Accord Insight

Women building peace

This volume looks back at a wealth of women's peacebuilding practice documented by Accord since 1998. Case studies from Cambodia, Sierra Leone, northern Uganda, Papua New Guinea–Bougainville, Northern Ireland, Angola, Sudan, Indonesia–Aceh and Somalia (presented in the chronological order in which the original Accord issues were published) shed light on what women peacebuilders have done to overcome conflict and the challenges they encountered.

The cases reflect women's practice in particular contexts yet also provide general insights for peacebuilding practitioners and policymakers – insights into what women peacebuilders can achieve and how they can be effectively supported in their efforts.

Insight from Accord case studies

Women's peace efforts can broaden the scope of peacebuilding by:
- Promoting consensus and inclusion as a key strategy
- Advancing broader issues of social justice
- Building peace beyond the negotiating table

Overcoming barriers to political participation is a challenge that requires:
- Going beyond quotas to meaningful participation
- Translating existing capacities and expertise into political participation

Understanding gender relations is key to building sustainable peace:
- Mainstream gender analysis of conflict and peace
- Engage both men and women in reshaping gender dynamics

Women's peace efforts can broaden the scope of peacebuilding

Conflict is fuelled by deeply engrained divisions, mistrust and exclusionary politics. Women's peace efforts, like many civil society activities, often challenge these dynamics in both formal and informal spheres by advocating consensus building instead of recrimination and inclusion instead of elite-dominated politics. These efforts often aim to address the structural changes necessary for sustainable peace, and can attract wide support for women's groups and build their legitimacy.

Consensus and inclusion as a key strategy
A key strategy used by women's groups is to take a non-partisan, unified and consensus-based approach to achieve influence. Women in Bougainville and Northern Ireland developed forums and networks as a way to achieve strength through consensus and unity. In Sierra Leone in 1995 the women's peace campaign put the issue of a negotiated settlement in the public domain in a non-partisan and non-confrontational manner, combining non-threatening events like prayer meetings to mobilise support with more direct measures like marches and meetings with government. As a result a negotiated settlement became a respectable option for both the government and the rebels without loss of face.

Advancing broader issues of social justice
Inclusion – ensuring that a wide range of perspectives is represented, including marginalised sections of community – is an important factor for sustainable peace. Women's groups can broaden the range of substantive issues on the table, promoting not just women's rights but also social justice. Many peace processes prioritise elites and those carrying arms and aim to satisfy their demands. Issues key to long lasting, durable peace such as reconciliation, equality and access to land can go unaddressed. Women's groups can therefore gain legitimacy and support by appealing to a broader constituency; they can also help ensure the interests of a wider section of the community are heard.

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During negotiations for the Belfast Agreement, the Northern Ireland's Women's Coalition (NIWC) ensured that victims' rights and reconciliation were included. These became key issues in the referendum campaign for the agreement. Accord author Kate Fearon argues that if the agreement had not addressed these concerns, many people might have voted against it.

In Cambodia and Sierra Leone women's groups reached out beyond urban centres. Cambodian women activists worked to promote a broad social development agenda focused on the

neglected rural majority. The Sierra Leone Women's Movement for Peace (SLWM) opened branches in all accessible parts of the country which strengthened its support base and helped to share information and coordinate marches.

Building peace beyond the negotiating table
Women activists also promote a vision of peace that goes beyond the negotiating table. The case studies demonstrate that women have been at the forefront of grassroots and civil society initiatives to address violence and build peace, and that their actions have often been instrumental.

Peace conferences in Somaliland in 1993 and 1996 would not have taken place without the collective lobbying of elders by women who urged them to intervene to end conflicts. Women were also instrumental in mobilising funds for peace meetings to take place.

Women have contributed to stopping violence and alleviating its consequences in a range of ways: providing humanitarian relief, creating and facilitating the space for negotiations through advocacy, and exerting influence through cultural or social means. They have also spearheaded civil society and reconciliation activities.

In Bougainville, individual women used their status in the family to negotiate peace in their communities and managed to use their influence and act as go-betweens with the warring factions to maintain constructive dialogue.

Women in northern Uganda worked collaboratively to revive cultural institutions and prepare the community for reconciliation and the reintegration of armed groups through prayer meetings and peace education, as well as through songs and story-telling.

Peace process support often focuses on formal negotiations and settlements, overlooking the significant contribution of broader, complementary peacebuilding efforts that are vital to sustainable peace. Important contributions by women, often at the household and community level, tend to go unrecognised.

It is therefore essential *to link efforts* at *multiple levels* more effectively, to open up the space where women and others excluded from formal forums work, and for this space to receive more recognition.

Overcoming challenges to political participation
Assistance to peace processes and practice needs to be re-thought so that women are better supported and integrated. The Accord case studies underscore the need to promote women's inclusion – in official negotiations aimed at bringing an end to conflict, as well as post-settlement decision-making processes. Women face major challenges to engaging in formal peace processes and exclusion is often the norm. Practical and logistical support can play an important role in facilitating participation in some cases; political support is almost always required.

Beyond quotas to meaningful participation
Experiences from Northern Ireland show that despite the obstacles women can achieve political change. The NIWC's

direct involvement in negotiations for the Belfast Agreement not only facilitated and secured women's participation in electoral politics, it also demonstrated a way for civil society to participate in and influence formal political negotiations.

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But women's inclusion in talks can be superficial. During negotiations for the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan, women delegates were expected to follow the party line and their perspectives and experiences in peacebuilding and negotiation were overlooked. In the post-settlement phase women were once more politically marginalised.

Women's meaningful participation in decision-making during and after negotiations requires going beyond token measures and quotas. International partners could more clearly define parameters for women's participation as a precondition for their support. International partners can also set the right example by ensuring that women are represented in senior posts within their own structures, including as mediators.

Translating existing capacities and expertise into political participation
Women often influence formal political processes from the outside. Women's groups have campaigned for the inclusion of women's rights during negotiations, monitored policies and legislation and lobbied for women's rights in new constitutions. In Aceh, women's organisations promoted political education at the grassroots to ensure the general population was familiar with government policies.

Those providing peace process support can help connect capacities and expertise among women's groups and integrate them more directly into formal political processes. The NIWC demonstrates the possibility of transitioning from civil society to political party.

Women in the case studies identified a lack of resources and capacity to engage in institutional politics, including deficits in funding, organisational and advocacy skills, and knowledge of political practice. The NIWC initially struggled to finance the activities required of a political party and was forced to rely on donations. The consensus-based approach many women's groups employ can involve lengthy consultations that take time.

It is also important to recognise that women are not a homogenous group: location, education, class and opportunity condition how individuals are affected by conflict, as well as the approaches they employ in peacebuilding. In Angola poor women, in both rural and urban areas, faced very different challenges from those more privileged. Larger numbers of poor women lost their husbands and were displaced; as a result their responses were focused at the household and community level and involved economic and social welfare. It was privileged women who were more likely to become political leaders.

The reality of women as primary caregivers in the home should also be recognised. Responsibilities such as child care and economic welfare may impede those desiring to engage in both civil society and formal politics.

Support and planning for peace processes should acknowledge these challenges, and adjust accordingly to build in training, capacity-building and technical advice. Mentoring may be one useful way to approach training.

Direct political support for participation is crucial. Politics in conflict and post-conflict contexts are often configured in a way that excludes those other than elites. In Cambodia after the 1991 Paris Agreement few political parties, despite commitments, seriously invested in programmes to help women move out of their traditional gender roles. In Sierra Leone, elites discouraged women's participation in political leadership for fear of disrupting traditional politics, resulting in women's groups refusing to convert into a political force that would have leverage in the peace process. International actors can fill this gap through political support.

An example of effective international support is the negotiations for the Darfur Peace Agreement in 2006. Darfurian women harnessed support from UNIFEM and other international actors to ensure that their participation in negotiations actually influenced the content of the negotiations. The result was over 70 sections in the agreement referring to women.

Understanding gender relations is key to building sustainable peace
Underlying many of the challenges women face are the power dynamics between men and women (and within gender groups) that exist at all levels of peace and conflict.

Mainstreaming gender analysis of conflict and peace
Understanding gender relations is key to effectively addressing armed conflict and building sustainable peace. A gender lens sheds light on the different experiences of women and men in armed conflict, which are in turn the result of socially constructed concepts of masculinity and femininity. Promoting and mainstreaming gender analysis of conflict and peace is a way to understand and address the power dynamics at play.

Examples from the case studies highlight how conflict impacts on gender roles and relations. Women responded to conflict and its effects in a variety of ways, some of which challenged traditional female roles. Women joined armed groups, both as combatants and as support, while others took over household and community duties normally assigned to men. In Angola, women's earnings in the informal sector of the economy started to pose a cultural challenge to men's income-earning abilities and to gender relations in the family. This has been linked to an upsurge in domestic violence against women and children in the 1990s.

Engaging both men and women in reshaping gender dynamics
Gender roles are often reinforced through all sections of society. Many of the case studies identify this as a major challenge to participation: in Northern Ireland the mainstream media were dismissive of the NIWC as a serious political force. After the 1991 Paris agreement, many Cambodians saw the maintenance of traditional gender relations, which discriminated against women entering politics, as crucial to the preservation of the Khmer cultural identity. The way in which gender is intertwined with social structures and reinforced by them requires further disaggregation, but many of the case studies point to the need for both men and women to be involved in reshaping the political and social culture to ensure gender equality.