

The politics of compromise  
and negotiations is a collective effort



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PEACEMAKING

# the untapped resource **women in peace negotiations**

**I**n October 2000 the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. It explicitly calls on member states and all parties to include women and civil society groups in peace processes and conflict resolution. Yet in the past few years, progress towards the full inclusion of women in peace processes has at best been slow, and at worst, non-existent.

This marginalisation of women is symptomatic of most peace processes. It is indicative of the catch-22 situation in which women are caught with regard to participation in peace negotiations and the longer-term process of building peace. On the one hand, to ensure that their concerns are addressed, it is necessary to have strong women's representation at the table. On the other hand, to ensure strong representation, it is necessary for other stakeholders to acknowledge that women's contributions are an essential component of the

process. But in the majority of cases neither the local protagonists nor the international mediators acknowledge this.

The prevailing belief is that participants at the peace table must be those who have the power to implement agreements, or those who have the power to threaten a veto and spoil the process. Women, it is argued, rarely have such power. Moreover, gender inequality is embedded in the local culture and traditions of many countries suffering from civil war, so women have always been powerless and excluded from the public arena. The peace table, the argument continues, is not the right context in which such deep-rooted cultural norms can be addressed. Those who have doubts also argue that often women delegates at negotiations are not representative of women in society as a whole, that they are of the elite, do not share the concerns of the poorer sectors of society, and as a result are no different to the men present.



Interestingly, the same argument, while equally true for men, is never used as a rationale for their exclusion. Even when there is recognition of the rights of women and the need for a more inclusive process, it is often cast aside in the process of bargaining. In effect women, and civil society in general, who may have important contributions to make, remain marginalised and their concerns excluded.

Finally there is still a prevailing belief that peace accords are gender-neutral. There is an implicit notion that references to 'human rights' and justice encompass everyone, including women. Yet time and again, when 'gender issues' or 'women's rights' are not overtly addressed, they are consistently ignored when it comes to implementation.

Not surprisingly, the women in war zones who are struggling to get their voices heard offer a different perspective on the purpose of the peace negotiations and the rationale for their participation.

On one level, they argue that women as victims have a right to voice their concerns at the peace

table. They are the deliberate targets of physical and sexual abuse. They are forced out of their homes and villages. The peace-table provides the chance to address the needs of all concerned and an opportunity to foster confidence and initiate the long process of reconciliation and healing. Without the presence and the voices of the victims on all sides, argue many women activists, this process can never be complete.

Demography and democracy also come into play. From South Africa to Burundi women comprise over 50 per cent of the population. Despite international commitments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) calling for women's increased participation in decision-making processes, they are still vastly under-represented. Excluding the majority population from decision-making, argue the women, counters the basic principles of democracy.

It is also important to recognise women's right to self-determination. This is particularly salient in the context of conflicts in which self-determina-

tion, freedom, equality and human rights were the principles for which people took up arms. As Cheryl Carolus, a member of the ANC's Women's League and CEO of South African Tourism has argued, if the right to self-determination is an acceptable cause for 'a people' or a nation, why should it be denied to women? "The parallels between racism and sexism in South Africa are very important for us," she says. "It was a very important approach to say, we're talking about equality here. So for the same reasons that you can't exclude me from the full benefits of my society, purely on the basis of one biological fact, like the colour of my skin. You can't use another one, like the sex in which I was born."<sup>1</sup>

Finally, in the aftermath of conflict, often over 50 per cent of households are headed by women.

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Apart from coping with their own trauma, these women are left with the sole responsibility of raising and educating children, earning a living, and caring for the wounded and maimed returning from war. By definition, they are not only committed to building peace and stability, but are also the most active on a daily basis.

Unlike political elites or international actors, women in communities never plan their work with an 'exit strategy' in mind.

### When Women Have Influenced the Peace Agreement

Despite the fact that women are mostly excluded from formal peace talks, there are exceptions to the rule. In Liberia, Northern Ireland, Guatemala, South Africa and elsewhere women succeeded in getting to the negotiations and making a difference, by:

- ▲ Changing the dynamics of the talks and fostering greater inclusiveness and trust during talks;<sup>2</sup>
- ▲ Introducing a more holistic approach to peace and security and infusing the concerns of the wider society into the talks;
- ▲ Integrating issues of women's rights into the agreement and demands for the inclusion of women in long-term decision-making processes.<sup>3</sup>

### Women in Civil Society

From 1994-1996, the Liberian Women's Initiative (LWI) was entirely based on civil society members. The group mobilised support amongst women across the country and lobbied on a platform of 'disarmament before elections'. They gained widespread public support. LWI organised workshops and seminars for the warlords, always advocating for peaceful negotiations and mutual approaches to problem solving. Although they never gained official status at the talks, the women played an immensely important advisory and counselling role. Their credibility was manifested when Ruth Perry (a founding member) was elected as the transitional head of government in 1996. Her task was to lead Liberia out of 17 years of political conflict and seven of civil war into a democratic election. Warring factions curtailed Perry's political power, and although her authority was at times undermined, she nevertheless succeeded in mitigating violence and creating a calmer and more moderate atmosphere in which the elections could be held.<sup>4</sup>

#### Did They Make a Difference?

The LWI was somewhat successful in its lobbying for disarmament prior to elections. In 1996 a partial disarmament process was undertaken prior to elections. LWI members were present at arms collection points throughout the country. For the elections, they trained, registered and encouraged women to vote. Due to their influential role in the peace negotiations, the LWI were able to call for and get a Women's Ministry. Seven years on, there are many variables that have contributed to the situation in Liberia, resulting in renewed violence. The LWI continues to work closely with groups such as the Mano River Women's Union in the sub-region in a coordinated campaign to end violence. Clearly they alone cannot withstand the tides of war but they symbolise the power that ordinary citizens can have in society, if they choose to engage and mobilise around issues of peace and security.

### When Civil Society Groups Transform into Political Parties

Throughout the 1980s in Northern Ireland, Catholic and Protestant women were forging strong bonds around issues of childcare, education,

health, economic well-being and equality for women. They built trust and understanding between their communities.

In 1996, it was decided that admission to the all-party talks would be via elections (with a maximum of ten parties) and the women's peace movement found itself at risk of being marginalised. They held an open meeting, and women's groups from various religious, geographical and social sectors across the region agreed to form their own political party. With 70 candidates across the region, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) campaigned on a platform of justice, equity and inclusive dialogue. They garnered sufficient votes to come ninth, thereby gaining two seats at the all-party talks. They were the only women at the peace table.

### ***Did They Make a Difference?***

The 1998 Good Friday Agreement became the foundation of the current (albeit slow) peace process in Northern Ireland. The NIWC contributed to the substance of the agreement, to the implementation processes and towards mobilising popular support for the agreement. Throughout the talks the NIWC played a critical role in:<sup>5</sup>

- ▲ opening spaces for women's participation;
- ▲ fostering external consultation with a wider number of groups representing the community, women, trade unions, business interests, churches and ensuring that their views were fed into the process of the talks;
- ▲ paying attention to the process and dynamic of the talks and often 'interpreting' differing positions between parties (who had little communication with each other) to clear confusion and ensuring that conflict was not exacerbated due to miscommunication or use of language.

Other political parties were suspicious of the NIWC but in time they had built sufficient trust to be called on as confidants and intermediaries. This is a role they continue to play.

### **Women Political Leaders, the Lone Voice**

While in most instances a single voice is drowned out, the presence of Luz Mendez as a member of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity

(URNG) made a significant difference in the Guatemalan peace process. By her own admission, Mendez was not fully aware of the women's concerns.<sup>6</sup> However, through the Assembly of Civilian Society (ACS), women's groups focused on Mendez and established close ties with her. They highlighted the critical areas of concern for the women and indigenous groups. Mendez successfully conveyed the message to her own colleagues and the opposition.

### ***Did They Make a Difference?***

Mendez as an advocate for women's and indigenous rights at the negotiations was critical in ensuring that the peace accords address a broad range of issues, notably:

- ▲ Access to the distribution of land, credits and other productive resources;
- ▲ Integral health programmes;
- ▲ Equal opportunities for training and education;
- ▲ The right to a paid job;
- ▲ Elimination of legal discrimination;
- ▲ Penalties for sexual harassment;
- ▲ Creation of spaces and institutions for the defence of women's rights;
- ▲ Mechanisms to promote the political participation of women.

"...an advocate for women's and indigenous rights at the negotiations was critical..."

Seven years on, some sections of the accords have been barely considered, and many groups, including women, feel marginalised. Nevertheless the Guatemala accords are a benchmark of success for Guatemalan women and civil society participation in general, and they remain a stark record of promises made but then broken.

### **Women as Equal Members of a Political Party**

In South Africa, the women's league of the African National Congress (ANC) played a critical role in ensuring women's full and equal participation in the negotiations and transformation process. Having secured their own 50 per cent participation within the ANC's negotiating team, the women reached out across the political spectrum to form a



coalition with other women from across the political and racial spectrum. In the midst of a tense and highly polarised political situation, they sought out the middle ground and created spaces for dialogue. In 1992, at the first meeting of the Women's National Coalition, women from different political, social, economic and racial groups came together to define a common agenda. It not only unified the voices of women but also enhanced their sense of dignity and empowerment.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Did They Make a Difference?***

The women of South Africa make up some 53 per cent of the population. Their mobilisation for peace within their communities, and their mass participation in the elections that led to Nelson Mandela's victory, was critical to the success of the South African transformation.


Women's 50 per cent representation in the negotiations altered the dynamics of the talks in terms of process and substance. There was greater empathy amongst participants, greater emphasis on building trust and dispelling fears. More specifically, the participation of women in the drafting of the South African Constitution was particularly significant. For example, the Bill of Rights is extremely comprehensive and reflects the nation's diversity. In addition there is specific recognition of women's economic, political, and reproductive rights. South African women broke new grounds in a number of areas:

Equality, human rights and the freedom to choose are key principles embedded in the constitution. In effect, the constitution ensures that people from different cultural, ethnic, tribal or social backgrounds have the right to live according to their own beliefs.

Women attained a 25 per cent quota in parliament. The presence of this critical mass of women parliamentarians has helped to transform the structures and systems of work. In particular, women in parliament have encouraged more inclusive and participatory approaches to discussions.

Traditionally male-dominated ministries, such as the defence ministry, have senior women staff. Their presence has shaped the country's approach to military and defence issues. As Thandi Modise, a notable female figure, states, women's contributions were crucial to the debate on the role and

functions of the military.<sup>8</sup> In a country where security forces were feared, there was demand for their abolition. Yet by opening the debate to the wider public it was agreed that the military should be trained in peacekeeping and emergency disaster relief services.

In South Africa, like other places, the struggle for gender equality has not ended and new issues such as the spread of HIV/AIDS create new challenges. But no one doubts that the exclusion of 50 per cent of the population, their talent, their energy and commitment when tackling such complex problems would be a mistake. As Cheryl Carolus says, "Today in South Africa...when any important body or activity is considered it is an obvious thing that people say: 'How does this impact women? Why are there no women?'"<sup>9</sup> 

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## **Endnotes**

- 1 In interview with the author, October 1999 for *Women at the Peacetable, Making a Difference*, New York: UNIFEM 2000.
- 2 J Darby and R MacGinty, eds. *The Management of Peace Processes*, New York: Palgrave, 2000, p 93.
- 3 The Guatemalan peace process, the South African process and Northern Ireland offer examples in this regard.
- 4 See Perry's speech at the UN, available at [www.the\\_perspective.org/ruthun.html](http://www.the_perspective.org/ruthun.html), 1996, and interviews in *Women at the Peacetable: Making a Difference*, New York: UNIFEM, 2000.
- 5 See [www.niwc.org](http://www.niwc.org) for information on the Coalition's activities and policy positions.
- 6 Mendez discussed her role in the Guatemala talks at the Kennedy School of Government, Women Waging Peace Research Symposium, Cambridge, November 2001, <http://www.womenwagingpeace.net/content/researchcenter/symposium/2001/>.
- 7 Susan Collin Marks, *Watching the Wind, Conflict Resolution During South Africa's Transition to Democracy*, Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2000, pp 136-139.
- 8 As quoted in S Naraghi-Anderlini and R Manchanda, eds. *Women and Violent Conflict*, Global Perspective, London: International Alert, 2000.
- 9 As quoted in S Naraghi-Anderlini, *Women at the Peace Table Making a Difference*, New York: UNIFEM, 2000.