support the research expectation that increasing group activism increases networking.

**RE 3(e): An increase in women’s group activism increases a feeling of inclusion.**

The research findings emerged from the surveys and interviews support this expectation. The survey findings on close connection, trust level, sense of belongingness, group identity among group members indicate increasing social capital as a result of group activism. It indicates that more than 75 percent women have agreed to have ‘three or more friends’ in their groups and communities (Table 5, Chapter V). The interview findings reveal the strong bond of friendship, trust co-operation among group members especially in times of need such as financial distress, childbirth, marriage and sickness.
This suggests strong connections, everyday sociability and reciprocity which are keys to inclusivity and social cohesion. A feeling of inclusivity and social cohesion is critical for peace and security in the conflict torn societies. The findings also suggest that the members share a strong sense of identity and belongingness in each group. The interview findings have also revealed that many members have lifelong and multi-generational connections with their groups. This symbolizes the inherent sense of belongingness and commitment to activism among its members. It also signifies group strength and the meaning and the values it is passing on to each generation. These findings support the hypothesis that increasing activism increases the feeling of inclusion. The findings also reveal the moderately happy reflections by the group members on life, family and community. This indicates a positive prospect for future social cohesion.

RE 3(f): An increase in women’s group activism increases empowerment and political action.

The study findings confirm positive correlation between increasing group activism and empowerment and political actions among the members of MSS, TDMS and ABWWF. The survey findings show that on average 89 percent women regularly participate in public meetings related to political, legal and economic issues; 72 percent women participate in awareness building meetings or workshops; 58 percent women members take part in peace rallies and 49 percent members participate in protest marches against domestic abuses, trafficking, and social evils. Survey findings also reveal that participation in the meetings, rallies or similar activities increases members’ understanding and awareness of political, civil, and legal rights. 74 percent women agreed to that note. The interview findings also confirm these findings. Many interview
participants narrated their personal experiences on how involvement with their respective women’s groups and participation in meetings, workshops, rallies, protest marches have influenced them. They have become self-conscious of women’s rights, social injustices and have also developed their self-esteem as women. Being self-conscious and developing civic awareness of one’s social, political and legal rights is a step towards empowerment. The survey findings indicate that a majority of women (67 percent) enjoyed some levels of decision making capacity within their households and a small number of women i.e. 38 percent women on average consider themselves self-sufficient. The interview findings suggest further evident on how women members have formed self-help groups and maintained micro credit and savings. They have learnt how to handle financial transactions, investments and to take risks to improve their family earnings. The interviews also highlight how women members join hands and take actions especially against alcoholism, violence and domestic abuse at local levels. Thus, both survey findings and interview findings suggest a strong correlation between increasing group activism and women’s prospect for empowerment and political actions.

In the light of the above discussion, we can conclude that women’s increasing group activism increases positive social capital. This leads us to review the third and final research outcome of the study:

RE 3: Increasing women’s activism contributes to an increase in social capital and peace building in Assam.

The findings discussed above suggest positive correlation between increasing women’s activism and social capital. The literature on social capital and development supports strong correlations between increasing social capital and development. Feminist
understandings of social capital also support women’s activism and social capital as closely related. The literature on conflict and peace studies indicate that sustainable peace depends on trust and solidarity, community networking, feeling of inclusivity and elimination of all forms of insecurities including violence at societal level. The findings of the study suggest evidence in support of trust and solidarity, communications, networking, collective actions against insecurities, and positive prospects for empowerment among the members of the three women groups in Assam. Hence, we conclude that women’s group activism creates social capital and grassroots peace-building in Assam.

Limitations

Each study has its limits, and this study is no exception. One of the primary areas in which this study is limited is its scope. This study is focused on three women’s groups working at the grassroots level. However, there are numerous other groups working with the same goal and objectives in the state. Given the limited time and financial resources, this study has focused only on three groups. Within the target groups too, the number of persons available for interviewing and survey research were restricted due to various reasons. The five month long field trip was not adequate given the weather conditions, travelling challenges and conflicting schedules of the study participants. A longer period time in the field would have allowed further observation and in-depth inquiry. It would have also been helpful for the researcher to establish rapport among the study participants much prior to the field trips. The intertwined nature of women’s activism and their personal lives demands inquiries and observations into participants’ personal lives. It demands personal rapport establishment on the part of the researcher. A greater length of
time combined with greater financial resources during the field trip would have been helpful in this regard.

Secondly, the selection of three groups in three different areas of the state has also posed certain restrictions especially in terms of travelling, getting access to information as well as participants. The time constraint did not allow the researcher to be present in actual group activities organized by the groups. It would have gained further insights if the researcher could have been present in group events, meetings in particular. Thirdly, the research is limited in studying women’s activism and their social capital within their respective groups and not across different groups. The limited nature of the study also did not allow scope for further investigation into members’ networking capacity across groups. Finally, given the scope of this research certain aspects of social capital are measured in a restrictive sense. As for example, empowerment encompasses greater meanings and covers many aspects ranging from individual and collective decision making capacity, access to justice, equality and power sharing. However, within the limited scope of this study, empowerment has been measured only in terms of decision making capacity within the household.

Future Implications

One of the features of qualitative research is that it holds implications for future research. This study also holds future implications especially in the areas of women’s activism, peace and security building and hence, conflict prevention. Using social capital theory alongside the feminist concepts of security in this study allows scope for better understanding women’s security challenges in conflict situations and how women are addressing those challenges at the grassroots level. This allows scope for future research
in women and peace-building area in other parts of the world. It is especially important in terms of assessing women’s contributions to peace building. There has been a great deal of scholarly discussion and debates on how to measure women’s contribution to grassroots peace building. This study adds meaningful insights into the debates. The use of social capital theory in the disciplines of sociology, political development and economics has been increasing. However, the study of social capital with regards to women’s activism and peace building has been very limited. This study challenges such limitations and marks the way for future research in similar direction.

Moreover, this study is situated at the intersections of Feminist IR studies, Peace and Conflict studies. The interdisciplinary nature of this study is relevant for undertaking similar research. The study uses a mix methods approach using both surveys and interviews and incorporated it within the feminist methodology. The use of mix methods within the feminist framework to understand the concepts of security/insecurity and peace has been useful and it can be used in similar research endeavors. Finally, this research has revealed the meaning of security and peace for women and those positioned at the margins. Future research in this direction can bring to light further aspects of women’s safety and security in the world and, most importantly, how to empower women to build peaceful communities and hence, to prevent conflict.
APPENDIX A– Interview Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed to gain information on women’s security/insecurity during and after conflict in Assam and how women’s activism has contributed towards social capital formations at grassroots level. This is intended to be used with interview participants of study “Women, Security and Peace Building in Northeast India.” The interview participants include independent researcher, women activists, academic researchers from various universities and organizations in the area, social scientists, concerned citizens and persons affiliated with NGOs and other local level organizations. It also includes govt. officials from State Women’s Commission, law enforcement personnel and so on.

**Socio-Demographic Profile**

In the following questions please tick the most appropriate response (or write the correct answer in the questions with dots …………).

Name:

Gender: Male Female

Age: Below 25 25-35 35-45 45-55 55 and above

Marital Status: Married Unmarried Divorced Widow

Educational Status: Less than HSC HSC or Equivalent Degree/Graduate Post Graduate Any Other (Please Specify) ………………

Employment Status: Govt. Service Private Other (Please specify) …………………
Current Position: ……………………

Institutional Affiliation: …………………..

Religion:
- Indigenous Faith
- Hindu
- Muslim
- Christian
- Other ………..

Community:
- SC
- ST
- OBC
- General

Questions:

1. What do you think about the conflicts (e.g. the Bodo, the ULFA and the Karbi-Kuki conflict) in the state and how it has impacted women in particular?

2. How does the conflict (during and after) affected women’s safety and wellbeing?

3. What is the biggest factor with regards to women’s security (security in terms of physical, economic, educational, emotional, physical mobility)?

4. Please share your views on how women’s security has been challenged particularly in the following areas
   a. Daily life and activities
   b. Family life and wellbeing
   c. Health
   d. Education
   e. Employment/ career opportunity/incomes
   f. Economy
   g. Social development

5. Are their special provisions / policies/ laws for women in the state (respective departments)? How effective and user friendly are these laws to address women’s security needs. Please elaborate.

6. Do you think women are aware of the existence of such provisions?

7. What do you think are the biggest challenges in terms of implementation such laws and how to overcome such challenges?
8. What role do the women’s groups (e.g. Assam Mahila Samittee, All Bodo Women’s Welfare Federation, Mahila Santi Sena, Naga Mothers, Meira Paibi) play in addressing women’s issues and challenges?

9. How do you define peace and peace building process with regards to community and the state?

10. How do you assess women’s contribution towards peace building? Do you think women in Assam/North East India are playing a role in grassroots peace building and community development?

11. Please share your views on women’s groups (e.g. Mahila Santi Sena, Assam Mahila Samiti, All Bodo Women’s Welfare Federation etc.) activism with regards to the following:
   a. Rights (human rights, voting rights, political participation,)
   b. Awareness building (educational, livelihood prospects, health care services, legal assistance)
   c. Fighting social evils (e.g. domestic abuse, drug abuse, alcoholism, sex trafficking, HIV/Aids)
   d. Intermediation and/or consensus building
   e. Community development (trust building, promoting/ preserving social values)
   f. Networking (e.g. Among members/non-members, govt. bodies, others institutions at local, state, national and international groups)
   g. Information sharing
   h. Social and economic development

12. Do you think women’s group activism can offer alternative pathways towards conflict resolution/transformation and grassroots peace building in North East India?
APPENDIX B – Survey Questionnaire

Survey Questionnaire for Activists/Group Members - Women’s Activism, Security, and Social Capital

The intended use of this questionnaire is to illicit information from activists, members of the targeted women’s groups. The primary objective is to gather information on how women’s activism has created social capital at the grassroots level. This questionnaire is based on issues of women’s security/insecurity, group activities, trust building, networking, information sharing, collective actions and empowerment. The information will be used for academic research purpose only.

In the following questions please tick the most appropriate response (or write in the correct answer in the space with dots ............).

Section I: Security/Insecurity

Q1. Do you now feel safe within your community?
   a. No
   b. Yes

Q2. Do you feel safe walking down your street or neighborhood after dark?
   a. No
   b. Yes

Q3. Are you or your near and dear ones directly affected by any acts of violence at the time of conflict?
   a. No
   b. Yes
   c. Not Sure

Q4. Has the conflict affected the education, employment, property, residence of you or members of your family?
   a. No, not at all
   b. Yes, to some extent
   c. Yes, to a great extent
Q5. How do you see your everyday life affected by the activities such as bandhs, protest march, rallies, road blockade etc.?
   
   a. Not at all
   b. Rarely (once in 1-2 yrs.)
   c. Regularly (once in 1-3 Months)

Q6. How do you describe safety and wellbeing for you and family at the time of conflict (Circle as many answers as you think applicable)?
   
   a. Food and shelter
   b. Health care
   c. Protection of life and property
   d. Job security/ Employment
   e. Public safety
   f. National security
   g. None of the above

Q7. In any conflict/violent outbreak, who do you think suffers most?
   
   a. Nobody
   b. Men
   c. Women
   d. Women and children
   e. Everybody

Q8. Do you think social values have changed for the worse as a result of the conflict?
   
   a. No, not at all
   b. Yes, to some extent
   c. Yes, completely

Q9. Do you think state government or local administration has been able to provide a secure environment?
   
   a. No, not at all
   b. Yes, to some extent
   c. Yes completely

**Section II: Women’s Activism and Social Capital**

Q10. Are you a member of any Women’s group (Groups such as Women’s self-help group, local or regional Mahila Samiti, Mahila Santi Sena, Religious group, Mothers Association etc.)?
   
   a. No
   b. Yes (Please specify ..........................................................)

Q11. How often do you take part in group meetings, community gatherings?
   
   a. Not at all
   b. Occasionally
c. Regularly (Please Specify … ………..Weekly/Monthly/ Every 3 months/Yearly)

Q12. What type of activities do you mostly take part as a group member? (Please circle as many as applies)
   a. Public meetings
   b. Peace march
   c. Protest rallies, blockades
   d. Awareness building (educational/financial/livelihood prospect etc.)
   e. Public demonstration against social evils (e.g. domestic abuse, alcoholism, human trafficking)
   f. Bandhs (called for by various groups)
   g. Health awareness
   h. Other

Q13. Do you have close friends within the group?
   a. None
   b. One or two
   c. Three to five
   d. Between 5 – 50

Q14. Do you get help from other members at times of need like child care, supporting family, illness, and emotional disturbances?
   d. No, not at all
   e. Yes, occasionally
   f. Yes, frequently

Q15. Do you think that people outside your community can be trusted?
   a. No, not at all
   b. Yes but one need to be careful
   c. Yes most people can be trusted

Q16. How do you value your group identity?
   a. Not so much
   b. Yes, very much

Q17. Does your local community feel like home?
   a. Not at all
   b. Yes, definitely

Q18. Do you think taking part in group activities increases unity and solidarity in the community?
   a. No way
   b. Yes, very much
   c. No sure

Q19. Do you help out your neighbors and/or your community as volunteer?
a. No, not at all
b. Yes, every now and then
c. Yes, almost regularly

Q20. Do group members share information on income opportunity, education, health programs etc.?
   a. No, not at all
   b. Yes, occasionally
   c. Yes, frequently

Q21. Do you think taking part in activities such as rallies, protest march, strikes increases your understanding and awareness of political, civil and legal rights and aids?
   a. Not much
   b. Yes, definitely
   c. Not sure

Q22. Do you interact with people outside your community?
   a. No, not at all
   b. Yes, sometimes
   c. Yes, regularly

Q23. Do you take part in meeting, gatherings outside your locality?
   a. No
   b. Yes, occasionally
   c. Yes, regularly

Q24. Do you think women play a role in safe keeping of the family and community?
   a. No, not at all
   b. Yes, somewhat
   c. Yes, significantly

Q25. If you have a disagreement with your neighbors are you willing to seek mediation?
   a. No, not at all
   b. Yes, sometimes
   c. Yes, most often

Q26. Do you have the authority to make decisions or take part in the decision making in your household?
   a. No, not at all
   b. Yes, to some extent
   c. Yes primarily

Q27. If you disagree with what everyone else agreed on, would you feel free to speak out?
Q28. Do you consider yourself independent/self-sufficient?
   a. No, not at all
   b. Yes, on occasions
   c. Yes, definitely

Q29. Do you consider yourself to be happy?
   a. No, not at all
   b. Yes to some extent
   c. Yes, very happy
   d. Not sure

Q30. Do your religion/religious affiliation play a role in your daily life and activities?
   a. No, not at all
   b. Yes, somewhat
   c. Yes, significantly
   d. Not sure

Q31. How do you define peace for you and your community?

Q32. As women how did/do you view your role/contribution in family/community? How do you feel about women’s role in community building? Do you think women’s activism can bring a change against ongoing violence, ethnic tension and insurgency at local level?
Section III: Socio-Demographic Profile

Name:

Place of Residence:

Village: Block:
District: Postal Code:

Sex: Male Female

Age: Below 25 25-35 35-45 45-55 55 and above

Marital Status: Married Unmarried Divorced Widow

Community: SC ST OBC General
(If SC or ST, Please Specify …………………………………)

Religion: Indigenous Faith Hindu Muslim Christian Other

Educational Status: Less than HSC HSC or Equivalent Degree/Graduate Post Graduate

Means of Livelihood: Agriculture Private Govt. Service Other

Annual Income: BPL Rs 20000-50,000 Above Rs. 50,000

Residence: Own House Rented In-Laws Ancestral Other

Family: Nuclear Joint
APPENDIX C – IRB Approval Letter

NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 48), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the “Adverse Effect Report Form”.
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months. Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 12020804
PROJECT TITLE: Women, Security and Peace-Building in North East India
PROJECT TYPE: Dissertation
RESEARCHER/S: Rubi Devi
COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Arts & Letters
DEPARTMENT: Political Science, International Development & Affairs
FUNDING AGENCY: N/A
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval
PERIOD OF PROJECT APPROVAL: 06/13/2012 to 06/12/2013

Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chair
REFERENCES


Alfred, Mary V. 2009. “Social Capital Theory: Implications for Women’s Networking and Learning.” New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education 122 (Summer).


www.transcend.org/t_database/.


2013. [www.assampolice.gov.in/crimes_women](http://www.assampolice.gov.in/crimes_women) [assessed July 2, 2013].


