

On the Agenda: Women's Essential Role in Peace-building

The issue: In today's world, with some form of conflict in almost every region, the recognition has grown that development and security issues have become inextricably intertwined. Underdevelopment raises the likelihood of instability; war obliterates development gains. While women are at times among those who perpetrate conflict, far more often they are among those who suffer the greatest harm. In today's conflicts, more than 70 per cent of the casualties are civilians-most of them women and children. Women also face specific and devastating forms of violence related to gender, including rape as a weapon of war and sexual slavery, practices that in turn greatly increase their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. As women struggle to keep families together and care for the wounded on the margins of fragile war economies, they are the first to be affected by infrastructure breakdown, and may be forced into survival strategies that involve exploitation.

Despite the fact that women have often been on the frontlines of urging the end to conflict and providing the support that allows their families and communities to survive, they have mostly remained on the periphery of formal peace and reconstruction processes. In recent years, recognition has grown that this not only contravenes the right of women to participate in decisions that affect their lives, but that for a sustainable peace to take hold, women must take an equal role in shaping it. Their perspectives and experiences are critical to stability and inclusive governance. Recovery also provides a chance to strengthen gender justice through the formulation of laws, judicial systems and political processes that uphold women's equality.

In 2000, the UN Security Council reaffirmed the essential role that women play in peace-building in its historic Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. UNIFEM provided insights and information to the UN Member States that drafted the resolution. Its wide-ranging provisions call for women's full participation in all aspects of peace-building, from negotiations to post-war reconstruction.

increase women's visibility and participation in peace processes, strengthen protection mechanisms, and incorporate gender equality provisions across democratic systems established once hostilities come to a close.

In Sudan: For over a decade, UNIFEM has worked nationally and locally to support women's participation in diverse aspects of Sudan's long-drawn-out peace process. The country's many layers of civil conflict have raged between villages, communities and entire regions. After women played a key role in 1999 in helping to settle hostilities between the two largest communities in southern Sudan, UNIFEM partnered with the Sudan Council of Churches on the 'People to People' peace process, which reserved a third of the seats in local and regional peace and reconciliation meetings for women. Women peace mobilizers, recruited from local communities, also began going door to door in their villages to encourage other women to take a proactive role.

In 2002, UNIFEM sponsored dialogues between women's groups from the north and south of Sudan that yielded a series of technical papers. Women later presented these to the negotiators at the peace talks in Machakos, Kenya. By the time Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed in early 2005, it called for the "equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all civil and political rights."

In the lead-up to the agreement, UNIFEM continued consulting with women on their concerns, from the need for new economic opportunities to the prevalence of gender-based violence. UNIFEM brought these findings into the discussions of the Joint Assessment Mission carried out by the UN and the World Bank, which produced a framework to guide international contributions to post-conflict Sudan. At a subsequent conference of major donors in Norway, UNIFEM, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway and the Norwegian Institute for International Affairs supported the attendance of women from the North and South, who jointly urged that a high percentage of donor funds be channeled towards reducing stark gender inequalities.

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In Afghanistan: UNIFEM's significant contributions to the constitutional process, including legal advice and the training of women delegates, helped Afghanistan's Loya Jirga agree to enshrine equality between men and women in the new Constitution. Starting from the first days of the creation of a new government, the fund has also played a central role in developing the skills and capacities of the new Ministry of Women's Affairs. In 2004, as election preparations geared up, UNIFEM partnered with a local NGO to train election commissioners on women's voting rights, and organized a discussion between women's activists and 10 out of 18 presidential candidates. Covered extensively by the press, the event marked the first event of its kind to publicly address women's rights. UNIFEM is currently supporting the efforts of the Ministry of Justice to review family law according to Islamic and international standards, and is sponsoring research into customary justice mechanisms used by up to 80 per cent of Afghans. The research will assist the Government in designing reforms to curb those practices harmful to women and girls.

In the Great Lakes region: After UNIFEM backed two years of concerted lobbying by women's activists, peace negotiations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo produced a Constitution guaranteeing women's participation in peace-building. In Rwanda, since demobilization efforts often overlook women ex-combatants, UNIFEM supported the first membership-wide meeting of the Ndabanga Association of Women Ex-Combatants. Over 200 women attended, securing a pledge of fiscal support from the Government and new ties with the Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission.

Within the Great Lakes region as a whole, UNIFEM brought over 100 women together before the 2004 International Conference on Peace, Security, Democracy and Development in the Great Lakes Region to develop a common agenda. They produced the Kigali Declaration, which includes a demand for the end of impunity for crimes such as rape, and a call for systematically integrating female ex-combatants into rehabilitation and reintegration processes. It was later incorporated into the Dar-es-Salaam Declaration of the First Summit of Heads of State and Governments.

In Sierra Leone: In Sierra Leone, UNIFEM helped the Truth and Reconciliation Commission fully respond to the needs and concerns of women. Training for commissioners and their senior staff covered international laws on gender crimes and

ways to ensure that women would be fully included in the formal reconciliation process. The commissioners subsequently agreed to make special provisions to encourage the collection of testimonies on sexual violence, including a witness-protection programme and trauma-counseling services. After national women's groups came together to identify how they could support the commission, UNIFEM assisted several groups in their efforts to help women come forward and to address the immediate medical needs of rape victims. Currently, UNIFEM is working with the Sierra Leone Law Reform Commission on drafting new laws to stop violence against women.

In the Southern Caucasus: Varying levels of internal strife and cross-border conflict have afflicted Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, with over a million people displaced from their homes. UNIFEM has supported the efforts of women's groups in each country to organize national women's peace networks—in Azerbaijan, for example, one group assists displaced women, while another advocates for the national implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325. These networks have come together in a regional coalition called Women for Peace. In the absence of formal peace processes, women's groups that belong to the networks have embarked on people-to-people diplomacy by reaching out to each other across the lines of conflict and ethnicity. They have built mutual trust and found unity in working together on women's human rights issues, and are supporting each other in fostering peace within their communities. Under another initiative, women journalists from the three countries are producing a regional journal, Women's Appeal for Peace, widely distributed to government officials and civil society organizations.

In Colombia: In Colombia, where internal conflict has caused an estimated two to three million people to flee their homes, UNIFEM has collaborated with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees on a gender evaluation of the national policy on displaced people, and provided recommendations to the UN and the Government on ways to protect refugee women.

Around the world: UNIFEM created www.womenWarPeace.org, a Web portal featuring gender profiles of over 30 conflicts, issue briefs and a Resolution 1325 toolbox. A new initiative involves developing gender-based indicators to warn of impending conflicts; these will also help to more precisely map the specific impacts of conflict on women and girls, and the critical role they can play in conflict prevention.