

An Effective Place at the Table: Women's Equal Participation in Peace Processes & Peacebuilding

Gina Torry, Coordinator

NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security¹

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"Women's equal participation in conflict prevention, management and conflict resolution in post-conflict peacebuilding"

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Excellencies, distinguished delegates and colleagues,

I would like to thank the Bureau of the Commission on the Status of Women for the invitation and honor to participate in this interactive dialogue.

I am here today as the Coordinator of the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security and as someone who has played a connecting role as part of transnational civil society alliances working to promote the full and effective participation of women in peacebuilding and the integration of gender perspectives into peacebuilding initiatives of the United Nations.

Quietly and not so quietly there is a global movement growing: a movement of local, regional and international civil society alliances which have identified the inclusion of women and gender perspectives in all aspects of peacebuilding as imperative to the maintenance of international peace and security.

In the realm of what is imagined, in our global collective consciousness, as the territory of men in suits and cigars, human security has been taken up by women around the globe as a key, overarching priority and one in which their participation and input has been historically and systematically left out.

Since the adoption of the Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security in 2000 and the Commission on the Status of Women's Agreed Conclusions of 2004, significant steps have been made by state actors, women, women's organizations and civil society networks to strengthen women's roles and gender perspectives in peacebuilding and conflict prevention.

Important achievements have been made by the UN, including formulating gender-sensitive action plans in disarmament, political, and humanitarian affairs and efforts to coordinate and build coherence in its women, peace, and security work. Some Member States have made themselves further accountable to international commitments by developing and implementing national action plans and strategies on women, peace and security.

While these strides are important, governments and the United Nations cannot go it alone. Over the past few years, State actors and women's networks have made significant progress in working together to make peacebuilding more effective and more sustainable.

And, it is women's networks that are playing an increasingly crucial local and global role. By joining together to bridge internal divides, women's networks and coalitions are better positioned to effectively channel multiple voices and concerns to the highest level of government and international policy making.²

I would like to draw on some examples of successful peacebuilding collaboration between state actors and women's networks which, at the same time, also demonstrate the challenges that women still face in obtaining an active, effective place at the table.

UN led Missions: Getting Women and Women's Perspective to the Table from the Start

As many have experience of here in this room, getting women and women's perspectives to the table to begin with means careful work in preparing the ground in the lead up to formal talks, peacebuilding processes and institution building.

The United Nations, no doubt, has a powerful role to play from the start.

As we know, the UN system is bound by ECOSOC and other mandates to mainstream gender perspectives throughout all policies and programmes. And, while gender mainstreaming policies exist in different UN departments, they are still not always fully or systematically put into practice.

One gap in practice that does not get much attention is the terms of reference for UN high-level or fact-finding missions led by the Department of Political Affairs. The Department of Political Affairs has its own gender mainstreaming policy, which includes the obligation to incorporate gender dimensions into their assessment missions.

These DPA-led missions are important and are often first steps in assessing where UN peacebuilding support is best placed.

The NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security has intervened on several occasions after missions have deployed to urge meetings with local women peacebuilders – such as the UN High-Level Mission to Nepal in July of 2006 and the UN Fact-Finding Mission to Fiji in April 2007.

To the credit of the Department of Political Affairs, each mission responded to the post-deployment request by meeting with women peacebuilders suggested by the coalition. UN agencies, particularly UNDP, and other UN Member States represented at the national level were then instrumental in setting-up meetings between the mission and women peacebuilders.

These meetings are important because they are a way to involve women as both stakeholders and negotiators in peacebuilding strategies from the beginning. After both the Nepal and Fiji missions, women's input and recommendations found their way into official UN reports and subsequent follow-up strategies.

However, as basic as this sounds, meetings with women's groups are *still not* systematically included as part of the planning or terms of reference of DPA led missions. Often, the actual deployment of the mission is not known until the mission is already in country.

At the same time, women and women's organizations need to be more organized and more strategic. This means coordinating together to agree and consolidate relevant recommendations and approach and to choose representatives to effectively communicate their collective messages, recommendations and conduct follow-up.

In order to do so, financial and human resources also need to be invested into women and women's organizations and UN gender architecture in post-conflict contexts. Too often, the only real investment made is in the perpetrators, politicians and state institutions, *and not the peacebuilders*.

Burundi PBC National Steering Committee: Ensuring Women are Stakeholders at the Table

Active involvement of women and women's perspectives in peacebuilding from the outset is critical, but sadly this first step still remains a significant challenge. This was especially evident *initially* in the work of the Peacebuilding Commission in Burundi. Despite thirty percent representation of women elected to national government, and despite relevant UN gender mainstreaming policies, this did not impact the original composition of the PBC National Steering Committee.

As national strategies began to take shape for Burundi and Sierra Leone in 2006/2007, along with allocation strategies for millions of dollars from the PBC Fund, it became apparent that women in Burundi were being almost entirely left behind in regard to the Commission's work.

Just a year ago, in February 2007, the PBC National Steering Committee in Burundi was comprised entirely of men, and included just one representative from civil society – a representative that had only observer status. By comparison, in Sierra Leone, the PBC National Steering Committee comprised both male and female governmental and non-governmental actors, all of whom were participating members - not just observers.

It was during this time that the NGO Working Group, together with Dushirehamwe, a network of women's peacebuilding organizations in Burundi, conducted advocacy at UN headquarters with high-level officials regarding women's lack of representation in the PBC National Steering Committee.

And this paid off. Norway, the chair of the PBC Burundi Country-Specific Committee at UNHQ, took *immediate* action. As a result of national level follow-on by Norway and other international actors and institutions which included UNIFEM and NGOs such as International Alert, women's representatives from both government and civil society are now a part of the PBC National Steering Committee.

But, getting women into the room is just the first step.

And so this begs the question: how do we define participation? What do we mean when we say “the full and effective participation of women in peacebuilding?”

In order to play a effective role in peacebuilding structures, especially when their participation and perspectives have not been brought into discussions and decisions from the beginning, women and women's organizations are in need of political, technical and financial support and follow-through in order to do so.

For instance, women civil society representatives on the PBC National Steering Committee in Burundi have found that there is a lack of gender analysis and perspectives being effectively integrated into various projects proposed by ministry staff and experts.

They have recommended that national institutions be strengthened in regard to their capacity to conduct gender analysis and to mainstream gender in their different projects by, for instance, through the provision of gender training for the ministry staff and experts.

However, rather than relying solely on ministry staff, women civil society PBC Committee members should be in a position to provide the relevant gender analysis and input missing from the projects. But, this doesn't always happen and women are in need of technical support in order to do so.

This is a reoccurring problem – not just for women in Burundi, but women attempting to take part in peacebuilding elsewhere.

We know that women comprise half of the population or more in most post-conflict countries and so must equally engage in and benefit from all processes and decisions aimed at post-conflict reconstruction. Among other things, this equality requires assessing the budget priorities of transitional assistance funds and plans to ensure that women actually benefit from available resources.

Women & the Darfur Peace Talks

One of the most visible examples of the struggle for women's equal and full participation in peace processes is the latest round of Darfur peace talks in Libya held last November.

Notably, four women representing civil society were able to communicate the importance of women's participation to the delegates, government, rebels and international mediators. However, according to Safaa Elagib Adam, one of the four women representing civil society present at the talks, there were no women in either the government or the rebel delegations. She has stressed that women should be a part of each negotiation delegation as well as civil society representatives at the talks.

Women's role in the talks going forward remains unclear. And, women who have managed to make it into the negotiation room report that they do not feel they really have a voice. However, the women's movement in Sudan has mobilized amongst each other to bring their own agenda to the peace negotiations, but they are in need of your support in that process.

It is important to point out that, as yet, there is no gender advisor to this round of talks. While we've heard that recruitment is underway to place a gender advisor in the UN/AU Joint Mediation Support Team, it is another instance where, yet again, the necessary gender expertise is not there from the beginning.

Gender advisors have made a difference.

This has been demonstrated in the successful collaboration between women's networks, gender advisors and international actors such as UNIFEM in getting women and gender perspectives integrated into peace talks and accords, for instance, in Northern Uganda and Abuja. However, there is no systematic inclusion

of or financing for gender advisors. Gender advisors who are experienced women's human rights advocates can foster greater coherence in the UN's responsibility to aid in women building peace.

Skilled gender advisors, equipped with adequate resources and support, can help women to face challenges and overcome divisions and can take consolidated action needed to build alliances to facilitate women's full and effective participation.

So, what does all of this mean for us sitting together here today?

Ongoing Challenges

It must be said that, despite laudable efforts and strides by many women's groups, Member States and United Nations actors, women in formal peacemaking and peacebuilding processes are still facing significant challenges.

Sometimes, as a fly on the wall in various forum, I have heard some Member States make the case that gender architecture doesn't deserve majority funding from the UN's regular allocated budget.

And, in fact, it's better to continue to fund the majority of UN gender initiatives, including women's peacebuilding initiatives, through extra-allocated voluntary funding in order to really ensure that gender and women's entities will perform well.

It's time to take women and gender entities off of probation.

The active engagement of half of the population and the gender architecture it takes to get them there helps to build sustainable peace and development. If we continue to under-resource UN gender architecture, including women's peacebuilding initiatives, gender is, simply, set up to fail. And, it's easy to say "See... I told you..."

In addition to resources, there is still importantly, no United Nations mechanism or system to ensure accountability for failures in achieving women's equal participation in conflict prevention, management and conflict resolution in post-conflict peacebuilding.

The NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security urges Member States at the 52nd Session of the Commission on the Status of Women to:

- Recognize the serious under-resourcing of the United Nation's gender-specific entities necessary to support women's equal participation in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and in post-conflict peace-building;
- To recognize that extra-allocated funding alone for gender equality is *not* sufficient. The United Nations must guarantee that adequate, dedicated and sustained regular budgetary funds are enhanced in order to build and consolidate the capacity of women and women's groups to participate fully in peacebuilding processes.
- To reiterate a call for improved collection, analysis and inclusion of information on women and gender issues, including sexual violence, as part of conflict prevention and early warning efforts;
- To support the UN Secretary-General's recommendation for a dedicated Security Council mechanism. A dedicated Security Council mechanism would provide more effective monitoring of women's equal participation in conflict prevention and peacebuilding and sexual violence against women in conflict;
- Finally to support the call for stronger UN gender equality architecture, including enhanced resources, operational capacity in the field, and high level leadership to drive the agenda, including the protection of women's rights and equal participation in conflict prevention, management and conflict resolution in post-conflict peacebuilding and peacemaking processes.

I would like to end by quoting Sharon Bhagran Rolls, a leading civil society peacemaker in Fiji who has said "Without the relevant information, training and resources, our women in their local communities will not be able to rise to the challenge. We need to instill in them a belief in themselves and the belief

that their knowledge and their strategies are just as important as someone who wears a tailored suit and speaks the language of policy makers”

Distinguished delegates and colleagues, I thank you for your attention.

¹ The NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security is a coalition of 12 organizations, based at United Nations Headquarters in New York, working on issues relating to women, peace and security and the full and effective implementation of SCR 1325.

² Women’s networks have been aided by the impact of globalization which has made communication between and across geographical, geo-political and multi-lingual divides possible in ways in which they have never been before – whether it be through the Internet, mobile radio and phone technology, rapid production and access to information and the growth of and financial support for local and international women’s peacebuilding initiatives.