

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PEACE PROCESSES

– HENRI MYRTTINEN, HEAD OF GENDER
TEAM, INTERNATIONAL ALERT

INTRODUCTION

Recently, I had the privilege of attending a workshop for women involved, in one capacity or another, with the Myanmar peace process, where parties to the National Ceasefire Agreement and resultant Political Dialogue have agreed to a non-binding quota of 30 per cent women's inclusion. While this was a potentially important step towards a more inclusive peace process, the experiences of the women in the room highlighted the obstacles that they have encountered throughout the process.¹ These obstacles are not new, and addressing them was one of the aims of the United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security, passed in 2000.

Last year, the UN commissioned a Global Study in preparation for a High Level Review of progress on the goals of UNSCR 1325 on the occasion of its 15th anniversary.² In spite of some advances, on the whole both the study and the review paint a sobering picture of women's increased participation in peace processes. While increasingly gender-sensitive language is being integrated into peace agreements, the review finds that:

“[t]he most challenging gap that remains concerns the participation of women in peace processes and post-conflict political transitions, even as empirical evidence reveals a strong connection between the inclusion of women in peace processes and more durable and stable peace.”

A closer look at the figures summarised in the Global Study underscores the extent of these challenges: since the adoption of resolution 1325, only 27 per cent of peace agreements have referenced women, and in 31 major peace processes between 1992 and 2011, only nine per cent of negotiators were women.³ A study by Conciliation Resources found that between August 2008 and March 2012, women were signatories of only two of 61 peace agreements.⁴

While the gaps in women's participation remain significant, there is a growing body of strong evidence to show that including women in peace processes as negotiators,

1 See also 'Women, Peace and Security Policymaking in Myanmar, Context Analysis and Recommendations', Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process, 2015.

2 'High-Level Review of SC Resolution 1325 (2000): From Rhetoric to Effective Results', UN Security Council, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1rQkHjZ>.

3 'A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325', UN Women, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1WIMG7J>.

4 'Women and Peace Processes', Conciliation Resources, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1P5trvZ>.

mediators, signatories and in other roles makes such processes more successful and sustainable.⁵ However, simply having women in the room is not enough. Women need to be able to participate effectively, be heard and have their inputs taken seriously. The barriers faced by women against having their voices heard and their contributions given due consideration on issues of war and peace are conceptual, structural and practical, and tackling them will require not only supporting women, but also critically engaging with men.

CONCEPTUAL BARRIERS

A key barrier to women's active participation is that in the vast majority of societies, political participation and particularly issues of war and peace have historically been viewed as male domains, and often continue to be perceived as such. Politics in general is often viewed as a violent and dangerous field unsuited to women, while the business of war, and therefore of peace, is often only seen as pertaining to men with guns. Women and girls are seen as extraneous to these issues, even though they are directly and indirectly affected by violent conflict, as well as contribute to perpetuating or ending violent conflict, in ways as diverse as men and boys. In spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary and an obligation under UNSCR 1325 to do otherwise, many of those involved in designing, funding, hosting and participating in peace processes, especially 'Track One', i.e. official governmental level peace processes, have systematically kept, and continue to keep, women and women's groups at a distance. The current Syrian negotiations are a case in point.

When women's voices are heard, their contribution is often limited to merely symbolic roles, either as a homogenous category of victims, as in the case of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Great Lakes region, or as 'innate peacebuilders', as for example in Liberia. In both cases, their gendered, tightly circumscribed roles as 'beautiful souls' foreclosed any possibility of taking part in the more fundamental political and economic discussions that have as great an impact on women's lives as they do on men's.⁶

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

The erroneous conceptualisation of war and conflict as being pre-eminently or exclusively male domains, and the essentialising of women as only either victims or peacebuilders, leads to direct structural barriers to women's participation. Even where women have played major and visible roles, as supporters or active combatants, their participation is often air-brushed out of public narratives of conflict by various actors, and their roles either downplayed or rendered invisible. This leads to a reinforcing of the male domination of armed groups, be they state or non-state, and of their political representatives, since having fought in conflict is often an unstated prerequisite for participation in peace processes. Thus, the combatant parties, their political

⁵ 'Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations', Jana Krause and Piia Bränfors, Unpublished Working Paper, Geneva Graduate Institute, 2015; 'Beyond the Normative: Can Women's Inclusion Really Make for Better Peace Processes?', Thania Paffenholz, Geneva Graduate Institute, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1lusZeP>.

⁶ 'Gender audit of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of Congo and the region', Mireia Cano Vinas, International Alert, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1UPQiha>; 'Post-conflict women's movements in turmoil: the challenges of success in Liberia in the 2005-aftermath', Petra Debusscher and Maria Martin De Almagro, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 2: 2016.

wings and, in spite of advances over past years, the international machinery supporting negotiations, remain a man's world, especially as far as Track One diplomacy is concerned. Most often, women have simply not been promoted to the positions necessary for taking part in discussions.

As participation in official channels is often blocked to women, they tend to be more active in so-called 'Track Two', i.e. non-governmental, processes. As indicative research shows, these efforts are often crucial to long-term stability and durable peace processes, giving life and substance to Track One agreements, something also highlighted by the UN High Level Review.⁷ For this to be more effective, however, the two tracks need to be brought closer together, and particularly, more input needs to flow from the broader, more inclusive non-governmental efforts into governmental processes.

PRACTICAL BARRIERS

Women who seek to participate in peace processes are often faced with a whole range of practical barriers.

In addition to conceptual and structural barriers, women who seek to participate in peace processes are often faced with a whole range of practical barriers. By way of example, Thin Lei Win recounts the obstacles faced by the seven per cent of women out of 700 delegates at the first Myanmar Union Peace Conference in early 2016: female delegates' contributions were left out of the minutes, men were dismissive of women's contributions and referred to delegates as 'girls', there was a lack of child care facilities, and women were informed at extremely short notice of events.⁸ These are not unique to this process. In our research, we have also repeatedly come across male-dominated, or even exclusively male, informal networks that make decisions in parallel to official processes and use informal communication channels that exclude women.

As in other professional contexts, if and when women do participate, they are often required to display a far higher level of expertise than male colleagues. If they gain access through a quota system, this is often held against them. Furthermore, politically active women are far more likely than men, even in peaceful societies, to be subjected to violent and sexualised intimidation, ranging from verbal or physical abuse to gender-based violence, abduction or death.

A NEED FOR A NEW PERSPECTIVE

If these factors that continue to conspire to keep women and women's voices out of peace negotiations can be addressed, better, more comprehensive, more inclusive and more durable peace settlements should result. Some of the steps that can be taken are relatively easy, such as ensuring that everyone is informed of processes on time and that child care is provided for those, almost always women, who are expected to take care of children. Quotas are an extremely effective tool to increase diversity and inclusiveness, but the evidence is clear: they work, and work well, when enabled by other elements that allow for effective participation, such as continuous training of delegates and gender caucuses, and when it is ensured that women are not put forward only as proxies of more powerful men. Challenges can be counteracted by increasing the role of civil society

⁷ 'Women Leading Peace: Women's Political Participation in Peace Processes', Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1O3fLzF>; 'Women Transforming Conflict - A Quantitative Analysis of Female Peacemaking', Laurel Stone, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1TEM5xN>; Krause and Bränfors, op. cit., UN High Level Review, op. cit.

⁸ 'Peace process quota no guarantee for women's participation', Thin Lei Win, Myanmar Now, 15 February 2016, <http://bit.ly/24rOd2W>.

actors. Women need to be able to participate, not merely in roles as symbolic victims or peacemakers, and not only on so-called 'women's issues', but on the whole spectrum of questions around peace and security, as these affect men and women alike, but differently.

Importantly, merely having more and more active women in peace processes is not enough. If the only women participating are external facilitators or guarantors from international agencies, and there is no local buy-in for gender-sensitive language, peace agreements are likely to fail. It is important to have local women, from combatant parties and civil society, involved, and, at the risk of stating the very obvious, it should be kept in mind that not all women will have the same goals or even be interested in promoting gender equality.⁹

Finally, to ensure increased women's participation requires a critical engagement with men and their masculinities in peace processes. Men's conceptualisations of politics, war and peace as being strictly male domains need to be challenged, along with men's attitudes and practices that actively and passively hinder increased women's participation. This is not a zero-sum game where men lose when women gain, and vice-versa; rather, it is a process where both sides stand to gain, but it requires an initial step of relinquishing some male privilege. In brief, to increase women's participation will require the adoption of a broader, deeper and more comprehensive understanding of gender in peace and security, in which neither women nor men are seen as homogenous categories; where the various roles played by men and women in war and peace are recognised; and where the transformation of certain unhelpful gendered dynamics is taken seriously as a prerequisite for building peace.

9 Georgetown Institute, op. cit.; Stone, op. cit.