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## Policy brief

# Women's political participation in post-conflict transitions

### SUMMARY

On March 23, 2011, Peacebuild, with financial support from Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, convened the second of a series of six workshops on various peacebuilding and conflict prevention policy issues. This workshop focused on women's political participation in post-conflict transitions. The present brief synthesizes the findings and recommendations arising from both the workshop and from an overview and three issue papers prepared to inform the workshop discussion. It highlights policy and programming options aimed at improving Canadian and global responses to violent conflict through supporting and promoting women's political participation in post-conflict situations.

### INFORMING THE DISCUSSION

To inform the discussions, Peacebuild prepared a literature review on women's political participation in peace processes and post-conflict transitions and commissioned three background papers – one on the successful experience of Liberian women engaged in that country's struggle for peace, the second on prospects for the emerging Afghan peace process, and the third on how women who have fled Burma/Myanmar for camps on the Thai/Burmese border are coping with conflict and displacement as refugees.

The literature review found that despite some progress in the 10 years since the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, the participation of women in peace negotiations and the inclusion of women's needs and concerns in peace agreement were still the exception rather than the rule. Among the causes of that marginalization, co-authors Gabrielle Tomovcik and Silke

**Gabrielle Tomovcik**  
is a Project Support staff with Peacebuild and a fourth-year student at Carleton University. She is currently completing her BA Honours in Public Affairs and Policy Management, specializing in International Studies.

**Silke Reichrath**  
coordinates Peacebuild's programming on Conflict Prevention and on Gender and Peacebuilding. She holds a BA in French and Spanish from the University of Calgary (1997) and an MA in International Affairs from Carleton University (2000).

**Ecoma Alaga**  
is a Doctoral student at the University of Reading, Member of the African Security Sector Network (ASSN) and co-founder of the Women Peace and Security Network Africa (WIPSEN-Africa).

**Corey Levine**  
is a human rights and peacebuilding policy expert, researcher and writer with a specialization in gender. She has worked in Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iraq, Bosnia, Sierra Leone, Kosovo, East Timor and Palestine for more than 15 years.

**Dr. Anna Snyder**  
is an associate professor in the conflict resolution program at Menno Simons College, an institution affiliated with the University of Winnipeg.

Reichrath noted: patriarchic structures of politics and power, traditional gender roles, differential access to education and financial resources, biased media coverage, and the fear of violence and stigma associated with increased mobility and participation in the public sphere.

Experts in this area argue that some of these barriers could be addressed with political and financial support from the UN, other multilateral organizations and bilateral donors; with the addition of gender expertise on mediating teams and country missions; by more capacity building for women's groups and networks; and through increased logistical support for women's participation (child care, transportation, etc.). Work with the media and support to national action plans for the implementation of Resolution 1325 are also seen as being important. For the longer term, well-designed quotas and gender sensitivity in needs assessments and country development plans are key measures to ensure women's political participation in post-conflict structures and processes.

Ecoma Alaga's paper, "*Pray the Devil Back to Hell:*" *Women's ingenuity in the peace process in Liberia*, highlighted the importance of training a core group of female peace activists and providing ongoing support through national and international networks. Building a shared identity (drawing on their common status of 'womanhood,' a basic message, uniform clothing, and daily shared group activities) were all crucial for the Liberian women's movement. Other key aspects of engagement were ongoing communications between parts of the movement and practices of inclusiveness, transparency and consultation; the value of a physical presence at, or near, the negotiating table; and the importance of remaining engaged at the implementation stage after an agreement was signed. The careful use of gender-stereotypes in a constructive manner and 'motherhood activism,' participatory decision-making to overcome cleavages within the group, local ownership, knowledge of UNSCR 1325 as a framework for engaging their government and international partners, and clear and inclusive political messaging were also factors in the movement's success in pressing for the signing and later the implementation of a peace agreement.

Corey Levine's analysis of women's participation in the Afghan peace process looked at the limited inclusion of women in newly established mechanisms for peace in Afghanistan, including the High Peace Council, the London Conference and the Consultative Peace *Jirga*. Women in Afghanistan have seen expanding rights on paper, including equality in the Constitution, the National Action

Plan for the Women of Afghanistan, and protections under the Elimination of Violence Against Women law. Yet, their access to health and education is still extremely limited and women who are politically active or providing or pursuing an education are under constant threat of physical violence. Legal set-backs have already occurred (e.g. the Shia Personal Status law and the 2010 Presidential Decree on the Electoral Code, whereby female quotas can be filled by males if no female candidate is available). Not surprisingly, the fear that women's rights will be sacrificed in peace negotiations with the Taliban is wide-spread. To alleviate these concerns, the Afghan Women's Network has recommended a 25 per cent quota for women on all decision-making bodies related to the Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Program, a gender component to all projects under the program, the inclusion of the Ministry of Women's Affairs in the Joint Secretariat, separate registration of female beneficiaries, and rigorous, participatory monitoring of the process.

According to Dr. Anna Snyder's analysis, life in exile on the Thai/Burmese border creates additional burdens and risks for Burmese women and narrows their life choices, but it also provides opportunities for empowerment by opening up new spaces for agency and leadership. Women become aware of gender relations as they become involved with women's NGOs, participate in various training workshops, become members of camp committees, assist at police stations and hospitals in incidents of gender-based violence, access formal education (for girls), and, in the case of the NGO leadership, network through the Women's League of Burma. Male and female roles change through workshops on women's rights and through skills development, which enhances self-confidence among women and men's confidence in women's abilities.

## **SUCCESSFUL PARTICIPATION**

In the discussion of the four presentations, participants underscored the following key factors for successful participation by women in political processes in conflict settings:

- Women's empowerment and training, including an understanding of the international normative framework they can use (CEDAW, UNSCR 1325, etc.) and skills training in negotiation, leadership, conflict analysis, communication, and work with the media;
- Women need to develop and then mobilize around a common agenda;
- Women need to build an inclusive movement around a shared identity that can accommodate differences (age, ethnicity, religion, party affiliation, class, geography, etc.) that will inevitably be present;
- Alliances with key male allies;
- Physical presence at or near the negotiating table or an institutionalized link to it;
- Communication of proposals and developments to the grassroots;
- Effective use of the media;
- Coordinated political and financial support from donors, without undermining local ownership.

## PROMOTING PARTICIPATION

Following the presentations, workshop participants were divided into three working groups to discuss specific issues related to the promotion of women's participation.

### *1. What are women's specific needs and risks in terms of participation and how can donor countries help to meet these needs and mitigate the risks?*

The first requirement for donor countries is **political will**. With women mostly absent from high-level decision-making in both donor and recipient countries, their specific needs and women's participation are usually not prioritized among the many pressing needs in countries in conflict or emerging from violent conflict.

Women lack access to political processes because of cultural limits on their participation in public life, childcare responsibilities, household tasks, illiteracy, and the insecurity caused by the weak rule of law. Where they do participate, they are often relegated to the lower ranks and not used to their full potential, for example, women police officers who are used to guard elite residences.

The group discussed what the most effective level for support was and suggested that support was needed at **multiple levels** and should address structural as well as social issues. Structurally, it is important to strengthen the **rule of law** to reduce fear and uncertainty as barriers to the participation of women. At the national level, it is important to strengthen **women's agencies** -- women's ministries, departments, secretariats or networks. This can be done through direct funding, training, mentoring, and strong connections with counterparts in other countries at the regional level. At the same time, it is crucial to **support grassroots projects** that will last after external funding ends because of strong local ownership.

In terms of the substance of donor support, priority should be given to **skills development** and **political education**, especially in democratic processes (how to vote, run as a candidate, use the media, etc.) and in negotiation, mediation and peacebuilding skills. Beyond this, training should target the specific needs of women in a given context, for example, literacy training where illiteracy is a barrier to participation. Teacher training and the training of trainers are likely to have lasting positive impacts. Innovative strategies are needed for reaching and educating women outside more formal educational structures, especially in rural communities. Education and training provide women not only with knowledge but also with confidence, status in the community, respect from family members, and empowerment. Roles in the household can change as men look after the children while women attend training and education sessions and then apply their new-found skills.

The group repeatedly noted that any support had to be focused on the **long-term** as gender equality was not a short-term goal, nor can the transformation of gender relations be qualified or quantified on a short-term basis. Gender relations are not tangible and require years and decades to show any real changes. Any funding should thus be long-term, as well as culturally appropriate in the local context. Where funding is limited, it is preferable to support grassroots organizations that will continue to grow independently

beyond the end of international funding. This could require creating more accessible and comprehensive methods for grassroots NGOs to obtain funding, such as small grants mechanisms or embassy funds.

The group also suggested that donor countries and agencies might need to **address their own gender disparities** before they would be able to more effectively support work in conflict-affected countries. This includes gender disparities in our governance structures; our military, police and other security forces; donor agencies; multilateral agencies; and among national representatives and mediators. In addition to promoting or hiring senior-level female staff, donor agencies and governments also need to increase the presence of gender advisors in all spheres.

Where there are numerous donors involved, there is a need to strengthen **coordination** between different countries and between agencies and departments of the same country -- for example, between the Canadian International Development Agency and the Department of National Defence. A case in point is Afghanistan, where many donors are eager to support women's rights but better coordination is needed to define each stakeholder's niche. This would avoid duplication, promote complementarity, ensure that agencies are not working in their own silos, and help to bridge the disconnect between gender and security.

## ***2. What can be done to involve more men in related debates and activities, and how can men best advocate for and support women's participation?***

This group looked into obstacles to men's involvement in women, peace and security processes, debates and activities, including the workshop itself. How to involve men has been a long-lasting debate in the women's movement. While some men may actively avoid the discussion of women's issues because they feel they are being blamed, believe they are not invited, are afraid to say something wrong and offend, or fear the unknown, most simply are not aware of what the issues are and do not understand the push for gender equality. Yet, it would be difficult for them to challenge the status quo if they are not aware of gaps and inequality in power relations between men and women.

Similarly, women may be afraid of letting men into the sphere for fear of losing ground and 'betraying their own gender,' and they may have experienced dramatic shifts in group dynamics depending on the ratio between men and women in a room. Yet, even though women have to advocate for their own issues, a lack of alliances with men leads to segregation and ineffectiveness as the institutions making and implementing rules and laws and assigning budget are often male-dominated.

In particular, men need to be involved in debates around sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Men are in the best position to stand up and say that SGBV is not acceptable, and men can act as mentors to their communities and influence other men. Similarly, in the area of legal reform, national or international experts on particular areas of law can be brought into debates around women's rights, including Sharia law experts from Muslim countries with progressive interpretations.

To promote men's involvement in debates and activities around women's participation in peacebuilding, the following steps might be useful.

Extend **an explicit invitation for men** to join specific dialogues and activities and ensure that they feel welcome. Men have been excluded by the feminist movement and now need to be invited in and realize this involves them, too. To make them feel comfortable requires leaving space for questions, using language that is accessible to everyone, and talking about gender issues just as one would talk about anything else, without creating or reinforcing existing taboos.

Men will not be eager to encourage female participation if women stick to **non-negotiable issues**; they need to work around those to make it seem advantageous for all sides to sit down at the table. More thought and discussion may be needed on how to deal with 'non-negotiables' in human rights, and how to engage in a negotiation while having a set of non-negotiable issues.

To motivate men to support women's participation, they need to believe that gender equality is good for both 'sides' and benefits the whole society and that it is in **men's best interest** to include women. For example, without women's inclusion in political processes, sustainable peace will not be created. **Research** showing that including women actually leads to better outcomes for both genders and/or to more effective peacebuilding would be immensely valuable in this respect.

It was suggested that women should target male-dominated local groups and organizations and get them involved by **making the agenda not a 'gender' agenda**. This could be achieved by mainstreaming gender issues in other dialogues and discussions or by reframing gender issues as human rights issues. It might also be approached by inviting key **male** academics, advocates and other **allies** to discuss the importance of engaging women in political participation. Peacebuild is working on a list of male researchers and prominent personalities working on women's participation in peacebuilding, but has so far found that male engagement with gender issues (beyond diplomatic statements and United Nations reports related to the Women, Peace and Security Resolutions) is mainly focused on the prevention of gender-related violence.

***3. How can the international community raise awareness of the importance of women's participation in peace processes and mitigate negative perceptions that including women in peace processes might derail such processes, pose a distraction, be perceived as a Western imposition, etc?***

There was agreement that the international community should base their activities on the Security Council resolutions on Women, Peace and Security as internationally agreed-upon norms. Canada's elaboration of its own Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security was a good step in the right direction. Yet, while there is a lot of rhetoric and verbal commitment to women's participation, money has not followed the words. There is a lack of political will among both donors and national governments to prioritize gender equality issues in fragile states with many competing needs.

Local women leaders know best how to participate in peace processes in socially and culturally appropriate ways, are more likely to continue their activism even after funding runs out, and need to be seen as being in the lead in order to maintain legitimacy. The exact nature of activities to be supported depends on the country and context, and **flexibility** is needed to accommodate different needs ranging from transportation, including transportation for male travel companions where needed, to childcare and personal security provisions. The international community's role is to **support local women and local women's groups**, both politically and financially.

Targeted funding is needed to support women's effective participation and to **help them succeed**. Capacity-building, training and regional networking are important to allow women to incorporate best practices into their situation, analyze proposed legislation or agreements, and to build a common agenda and platform. Developing a **shared vision and agenda** in a participatory way is crucial for any mass action, although it can be difficult in a polarized society. Yet, if the international community creates a space for women at the political peace table and then they fail to actively participate and to represent a coherent, representative set of women's interests, this defeats the purpose and is counter-productive. While men's failure is individual, women are perceived to fail as a group when one or a few fail.

Discretion has to be used over the extent to which **funding** for a given women's group is **publicized**. In some contexts, international funding can enhance a group's standing and credibility, while in other contexts, it can undermine their credibility and lead to accusations of the group advancing a foreign, 'imposed,' agenda, working for the 'enemy,' or engaging in certain activities for the money.

The argument for women's participation is often made in **rights-based** language, whereby women -- as over 50 per cent of the population -- intrinsically have an equal right to participate and this right is enshrined in a series of international agreements. However, with some audiences, this argument is not effective, and the case of women's participation needs to be made **empirically** by showing how having women at the table can lead to more durable, long-term, sustainable peace.

Women sometimes claim the right to participate based on their widely recognized and respected **identity** as mothers, or based on their identity of victims. However, if this tool is used, a fine line has to be drawn between a beneficial appeal to the identity for obtaining support and legitimacy and a counter-productive effect of limiting women to that identity and exacerbating stereotypes.

Increasing **literacy** levels is a very important aspect of advancing women's participation in some countries. Women need literacy to be able to participate and organize themselves effectively, to communicate their ideas and demands, and to gain respect and credibility. Men with higher education levels are also more able to engage with new ideas and concepts and to implement existing national laws effectively.

The group debated whether or not to recommend **making support for any peace process dependent on women's participation**; this might work in some cases, while in other cases it might result in a peace process breaking down or not even starting. It was hence a risky tactic.

## CONCLUSION

Key considerations for the international community in promoting women's political participation in peace processes are to follow the lead of local women's organizations, to think and act for the long term, to support work both at the grassroots and the national level, to make resources available to women to network and build a shared vision and agenda, to prepare women through skills training and political education, and to then enable them to be present at the peace table, or at a parallel process linked to the peace table, and at the implementation stage. Quotas both in formal political institutions and in fora directly related to peace negotiations and implementation are a highly useful tool, especially in combination with effective efforts to prepare qualified and representative women to fill the quotas. Male allies in decision-making positions are essential to achieve legal reforms, access for women to health care and education, and social change.

Some areas for further discussion and research are empirical evidence of the difference women's participation makes in the outcomes of peace negotiations and implementation processes; experiences with making women's participation a conditionality; the identification of male champions for the implementation of the women, peace, and security agenda; and evidence on productive roles for mediators and gender advisors in ensuring women's participation in peace processes.

This report was prepared by Silke Reichrath, who also facilitated the workshop.

We would also like to thank all the participants, as well as Peacebuild volunteers Gabrielle Tomovcik and Jennifer Fowlow for their assistance.

Peacebuild gratefully acknowledges the support of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade for the workshop series.

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