

FOCUS

What More can the NGOs Achieve at the Beijing Forum '95?

by Farida Akhter

THE UN Conference on Environmental and Development (UNCED) was perhaps the first UN world summit which has given chance to the NGOs to participate in parallel meetings called Global forum. Since then, these parallel NGO meetings are planned for every World Summit. The UN seems to have become addicted to organising such conferences holding every year a world summit. In each of these world conferences, no less than 20,000 participants come, and thereby become a special event for the host countries. However, in the host countries such as Rio, Cairo and China, new hotels were built and the travel agents and tourist organisations made a fortune.

NGO is the English abbreviation for Non Government Organisation, but they actually include every organisation which is not government. Now who are the NGOs? They can be an activist organisation, a people's organisation, a development organisation, a private company, anything you can name. In the UNCED, there were participants in the NGO forum from chemical companies. In the Inter-

national Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) the NGOs meant mostly private population foundations, contraceptive companies and so-called Family Planning Organisations funded by the international agencies and led by the elites of the third world. There were two other summits, the World Conference on Human Rights and the Social Summit on Poverty and Social Development. It is assumed that the government may not reflect peoples interest, therefore NGOs have to lobby for "changes" in the document of the conference in favour of people. But unfortunately, the experience shows that the successful NGOs were those who did not reflect peoples interest but could add the business interest. On the other hand, the NGOs trying to bring out people's point of view were marginalised and hardly could bring any change in the real document. Many of them came back frustrated.

The northern women must work and deal with the issues which they are confronting in their everyday life without pretending that they are not suffering from patriarchal oppression and fundamentalism. The northern women are more interested in fighting or safeguarding the women in Islamic countries instead of fighting against the Vatican!

This is not to say that the people's organisations, progressive NGOs and women's activist groups did not have any contribution in any of these NGO Forums organised by the UN. What I want to stress here is that we should not have any illusion about our achievement in the official forums or in raising issues in NGO forums. It is clear by now that it is not meant for those who speak in favour of people. Anti-people and the mainstream NGOs are very active in the NGO forum and have access to the official documents. Interestingly, the government delegations are also composed of the "government nominated NGOs". These NGOs hold the capacity to sit in the official meetings and intervene in the discussions. Some say, these are the "tolerable" NGOs. However, the status of the NGOs as government delegation depends on the political situation of each participating country. A liberal and pro-people government may take progressive NGOs in their delegation. But in most government delegations, this is not

the case. However, since UNCED one thing has become transparent that in the official sessions attended by the official delegates, the discussion ends up mostly in changing the "commas" and "fullstops" of the main document. The NGO forum, on the contrary, is very active with all kinds of programmes happening simultaneously. There are small demonstrations, seminars, meetings, press conferences, cultural programmes, bazaars etc. Of course, these are very interesting and many good things happen. While the progressive people feel suffocated at the outcomes of the official discussions and by the domination of the northern interest groups, they can only justify that networking can be developed for future works.

Now we are heading towards the Fourth World Conference on Women, which is in September this year in Beijing, China. There is an NGO Forum '95 and the women groups worldwide are preparing for this meeting. Some

36,000 persons have applied for registration at the NGO Forum. The registrations are done in New York. The last date of applications for registration was April 30th. But suddenly, we started hearing that the NGO Forum site was changed by the Chinese Organising Committee. About 2500 organisations from 70 countries sent letters of protests about this "unconvincing" reason for change of site. Originally the NGO Forum was supposed to happen in the Workers Stadium. But in April, the Chinese Organising Committee declared that the Workers Stadium has shown some flaws, therefore must be changed. The proposed alternative is a 45 minute drive away from the official conference venue, i.e. the Beijing International Convention Center, the site of the Fourth World Conference on Women. The new site for NGO Forum is no more in Beijing, it is in Huairou Scenic Tourist Area. The change was perceived as being international to undermine the role of the NGOs. I do not think that it was meant that way by the Chinese Organisation Committee. It was also expressed by many international organisations that they need to urge upon the Chinese sisters "to impress upon their government the importance of the NGO Forum". As if they are not.

But are the NGOs going to have any impact in the main conference anyway? Even if there was no question of site change, could the NGOs "change" the bracketed document in favour of women? I see no possibility after what happened in the last PrepCom. In the last PrepCom, NGOs were not given enough room for interventions. In an interview the convenor of the NGO Forum, Khuning Supratia Masdit said "NGOs were almost totally excluded in some meetings (of the Commission for the Status of Women, CSW) and they felt that this was a precedent for what will happen in Beijing". [Reaching Out, Vol.3, Issue 1 May '95]. There is no sign of changing this situation. Even the word "Gender" is bracketed due to

the interventions of the Vatican and yet NGOs did not decide to boycott the conference. They were quite vocal about protesting against the Chinese Organising Committee's decision on the change of sites, but no protest for the bracketing of words in the document. The document is almost final. How can NGOs achieve anymore in the main conference? The Secretary General of FWCW Gertrude Mongella gave an assurance in quite a weak language by accepting the fact that NGOs felt a little frustrated (!). She said, in Beijing that will not happen. "NGOs can participate as observers according to the UN rules". That's it. This is her promise to the NGOs around the world.

Another aspect which is crucial for the southern women to understand that by having a "strong NGO forum" led by northern organisations and by northern women does not make it any better. In fact, the northern women are not raising their own issues, rather they are using the southern women's issues and thereby want to take leadership in the world. Southern

women are capable enough to give leadership in the international women's movement. The northern women must work and deal with the issues which they are confronting in their everyday life without pretending that they are not suffering from patriarchal oppression and fundamentalism. The northern women are more interested in fighting or safeguarding the women in Islamic countries instead of fighting against the Vatican!

I genuinely question the possibility of being effective in the NGO forum when already the document has been hijacked by the patriarchal forces of the world. Now, in order to hide this failure, the leading Northern NGOs are trying to make noise over the change of site for NGO forum in China. Elites from the South are also rambling with their "sisters" in the North. The politicising of the NGO forum by some Northern NGOs to the extent of exploiting it as an instrument of portraying China as the "violin of human right" has complicated the situation more deeply. Progressive Southern and Northern women's organisations are very concerned to see how a few powerful NGOs in the North are diverting the entire women's agenda.

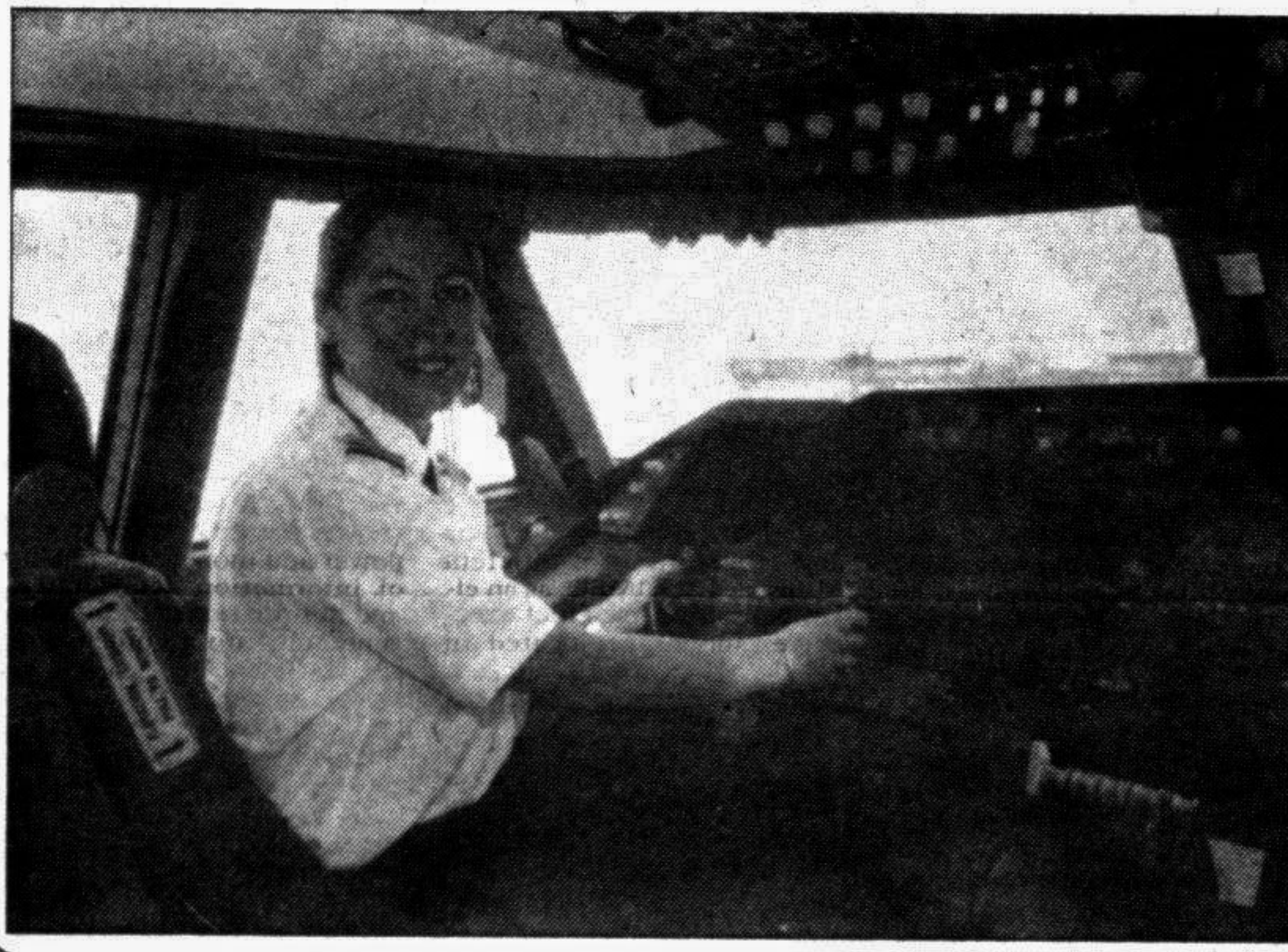
First Woman Captain of Boeing 747

YVONNE Kershaw, a 42-year-old mother and Virgin Atlantic Airways pilot, has become the first British female Captain of a Boeing 747-400 — the world's largest passenger aircraft. She is pictured at the controls of one of the two new Boeing 747-400 series aircraft which she commands, as it comes to rest on the apron at London's Heathrow airport. These aircraft operate Virgin Atlantic's daily service from Heathrow to the USA's New York (Newark) and Los Angeles airports.

Captain Kershaw joined Virgin Atlantic in 1990 as a First Officer on Boeing 747-100 and 200 series aircraft, popularly known as jumbo jets and the forerunners to the Boeing 747-400. She was promoted to Captain in 1993. Her previous flying experience included command of 167-seater MD83 aircraft, taking up her first jet command in 1986 on a BAe (British Aerospace) 125 executive jet.

Virgin Atlantic's other services from Heathrow include flights to the USA's New York (JFK) and San Francisco airports, operated by Boeing 747-200 aircraft, and Tokyo (Japan) and Hong Kong by new Airbus A340-300s. Services from London's Gatwick International Airport are by Boeing 747-100 and 200 series aircraft to the USA cities of Boston, Miami and Orlando.

— London Picture Service



Yvonne Kershaw, a 42-year-old mother and Virgin Atlantic Airways pilot, has become the first British female Captain of a Boeing 747-400 — the world's largest passenger aircraft.

Thana. At present, there are 4 members in her family. Husband, Nazrul Rahaman (48), is a marginal farmer who has got 20 katha of land. But the land is not fertile. It gives only one crop in the year. So, most of the time he sells his labour to others. The other two members of the family are her son and newly married daughter-in-law. Shahida's two daughters are married.

36 years old Shahida Begum looks older than her age. While talking, I discovered her to be an enthusiastic, energetic and courageous person hidden behind her most ordinary physique.

Did Shahida ever dream of today's busy social life? No, she said emphatically. "I was only 11 when I got married and came into this house. It is RDRS, who brought me out after 16 years of my marriage. The story of those 16 years is so monotonous, I am afraid to remember. Let's talk about the present."

Shahida, married as a child at 11. Now, she owns her own land and works outside the home earning a significant income. A dream come true.

In 1986, Shahida under went an adult literacy course in the area, initiated by RDRS. Since then Shahida has not looked back. With the help of numeracy and literacy skills, she keeps her personal accounts and routinely work updated. She maintains a register on poultry vaccination, and keeps notes on TBA schedules.

Shahida now has several sources of income. She is a poultry vaccinator, a vegetable grower, a TBA volunteer. All these have not happened automatically. Shahida went through several training courses and tried to apply in her own life whatever she learnt from each of the courses. Now she is enjoying the fruit of her labour.

The family has got a piece of 10 decimal homestead land. Shahida grows vegetables there, as all housewives do in rural Bangladesh. Before joining the RDRS group, it

Women on the Move

Shahida

Talking about Empowerment

by Selina Shelley

IT was late afternoon. Shahida was at home and we had been talking for more than two hours. I asked her if I could take her photograph the next day. Shahida brought her diary, a half-torn, over-used scribbling book (khata), and looked into it. Counting the days using fingers, she said, "not possible; tomorrow is poultry vaccination day. I have got to go around the village to vaccinate the chickens."

"Day after tomorrow?" I asked eagerly. "No," she replied. She had on her, schedule, attending pregnant mothers, whom she regularly cares for.

I had to leave the next day. Thus, Shahida was unable to give even half an hour of her time. This is unusual. That a village woman in Bangladesh is so busy with her routinised social work, outside the homestead, it's really unbelievable.

Shahida lives in Choudhurypara of Salander Union near Thakurgaon Sadar

was her only source of income. After family consumption, whatever was surplus she used to send to the market through her husband. A lumpsum, Tk 400-500, she earned per year. Six years back she received training on Home-gardening. This training helped her a lot. She learnt to grow vegetables and fruits like kazi peyara, papya, etc, round the year. She also bought a treadle pump for watering the garden. With this input, presently she earns Tk 5000 per year. She believes that if she could have gone to the market to do the business directly, it would help earn more money.

Shahida is a poultry vaccinator of the village Choudhurypara. She collects vaccine from the government Thana office and makes routine visits in the village. Not only to fellow group members and the poor households; sometime she receives calls from rich households to vaccinate their birds. Shahida says, "It's one kind of pleasure that rich

'power' is very practical. She says, "Power is not simply a catchword; and not courage only. Power is something else and more than courage. I don't know what exactly it is. But I feel it after buying the property in my name, with my own savings."

people also need my service." Shahida never charges anything to the poor people. "They know me and I know them, I won't be cheated by them". But from the rich families, she charges full payment. Shahida earns Tk 80-100 per month by vaccinating the birds.

Recently Shahida joined another NGO in the same working area as a paid volunteer of the TBA programme. She gets Tk 300 per month for this job. Agan, Shahida expresses her gratefulness to RDRS, as she received the basic training on TBA from this organisation.

Ten years back, when Shahida joined the group (samity) with a few other women from the neighbourhood, who were poor like her, she did not realise it would bring such a qualitative change in her life. At present, there are 20 RDRS assisted groups in Salander Union of



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which 15 are women groups. Three years back, all these RDRS assisted groups joined together in a Federation to develop further their aims. Shahida was unanimously elected president of Salander Union Federation. This year, another Federation election was held and again Shahida has been elected president.

Last month Shahida bought 5 decimals of land in her own name, with her hard won earnings. This achievement gives her an enormous confidence. She says, "Each woman must try to get entitlement of property, because power lies there."

Shahida's definition of 'power' is very practical. She says, "Power is not simply a catchword, and not courage only. Power is something else and more than courage. I don't know what exactly it is. But I feel it after buying the property in my name, with my own savings."

When Women Reach for the Gun

WOMEN are not just victims of war, but also often participants — with mixed results.

Tigrayan women who took part in the struggle against the Ethiopian government saw themselves as fighting for political justice and social

progress — including equality for themselves. During the civil war in El Salvador, some took up arms, though within the guerrilla

movement there was no clear political commitment to social progress for women. In Nicaragua, the experience of being part of a revolutionary movement left some women with a stronger sense of their own rights. About 30 per cent of combatants and leaders of the Sandinista National Liberation Front were women. "It was a wonderful fight, because those who fought and died did not die in vain, they taught us how to fight for our rights," says Maria, quoted in a new book, Arms to Fight, Arms to Protect: Women speak out about conflict.

The evidence of the book, compiled from the testimonies of women from 12 countries, is that many participate in conflict only when their families or homes are threatened or attacked. If the rebels killed your husband, says the leader of a women's group in a Liberian refugee camp, "You could go out of your mind. What is the next thing to do? You are going to take up arms. If they kill your husband, kill all your children, loot your whole house or end up burning your house, what is the next thing? You go crazy. So, most of these women took up arms."

Where conflict is primarily along ethnic or religious lines women are likely to identify strongly with a particular side though still not necessarily play an active role. The scope of action for those women who do wish to participate is often defined by the roles with which they have been invested by society.

An extreme example of constraints on active participation came in the wake of the 1947 riots prompted by the partition of India when Sikh, Hindu and Muslim women, seen as representing the honour and purity of their religion, were targets of attack by hostile communities and used as symbols by their own.

The interviews in the book

Women Speak out on War

IN September over 30,000 women meet in Beijing to see what progress has been made in improving women's lives over the past 10 years. The impact of armed conflict on women will be a key item on the agenda. People in over 30 countries, from Angola to former Yugoslavia, are currently caught up in war — and it is women who overwhelmingly bear the brunt of the consequences.

Arms to fight, arms to protect: women speak out about conflict is a new book published by Panos which will make an important contribution to this debate. Drawn from over 200 testimonies collected in 12 countries, this book provides first-hand accounts of women as fighters, active participants or supporters of armed struggle, organisers for peace and rehabilitation, as well as carers and mothers relatives and partners of the dead and disappeared. Here, women speak for themselves about conflict and show how the predominant image of women as passive victims in only half the picture.

These vivid and often harrowing stories reveal women's determined efforts to survive — emotionally and economically — during wartime and highlight their active contributions to the recovery process in their communities and at home. Many women talk of gaining new skills, capabilities and confidence in the tragedy of war.

PANOS
ARMS TO FIGHT
ARMS TO PROTECT
WOMEN SPEAK OUT ABOUT CONFLICT



Liberia • Somaliland • Tigray (Ethiopia) • Uganda • India • Sri Lanka
Vietnam • El Salvador • Nicaragua • Lebanon • Bosnia and Croatia