



Women have the capability to effect change, pave the way for peace, work across conflict divides, and act as agents in conflict prevention, resolution, and reconstruction

PEACEBUILDING

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women waging peace

– making women visible

Introduction

War has terrible consequences. Violent conflict results in an increase in female-headed households with limited social, economic, and educational resources, leading to increased poverty and diminished educational opportunities – especially for young girls. War's violence often leads to sexual assault, such as rape and genital mutilation. In the midst of fighting, and even post-conflict, populations are vulnerable to other inhumane and criminal acts such as incest, slavery, and domestic abuse.

Although men instigate most violent conflicts, not all women are innocent bystanders. Women may occupy combat positions in the military, and may torture men and women alike. On the other hand, some women warriors have used their leadership

skills to stabilise post-conflict societies.¹

Women's interests have been neglected in peace-making processes. Although women were recognised as 'observers' in the Burundi peace process and as 'advisors' to the Inter-Congolese Dialogue in South Africa, they are all but invisible in most peace negotiations. This poses a challenge for women determined to be active decision makers. In response, they have launched multiple awareness campaigns, conferences, seminars, and advocacy efforts to gain international recognition of their effectiveness. Although their successes are often pushed to the background, women are highly invested in preventing and stopping conflict and have the capability to effect change, pave the way for peace, work across conflict divides, and act as agents in conflict prevention, resolution, and reconstruction.²



Making Women Visible

Women Waging Peace was launched in 1999 to advocate for the full inclusion of women in formal and informal peace processes, and to connect women in conflict areas to one another and to policy shapers worldwide. The inclusion of all sectors of society furthers the development of fresh, workable solutions to seemingly intractable conflicts. Sustainable peace, and therefore international security, depends on such innovations.

WWP brokers relationships among an extensive network of women peace builders and policy shapers, resulting in new solutions to long-standing conflicts at local, regional and international levels. The organisation has extended its network to more than 20 conflict areas and is working with ACCORD in South Africa. Over 1 000 government officials, NGO leaders, media professionals, and academics have collaborated with the WWP network. Together they have explored options for building sustainable peace at annual colloquia, held in conjunction with an executive programme of the Women and Public Policy Program at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. They have also sponsored similar meetings around the world.³

Women, Peace, and Security

Recent policy statements from the UN Security Council, the Organization for Security and

Cooperation in Europe, the G8, and the European Union recognise the role women play in peace and security and call for women's inclusion in local and international efforts to prevent and resolve conflicts. WWP advocates for the implementation of these groundbreaking international commitments.

Women's contributions in the field of peace and security are largely unrecognised at institutional and public policy levels. The Women Waging Peace Policy Commission was created in 2001 to focus on research and analysis as underpinnings for policy advocacy. The commission is producing a series of approximately 15 case studies documenting the effectiveness of women in peace efforts around the globe, including South Africa. The studies examine women's activities in conflict prevention, pre-negotiation and negotiation, and post-conflict reconstruction.⁴

In November 2002, the Waging Policy Commission hosted a conference to discuss the G8's recognition of women's roles in peace and security, as well as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Participants included 11 African women leaders from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Sudan, as well as government representatives from Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The meeting provided a unique opportunity for in-depth discussion between donors and stakeholders regarding the most effective and concrete means of

fulfilling NEPAD's promise and the G8's commitment to women.⁵

African women are skilled in the art of reconciliation, which involves strong listening and communication skills, intellectual and emotional flexibility, extensive experience in practical problem solving, and the willingness to care for all people despite political differences.⁶ Such attributes pose a threat to warlords, who generally refuse to allow women to participate in peace talks.⁷

Women's participation in peace processes helps break down traditional stereotypes in patriarchal societies. Women have their fingers on the pulse of the community and can gather essential information on the ground to mobilise post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction.⁸ Contrary to some expectations, many women willingly accept the challenges of working in dangerous and isolated situations. Women foster confidence and trust among local populations, since they often care for the maimed, injured, and orphaned. They propose constructive solutions while suggesting innovative approaches for dialogue among polarised groups. They sometimes use unorthodox means such as singing and dancing to diffuse potentially violent situations.

In cases where women have joined organisations or decision-making bodies in sufficient numbers, they have created a more collaborative atmosphere, characterised by mutual respect, and have sought consensus rather than 'winner-take-all'. They tend to focus more on understanding and resolving problems.


Waging Peace in Africa

The African Waging Network includes women from Burundi, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa and Sudan. Women Waging Peace created the opportunity for African women to network with women from other conflict areas, share strategies, have access to policymakers, and research the role of women in peace processes globally. Local and regional meetings in Africa have allowed academics, civic leaders, corporate executives, and community leaders to discuss a wide range of issues affecting African women: reconciliation, justice and trauma counselling; economic inequity; conflict and HIV/AIDS; capacity building and empowerment; dissemination of information, education, and technology; work with refugees and

displaced persons; and the role of international agencies in humanitarian assistance.

ACCORD has hosted a series of online chats with regional and international members. The organisation also convened the first WWP delegation meeting in South Africa, where issues such as racism and xenophobia were raised. South African delegates also participated in a Waging regional meeting in Kigali, followed by a 'training for trainers' session sponsored by Women as Partners for Peace in Africa, with women from the DRC, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. Participants included His Excellency Olara Otunnu, UN Under Secretary for Children in Armed Conflict.

Conclusion

Waging Boston recognises ACCORD as an important and valued partner in the effort to bridge the gap between expert community work and the policy arena. Rhetorical commitment to women's involvement must be translated into action. To that end, we should enhance capacity-building initiatives for women peacemakers at the grassroots and national levels. As women find their voice, progressive and effective government leaders will recognise the pivotal role they can play in all phases of peace processes. 

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Endnotes

- 1 Swanee Hunt (2003), 'The Critical Role of Women Waging Peace'. *Columbia Transnational Law Journal*, 14 April, p 106.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Overview of the Women Waging Peace Initiative, www.WomenWagingPeace.net.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Summary of Proceedings from the 'G8, NEPAD, Women, Peace, and Security Meeting', 8 November 2002, Cambridge, MA.
- 6 S Anderson (1999), 'Women's Many Roles in Reconciliation' in *People Building Peace, 35 Inspiring Stories from Around the World*, 1999, p 230.
- 7 Hunt 2003, p 108.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p 110.