



# Recognizing Women Peacebuilders:

*CRITICAL ACTORS IN EFFECTIVE PEACEMAKING*

Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, MBE

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## INTRODUCTION

When the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 1325 on women, peace and security (WPS) in October 2000, it set into motion a slow but consistent global movement towards recognition that in war women and men have different experiences of violence, victimization, survival, and peacebuilding.

The agenda was transformative and prescient. It formally recognized women's agency and roles—as well as their inherent right—in seeking to end violence, and in negotiating and building sustainable peace.

Despite this acknowledgement and the reams of policy statements and resolutions that subsequently reiterated and reinforced this message, international diplomatic, development and security sector practices have not put this political and normative shift into practice. As a result, women at the center of the WPS agenda, especially those working on the frontlines of conflict as peacebuilders, face a dual challenge.

First, archaic patriarchal and neo-colonialist attitudes towards women persist. If the gendered dimension of a crisis or conflict is mentioned, the tendency is to refer to women exclusively as victims, impacted by events but with little or no agency in resisting or influencing them. Even when there is rhetorical support for women's participation and agency, many in the policy world speak of “capacity” and “empowerment”, instead of recognizing the capacities and power that already exist, that women are already deploying. Women peacebuilders face discrimination and unconscious bias simply because they are women.

Second, when UNSCR 1325 was adopted, the concept of citizen-based peacebuilding was still new to the global policy community.<sup>1</sup> So the text of the resolution does not refer to “peacebuilders” as a cohort. Instead it refers to the need for “women” generically to participate in peace and security decision-making. The closest it comes to acknowledging citizen-based peacemaking is in paragraph 8, which mentions support to “local women's peace initiatives”.

Since 2000, the theory and practice of peacebuilding has grown exponentially—both in countries affected by civil war, and among international practitioners across the more established and traditional fields of development, human rights and security. Yet, peacebuilders as a cohort of practitioners and experts whose work is driven by certain concepts, knowledge, values, approaches, and skill sets are still not as widely recognized as their colleagues in the development or human rights fields.<sup>2</sup> In 2018, numerous international organizations campaigned to have “peacebuilding” included as an entry in the dictionary.<sup>3</sup> But this does not include a holistic definition of the characteristics and skills of a peacebuilder, particularly those who work within their own societies.

*Women who are peacebuilders must contend with the fact that national and international state actors do not recognize their skills and strategies in addressing conflicts, even though their contributions and impact on the ground are vital.*



This combination of sexism and disregard for peacebuilders as a cohort of actors in and on conflicts still permeates the cultures of many political and diplomatic institutions engaged in supporting and enabling Track One peace processes. It contributes to the barriers that women peacebuilders face.

A significant and rich body of work tackles the problem of gender inequality and sex discrimination within these institutions and systems. This brief therefore focuses on the need to recognize peacebuilders, and particularly women peacebuilders, as actors in conflict settings, working directly on issues related to preventing, resolving and transforming them. It draws on a range of existing documented sources and first-person interviews to provide parameters for understanding the specificities of women peacebuilders (WPBs) as a community of practitioners, their motivations, and their range of approaches relevant to peace processes in contemporary conflict settings. In doing so, the discussion also addresses aspects that this community of practitioners shares with women activists and practitioners in related sectors, such as human rights defenders and mediators.

The discussion below explores the issues addressing three interrelated questions:

- Why does recognizing women peacebuilders matter in the context of today's conflicts and communities affected by violence?
- How do the lexicon and labels in the policy arena hinder or help women's greater inclusion in peace processes?
- What are the factors that capture the complexity and commonality of WPBs' experiences in relation to and distinct from other forms of socio-political activism? The answer to this final question delves into the motivations and factors that propel women to become peacebuilders; the activities they engage in that bridge the local and the global arenas; and how WPBs across time and geography willingly and strategically harness, reframe, and deploy existing traditions, cultural practices, religious teachings, and kinship structures, alongside national and international laws, in their pursuit of peace, justice, and the power to influence adversaries and belligerent forces.

The paper also makes the case that while women peacebuilders draw on global legal norms and policies emanating from the WPS agenda to pursue their demands for inclusion in peace and security decision-making, their local peacebuilding efforts have both informed the formation of those policies and further legitimized their call for recognition of their expertise and contributions, and systematic inclusion in the peace and security processes that shape their lives.

This is by no means a definitive discussion. Rather, it seeks to give clarity and a deeper understanding of and attention to a cohort of women who dedicate their lives to ending violence and promoting just and inclusive peace at the frontlines of the world's most war-torn and violent settings. It also seeks to widen the space for further research, analysis and documentation of the strategies and conceptual frameworks women peacebuilders develop and deploy. The brief emerges from two decades of research, policy development, and experience in advocacy and Track One mediation practice. It draws upon in-person online interviews and a series of consultations with 50 WPBs and numerous policymakers over two years across 40 war- and violence-affected contexts. Recognizing WPBs' existence is a necessary preliminary step if they are to be invited as participants in relevant decision-making arenas.

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1. In the global policy context, "peacebuilding" was first noted in 1992 by the UN's former Secretary General, Boutros-Boutros Ghali in his seminal 'Agenda for Peace'. It was an area of practice arising as a result of the ending of the Cold War and the rise of internal and transnational civil wars. It emerged because although the United Nations' primary role is prevention of war, the multilateral system is constrained by the principles of non-interference and respect for state sovereignty, so it cannot intervene in civil wars without explicit permission from the state or the Security Council. While in 2019 these issues are relevant to wars and conflicts from Yemen to Venezuela, in the 1990s Bosnians, Rwandans and others had already felt the limitations of the global peace architecture, and citizen peacebuilders were already emerging. Many among them were women, who mobilized to demand recognition resulting in SCR 1325.

2. See, for example, Séverine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014) and Catherine Goetze, *The Distinction of Peace: A Social Analysis of Peacebuilding* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

3. That definition is "Peacebuilding is an activity that aims to resolve injustice in nonviolent ways and to transform the cultural and structural conditions that generate deadly or destructive conflict." See International Alert, "This Peace Day, Charities Campaign to Put a New Word in the Dictionary," September 21, 2018, <http://www.international-alert.org/news/peace-day-charities-campaign-put-new-word-dictionary>.

# WHY RECOGNITION OF WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS MATTERS

Recognition for women peacebuilders i) improves peacemaking processes by understanding the comparative advantages, knowledge and differential approaches that they bring and ii) strengthens the protection and security of this growing community of practitioners.<sup>4</sup>

**i. Women peacebuilders interact closely with communities, and so are the key conduit through which war-affected populations voice their concerns, experiences and needs.** WPBs become de facto representatives of such constituencies to the outside world. When invited to consultations related to formal peace talks, they channel those voices, and, where possible, advocate for and negotiate to address the needs. They are not just impartial mediators. They come into processes with demands from constituencies that are not otherwise represented. This rootedness and their ability to draw attention to the physical, emotional and psychological impacts of war in the political space of negotiations can help transform the process. The Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) in West Africa is a case in point. In 2003 the network comprised women peacebuilders from Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. As tensions rose between the three States, the women mobilized to send peace delegations to meet with each of the three presidents. Their strategy was to focus on the human suffering that war would bring. As the UN reported in 2003, after meeting with and convincing then-Liberian president Charles Taylor of the need for de-escalation and dialogue, the women's delegation went to Conakry, Guinea to meet with then President Lansana Conté:

One of the group's elder stateswomen, Ms. Brownell...told Mr. Conté, "You and President Taylor have to meet as men and iron out your differences, and we the women want to be present. We will lock you in this room until you come to your senses, and I will sit on the key." When her comments were translated into French for Mr. Conté, there was a long silence. "Then he started laughing," she recalled. "He couldn't believe it! Finally he stopped laughing and said, 'What man do you think would say that to me? Only a woman could do such a thing and get by with it.'" In the end, Mr. Conté agreed to attend the summit, and he credited the women for changing his mind. "Many people have tried to convince me to meet with President Taylor," he said as the delegation left. "Your commitment and your appeal have convinced me." It was a major diplomatic achievement for MARWOPNET—one that regional and international mediators had tried for months to reach without success.<sup>5</sup>

Such instances are notable given that many current peace processes are frozen, precarious or failing. Research also shows that even when peace agreements are reached, implementation is rare, and "more than 50 percent of peace agreements fail within 5 years,"<sup>6</sup> lurching countries back into war. Meanwhile both qualitative and quantitative research over the past 20 years shows that:

- When women participate meaningfully, the chances of a peace agreement failing decrease by 35 percent;<sup>7</sup>
- When women's civil society movements are engaged in peace processes, there is a notable increase in the implementation of the provisions in peace accords over the subsequent 10-year period.<sup>8</sup>

Thus recognition is a necessary step towards the inclusion of women peacebuilders in Track One processes. This in turn improves the processes' quality and likelihood of success.

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4. For further elaboration of these key themes see forthcoming research on the characterization and visibility of the role and agency of women peacebuilders by the Corporación de Investigación y Acción Social y Económica (CIASE) produced as part of the project "Providing visibility and developing safety and security tools for and by women peacebuilders in Colombia" with support from ICAN's Innovative Peace Fund.

5. Michael Fleshman, "African Women Struggle for a Seat at the Peace Table," *Africa Renewal* (February 2003), <http://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/february-2003/african-women-struggle-seat-peace-table>.

6. "World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security and Development." The World Bank Group. 2011, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWDRS/Resources/>.

7. Desirée Nilsson, "Anchoring the Peace: Civil Society Actors in Peace Accords and Durable Peace," *International Interactions* 38, no. 2 (2012): 243–266; Marie O'Reilly, Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, and Thania Paffenholz, "Reimagining Peacemaking: Women's Roles in Peace Processes (New York: International Peace Institute, 2015).

8. Jana Krause, Werner Krause, and Piia Bränfors, "Women's participation in peace negotiations and the durability of peace," *International Interactions* 44, no. 6 (2018): 985–1016, DOI: 10.1080/03050629.2018.1492386.



**ii. Peacebuilding work is risky and precarious. In highly polarized contexts where adversaries dehumanize each other, anyone willing to reach across the lines of conflict to engage in dialogue exposes themselves to mistrust from all sides, including from within their own communities.** Since their integrity is peacebuilders' greatest asset for establishing trust and accessing communities, undermining their reputation and credibility is a key tactic used against them. As addressed in a forthcoming brief, women who are peacebuilders are threatened because of their peace work.<sup>9</sup> Like women human rights defenders (WHRDs), they face particular gendered threats, notably:

- Accusations of sexual promiscuity and public verbal attacks such as calling women peacebuilders “whores”;
- Sexual undertones and threats of assault and rape;
- Threats to children and family (more so than for men); and,
- Tarnishing of reputations and credibility by accusing women of transgressing and violating social norms of behavior or being “Western” or untethered from and alien to their own communities and culture.

Such accusations can come from many quarters. Politically motivated groups (or self-proclaimed human rights activists) may conflate peacebuilders' efforts at dialogue with accusations of siding or sympathizing with perpetrators of violence. It is one of the side effects of peace activism.

In the 1990s, for example, Israel's Peace Now movement was vilified because they advocated engagement with Palestinians against a backdrop of violence. In Syria, as the conflict metastasized from 2011 onwards, established Syrian women's rights and human rights activists often viewed newly emerging peacebuilding networks and leaders with mistrust and accusations that they were government affiliated. In Cameroon and Iraq amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, governmental and non-governmental forces have issued death threats against and attempted kidnappings of women peacebuilders as tactics to silence and stop their work.

In addition to direct physical attacks, detention and interrogation, accusations of criminality (and arrest warrants), having bank accounts frozen, and visas or residency papers being annulled are among the many threats that peacebuilders navigate.<sup>10</sup>

A significant body of international policies and frameworks and protection mechanisms exists to address the challenges WHRDs face. But such mechanisms do not yet exist for peacebuilders, because they are not fully recognized as a category of practitioners. WHRDs are named and protected by the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, and case-specific mechanisms; peacebuilders are not. As a result, they have no mechanisms to ensure their protection or due access to justice, similar to related professionals within the current international system. Here, too, recognition of the scope and nature of peacebuilders' work matters, because it is a necessary first step to understanding the risks they face and providing them with effective physical, legal, political, and—when needed—financial protection.

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9. For a more detailed discussion of the threats women peacebuilders face and how to ensure their protection see ICAN's forthcoming brief “Protecting Women Peacebuilders”; and for more on the relationship between WHRDs and peace and security see International Service for Human Rights, “Are Peace and Security Possible Without Women Human Rights Defenders?,” 2019, [http://www.ishr.ch/sites/default/files/documents/ishr\\_whrd\\_report\\_2019\\_web\\_0.pdf](http://www.ishr.ch/sites/default/files/documents/ishr_whrd_report_2019_web_0.pdf).

10. International Civil Society Action Network, “Protecting Women Peacebuilders' Workshop Convened in London,” March 5, 2020, <http://icanpeacework.org/2020/03/05/protecting-women-peacebuilders-workshop-london-ican/>.

# THE LABELS THAT CAN HINDER OR HELP

As the field of WPS scholarship and practice has evolved, its lexicon has been slower to develop. The use of the generic term “women” without qualifiers and descriptors or representation of the heterogeneous experience of women has contributed to inertia in practice, particularly with regard to Track One peace processes.

## Women

The reference to “women” in peace talks has typically led to the call that the existing warring or political parties should include women in negotiation teams. From an equal opportunity perspective, this is certainly a desirable objective of the WPS agenda. But advocates and women peacebuilders have always noted that while necessary, it is by no means sufficient or transformative.

There is good reason to be wary. Not every woman is a peacebuilder, or even supportive of human rights. Too often, calls on delegations to increase their female quota result in the appointment of women politicians and diplomats who are beholden to the party leaders or the State, or women combatants and security actors.

Of course, there can be overlap and fluidity in terms of their values and priorities. Some female politicians champion women's rights. Some engage in mediation and others are active peacebuilders. Peacebuilders have entered politics and politicians have become peacebuilders. Similarly, women combatants have been included in delegations, as in El Salvador in the 1990s, South Africa and Colombia in the peace process that culminated in 2016. But the assumption that female politicians or security actors are automatically aligned with women peacebuilders is misplaced. Indeed, many female politicians represent hardline positions and may be strong advocates of warfare or authoritarianism. Female combatants, when made aware of discriminatory practices or outcomes of negotiations, have been strong advocates and allies to women's rights movements. But they are still representing their own party's goals. While from an equal rights standpoint they should have an opportunity to have a seat at the table of negotiations, it is erroneous to assume that they would be willing or even able to step away from the party line.

Over the years, when pressed in some contexts, male leaders have appointed their sisters, wives and female relatives, deliberately bypassing women who have been critical actors in peacemaking or addressing the causes and consequences of the conflict. More often than not, appointed women, like men, are either party loyalists or have strong ties to powerful elites and warlords. As such they have no credentials with peace movements and may be deliberately appointed to undermine equality or other concerns of women's peace movements. Even when women with ties to the broader women's peace movement are appointed, they can face an uphill and often losing battle during negotiations. They may encounter opposition from within their own delegation and be pressed to toe the line. Since they are appointed because of their political credentials, not as representatives of civil society women's and peace movements, the government (or leading bodies) appointing delegations can easily remove them.

In effect, the inclusion of an individual or a small group of women into existing delegations is rarely transformative. The catalyst for transformation in such cases, as in Guatemala in the 1990s and Colombia in 2010s, was the significant involvement of a wider women's peace movement in formalized structures of the peace process, such as civil society forums, working groups and commissions who can both support the women negotiators and press for critical demands.

Moreover, as noted in UNSCR 1325, the generic call for increasing “women” in decision-making is accompanied by the specific call for “Measures that support local women's peace initiatives and indigenous processes for conflict resolution” (emphasis added), noted in paragraph 8 of UNSCR 1325. This commitment remains largely unfulfilled 20 years on.

*The inclusion of an individual or a small group of women into existing delegations is rarely transformative.*



## Women Mediators

The attention to “women mediators” is also a key goal of the agenda’s participation pillar, detailed in paragraphs 1 through 4 of UNSCR 1325 and reiterated in subsequent resolutions. It is aligned with the principles of ensuring women have equal opportunities to take up key posts in peace processes that are mediated by international organizations, or in which governments take on bilateral diplomatic initiatives.

Women with gender expertise in mediation teams with sectoral mediation advisors are also essential. They can facilitate greater inclusivity in the design and process of negotiations. This includes widening the scope of issues addressed as well as ensuring gender responsiveness across peace negotiations pertaining to security, economic, justice, political and other matters that arise.

The call for women mediators is also an important recognition of the historic and often cultural role of women as interlocutors in local contexts when disputes arise. As such, it is important to acknowledge and elevate the need for women mediators in national and international processes.

These factors have contributed to the emergence of regional and global women mediators’ networks in recent years. But having women mediators or gender expertise within mediation teams, while necessary, is not a replacement for the representation, knowledge and action that national and local women peacebuilders can bring.

The UN defines mediation as “a process whereby a third party assists two or more parties, with their consent, to prevent, manage or resolve a conflict by helping them to develop mutually acceptable agreements.”<sup>11</sup> A mediator is defined as “a person who attempts to make people involved in a conflict come to an agreement; a go-between.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, mediators do not bring their own concerns or political vision to the discussions.

In conflict zones, women peacebuilders often perform mediation tasks to further their values and vision. They may be informal mediators between warring parties, as in Northern Ireland. They may negotiate and mediate between armed groups on behalf of communities to ensure their protection or access to services. Often this is at significant cost and risk to their own lives. But categorizing and limiting local women peacebuilders to the role of mediator removes their political voice and agency. It can reinforce deeply patriarchal and militaristic norms wherein the warring parties (typically represented by male political or military leaders) are elevated and recognized as the sole legitimate negotiators, representing constituencies in peace talks, given the power to identify priorities, the agenda for talks, the sequencing, the nature of the solutions and ultimately determining the future, while women are there to smooth the way.

Women as mediators may be highly effective in enabling compromises between such parties but would not have an equal voice in determining those priorities, agendas and ultimately the future. Moreover, once their mediation is completed, if they are not signatories to the agreement, they can be excluded. The power reverts back to the parties to uphold and implement the agreements. Given that peace agreements falter at the point of implementation, the continuous presence of peace actors as negotiators, signatories, and monitors who can hold other parties accountable is important.

As noted, there is significant overlap between the work of peacebuilders and mediators. Many people wear both hats. But there is also a distinction to be made and respected between local peacebuilders who are from war-affected communities and choose to engage in addressing the conflict non-violently, and international actors, who may be peacebuilders or diplomats by profession, but are not part of the communities directly affected by the conflict.

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11. United Nations, Guidance for Effective Mediation, 2012, [http://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/GuidanceEffectiveMediation\\_UN-DPA2012%28english%29\\_0.pdf](http://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/GuidanceEffectiveMediation_UN-DPA2012%28english%29_0.pdf).

12. Ibid.

## Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs)

The term “women human rights defender” has a longer history than “peacebuilder” and has often been used as a catch-all term in reference to women peacebuilders in conflict contexts. The UN’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) defines WHRDs as:

“Both female human rights defenders, and any other human rights defenders who work in the defence of women’s rights or on gender issues.”<sup>13</sup>

In principle, “women’s rights or on gender issues” should encompass experiences in conflict, as well as women’s perspectives and activism with regard to preventing violent conflict and oppression. In practice, however, despite the 20 years of the WPS agenda, the terms “women’s rights” and “gender issues” are still widely relegated to socio-economic issues or broad political participation.

Given the relative newness of the field and still-limited recognition of women peacebuilders, the framing of WHRDs can result in excluding WPBs from discussions on security issues such as ceasefire negotiations or power-sharing, as the gendered dimensions of such issues are not widely understood. In effect it can reduce women to speaking only on traditionally circumscribed “women’s issues” or women’s legal rights. Such issues are essential, but this type of framing excludes them from challenging the underlying conditions that create discrimination and violence.

WPBs also choose to engage in articulating comprehensive solutions to intractable conflicts. From Yemen to Colombia, WPBs are addressing hard security issues ranging from ceasefire monitoring, negotiation of detainee releases, and disarmament and deradicalization of militias to offering approaches to the design of peace negotiations, governance systems, justice or reconciliation, resolution of natural resource conflicts and other key issues such as security sector reform, military spending and matters affecting all sectors of society. These are all serious and vital matters, hardly traditional “women’s issues”. These women are fewer in number, typically more active at local and national levels, and may be less visible than more established women’s rights and development practitioners.

Moreover, as discussed below, WPBs often emerge through their work as humanitarian relief and service providers to communities. By virtue of preventing young boys (and girls) from being recruited into militias or working with religious and clan leaders to mitigate disputes or end violence, WPBs often practice realizing the rights of not only women but also others impacted by conflict in their communities.

The distinctions may seem forced or arbitrary in many cases. WHRDs are often peacebuilders, and women peacebuilders uphold and defend women’s rights and integrate rights-based approaches in their activities. But there are key distinguishing features between the approaches of human rights and peace workers. As peacebuilder and founder of the Association of War Affected Women (AWAW), Visaka Dharmadasa, says:

The basic and most visible difference is that while a WHRD will work on rights of people and will refrain from directly dealing with any perceived perpetrator, a WPB will talk to a confirmed perpetrator. Our main strategy is inclusion. We stand by this policy at all times and with the strong belief that everyone can change, and we need to give room for that change since it can stop killings and save lives irrespective of which side. We are taking risks that are not recognized. Because we do speak to the perpetrators, we are also called traitors, and sometimes are threatened by all sides, but we will still talk and meet all. There can be tensions when WHRDs exclude us or accuse us of siding with perpetrators because of our willingness to talk to them.<sup>14</sup>

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13. UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, A/HRC/16/44, December 20, 2010, <http://un-docs.org/A/HRC/16/44>.

14. Personal correspondence, June 2020.

سرور بر وسعت مجيبي قانون منع خشونت خيیه زنان  
د بنخو پر وړاندې د تاوتریخوالي د مخنيوي قانون د پلي  
کیدو وضعیت ته بیا کتنه

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Law on preventing Violence against Women  
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*WPBs often emerge through their work as humanitarian relief and service providers to communities.*

Related to this, human rights defenders and peacebuilders have different approaches to justice and reconciliation. Peacebuilders across war zones acknowledge that peace requires the creation of shared platforms and potential, and often difficult compromises. This is particularly sensitive in discussions of justice for victims, given that often, for ceasefires and agreements to be possible, the demand for justice—particularly criminal and punitive justice—needs to be tempered and combined with reconciliation and amnesty. By definition, that means that many perpetrators of violence may have impunity. Peacebuilders, especially those who have suffered from violence or lost loved ones to war, understand the difficulty of this reality. Asking victims and survivors to define their version of justice and provide acknowledgement of their suffering can make peacebuilders vulnerable to attack and abuse. As Monica McWilliams, one of the leading figures in the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, reflects, she was accused of insensitivity to victims' needs and of "talking to terrorists".<sup>15</sup>

The 20-year evolution of the WPS agenda has opened space for greater recognition of women's roles in conflict and peace processes. There are similarities and much intersectionality between the different cohorts (see diagram). But there are also distinctions. Given their presence in the practice and advocacy around peace, it would seem obvious that women peacebuilders should be a well-represented and recognized cohort in the mainstream peace and mediation community by now. But they remain overlooked, excluded, and largely unacknowledged. This is exacerbated by the persistent lack of gender perspectives and mapping of peace actors in conflict analyses. Women's experiences and agency are perpetually minimized, ignored, or obscured. Added to this, there is still a tendency to elevate individual women peacebuilders as unique and exceptional, rather than recognizing the global and dynamic community of practitioners, many rooted in local networks.

15. Avila Kilmurray and Monica McWilliams, "Struggling for Peace: How Women in Northern Ireland Challenged the Status Quo," Solutions Journal 2, no. 2 (February 2011).

# WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS: MOTIVATIONS, ACTIONS, AND APPROACHES

As noted earlier, women peacebuilders face the double barrier of gender discrimination and being affiliated with a field of practice that appears relatively amorphous and unknown.

Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung is credited for coining the term “peacebuilding” as distinct from peacekeeping and peacemaking. Galtung’s premise was that peace itself is more than the militarized element of peacekeeping or the diplomatic efforts pertaining to peacemaking.<sup>16</sup> It is a complex societal construct comprising political, security-related, economic and socio-cultural facets that “remove the causes of wars and offers alternatives to war in situations where wars might occur.”<sup>17</sup> In emphasizing the need to address the root causes of conflict, Galtung also highlighted the importance of local and bottom-up capacities for the management and resolution of conflict and the building of a culture of positive peace—i.e., not just the absence of violence.

In 1992, the UN Secretary-General’s Agenda for Peace offered a simplified definition of post-conflict “peacebuilding” as an “action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict.”<sup>18</sup> American sociologist Jean Paul Lederach also contributed to the debate by drawing attention to the role of multiple actors including non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the processes of creating sustainable peace.<sup>19</sup>

Other definitions expand the scope of activities, sectors, actions and time to include events before, during and after the outbreak of violence. They also entail constructive engagement across personal, social and political groups. While there is still no clearly agreed-upon definition of “peacebuilding” among the range of stakeholders, States, multilateral organizations, academia and civil society practitioners, there is consensus that peacebuilding activities aim to resolve injustices in non-violent ways and seek to transform relationships and conditions that “generate deadly or destructive conflict.”<sup>20</sup>

These definitions are helpful but incomplete. Although “peace” is central to the term and “building” implies construction and creativity, the definitions lapse back into emphasizing the prevention of conflict, not the building or creation of an alternative positive structure for the purpose of:

- Managing diversity, including the inevitable differences that might arise; and
- Drawing on the strengths that diverse socio-political and cultural factors offer to envision and foster a culture of peace, as Galtung says.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, the definitions are largely technical and oriented towards action. They do not factor in the “actors”—i.e., who is a peacebuilder? Do their motivations, social standing, skills, or life experiences matter and if so, how?

For the purposes of this discussion, I have focused on women peacebuilders active in their local and national contexts, with access to the international arena. In making the case that they need recognition as a category of practitioners I analyzed the cohort based on three questions:

- How did they become peacebuilders? Why did they enter into peacebuilding work? What are their motivations?
- What do they do in terms of the type of activities?
- How do they engage and determine their approaches to peacebuilding?

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16. Johan Galtung, “Three Approaches to Peace: Peacekeeping, Peacemaking, and Peacebuilding,” *Impact of Science on Society* 25, no. 9 (1976): 282-304.

17. *Ibid.*, 298.

18. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace* (New York: United Nations, 2002).

19. John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998).

20. Fritz Dufour, *The Realities of ‘Reality’ – Part IV: The Reality Behind Achieving World Peace—A Thorough Inquiry*, April 5, 2020.

21. Galtung, “Three Approaches to Peace,” 1976.



Over the past two decades, women peacebuilders have produced a number of publications. Other researchers have published cross-country cases that distill the work and approaches of women peacebuilders.<sup>22</sup> In addition, academic centers and NGOs have documented the experiences and work of women peacebuilders.<sup>23</sup> As new generations of women arise in this field, and new conflicts also emerge, their efforts warrant further documentation, analysis and understanding, as often they are pioneering approaches and achieving results that remain invisible in the international sphere and academia.

*“For human rights defenders, we already have a strategy of [protection]... We have the civil rights systems and other systems—although it’s still lacking but it exists. There is a system. There are prevention methods and strategies and workshops and funding and all that is already there. Where it’s lacking is for peacebuilders, so I think just that definition and recognition will help us to move forward.”*

*— Muna Luqman, Food4Peace, Yemen*

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22. See Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, *Women Building Peace: What They Do, Why It Matters* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007); also Kate Fearon, *Women’s Work: The Story of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition* (Belfast (Northern Ireland), Ireland: Blackstaff Press, 2000); and Conciliation Resources, “Women Building Peace,” *Accord Insight*, March 2013, <http://www.c-r.org/accord/women-and-peacebuilding-insight/women-building-peace>.

23. See, for example, Institute for Inclusive Security publications available at <http://www.inclusivesecurity.org/research-and-publications-library>; Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies resources and publications available at <http://www.sandiego.edu/peace/institutes/ipj/peace-resources.php>; and Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security works available at <http://giwps.georgetown.edu/priority/peacebuilding/>.

## Becoming a Peacebuilder: Running to the Problem & Taking on the Responsibility

More than two decades of discussions and interviews with women peacebuilders across conflict zones have shown a number of commonalities in terms of their process of becoming peacebuilders. Becoming a peacebuilder is often a transformative experience based on directly experiencing or witnessing the impact of violent conflict. As discussed below, the motivations range from the desire to find solutions, peace and healing both personally and for communities.

For many, the motivation and initial actions arise instinctively, driven by caring for and a sense of responsibility towards the more vulnerable members of their community. Muna Luqman, Yemeni poet-turned-peacebuilder, says her initial step into peacebuilding was witnessing how families were caught in the crossfire of the Yemen war. She and others stepped in to assist those at risk, but in doing so had to negotiate with the armed groups to cease firing and allow for the safe passage of civilians and humanitarian relief. Her work evolved into disarmament and reintegration of young men and boys who had been recruited to fight. Luqman's approach provided a positive and peaceful alternative to the fighting, with a simple message of "pens not guns" and the creation of youth teams to provide aid and relief to the community.<sup>24</sup>

Fatima Al Bahadly's trajectory in southern Iraq is similar. She was a teacher who became involved in providing clothing and food for war-affected families in the 1990s. Her work continued and expanded in the aftermath of the 2003 US occupation. Because of the humanitarian services she provided, she had access to and the trust of a wide swathe of Basra society. As sectarian militias formed, Al Bahadly reached out to them by offering food and clothing, and engaging the young men and teenagers online with an alternative narrative of doing God's work through community service rather than violence. In 2014 she explained her approach: "I told them jihad is giving blood in the hospitals, not spilling it on the streets."<sup>25</sup>

The path from humanitarian relief and aid into mediation with armed or state actors and community-based education and mobilization for coexistence is shared among women peacebuilders across countries. Too often they are engaged in the work but unaware of the term "peacebuilding". For many, the initial assumption is that "peace" is inherently tied to militarized security and thus a matter for State actors and politicians alone. As Najlaa Sheikh, a Syrian refugee providing support to Syrian women refugees in Turkey, notes, "I didn't understand 'peacebuilding'. I thought it was for politicians. But when I stopped my son returning to Syria to join Daesh and talked to other women to prevent their sons from going, I realized that I am also a peacebuilder."<sup>26</sup>

Women peacebuilders working nationally and internationally recognize that they may occupy positions of privilege compared to their compatriots. This confers a level of responsibility to act, speak and advocate for those who cannot. As Dr. Neelam Raina notes, her activism for peace commenced at a march in Delhi protesting nuclear weapons. "To know that only some of us have the privilege of moving to 'peaceful spaces'," she says, was the impetus for remaining and continuing her commitment to peacebuilding.<sup>27</sup>

In many instances, women's privilege comes from their family status and kinship ties. This gives them power and local influence. In effect, women peacebuilders draw on themselves to become the bridges between community and state, or between warring factions. At times local peacebuilders emerge from the local elite. They have deep roots and garner respect in communities while being members of politically elite families, clans or tribes.

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24. Personal correspondence with the author, June 2020.

25. Fatima Al-Bahadly (Director of Iraqi Al-Firdaws Society), Interview with the author, Istanbul, Turkey, May 13-14, 2014.

26. ICAN forum discussions, Colombo, Sri Lanka, November 2018.

27. Personal correspondence with the author, May 2020.



Hamsatu Allamin has a growing reputation for her work in communities affected by Boko Haram in and around Maiduguri, Nigeria. She brings a depth of Islamic scholarship and knowledge necessary to counter their religious (mis)interpretations as well as a deep connectivity in the fabric of local society in her community. Like many others, her peacebuilding work has evolved with the changing conditions in her region. What started as discreet mediation with the original Boko Haram leadership has evolved into the formation of networks for female victims and families, as well as psycho-social reintegration and deradicalization work with women and girls who had attempted to become suicide bombers.

## Stopping the Cycle of Pain, Giving Meaning to Loss

My own involvement in this work stems from witnessing and living through the convulsions of the 1979 Iranian revolution that ripped my family apart and scattered us around the world as exiles and refugees. Sometimes entering into peace work stems from becoming a refugee, experiencing the hardships of war and conflict firsthand, and being motivated to prevent others from having to experience this trauma.

Ugandan Robinah Rubimbwa, co-founder and Executive Director of Coalition for Action on 1325, echoes this, stating, "I had to flee my country with my 2-year-old and 6-month-old baby, and lived as a refugee in exile for seven years. My brother died and I couldn't return home to bury him. I returned after Uganda became peaceful again. I decided to do peacebuilding work to ensure no one else would ever need to go into exile."<sup>27</sup>

Understanding and finding humanity in the perpetrators is a pathway to coping and healing. For some, the entry into peace work is catalyzed by the disappearance, loss, or death of family members. "The compulsion for revenge may be high", says Lucy, a Palestinian peacebuilder whose father was killed by the Israeli forces. But she adds, "The irrationality of an 'eye for an eye', which leaves everyone blind, directs the drive for justice towards an alternative path."<sup>28</sup>

The need to give meaning to the loss of a loved one and ensure that it was not futile draws some further into the path of peacemaking. It comes from the desire to create a positive legacy for the life lost. It also leads women to seek an understanding of the perpetrators' motivations. "A basic motivation," says Visaka Dharmadasa, the Sri Lankan peacebuilder who became involved in this work after her son, a soldier in the national army, went missing in 1998, is "to try and understand the reasons for the cruelty and behavior of those who were responsible."<sup>29</sup>

Dharmadasa led a group of mothers of missing servicemen into the jungles to meet directly with members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). This search for understanding is a means of also seeking to acknowledge the rationale for their actions. "It is very difficult," says Dharmadasa. "But it is a path towards healing."

As Jennifer Freeman, CEO of PeaceGeeks and the former Director of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice's Women PeaceMakers program at the University of San Diego, reflects,

*"The approach of women peacebuilders is to try and somehow understand the pain of the other, and heal together, or at least to find the commonality [with the pain of the perpetrator] so that there can be separate healing for all."<sup>30</sup>*

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27. Personal correspondence with the author.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

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This personal journey through pain, feelings of vengeance and anger, seeking justice, understanding, healing and even forgiveness is one that many women peacebuilders internalize. As Tunisian Dr. Khediya Arfaoui, whose son and daughter-in-law were killed in the 2015 New Year's Eve terror attack in Istanbul, says, "I am devastated, but I remain steadfastly against the death penalty [...] because it does not bring back the dead." Despite this conviction, Dr. Arfaoui is adamant that perpetrators must not only face justice but also acknowledge the depth of the pain they have caused. "I would strive to see him pay for his crimes in jail while learning about life and why life is so precious and dear."<sup>31</sup>

Precisely because of their own personal loss, these women have public legitimacy and credibility. They work to replicate and generate their own journey towards peace and forms of restorative justice at a societal level.

## **Consultation, Trust, & Responsibility to Represent the Needs of the Community**

Women peacebuilders tend to bridge the gap between formal political processes and communities. As community peacebuilders, women do not have the weight of influence that politicians or religious leaders may have. They do not wield their power through the barrel of a gun or imposition of fear. Their credibility and influence are derived from the trust they have built across and within communities and their ability to sustain it, even in the most difficult times. This trust takes time to foster. It can be rooted in their track record of service to their communities, providing food and assistance in dire times, addressing grievances, or helping to fulfil people's aspirations.

"Civil society and women are voicing concerns of the community," says Luqman. Across conflict zones, women as peacebuilders seek to ensure communication between negotiators at the table and civil society "so people can know what is happening at the table."<sup>31</sup> "If you don't have this link, people will not have the knowledge about if they should support or not support the peace process," adds Rosa Emilia Salamanca.<sup>32</sup>

Syrian Najlaa Sheikh echoed this sentiment. Invited to the Civil Society Room of the UN's Syria mediation efforts in January 2018, Sheikh recalled a deep and urgent sense of responsibility to draw attention to the plight of civilians caught in Idlib. In personal correspondence she wrote, "In reality, the situation in Idlib is much more serious than we imagine. The humanitarian situation is very bad. I don't know how children, women, and even men, and the elderly can bear the severe cold and temperatures below zero without homes or shelter. The women I communicate with in Idlib say the simplest of our needs is to shower. They say, "When we menstruate, we can't find any pads to use, and we can't even shower."<sup>33</sup>

Sheikh has no formal obligation to be a conduit for conveying the needs of these IDPs. There are multi-million-dollar humanitarian operations in place to do this. But like other WPBs, she takes on the burden and believes that being invited to and present in the UN Civil Society Room in Geneva, it is her duty and responsibility to do so.

During the peace talks between the Lord's Resistance Army and the Government of Uganda in 2006, it was the Women's Peace Coalition's representatives in Juba that kept communities in Northern Uganda abreast of how the talks were going, so they could put pressure on the rebels to stay and talk until an agreement was reached.

***"As peace women we must not encourage the death penalty."***

***— Dr. Khediya Arfaoui, Dali and Senda Association for Peace Tunisia***

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31. Personal correspondence with the author, May 2020.

32. Ibid.

33. ICAN Better Peace Symposium consultations, New York, May 2019.



This willingness to be the conduits and trusted messengers between parties and for the marginalized and voiceless means that women peacebuilders are entrusted by communities and constituencies to take forth the concerns, positions and demands of a population impacted by conflict.

Kate Fearon, a founding member of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) and a negotiator of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, echoes the importance of connecting and transmitting the voices and concerns of different constituents. "We engaged in connecting people; for us, it was important to not forget where we came from [women's movement]."<sup>34</sup> The coalition's members spanned the Catholic-Protestant divide. Although they disagreed on many issues, they had consensus on three core values that informed their positions: adherence to human rights, equality, and inclusivity. As such, they consulted their constituents widely to identify the priorities and concerns to bring to the negotiating table. Their additions to the agenda included negotiations on the need for non-sectarian housing and education, and reforms of the prison systems and police service to be inclusive and service-oriented.

Because they are of the community, they also have an understanding of the context and cultural nuances of their settings, and can adapt their messages and activities to fit local needs and evolving changes. Some are respected for their education, religious scholarship, or familial ties across tribal or ethnic lines, which enables them to both advocate for members of their communities and mediate disputes. For example, in Somalia, women from prominent families led humanitarian relief services. On numerous occasions they used their social standing to negotiate with Al Shabaab for the passage of humanitarian aid or the opening of the airport, and to mediate political disputes between rival figures and clans in the transition government.

The trust they develop within their communities and through their interactions with armed groups and state actors provides them with a degree of protection as they seek solutions. But in highly divided contexts, this willingness to reach across the lines of conflict to build peace also exposes people to attacks from all sides.

## Vision and Value-Driven Practices

Despite differences in the initial motivations that draw women to become peacebuilders, there are numerous common characteristics and values that inform their activities and approaches. A consistent credo of WPBs (often aligned with WHRDs) is that there are no sustainable military solutions to contemporary civil conflicts. Even when military operations lead to a clear short-term "win", political and societal dialogue and engagement are needed to sustain the ceasefire and shift away from a fragile negative peace (i.e., absence of violence) to a positive and more sustainable one.

This is accompanied by articulating a vision of peace rooted in universal human rights and social justice, drawing attention to more equitable relations between state and society, communities within societies, and in terms of gender relations. While wars perpetuate and deepen injustice and inequalities, legitimate root causes often persist and are exacerbated into violent expression. As Rubimbwa says, "Those who start a civil war have motivations for doing so. They need to be heard and their concerns addressed as part of the peacebuilding process."<sup>35</sup> At its core, there is a redefinition of the concept of security. The goal is to change it from a militarized one where the nation state is the unit of analysis and the assumption is that national security is synonymous with military power, to a more holistic human security framework. In the latter, people are the starting point, and issues such as access to health care, food, social safety nets, education, community security, social cohesion, and mutual interdependence come under the broad umbrella of "national security".

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34. ICAN Better Peace Symposium consultations, New York, May 2019.

35. Personal correspondence with the author.

Rosa Emilia Salamanca, Project Advisor for Political Management and Alliances at Corporación de Investigación y Acción Social y Económica (CIASE) in Colombia, and a member of the Women, Peace and Security Collective for Reflection and Action, offers insight into these complex and sensitive issues:

*“A peacebuilder,” Salamanca says, “is a person who keeps the deep hope that despite all these difficulties, we can still be better as humans, men and women... [peacebuilders] are people who can feel deep empathy, but at the same time clearly recognize that there are ethical limits.”<sup>36</sup>*

This ability to carry and balance dichotomous perspectives and reject binary positions is evident across the work and approaches of peacebuilders, and diverges from that of human rights activists. Peacebuilders know full well the abuses and violence that armed groups or States have perpetrated. But they also understand that ending that violence requires a rehumanizing of those same actors. As one Syrian activist notes, “We need people to help us talk to each other, not help us kill each other.”<sup>37</sup>

For peacebuilders emerging from one of the affected communities, it is doubly difficult. It is emotionally fraught work to persist in seeking dialogue to build trust and reach the humanity of those who may be responsible for horrific acts of violence. But this lies at the center of peace work. In seeking the humanity and pain of the perpetrators, peacebuilders are not denying the inhumane wrongs done by them. Rather, as Salamanca says, they are willing to acknowledge that there is no single or absolute truth, rather that “truth is built little by little and changes every time someone names it, because through my truth and your truth the possible truth is being built.”<sup>38</sup> This, too, breaks the binary narrative that there is good and evil, friend or foe, that validates violent conflicts.

## **Tackling Discrimination and Asserting the Universality of Human Rights**

Human rights, particularly women's rights, are among women peacebuilders' core values. While some women who become peacebuilders may have roots in rights activism, more often they take on peacebuilding through personal motivations or experience. WPBs may have little awareness of the gendered dimensions of issues, feminist framings or the discrimination they might face as they seek to enter political spaces.

The intersection between rights and peace work is fluid. In Northern Ireland, engaging on issues of inequality and shared experiences of the impact of the conflict led Protestant and Catholic women's rights activists to articulate new spaces for peace dialogues. Similarly, a rejection of militarism that is rooted in feminism was a pathway for women to become peacebuilders across lines of conflict in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the 1990s. Often WHRDs become conscious of the value and need for dialogue and engagement as a way to address issues of discrimination or violence. Reflecting on people's interest in Islamist ideology and messaging during the COVID-19 pandemic, Moroccan WHRD Dr. Fatima Outaleb noted the importance of taking different approaches such as providing services and offering support given that “fundamentalists are gaining space through what they are providing.”<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, women peacebuilders become conscious of the depths of gender and racial discrimination through the experience of being marginalized or excluded by national and international actors. As they become more familiar with the causes and consequences of conflict, their exposure to systemic inequalities, the extent of gender-based violence and persistent biases leads many to become strong advocates for a rights-based perspective over time.

36. Ryan T. Blystone, “2018 Women Peacemakers Spotlight: Rosa Emilia Salamanca, Colombia,” University of San Diego News Center, October 18, 2018, [http://www.sandiego.edu/news/detail.php?\\_focus=69284](http://www.sandiego.edu/news/detail.php?_focus=69284).

37. Personal correspondence with the author, 2012.

38. Blystone, “2018 Women Peacemakers Spotlight: Rosa Emilia Salamanca, Colombia,” October 18, 2018.

39. WASL Community Check-In Call consultations, May 14, 2020.



For WHRDs and peacebuilders alike, awareness of the gendered dimensions of political and security issues often arises from direct experience, such as becoming active in ceasefire negotiations. Exposure to the global community of WPS policy and practice, particularly learning from peer women peacebuilders across other conflicts, helps deepen their understanding of the technicalities of ensuring gendered approaches to issues such as governance systems and structures. In effect, WHRDs can shift into peacebuilding through their interactions with peacebuilders, just as women peacebuilders embrace rights-based approaches as they encounter discrimination and engage with WHRDs.

## **Deriving Power from Faith and Culture to Challenge Militarism and Transform Patriarchy**

In positioning and defining themselves, women peacebuilders acknowledge the multi-faceted nature of their work and the need for strategies to suit different contexts and audiences. As noted above, they, like WHRDs, value the importance of national and international policies in efforts to attain justice, equal rights and opportunities. They also contribute, draw up and use national and international legal frameworks to further their goals. However, they also understand that laws and policies are not sufficient. In fact, lack of adherence to laws is a key cause of discrimination and conflict. Moreover, they understand that reliance solely on legal frameworks—national or international—can be limiting and at times detrimental if the political and cultural context of the country is not considered. In particular, reference to terms such as “gender equality” or “women’s rights” can make them vulnerable to attack from warring parties or religious and traditional leaders who seek to undermine their credibility by promulgating narratives that such issues threaten local culture, that they are a western imposition, and that the women’s rights advocates are not trustworthy, for they may be foreign agents.

So instead of solely relying on the legal frameworks, WPBs take a more pragmatic approach, drawing on traditional cultural systems to reach and challenge the powerful. Being cognizant of the sources and dynamics of socio-political power and the patriarchal norms that dominate their own societies, they often choose to engage, reclaim, and if needed, subvert these dynamics using a range of approaches from kinship ties to indigenous traditions, faith and even dress. Through these channels they empower themselves to be peacebuilders and assert their credibility. Examples of these tactics are noted below.

**Kinship Ties:** In many traditional societies, women are often the holders of kinship ties that are typically invisible but essential to social cohesion. In Somalia’s clan-based society, for example, women marry across clan or community lines to deepen such ties. When conflict arises, some women claim those ties for the benefit of peacemaking. They use both their marital status and their position as the daughters of clan elders as a bridge between male-led clans, to initiate dialogue and press for resolution of disputes through informal channels. In 1999, Somali women peacebuilders temporarily formed the sixth clan—the women’s clan—to gain space at the peace talks and to challenge the clan system in which women were invisible yet vital.

**Motherhood and Militarism:** Many times women have chosen to deploy the moral authority that comes with being mothers. This is particularly effective given that highly patriarchal and militarized systems value motherhood as the key role of women. Inherent to this is the assumption that women retain their domestic roles while serving and supporting the system.

Yet from Argentina in the 1980s to Sri Lanka in the 2000s and across current crises today, women have subverted these notions by entering and occupying public spaces and taking power into their own hands. They have mobilized as mothers of the disappeared, of servicemen and of detainees to justify the weight of their moral and societal authority to demand changes in policies, justice for victims, ceasefires, and the end to war.

In Yemen at the time of writing, the Abductees' Mothers Association, which arose in response to the war, is highly active. Similar to other contexts, by identifying themselves as mothers, and asserting the moral and emotional authority that conveys, they have challenged armed groups and successfully negotiated the release of more than 900 detainees.

Under the guise of motherhood, women also provide a safe cover for men to join in anti-war movements. This was evident in the Four Mothers' Movement in Israel in the 1990s.<sup>40</sup> Mothers of soldiers protesting Israel's occupation of Lebanon started the movement and the demand for withdrawal. Many Israeli men who agreed with their call joined in. But retaining the identity of mothers provided an important tactical advantage to the group because Israel's male military leaders could not denounce, silence, threaten or question the legitimacy of soldiers' mothers.

**Tradition and Superstition:** It is often assumed that culture and tradition are oppressive towards women, and thus it is important to ensure the protection of women through legislation. But women peacebuilders have proven adept at identifying and deploying historic traditions and cultural practices, including superstitions that are beneficial to women and can be used strategically for their own protection, empowerment and peacemaking.

In Liberia in 2003, Nobel Laureate Leymah Gbowee and the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace movement were strategic in their use of religious and cultural symbolism. They deliberately dressed in white for protests, to denote peace and the defiance of Esther in the Bible. When peace talks were stalling and the violence was escalating, they blocked the entries and exits of the meeting hall in Ghana where militia leaders were negotiating, and started to disrobe. As Nobel Laureate Gbowee explained in West Africa, for women to strip naked in public against anyone is a powerful curse, denoting bad luck and bad fortune.<sup>41</sup>

Liberian women were not the first to use such tactics. In Sierra Leone in 2000, an interfaith group of women demonstrated against the Revolutionary United Front's (RUF) violence and non-adherence to the Lomé Peace Agreement. When the militia leader insulted them, the women bared themselves, thus conveying shame onto the men. According to tradition, since the women had been insulted, their families and particularly the men in their communities and faith groups were obliged to stand up for their honor. This led to popular mobilization against the RUF and pressure on them to revert to the agreed ceasefire and transition process.<sup>42</sup>

Nearly two decades later, in Cameroon in 2018-2019, the South West/North West Women's Task Force (SNWOT) organized public lamentations against the war. These protests involved up to 500 women gathering in public to cry in protest against the violence of war, the recruitment of youth into militias, and the rape of girls and women. The spectacle of so many women crying in public was a means of pressuring and shaming the government and armed groups into ceasefire and peace negotiations.

Such practices are often rooted in pre-colonial social structures. In northwest Cameroon for example, women's social movements, known as "Takembengs" drew women together to perform practices and rituals to maintain traditions and social cohesion. Given their moral authority, the Takembeng could also hold rituals and ostracize individuals from their communities for committing injustice. Writing in *World Pulse* in 2014, one Cameroonian activist described them as "a dreaded name to oppressors of the voiceless. When these matriarchs say 'No', only God can say 'Yes'. When they appear in public, every man takes to his heels."

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40. See Tamar Hermann, "Winning the Mainstream: Arba Imahot, the Four Mothers Movement in Israel" in *Civilian Jihad*, ed. M.J. Stephan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): 253:264, [http://doi.org/10.1057/9780230101753\\_18](http://doi.org/10.1057/9780230101753_18); and International Alert, *Women, Violent Conflict and Peacebuilding: Global Perspectives* (London, UK: International Alert, 2000).

41. Leymah Gbowee, *Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publisher, 2011).

42. Dyan Mazurana, Christopher Carlson, and Sanam Anderlini, *From Combat to Community: Women and Girls of Sierra Leone*, January 2004, [https://www.peacewomen.org/assets/file/Resources/NGO/PartPPGIssueDisp\\_CombatToCommunity\\_WomenWagePeace\\_2004.pdf](https://www.peacewomen.org/assets/file/Resources/NGO/PartPPGIssueDisp_CombatToCommunity_WomenWagePeace_2004.pdf).



The cultural rootedness of such actions lends women peacebuilders a depth of authenticity and legitimacy in their own communities. Given that the beliefs are indigenous, it also protects them against accusations of being foreign, especially “Western” agents.

***Harnessing the Power of Religion for Women’s Peace Work:*** Religious teachings and interpretations of texts by clerics across many faiths are often a source of misogyny and disempowerment for women. From North America to the Middle East and Africa, the tensions between civil laws and religious teachings that influence legislation are evident in terms of women’s status and rights in society.

Yet, women peacebuilders often engage and challenge the religious order to draw attention to and emphasize the teachings that advocate for respect, equality, pluralism and non-violence. As Susan Hayward and Katharine Marshall write:

All religions contain moral imperatives to support peace. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all affirm shalom or salaam, which conveys a rich understanding of peace as encompassing both political reality and inner spiritual wholeness. Religious understandings of peace often encompass social justice and reconciliation, which can inspire and help shape individual and community commitments to peace by promoting hospitality, respect for other faith communities, justice and human rights, healing, forgiveness and individual growth.<sup>43</sup>

They further note that “in Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism and other faiths, women scholars and practitioners have [...] sought to reclaim their traditions to affirm their dignity and authority and to celebrate women’s experiences and agency within religious communities.”<sup>44</sup>

The approaches developed by Mossarat Qadeem, Co-Founder of Paiman Alumni Trust in Pakistan, are case in point. As Qadeem says, “In a patriarchal society like Pakistan, religion—like politics—is considered men’s domain.” So, any woman who enters this space to challenge the Taliban’s interpretations must have, as Qadeem says, “a grip on the religion so the authenticity of her narratives cannot be challenged by anyone.” To further her peacebuilding work, Qadeem’s strategy is to use Quranic texts, concepts, and vocabulary, as well as the prophet’s sayings (Hadith) and practices to help women and youth deconstruct, demystify and discredit the extremists’ ideology. In effect, she uses the foundations of the same faith and teachings to challenge and subvert the ideology that extremists espouse. As she says, “Paiman’s ‘transformative methodology’ of empowering women and youth to prevent and counter violent extremism in their communities is based on the Quran and Sunnah.”<sup>45</sup>

***The strategy of harnessing the power of superstitions—good or bad luck and fear—in support of peace is also notable, as it reaches and affects people emotionally, and cannot be easily discredited.***

43. Susan Hayward and Katharine Marshall (eds), *Women, Religion and Peacebuilding* (Washington DC: US Institute of Peace, 2015): 10.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Personal correspondence with the author.

These observations are reflected in the work of women peacebuilders across many contexts. Often WPBs are inspired to do peace work because of their strong faith. In Northern Ireland, for example, peace scholar and practitioner Mari Fitzduff notes, "It was religious women who first put their feet down, insisting that action be taken to bring violence to an end and advancing practical solutions such as integrating Catholic and Protestant schools."<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, Fatima Al Bahadly, founder of the Iraqi Al Firdaws Society, who works to disengage young men from sectarian militias because of their commitment to jihad as a religious obligation, draws on strength from her own beliefs and values. In engaging the young men, she does not criticize their faith or their sense of duty. Instead, she offers a reframed interpretation of jihad that rejects the use of violence and makes the case that jihad is a struggle to do God's work on earth.

Also in Pakistan, Bushra Hyder, a school principal and peacebuilder, uses similar tactics. In 2017, faced with the prospect of her teenage male students planning to go on a jihad to Myanmar to avenge the violence perpetrated against the Rohingya Muslim minority, Hyder questioned her students' religiosity by asking if they helped the poor and downtrodden in their own community. Like Al Bahadly, her approach was to expose them to their lack of understanding of the purpose of the teachings and offer them a peaceful, alternate pathway.

In Northern Nigeria, where Boko Haram has been active, Hamsatu Allamin, herself an Islamic scholar and founder of the Allamin Foundation for Peace and Development, deployed a similar strategy by first engaging local Islamic scholars in a discussion comparing Islamic teachings on peaceful coexistence, non-violence and the rights of women and girls with peacebuilding principles and universal human rights. It was a means of exposing the scholars to these rights with reference to their own faith, so that they could no longer be deemed to be foreign or "haram". A key focus was emphasizing that education is a duty for every Muslim (male and female) and not forbidden, as Boko Haram claimed. She invited the scholars to weekly call-in radio shows to share their teaching with local communities and respond to questions. Within 15 weeks, school enrollment in the area had increased by 40 percent.<sup>47</sup>

**Leading Patriarchal Leaders towards Peace and Equality:** Women peacebuilders also adopt the strategy of changing the mindsets of community leaders and patriarchs. In Afghanistan's Herat Province, Hassina Neekzad, founder of the Afghan Women's Organization for Equality (AWOE), has established a men's network across villages and districts to prevent and mitigate conflict and violence, with attention to women and children, as well as extremism more widely. Her groups comprise clerics, local leaders, schoolteachers and young men, all of whom are people of influence in their communities.

Neekzad's approach is to show empathy by reaching into the men's personal experiences of violence and encouraging them to consider how women and children may feel when at risk of violence. She teaches leadership and conflict resolution skills and, where needed, draws on a mix of Islamic laws and human rights norms to reinforce why and how to avoid violence. This approach also taps into concepts of patriarchy and masculinity.

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46. Hayward and Marshall, *Women, Religion and Peacebuilding*, 306 and 321-324.

47. As documented in 2015-2016 project report submitted to ICAN.



In defining characteristics of masculinity and manhood in my own multi-country research, “protector” is one of the ways in which men define masculinity, but often this warps into the role of warrior or protector of family or tribal honor, which is then used to justify violence against those who threaten the group.<sup>48</sup> Neekzad’s approach is to offer men an alternative means of being protective—i.e., by protecting their communities, especially women and children, from violence and fear and with opportunities. In the communities where she has worked, the levels of violence have declined and women’s participation in public life, including local politics, has increased. In 2019, in just the two-month period following their participation in AWOE’s workshops, the men intervened in and resolved 72 conflicts in their communities.<sup>49</sup>

## Using Different Means to Get to the Ends of Achieving Sustainable Peace

As noted above, in their pursuit of peace and justice, peacebuilders make strategic decisions to harness the social, political and legal resources available. Simultaneously they are tactical in terms of the resources they draw upon in different contexts and times. Similarly, they are cognizant of political sensitivities to semantics. For example, over the course of the conflict in Sri Lanka, the State sometimes perceived the term “peace” as threatening. Other terms such as “gender” and “violent extremism” are also misconstrued in many settings. Such dilemmas are often apparent in international contexts where WPBs may refer to their work as “building social harmony” rather than the more politically inflammatory term of “preventing/countering violent extremism,” or “P/CVE”.

The same sensitivities arise in terms of self-identification. Viewed objectively, many WPBs are inherently feminist in their views, values and approaches. But in many contexts, to self-identify as a “feminist” can put them at profound risk and prevent their work, so they avoid the label.

Visual symbols can also be fraught with challenges. For example, in many Muslim-majority contexts, WPBs will abide by hijab or other dress codes to conduct their peace work. As one peacebuilder stated, “If I am dressed as they expect me to, I can carry on my work with rehabilitating militias.”

In effect, WPBs navigate such issues with dexterity and wisdom, using terms and words that are sufficiently broad to encompass their goals and enable their work, without being provocative in the eyes of local authorities or armed groups. They tend to eschew performative actions and ideologically declarative statements and stances in favor of a pragmatic and strategic focus on their end goals of ending violence, promoting justice and rights, and building inclusive peace.

*In their pursuit of peace and justice, peacebuilders make strategic decisions to harness the social, political and legal resources available.*

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48. Between 2008 and 2010 the author designed and led a 10-country study on men’s experiences and involvement in violence for the UN Development Programme (UNDP). This research found that despite geographic and cultural diversity, men defined masculinity through four pillars of men as providers, protectors, procreators, and holding social prestige.

49. International Civil Society Action Network, Annual Report (2019), 55, <http://icanpeacework.org/2020/07/23/icans-annual-report-2019>.



## CONCLUSIONS

With conflicts and identity-based extremisms pulling apart the social fabric of societies, most people feel a strong tendency to withdraw into their own comfort zones and communities. But this further weakens the ability of pluralistic societies to reform and strengthen. Peacebuilders are the few individuals who not only imagine an alternative and inclusive future but also dare to become the change they seek to bring. Like any bridge, once they exist and create pathways for others to also engage across the lines of conflict, they can be walked over and taken for granted. But, when negative forces aim to disrupt this engagement, they target the bridges first.

With increasingly close civic space, rising authoritarianism, mainstreaming of extremisms, and the corresponding breaking down of trust, it is urgent and necessary to recognize and celebrate the existence and work of peacebuilders. Their approach and vision are inspirational, and also a critical antidote to the cynicism and apathy that can prevail when people have forgotten or never known peace within pluralistic societies and states. But peacebuilding is difficult. It is a mindset, an emotional journey, a daily, weekly, year-on-year effort and often a struggle to persist. It cannot be sustained by a handful of individuals and specialized networks alone. A wider movement and global public engagement are essential.

Twenty years ago, women building peace brought visibility to their work by successfully advocating for the UN Security Council's recognition of their contributions. Now, it is time to acknowledge and respect the unique combination of values, characteristics, strategies and tactics that together define women peacebuilders as critical actors working in conflict settings on conflicts.

They are negotiating or mediating with armed groups and governments to end violence in formal and informal spaces. They focus on the rights and protection of civilian populations, particularly the most marginalized. They work on sustaining and building peace. It is dangerous work because they are exposing themselves to threats and ostracization at a time when people, even their own families and communities, are entrenched in their positions. These women are the heart and soul of the 1325 agenda, and they are a missing piece of contemporary peacemaking. It is time to ensure that they have their rightful place secured as independent actors and delegations at every stage of the peace process and every level of effort being undertaken to prevent, mitigate and resolve conflicts affecting their countries.

Below are 10 practical recommendations, including many based on existing precedence, to enable this shift.

## Operational Guidance to Guarantee the Participation of Women Peacebuilders in Track One Peace Processes

In 2000, women peacebuilders mobilized to demand recognition and inclusion in peace and security processes, resulting in the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security (WPS). The resolution called for “support to women’s local peace initiatives” and the participation of women in peace and security decision making. Twenty years on, there is some progress. Over 80 countries have national action plans committing to women’s inclusion; regional women mediators’ networks have emerged globally; a handful of women are being appointed to official delegations to peace talks; the United Nations (UN) has appointed gender advisors to its Mediation Standby Teams; and envoys have created Civil Society Support Rooms and Women’s Advisory Boards to accompany Track One peace processes. While these models provide some space for engagement, they are by definition limited and do not guarantee direct and equal participation or representation of women peacebuilders in peace processes.

As research shows, this exclusion has a direct negative impact on the outcomes and the sustainability of peace agreements.

To improve the outcomes of existing peace processes and to mark the 20th anniversary of the WPS agenda, governments, multilateral organizations, and others engaged in the field of mediation and peacemaking need to change their standard practices. Here are 10 steps that mediation teams and governments supporting peace processes can take at each stage of the peace process to ensure inclusive and gender-responsive processes that have a better chance of sustainable peace.

### 1. Support independent women peacebuilder delegations to take part in peace talks.

**Precedence:** At the Somali National Peace Conference in Arta, Djibouti (2000), the UN invited Somali women peacebuilders to observe the peace talks among the five clans all represented by men. The women united across clans as the “Sixth Clan,” referencing the clan-based design of the conference. They negotiated with the men to secure their seat at the table as an independent delegation and as signatories to the agreement.

**Precedence:** In 1996, as the Northern Ireland peace talks were beginning, the mediator, Senator George Mitchell, called for an all-party process that would include the ten most popular political parties. Catholic and Protestant women’s rights and peace activists united to form a new party, the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition, and came 9th in the elections, thereby securing their seat at the table. They introduced issues such as police, prison, and education reform to the agenda and played a pivotal role as internal mediators between the major parties when negotiations stalled. They were also crucial in mobilizing the public’s vote in the referendum to continue the talks.

### 2. Design inclusive processes where women and other marginalized groups have fair representation.

**Precedence:** In facilitating the 2012-2014 Yemen National Dialogue Conference (NDC), the UN heeded the call for inclusivity and helped create a process that included political and tribal leaders alongside youth and women’s civil society movements. The NDC comprised 28% female participation. There was an all-woman delegation and a minimum 30% quota for women’s participation in the delegations of other parties. Women chaired three of the nine working groups and comprised 25% of the Consensus Committee.

### **3. Convene meetings early on, encouraging systematic interactions from the start of the process so relations are built:**

- Between women peacebuilders and the envoy/mediator, and
- Between women peacebuilders and the negotiating parties.

**Precedence:** As common practice, Norwegian mediation teams meet with various stakeholders, including women, before an official process starts. Throughout the process they engage on issues like inclusion and rights, particularly with those that are likely to be the formal parties. A gendered conflict and actor analysis is undertaken and targeted support for relevant women's peace organizations and WPS actors is provided.

### **4. Invite women as official observers and convene the women to negotiate on the issues on the agenda, come up with negotiated solutions to share with armed actors, and encourage them to adopt solutions.**

**Precedence:** In Burundi in 1999, President Nelson Mandela (mediator), UNIFEM, and the Mwalimu Nyerere Foundation supported an all-party women's peace conference, bringing together more than 50 women representatives from the 19 Burundian groups involved in the peace negotiations. The women discussed and agreed on gender-specific demands including the inclusion of a women's charter in the Constitution; measures to ensure women's security; women's rights to land, inheritance, and education; and an end to impunity for gender-based war crimes and domestic violence. Mandela subsequently presented the negotiated recommendations to the 19 negotiating parties, who accepted all requests.

### **5. Invite women peacebuilders to regularly speak to delegations about issues on the negotiation agenda—such as ceasefires, power/responsibility sharing, and security sector reform—and what they expect to see coming out of the process.**

**Precedence:** In 2002, in advance of the Sun City talks, UNIFEM assisted Congolese women to meet with women from South Africa, Guatemala, and Uganda who had experience in peace negotiations. The women were later able to contribute substantively to the agendas of several commissions (defense and security, political and judiciary, financial and economic, humanitarian, social and cultural, peace and reconciliation) and provide technical assistance to the Facilitator's office in the last round of negotiations.

### **6. Provide all delegates with gendered tools and training, including gendered briefing papers on all thematic topics on the agenda, so delegates understand how women and men are affected by and respond to conflict, and what expertise the peacebuilders bring to the table.**

**Precedence:** During the Colombian peace process, the UN's Mediation Standby Team produced gendered briefing notes for the Norwegian envoy on each of the topics on the agenda, including Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration (DDR); land issues; and victims' rights.

### **7. Fund women peacebuilders early, throughout the process and, during implementation of agreements.**

This enables them to carry out consultations, draft statements and papers, and engage substantively in the process from the start and in the implementation and monitoring of accords. Refer to their outputs to inform and shape the agenda and process, as well as in discussions with belligerent parties, as precedence in actions 4 and 5 show.

### **8. Allow flexibility for ongoing grants or provide new additional “rapid response” funding to women peacebuilders to enable them to travel on short notice and participate in peace processes.**



**Precedence:** In 2019, ICAN's Innovative Peace Fund (IPF) and Better Peace Initiative (BPI) mobilized within 16 days to provide financial support (travel, accommodation, and per diems) and strategic advising (messaging and statement input) to Cameroonian women to enable them to engage in the National Dialogue.

**9. Assist with issuing and expediting visas to enable last-minute travel to peace talks/pre-talks, provide other travel support (including transportation, accommodation, and per diems), and assist in obtaining security clearances and access.**

**Precedence:** In 2002, as Canada's Special Envoy for Peace in Sudan, Senator Mobina Jaffer, with the support of mediator Salim Salim (former President of Tanzania), was able to insist that 17 Darfuri women be brought to the peace talks. By building rapport with the Arab League and the African Union, Jaffer was able to change the dynamics of the process despite the initial refusal by male negotiators to include women.

**Precedence:** In 2019, the European Union (EU) included Yemeni and Syrian women peacebuilders in its delegation to the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), enabling them to secure visas to the United States that would otherwise not have been issued. The peacebuilders were able to address and engage with a wide array of UN, member state, and US government officials, as well as the global NGO community.

**10. Before committing funding or political support, insist on the inclusion of women peacebuilders and consult with women peacebuilders to determine the viability and vulnerabilities of agreements. Don't commit support if delegations are not inclusive or if agreements enable, validate, or reinforce violence, corruption, discrimination, or exclusion.**

**Precedence:** In May of 2020, the Council of the European Union concluded that the EU "will condition its future political and financial support to ensure that republican, democratic, and values-based principles are protected and further promoted"<sup>50</sup> within the Afghanistan Peace Process. In declaring their support for a negotiated political settlement, the European Union remains committed to effectively enhancing governance and strengthening Afghan institutions in order to foster a sustainable peace. Additionally, the EU urges the settlement to ensure the democratic and fundamental freedoms of all Afghan citizens, particularly women, children, and minorities. These groups must be protected and strengthened to contribute to "the economic, social, political, and development achievements of the past 19 years."<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the European Union reaffirmed alignment with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, highlighting the "importance of meaningful participation of women in all peace initiatives including formal and informal peace negotiations."<sup>52</sup>

*Pressuring women peacebuilder coalitions to channel their concerns to the peace table through the warring parties can be harmful. First, it politicizes the issues that women raise, turning the lives and well-being of abductees, for example, into a political bargaining chip. Second, it can compromise the integrity and independence of women peacebuilders—as active citizens from war-affected communities—if they are perceived to be co-opted by one side. We are peace actors working in and on the conflict for the benefit of the people, not the political elite.*

– Rasha Jarhum, Peace Track Initiative, Yemen

50. Council of the European Union, Council Conclusions on Afghanistan (8223/20 COR 1), Brussels, 29 May 2020: COASI 47

51. *ibid.*

52. *ibid.*



*"We're called ICAN because it's very much about what I can do. We have an appetite for trust, as opposed to an appetite for risk, and engage by building trusted relationships and framing things in a positive and proactive way."*

*- Ambassador (Ret.) Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley  
United States*