

Expert analysis

From the forefront of peace and reconciliation: testimonies from women building peace¹

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Judith Gardner and Judy El-Bushra co-edited, *Somalia – the untold story: the war through the eyes of Somali women* (CIIR & Pluto Press 2004)

This publication brings together nine case studies of women's peacebuilding from Conciliation Resources' Accord publication series. The Accord series informs and strengthens peace processes by documenting and analysing practical lessons of peacebuilding, looking at both specific conflicts and common peacebuilding themes. Each publication presents a range of experiences and insights from local and international practitioners and experts. Many have included case studies of women's peacebuilding efforts, and it is these that are collected and analysed here.

The case studies document women's peacebuilding practice, the challenges and opportunities they faced, and the lessons they have drawn from their experiences. They cover a period from 1998 to 2010, and describe women's involvement in peace processes as far apart as Bougainville and Sierra Leone, Aceh and Northern Ireland. They show how women have been specific targets of violence, and also how they have participated in it – as combatants and supporters of armed resistance. Most importantly, the case studies demonstrate women's contribution to mediation and reconciliation. They depict women in different contexts taking varying approaches to peacebuilding – some local, some national; some political, some non-political.

Women, peace and security: global policy developments

The international policy environment has seen significant shifts regarding women, peace and security over recent decades. Milestones in policy evolution include:

BOX 1

Gender & peacebuilding

Gender relations – the way men and women live together in society – underlie many of the women's experiences documented in the case studies. A gender lens recognises that women and men are differently affected by armed conflict, violence and peace, and play different roles in relation to them. Although these roles vary from place to place, women's experiences of conflict and violence often mean that they have different views on what peace should mean and how it should be built. The focus on women in this volume does not overlook the need for a gender analysis of peace and conflict, but complements it. A reflection on women's actual experiences of peacebuilding helps identify the gaps in policy and practice, and the ways in which women's peace practice can be better supported and incorporated into peace initiatives.

- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979
- The Beijing Conference on Women (1995), which identifies women and armed conflict as one of twelve priority areas for action
- UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (2000) mandating member states to protect women and girls in war and to promote their participation in peace negotiations

¹ Adapted from a line in a poem by Anab Xasan, peace activist, Puntland, Somalia, quoted in Faiza Mohamed's article 'Somali women and peacebuilding'

BOX 2

Accord case studies of women's experiences of peacebuilding

Accord publication	Case study title & author
Issue 5 (1998) Safeguarding peace: Cambodia's constitutional challenge	Mu Sochua Cambodian women in politics: breaking through the traditional image
Issue 9 (2000) Paying the price: the Sierra Leone peace process	Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff Sierra Leonean women and the peace process
Issue 11 (2002) Protracted conflict, elusive peace: initiatives to end the violence in northern Uganda	Rosalba Oywa Women's contribution to peacebuilding in northern Uganda
Issue 12 (2002) Weaving consensus: the Papua New Guinea – Bougainville peace process	Lorraine Garasu The role of women in promoting peace and reconciliation
Issue 13 (2002) Owning the process: public participation in peacemaking	Kate Fearon Northern Ireland's Women's Coalition: institutionalising a political voice and ensuring representation
Issue 15 (2004) From military peace to social justice? The Angolan peace process	Henda Ducados Angolan women in the aftermath of conflict
Issue 18 (2006) Peace by piece: addressing Sudan's conflicts	Anne Itto Guests at the table? The role of women in Sudan's peace processes
Issue 20 (2008) Reconfiguring politics: the Indonesia-Aceh peace process	Suraiya Kamaruzzaman Agents for change: the roles of women in Aceh's peace process
Issue 21 (2009) Whose peace is it anyway? Connecting Somali and international peacemaking	Faiza Jama Somali women and peacebuilding

- UNSCR 1820 (2008) identifying sexual violence as a potential war crime and calling for an end to impunity for it

The UNSCR 1325 framework in particular has succeeded in prioritising women's participation on the international peace and security agenda, and has linked protection and participation concerns. It acknowledges that women and men experience conflict and its consequences differently; that women play important roles in relation to peace and security, often at the grass roots level; and that women face various barriers (cultural, social, political and economic) to participating in official peace and security efforts.

Since the adoption of UNSCR 1325, the international system has further developed conceptual frameworks that address the specific concerns of women in conflict, and these have been widely accepted throughout the international system. Concerns such as sexual violence in war, women's political participation, and the appointment of women to mediation teams have been accorded an increasingly higher profile internationally.

In 2004 the UN Security Council urged member states to develop National Action Plans (NAPs) to implement Resolutions 1325 and 1820. As of February 2013, 37 such NAPs were in place worldwide. More broadly, international organisations, governments and other authorities have

been drawing up policy documents, setting up institutional machinery, and initiating capacity-building projects around these resolutions.

These developments have made women's rights in conflict-affected settings more visible. However this is often separate from mainstream, official 'post-conflict' and 'fragile states' work. As a result it is often difficult to see the impact of policy initiatives in practice, and many women's rights activists still feel that women are largely excluded from political processes. A report by UN WOMEN in 2012 (*Women's participation in peace negotiations: Connections between presence and influence*) assessing the impact of Resolution 1325, found that 'a limited but reasonably representative sample of 31 major peace processes between 1992 and 2011 reveals that only 4 per cent of signatories, 2.4 per cent of chief mediators, 3.7 per cent of witnesses and 9 per cent of negotiators are women'. The report also refers to another survey which found that only 92 (16 per cent) of 585 peace agreements since 1990 contained at least one reference to women or gender.

The UN itself acknowledges the lack of progress, even within its own structures, and especially in bringing women into formal peace negotiations. In 2010 the UN Secretary-General introduced a 'Seven-Point Plan' to track progress on women's participation in peacebuilding. The plan required that

'UN entities take more systematic action to ensure women's participation in and the availability of gender expertise to peace processes'.

The challenge therefore is how to translate the international commitment manifested in Resolutions 1325 and 1820 into real changes for women on the ground. This collection of Accord case studies suggests that one of the most effective strategies for achieving this is to support women's own varied and broad-ranging peacebuilding initiatives and capacities.

What do women do for peace?

The nine Accord case studies demonstrate the range of peacebuilding activities women have carried out in their respective contexts. As the case studies illustrate, there are many similarities across the nine country contexts. At the same time, they show how women's priorities and actions vary depending on the phase of the conflict, and how they are influenced by social and cultural factors, such as class and rural or urban settings, and by their political orientations.

Women are not always united in their peacebuilding initiatives. For example, in Angola poor women in both urban and rural communities faced immediate practical problems that constrained their ability to unite. More privileged women were more inclined to engage politically, but they were divided politically according to their views in favour of or against the government's policy framework for women.

The peacebuilding roles women have played include:

Humanitarian and social welfare

During conflict, many women take up roles normally assigned to men, as breadwinners and protectors of their families. Outside their own families they play humanitarian roles in the community: providing food, clothing, and medicines to families in distress. In Cambodia women ran a literacy campaign, took care of war orphans, and set up a national network of co-operative groups to maintain the local economy. In Aceh they buried the dead in the absence of men, and kept religious observance going through Koranic recitation. Women in Somalia promoted security by taking down roadblocks.

Peacebuilding and mediation (both formal and informal)

All nine case studies describe how women peace activists sought to bring an end to violence. The approaches they used included engaging locally with elders, commanders and warlords to advocate clemency and negotiated settlements. They spoke out against violence, and persuaded family members to put down arms and return home. They negotiated between warring parties and maintained contact with other women across divides.

In general women used all the resources they could muster to achieve influence over peace processes, including holding prayer meetings, marches and vigils, and circulating petitions against violence. Some – as alluded to in the Sudan case study – withheld sexual services from their partners or shamed authorities into negotiating by appearing naked in public demonstrations.

Women in Somalia deployed their traditional skill in poetry to move male elders and political negotiators towards reconciliation. Women in southern Sudan continued to communicate with each other after the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) underwent a serious split, thus making later reconciliation possible.

Organised women's groups in Bougainville, Northern Ireland, Sierra Leone and Aceh deliberated on the politics of formal peace negotiations and drew up written submissions proposing ways forward. Women in Bougainville and Sudan lobbied for peace in the highest councils in the land, and went further to lobby the international community in Sydney and New York. The Sierra Leone Women's Forum advocated for conflict prevention when it argued in favour of democratic rule as the main guarantor of peace and pushed for elections in 1996. Some women, including authors Anne Itto in the Sudan and Kate Fearon in Northern Ireland, took part in officially sponsored peace negotiations, though unfortunately they remain exceptions.

Human rights: advocacy and awareness raising

The women whose work is depicted in this volume were instrumental in bringing human rights violations to national and international attention both during and after violence, including publicising abuses to the international community.

In northern Uganda the local NGO People's Voice for Peace carried out research and documentation projects which provided material for use in advocacy campaigns, as well as giving its members a deeper understanding of conflict dynamics. Somali women were influential in setting up the country's first human rights monitoring organisation, the Peace and Human Rights Network. Women in Uganda monitored and reported on rights violations by both government troops and rebel militias, and campaigned for the return of abducted schoolgirls. The Women's National Coalition in Northern Ireland adopted equality, human rights and inclusion as their guiding principles and sought to exemplify these principles in all their work.

In the post-settlement phase, women have continued to press for broader social change on a rights based agenda. The Organisation of Angolan Women (OMA) pushed for the introduction of a Family Code, which recognised consensual unions as marriage, protected the rights of children born out of wedlock, and encouraged fair division of responsibilities within the family.

Promoting women's rights and political participation

Women's goals in peacebuilding have been both to improve society in general and to improve women's position within that society. They have often viewed these two goals as inseparable. Across the case studies, women's organisations promoted women's rights and opened up discussion about subjects of concern to them, including some that had previously been taboo, such as customary marriage and abortion.

These goals have also meant encouraging women to get involved in local and national politics. In Cambodia women addressed domestic violence and lobbied for women's rights in the new constitution. In Uganda women activists advocated for women to be adopted as candidates in elections. Sudanese women lobbied for their participation in formal peace



Cambodian women from Boeung Kak community shout slogans during a march on International Women's Day in Phnom Penh on March 2012 // © TANG CHHIN SOTHY/AFP/Getty Images

negotiations. Women from southern Sudan, who became disillusioned with unfulfilled promises about participation in negotiations, offered advice based on their own experiences to their counterparts in Darfur (the eventual Darfur peace agreement in 2006 recognised gender-based violence and recommended women's involvement in the drafting of legislation). In Angola, Northern Ireland and Sierra Leone, women deliberately promoted an inclusive and non-partisan approach to politics, ensuring that the widest range of voices would be heard, including those of women from different factions, classes and areas of the country.

Social and economic reconstruction

The women activists described in the case studies identified a range of changes they wanted to promote as part of the preparations for the new society that they hoped would emerge after the war. Women in Cambodia and Somalia, for example, were active members of emerging civil societies and founded their countries' earliest civil society organisations and networks. In Uganda, some women became active in local government, while others ran reception centres for returning ex-combatants, or promoted reconciliation by campaigning for the re-constitution of cultural institutions. Women's organisations in Bougainville developed new roles in literacy, health, and education, and aimed to build the capacity of their own organisations. Women in Somalia were active in encouraging young men to demobilise and provided them with micro-credit to prevent a return to violence.

What 'added value' do women bring?

Bringing inclusivity into peacebuilding

The range of women's peace activities is broad and has expanded the scope of peacebuilding itself. As Accord author Anne Itto pointed out in 2006, many mainstream peace actors

see peace as a process of settling national and regional power contests between elites. In contrast, women peace activists tend to work towards a vision in which peace is a just society; one where political participation is inclusive and where the security and needs of the whole population are adequately and equally addressed. Their specific experiences of suffering during conflict – both directly and through the suffering of their families and associates whom they support – have led them to work to address a wide range of psychosocial, relational, spiritual as well as political and economic dimensions of conflict transformation.

The consequence of women's exclusion from peace processes is therefore not only the gender-blind nature of peace agreements, and the absence of gender-based targets in post-conflict settlements, but also a broader lack of concern in peace processes for inclusivity. It is not just women who suffer as a result of this but society at large. As Henda Ducados from Angola tellingly suggests, there is a need to 're-adjust gender relations to the needs of both women and men, as a fundamental component of the long-term process of peaceful and sustainable development'.

Capitalising on women's traditional roles

Even though the stereotype of women as 'natural' peacemakers is difficult to sustain given their multiple roles in conflict contexts, it is clear that for women peace activists, their identity as women gives them qualities that bring something special to their work. The stereotype is not without its uses – the widespread perception of women as natural nurturers has given them small windows of opportunity to achieve their goals, and they have been willing to deploy these advantages where they can.

Much that the women in the Accord case studies accomplished would not have been achievable for men, in whom support for peace initiatives has often been viewed as either a weakness or a threat to those in power. Women can wield the 'power of the powerless': as a Bougainville peace activist explained when describing how she had stood up to soldiers at a roadblock, 'If we had involved men there would have been trouble'.

In many societies women have specific functions in relation to decision-making about conflict and peace, often wielding sanctions against men for being more – or less – bent on violence than the women thought right. In societies as far apart as Sudan and India it has been traditional for women to step into battlefields between opposing forces when they saw the need to bring an end to fighting. Case studies from Bougainville and Somalia describe how women used their special status (in Bougainville their role as custodians of the land, and in Somalia their position as privileged channels of communication between clans) to mediate, entreat and exert influence.

Women at the forefront of civil society

The case studies show that women have been at the heart of the emergence of civil society movements both during and after the violence. Mu Sochua of Cambodia, for example, founded Khemara, Cambodia's first indigenous NGO. In Northern Ireland the Civic Forum that was set up as part of the 1998 Belfast Agreement was the brainchild of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC).

Faiza Jama describes how in Somalia the establishment of the Peace and Human Rights Network was the outcome of a conference organised in 1997 by the Coalition for Grassroots Women's Organisations. Rosalba Oywa depicts the role played in peace advocacy by People's Voice for Peace, an early example of civil society in northern Uganda established mainly by women. These women's organisations focused on defending women's rights, but at the same time were actively campaigning for and supporting change that would benefit the whole society.

A different sort of politics

The case studies present examples of women peace activists seeking to operate through a different sort of politics – a politics based on inclusivity and consensus as opposed to the adversarial confrontation and mutual recrimination that characterised existing political relations in their contexts.

- In Northern Ireland, where sectarian political groupings were the norm, the NIWC was established as a political party with membership drawn from the two conflicting communities. It ensured that both nationalist and loyalist women were present throughout the all-party talks that led to the signing of the Belfast Agreement, and made sure its policy proposals were acceptable to both its nationalist and unionist members.
- The women's perspective articulated by the Sierra Leone Women's Forum (SLWF) was deliberately non-partisan, while both the government and the rebels were committed to entrenched positions. At first the government dismissed the women as rebel sympathisers but eventually accepted their legitimacy. By presenting peace as a 'neutral'

BOX 3

How the NIWC influenced the Northern Ireland peace process

Adapted from: Institute for Inclusive Security, 'Bringing women into peace negotiations', *Strategies for Policymakers*, No. 2, October 2009

The NIWC played an important role in shaping the Belfast Agreement. Party members brought health and social issues to the forefront of the agenda. They broadened the talks to include topics of interest to marginalised groups other than women and fought for recognition of the rights and needs of victims of violence. NIWC delegates applied principles of inclusion, equality and respect for human rights when developing positions, and argued that a workable solution needed to be based on values and common ground, not fixed positions. They also had an important impact on the formal negotiations; by remaining impartial, the women built trust and broke down communication barriers. NIWC delegates established close relationships with other parties, and as a result of its influence and approach, it had more of its issues and proposals included in the final document than any other party.

The peace process benefited from their participation through:

- Bridges built among negotiating parties. Using their access to full effect, the NIWC delegates served as facilitators for the negotiations, encouraged political opponents to work together, and promoted novel solutions as well as consensus building.
- Increased awareness of prisoners' rights. The NIWC successfully pushed for the agreement to include accelerated release and reintegration of political prisoners.
- Emphasis on victims and youth in reconciliation. The NIWC secured language on victims' rights in the agreement, and argued that young people required particular attention. The agreement acknowledged that addressing the suffering of victims was a necessary element of reconciliation and committed to supporting development of special community-based initiatives to help young victims of violence.
- Promotion of social goals, including integrated education and mixed housing. During the peace talks, the NIWC argued for safer communities and ensured that the agreement included provisions for the support of integrated education and mixed housing.
- More comprehensive dialogue. The NIWC proposed a Civic Forum to ensure that the inclusive process continued beyond the negotiations. Comprising business, trade unions and other civic sectors, the forum was created to consult with the new Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly on economic, social and cultural issues.
- Protection of women's political rights. The agreement's human rights section included a clause calling for 'the right of women to full and equal political participation'.

option, the SLWF contributed to a climate in which both government and rebels could agree to negotiations without losing face. The SLWF felt able to challenge the military rulers when other civil society organisations would have been perceived as a threat.

In these cases women activists created an environment in which women were acknowledged as legitimate political participants, and at the same time raised the profile of peace activism, which, as in the case of Sierra Leone, had previously been viewed as a 'fifth column' aiming to undermine the government.

The studies show that women have sometimes been able to change the nature and culture of politics, at least for a certain length of time. The NIWC in Northern Ireland is probably the most significant example of this, and remains a model to which many other movements aspire (see Box 3). However, it is important not to overstate the influence women have had in changing political cultures; more often than not the barriers they face to entering politics and achieving change are considerable.

Women as political actors – what are the challenges?

Given the extent and significance of women's peace activism it is surprising how uniformly women have been excluded from formal peace processes. UN WOMEN's 2012 report *Women's participation in peace negotiations* provides countless examples of women being excluded from the peace table by national leaders and the international community alike. International, as well as national, organisations employ minimal numbers of women as mediators.

The nine Accord case studies uniformly attest to this pattern. To give just two examples:

- Although Bougainville women hold an important position in society and specific social responsibilities, their extensive peace work ran in parallel to official negotiations rather than being integrated into them. Women acquired almost no positions in post-conflict institutions such as the Bougainville People's Congress.
- Somali women lobbied clan elders to sustain dialogue in a series of negotiations over clan conflict in Somaliland in the mid-1990s, supporting peace conferences as fundraisers and even as cooks. Though some women were eventually allowed to attend the conferences as observers, they were denied voting rights.

It is not just the negotiating table that women are excluded from, but also the post-conflict settlement in general (the two are, of course, linked). For example, in Somalia, Puntland and Somaliland, agreements on quotas for women in post-war parliaments have been progressively downgraded.

The Angolan case study refers to the problem of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration arrangements in which women – and especially women who were attached to armed groups but did not carry arms – were typically not counted, nor provided with demobilisation support, in spite of their entitlement in international policy (note that a similar constraint applies to children).

Why are women excluded from peace processes?

The case studies suggest several reasons for the failure to include women in peace processes, including their inexperience of formal political engagement and the practical difficulties of sustaining a non-partisan position based on broad consultation.

Henda Ducados of Angola, for example, accepts that women's civil society organisations are comparatively weak, which reflects the elite dominance of Angolan civil society generally. Anne Itto, in Sudan, remarks that meetings were often called at short notice, giving women inadequate time to confer among each other and present consensus.

Women face a number of other impediments that relate less to organisation and more to public perceptions. It is these public perceptions that present the most obvious challenges to participation. As many of the case studies emphasise, women are often seen as passive victims rather than active participants in decision-making processes. There is a perception that it is only men who engage in violence and it is they who should therefore determine the peace.

In southern Sudan thousands of women joined the armed struggle, as combatants and as providers of support to fighters. Yet their involvement was overlooked and they were not seen as appropriate participants for negotiations.

Anne Itto identifies the following manifestations of such attitudes in the case of Sudan:

- Lack of confidence in women's capacity to fill political positions
- Belief that power-sharing is the preserve of those who had participated directly in hostilities (the assumption being that these are men)
- The promotion by male leaders of customs and traditions that marginalise women
- Lack of commitment to implementing provisions of agreements pertaining to women's participation
- Peace agreements built around political and regional interests, rather than bringing in other constituencies to share power and resources.

Opportunities for political engagement

The nine Accord case studies show the range of ways women have seized opportunities for political engagement and their varying degrees of success.

- In Sierra Leone, Jasmin Jusu-Sheriff points out that women initially succeeded in influencing political decision-making by effectively arguing for democratic elections to be held in 1996. Once a civilian government was sworn in, however, members of the Women's Forum drew back from seeking further political engagement on the grounds that their immediate peacebuilding goal had been attained. In her analysis, Jusu-Sheriff argues that one factor that held them back was the lack of an 'ideological framework' or a 'clear and consistent long-term vision'.
- Kate Fearon describes how the NIWC became a political force by forming a political party of its own. In its political engagement the NIWC attempted to foster consensus and dialogue, thereby promoting a political culture that 'worked to accommodate difference, instead of throwing up obstacles based on those differences'.
- In Aceh, Suraiya Kamaruzzaman shows how women were poorly represented in post-settlement national political structures, but subsequently developed a lobbying mechanism through the Women's Peace Network



A paralegal for Timbur Justice greets an on-duty police officer at Bo central station, Sierra Leone, 2011 // © Aubrey Wade

(established in 2005) and the Gender Working Group. This monitored policies and legislation, and lobbied to ensure women's interests were taken into account, albeit with little direct representation in the actual corridors of power.

- The Angola case study raises the issue of differences between women in terms of their political goals. Whereas some saw the establishment of the Ministry for Family and Women, for example, as a positive step forward in creating political space for women, others argued that it reflected a patriarchal view of women's social roles, and sought to distance the women's agenda from core government policy.

The case studies also show that when women were blocked in their attempts to influence post-settlement politics they developed roles in social activism. For example Lorraine Garasu shows how women's NGOs in Bougainville began focusing on literacy, reproductive health, education and combating violence against women, as well as small business training and capacity building for women and women's organisations.

Conclusion: lessons learned and challenges for policymakers and practitioners

What is the most effective way of translating commitments to the women, peace and security agenda into reality for women on the ground? This collection of Accord case studies suggests that the answer lies in supporting women's own varied and broad-ranging peacebuilding initiatives and capacities. Spanning three continents and more than a decade, the case studies present strikingly similar experiences. They demonstrate that women's peace activism covers a huge range, from humanitarian to economic, from rights advocacy to mediation and negotiation. These add value to mainstream peace processes because they derive from real life experiences rather than from political power play.

The case studies demonstrate women's resilience and their capacity to use what leverage their social and cultural positions allow to influence those set on violence. However, while underlining the capacity of women to mobilise and organise for peace, they also point to their marginalisation and exclusion from peace processes, political settlements, and post-conflict political forums. As a result of this exclusion, most peace agreements are gender-blind, failing to pay special attention to gender-specific concerns or to recognise women's contributions to peace.

Challenges and lessons for women peace activists and organisations

Many of the constraints women peace activists face are practical ones. These include the costs – in time and money – of organising and sustaining an inclusive and consultative approach, as well as women's general lack of familiarity with the practice of advocacy.

The biggest challenge, however, concerns political engagement – in formal political processes but also the politics of engagement in decision-making generally, whether at household and community or national levels or within civil society movements.

For peace to be sustainable it requires structural change towards greater levels of inclusion and participation. This means going beyond expressing women's immediate and practical needs or simply promoting quotas. New political structures and practices are needed in which the involvement of women as decision-makers is accepted as legitimate and normal.

What lessons can be learned about women's involvement in political processes? A key strategy used by the women

described in this volume was to play a neutral and facilitating role.

The NIWC developed a broad agenda and supported the rights of marginalised groups, whether men or women. They formed alliances with other parties in the negotiations, whom they were then able to influence, and took on the politically neutral role of upholding procedures and processes. In this way they helped define common ground between otherwise polarised positions.

Similarly, women in Sierra Leone gained influence by being perceived as politically neutral. Women in Angola who took part in peacebuilding platforms rather than political parties found that this enabled them to present a united front. Bougainville women attending the Sandline talks in Burnham in 1997 also found that unity, in spite of their different political affiliations, enabled them to influence talks more effectively.

Ensuring strong links between national-level representatives and their grass-roots supporters was another key strategy, and one adopted successfully by the Angolan women's organisation OMA as well as by women in Sierra Leone and Sudan. In Aceh, women's organisations took this strategy one step further by promoting political education at the grass roots to ensure that the general population was familiar with government and international policies (and the budgets attached to them).

As the case studies show, evidence about women's capacity to influence the political process is contradictory. The NIWC did exert a positive influence on key political decision-making, raising issues such as victim rights, which would not have been addressed by the main protagonists. Yet women often lacked the confidence to confront experienced political actors and felt more comfortable influencing situations indirectly.

In weighing up the risks and challenges attached to political engagement, some women, including those in Sierra Leone, have felt that gradual change is more secure – and incurs less resistance – than radical change.

But, as Anne Itto describes in Sudan, a pragmatic approach may simply privilege the warring parties, no matter how culpable they were during the war and even if they represent past institutions whose interests are threatened by the notion of inclusivity. Once fixed, decisions agreed early on in peace negotiations can be hard to influence later.

The Aceh and Bougainville case studies, for example, demonstrate the risk that old politics may simply continue as 'business as usual'. Case study authors from Angola and Cambodia also viewed with alarm tendencies to perpetuate patriarchal structures that violate women's rights.

Clearly confidence is a key asset for women seeking to influence political settlements. Sharing lessons and strategies can help to build women's confidence and showcase ways of overcoming obstacles.

Lessons for policymakers

The most significant lesson brought out by the case studies is that women should be viewed as legitimate political actors

during conflict, during negotiations around peace settlements, and in post-settlement political accommodations. Women's peace movements derive legitimacy from the fact that they represent a broad and inclusive constituency at times when inclusivity is a critical ingredient in building a new society.

Finding practical mechanisms for involving women in peace processes from the beginning is therefore a win-win strategy. Governments and donors often prioritise the involvement of armed parties in order to guarantee security and prevent a return to violence. They often justify pushing 'women's issues' back on grounds of pragmatism, arguing that there are more urgent priorities and that gradual change is best.

But, as noted above, decisions made early on are hard to reverse later. It is wrong to assume that involving women is inconsistent with addressing pressing security and reconstruction issues. On the contrary, women have important things to say about all components of conflict resolution and reconstruction processes.

Peace processes consist of negotiations not only for ceasefires and an end to violence, but also for a whole range of instruments that contribute to the foundations for a newly emerging society. These include plans for the transition to civilian governance, such as demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration, as well as plans for political power-sharing, economic recovery and transitional justice. A broad range of interest groups need to contribute to dialogue on these issues if the post-conflict political settlement is to be inclusive, and therefore sustainable.

Women can help to achieve this, but to do so they need to gain access to those planning and managing peace processes and political settlements. The breadth of consultation that women bring to peace processes needs to be acknowledged in the timing of events and in the costs of logistics and communications. Women's inputs into peace processes can be maximised through relevant and timely support. This might include helping them develop political awareness as well as organisational and advocacy skills.

A clear lesson from the case studies in this volume is the importance of networking. Linking women across divides, facilitating contacts and consultations between women in capital cities and those in the countryside, can enrich peace processes by contributing to the development of broad-based agendas. Moreover, women peace activists and their organisations gain confidence and inspiration from learning about other women's experiences elsewhere in the world, as Bougainville women did for example when they attended the Beijing Conference on Women in 1994. Indeed, in the case of countries divided by war, such forums may provide the only occasion for women from the different sides to meet at all.

Most significantly for donors and decision-makers, the case studies illustrate how 'peace' is a gendered concept. The women peace activists writing in this collection describe a view of peace that is holistic and inclusive. Involving women in peace processes, on their terms, will help to ground settlements and ensure their sustainability.