Removing Obstacles to Women's Participation at the Peace Table and in Politics

By Pearl Karuhanga Atuhaire and Grace Ndirangu

Women who seek to participate in peace processes and political decision-making face many obstacles. To achieve sustainable peace and development, societies emerging from conflict must remove these obstacles. In so doing, they must recognize and prioritize that women are fully capable of active participation in all political processes. Women's equal participation in leadership at every level and in every sector is imperative to eliminating gender-based violence, poverty and enabling sustainable peace.

Across the globe, women are increasingly assuming political leadership. For example, Ethiopia elected a woman president in 2018, and half of the nation's parliamentarians are women. In the Republic of Rwanda, women make up 78 percent of the representation in parliament.[1] Leadership in politics and peacebuilding are linked. That is, women's political leadership paves the way for women's participation in peacebuilding processes and vice versa.

Despite promising advances in women's political involvement, the number of women in decision-making positions, peace negotiation processes, and reconstruction/rebuilding efforts remains small. Between 1992 and 2011, women made up only two percent of mediators, four percent of witnesses and signatories, and nine percent of negotiators in global peace negotiations.[2]

There are many reasons to advocate for women's broad inclusion in politics and peacebuilding. First, women have a substantial impact on conflict. Contrary to conventional wisdom that women exist only outside of conflict, these actors are central in roles as diverse as caretakers, mothers, nurses,

and sometimes, combatants themselves. Women constitute half of the population in most communities. For the entirety of a community to be represented, both women and men must take part in decision-making processes. As cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova once said, "A bird cannot fly with one wing." Second, women and female political leaders are more likely than men to push for women's integration and gender sensitive clauses in peacebuilding efforts. Third, negotiations progress more quickly and lead to more sustainable peace when women are engaged in peace processes.[3]

In this policy brief, we examine five main barriers to women's participation at the peace table and in politics. We also present recommendations to the international community, state actors, civil society organizations, women's rights defenders, and male champions to help create an enabling environment for the full participation of women in all political processes.

Background

The international community has established instruments designed to ensure women's participation in peacebuilding and political life. Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (IC-CPR) stipulates that every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity, without any distinctions to take part in the conduct of public life and to vote and be elected. Article 7 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) requires States to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of a country. Article 10 of the 2003 Maputo

Protocol—that is the Protocol on the Right of Women in Africa—calls on member states to ensure the increased participation of women in the structures and processes for conflict prevention, management, and resolution at local, national, regional, continental, and international levels.[4]

The United Nations highlighted the role of women in peacebuilding as early as 1995 with the passage of the Beijing Platform for Action. Yet in 2000, the Beijing +5 Review of the Beijing declarations indicated that progress for women in gender equality, development and peace had been limited. The document recognized major obstacles to women's participation at all stages of peace processes—pre-conflict, during hostilities, and in post-conflict peacekeeping, peacebuilding, reconciliation, and reconstruction.

It is against this backdrop that the UN Security Council in 2000 adopted the ground-breaking Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security to draw attention to the need for a more gender-representative and responsive security sector, build on best practices, and fill gaps in previous interventions.[5] The resolution addresses how conflict and war differentially affect women and girls, and it recognizes the critical role that women can and do play in peacebuilding. The resolution affirms that peace and security efforts are more sustainable when women are equal partners in the prevention of violent conflict, reconstruction and rebuilding, relief and recovery efforts, and in the forging of lasting peace.[6] It further posits that the presence of women at the decision-making table contributes to international peace and security by observing women's rights as well as providing their safety.

UNSCR 1325 has had a significant impact. In 2008, UN Security Council Resolution 1820 expanded this effort, making explicit the need to integrate gender into security sector reform.[7] Yet challenges to full implementation remain. While the UN resolutions have highlighted how conflict disproportionately affects women, much more needs to be done to roll out the strategies spelled out in the resolutions.

Despite women's positive, active impact on the operational effectiveness of peacebuilding and decision-making efforts in many instances, these international rights-based arguments remain marginal in rhetoric and institutional strategy.[8] Of 1,500 peace and political agreements adopted between 2000 and 2016 globally, only 25 discuss the role of women's engagement in implementation.[9]

Barriers to women's participation in peacebuilding efforts

Systematic inclusion of women in peace and security decisions is not only important to ensuring peace talks produce an end to conflict, but also for ensuring that women's interests are addressed in negotiations. Neglect of women's needs and experiences during negotiations and peacebuilding efforts—which is more likely when women are not at the table—limits the effectiveness of peace and security agreements as well as humanitarian responses.

We identify five main barriers to women's participation in peacebuilding efforts and political life more generally.

First, restrictive gender norms and stereotypes pose a major challenge to women's participation in peacebuilding and reconstruction. While gender roles in times of war may become less fixed and women can gain greater influence, this new space often narrows once the war is officially over.[10] As soldiers return home, gender relations readjust, sometimes violently, as the men reassert their positions in families and communities.[11] The perception that women lack the skills, knowledge, or social status to transform post-conflict situations acts as a barrier for their participation.

Gender norms and stereotypes can lead to discriminatory practices against women that impede the implementation of legislative and normative frameworks that advocate for gender equality. For example, many Nepalese women active in peacebuilding reported that their husbands and other household members questioned them about their whereabouts and their use of money for travel and activities associated with their attempts to engage in peacebuilding initiatives.[12] In sum, restrictive social norms and attitudes that reinforce traditional gender roles make it difficult for women to participate in peacebuilding in a safe, meaningful way.

Second, women often face threats and intimidation when they try to assume leadership roles in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. Hostility from men in positions of power ranges from sexist remarks to threats of violence--sexual violence and outright killings.[13] Such traumatizing experiences often lead women to abandon leadership positions in peacebuilding and political processes, a reality that reinforces the stereotype of women as mere victims of conflict. For example, women in Mozambique, Algeria, Eritrea, Zimbabwe, and Vietnam have faced severe forms of backlash from their communities even after they had secured senior military positions. Women in El Salvador have confronted criticism for challenging gender roles during conflict and subsequently led less public, politically active lives.[14] International Alert, an international, independent peacebuilding organization that operates globally, observes that women of all ages are at greater risk of experiencing violence as they become more civically and socially engaged.[15] The 2018 UN Report on Youth, Peace and Security also concluded that politically active women are far more likely than men, even in peaceful societies, to encounter violent and sexualized intimidation, from verbal abuse to gender-based violence, abduction, or death.[16]

Third, inequitable access to education and resulting low levels of literacy bar women from active participation in peacebuilding around the globe. While it has been noted that women bring many skills to conflict resolution and peacebuilding that do not necessarily require high levels of education, low education levels limit their ability to engage in negotiation and other formal conflict resolution processes.[17] Moreover, grassroots women may feel unable to engage meaningfully when they sit next to more skilled negotiators in roundtable meetings.[18] Less education also translates to less bargaining power for women in home finances and in the labor market.

Fourth, poverty and economic inequality inhibit women's involvement in peacebuilding. Women report that they are unable to engage in peacebuilding activities because of the double burden of their responsibilities inside and outside the home. These burdens often limit the time that women have available to engage in peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts. In some circumstances, women do not have control over the household income. Spouses or male heads of households often have final say in how money is spent—women who want to invest money or bring in extra income may be unable to do so. Thus, many women can only participate in peacebuilding work with the support of a male family member.

Women in post-conflict settings that must support their families often have limited employment opportunities. Most available work for these women is poorly paid, unskilled labor, typically in the informal sector.[19] Gender discrimination in the labor market reduces women's earnings relative to men's and limits their ability to realize economic benefits.[20] Furthermore, women in most African communities do not own land. Consequently, women cannot safeguard their family land from dispossession in the middle and aftermath of conflict. Overall, economic breakdown and high unemployment have an outsized impact on women's ability to find work. Similarly, poor infrastructure increases the burden of women's domestic work and impedes their access to markets, making it more difficult for them to transform assets such as land into economic opportunities.

Fifth, the lack of sustained funding sources for women's community-based organizations presents a substantial obstacle for women's engagement in peacebuilding. In the immediate aftermath of conflict, such organizations may experience an influx of donor funds. However, these funding sources typically dry up after the initial reconstruction phase, leaving women's peacebuilding efforts with no support and forcing them to focus most of their efforts on finding alternative short-term funding.[21]

Recommendations

Women need a voice to articulate their unique perspectives and needs in the aftermath of conflict. If they are not offered a place at the negotiating table, women cannot raise issues arising from conflict that affect them in distinct and significant ways. There is also an urgent need to raise awareness about the frequent and life-threatening violence targeted at women politicians and other women actively involved in politics and public life.[22]

Gender analysis is critical to programming for women's peacebuilding initiatives. Such analysis can help ensure that women are not viewed as victims but are instead given the opportunity to meaningfully contribute to peacebuilding efforts, resource mobilization, reconstruction and rebuilding. Gender analysis can help identify and address inequalities of opportunity, resource allocation, and participation.

Based on the barriers identified above, national and international actors should adopt the following recommendations:

States: All countries should adopt international resolutions and protocols that promote women's participation in decision making at all levels. Strong models of such resolutions are the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa and UNSCR 1325, in addition to national action plans for their implementation. State leaders should also partner with academia to study women's efforts in peacebuilding, civil society, and political leadership so that their policies and procedures are evidence-based and sound.

States and local governments: Local governments should take steps to address violence and threats of violence against women, human rights defenders, and female activists. More often than not, acts of violence directed at women activists and human rights defenders are not recognized as intentional and reprehensible strategies to silence them; rather, they are tolerated due to general societal permissiveness toward violence against women. It is therefore critical for local authorities to protect women so they may participate safely in decision making. Under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), governments are required to take measures to ensure the equity and protection of women in all social, political, economic, and cultural forums. CEDAW and UN Resolution 1325 work hand in glove: The former provides an overarching legal structure for the inclusion and protection of women; the latter enforces gender mainstreaming in peacebuilding and seeks a sustainable structure for the advancement of women more broadly.[23]

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs): In order to better support women's peacebuilding initiatives, CSOs should increase their advocacy efforts, calling upon national governments to create a place for women at the peace table. CSOs can also ramp up efforts to train and empower women to lead peacebuilding efforts and advocate for important issues at the peace table. They should bolster economic empowerment programs and psychosocial support for women as well. By working with local actors, CSOs can facilitate community integration and reconciliation.

Men and Women Leaders: The significance of continuous mentorship and coaching of aspiring women leaders cannot be overstated. Women who occupy leadership positions can play a big role in expanding political participation, provided there are specific spaces and platforms for them to engage other women in confidence building, sharing, and capacity building. Organizing local branches of projects for mentoring women is one way to reach women at the grassroots level and to provide them moral support and practical guidance.

Men also must step up as champions for women's active engagement in peacebuilding and decision making. Because men are culturally well positioned as community leaders, men and women alike tend to be more responsive to their appeals. Men should therefore advocate for inclusion of women in all decision-making processes—in politics, community forums, and in private spaces.

Donors: A longer term mechanism for advancing women's participation is imperative to equitable peacebuilding in post-conflict communities. Funding women's community-based initiatives is crucial to women's peacebuilding efforts. Women-led organizations and those groups and individuals agitating for women's human rights often face funding constrictions that disrupt their peacebuilding activities. In some instances, funding is inconsistent, especially when more efforts are concentrated towards fundraising, thus neglecting peacebuilding activities. The lack of resources only compounds the difficulty such organizations face in getting decisionmakers to take their peacebuilding efforts seriously.

References

1. On average 24 percent of all parliamentarians world-wide are women. See Inter-Parliamentary Union website. 17.7% of all members of governments are women. Women made up 7% of heads of states heads of governments. See also Women In Political Leadership (WPL) website.

2. *Women's Participation in Peace Processes*, (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, January 30, 2019), https://www.cfr.org/report/how-womens-participation-conflict-prevention-and-resolution-advances-us-interests.

3. Jana Krause et al., "Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations and the Durability of Peace," *International Interactions*, Vol. 44, No. 6, 2018.

4. African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, "Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa," 2003. http://www.achpr.org/instruments/women-protocol/ See also Compendium of International Standards for elections. Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union, 2016. https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/compendium-en-n-pdf.pdf.

5. Elisabeth Porter, "Women, Political Decision-Making, and Peace-Building," Global Change, Peace & Security, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2003, pp. 245–62.

6. *What Is UNSCR 1325? An Explanation of the Landmark Resolution on Women, Peace and Security,*" webpage United States Institute of Peace. https://www.usip.org/gender_peacebuilding/about_UNSCR_1325.

7. Ibid.

8. Maria Eriksson Baaz and Mats Utas, "Beyond 'Gender and Stir': Reflections on Gender and SSR in the Aftermath of African Conflicts," Policy Dialogue, No. 9, 2012.

9. C. Bell and K. McNicholl, *Implementation of Gender Provisions in Peace Agreements: An Overview of the PA-X Database* (forthcoming).

10. Following the civil conflict in Liberia, changes in gender roles enabled women to live independently and assume leadership roles in the civil, political, and religious sectors of society. During an interview with a female superintendent, researcher Veronika Fuest reported: "*The war brought a lot of evils, and a lot of good things. It brought out our leadership abilities in women. They think of how to protect their communities, their families; the women show so much ingenuity, creativity.… [T]he war has made an enabling atmosphere for women to strive for leadership.* (Fuest, Veronika, "'This is the Time to Get in Front': Changing Roles and Opportunities for Women in Liberia," *African Affairs*, Vol. 107, Issue 427, pp. 201-224, 2008. At https://ssrn.com/abstract=1436835 or http://dx.doi.org/adn003.') Nevertheless, changes for women in Liberia did not necessarily translate to greater representation at the decision-making table. Challenges remain. For example, according to the Women Legislative Caucus report 2018 in Liberia, only 11 out of 103 legislators in Liberia are women, and there are two women in the cabinet. Liberia's experience illustrates that women can be experienced actors in peacebuilding processes while nonetheless remaining in less visible roles than men and better represented at community levels than "at the table."

11. Their Gains and Their Losses," in Sheila Meintjes et al., eds., *The Aftermath: Women in Post-Conflict Transformation* (London: Zed Books, 2001), pp. 19–34.

12. Ivan Cardona et al., *From the Ground Up: Women's Roles in Local Peacebuilding in Afghanistan, Liberia, Nepal, Pakistan and Sierra Leone*, (Johannesburg: ActionAid, Womankind & IDS, September 2012).

13. Access to justice also remains a significant challenge for women. There are often few avenues for redress from sexual harassment and assault. Access low cost legal services is often not available. The process is generally quite lengthy and emotional for the survivors, most of whom lack the financial resources to see the entire process through. In some instances, survivors and witnesses are threatened by their perpetrators leaving them vulnerable to reprisal attacks. In addition, informal mediations by local authorities often overlooks the dignity of the victims and survivors.

14. Donna Pankhurst, *Gendered Peace: Women's Struggles for Post War Justice and Reconciliation*, (Abingdon: Routledge Publishers, 2007)

15. " 'Stop Violence against Women in Politics' Urges the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Its Causes and Consequences," Press Release (Geneva: UNHCR, June 21, 2016), https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21652&LangID=E.

16. Graeme Simpson, *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth, Peace, and Security*, (New York: UN Populations Fund and Peacebuilding Support Office Secretariat, 2018).

17. *Equal Power Lasting Power; Lasting Peace Obstacles for Women's Participation in Peace Processes* (2012) http://www.equalpowerlastingpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Equal-Power_print.pdf.

18. Ecoma Alaga, "Challenges for Women in Peacebuilding in West Africa," *Asia Policy Brief*, No. 18, 2010.

19. ActionAid, Womankind & IDS, *From the ground up Women's roles in local peacebuilding in Afghanistan, Liberia, Nepal, Pakistan and Sierra Leone*, September 2012. See also "World Conferences on Women," webpage (New York: UN Women), accessed February 7, 2019, http://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/intergovernmental-support/world-conferences-on-women.

20. Rekha Mehra et al., *Fulfilling the Beijing Commitment: Reducing Poverty, Enhancing Women's Economic Options*, (Washington DC: International Center for Research on Women, 2000).

21. Sarah Douglas, *Expert's Take: Is Funding for Gender-Responsive Peacebuilding Pie in the Sky?* (New York: UN Women.,July 2012), http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2016/7/experts-take-is-funding-for-gender-responsive-peacebuilding-pie-in-the-sky.

22. " 'Stop Violence against Women in Politics' Urges the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Its Causes and Consequences," press release (Geneva: UNHCR, June 21, 2016), https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21652&LangID=E.

23. Shelly Inglis et al., *CEDAW and Security Council Resolution 1325: A Quick Guide*, (New York: United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2006).

Authors:

Dr. Pearl Karuhanga Atuhaire is a SGBV Programme Specialist at UN Women Liberia. She holds a PhD in Public Administration: Peace and Conflict Studies from the Durban University of Technology, South Africa and a Masters' degree in International Relations and Diplomatic Studies from Makerere University, Uganda. She is a 2017 WIIS Next Generation GPS Fellow.

Ms. Grace Ndirangu is an Economic Inclusion Manager with a humanitarian agency in Nairobi working with urban refugees. Grace is an MSc candidate in Governance, Peace and Security at the African Nazarene University in Nairobi. She is a 2017 WIIS Next Generation GPS Fellow.

RECENT WIIS PUBLICATIONS

POLICYbrief

ABOUT WIIS

Women In International Security (WIIS) is the premier organization in the world dedicated to advancing the leadership and professional development of women in the field of international peace and security. WIIS (pronounced "wise") sponsors leadership training, mentoring, and networking programs as well as substantive events focused on current policy problems. WIIS also supports research projects and policy engagement initiatives on critical international security issues, including the nexus between gender and security.

To learn more about WIIS and become a member, please visit http://wiisglobal.org/.

WIIS | WOMEN IN INTERNATIONAL SECURITY