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Centre for
Humanitarian
Dialogue

February 2008

OPINION

Women and
negotiations with
armed groups

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i This article draws on the author's previous research. sources on peace agreements and implementation available at www.peacewomen.org and Gender, Conflict and Development, T. Bouta, G. Frerks, I. Bannon, World Bank 2004.

ii For example, UNIFEM supported the participation of two Acehnese women in the process of drafting the Law of Governance on Aceh.

iii An example of this was that women ex-combatants were not included as beneficiaries for demobilisation, disarmament and rehabilitation programmes until FMLN female leadership realised their mistake and reopened the issue during the implementation phase.

This article highlights some issues concerning the current situation of women [i] as mediators in dialogues with nonstate armed groups, and as members of and negotiators for such groups. It shows that the lack of female involvement as peace negotiators provides scarce evidence as to the costs and benefits of their inclusion; however, some evidence and plausible arguments for their involvement in negotiations with nonstate armed groups do exist and should be built on.

While the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the 2005 UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security are mainstays of the international discourse on peace and security, they are not fully implemented even in the most progressive democracies. Currently, for example, only one UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General and no EU Special Envoys are women. Additionally, women are not leading mediation efforts in any of the high profile or ongoing conflict resolution cases such as Darfur, Kenya, or the Middle East, though there are some eminent advisors such as Graça Machel involved in the Kenya mediation effort.

The picture in terms of female negotiators for governments and nonstate armed groups is similarly unbalanced. While women's groups are given status as observers or delegates, often through intervention from the international community [ii], parties to conflict hardly ever field a woman in their teams. Even radically left-wing nonstate armed groups - which typically have egalitarian attitudes and practices as well as significant female membership, and women in combat roles, such as Eritrea's EPLF or the Nepalese Maoists - rarely send female delegates to lead talks or insist on equality of representation or the consideration of the topics at the table from a gendered perspective. The FMLN in El Salvador is an exception to the first point -- almost one third of the negotiators were women. However, their self-confessed lack of gender awareness meant that some clauses

in the agreement were gender blind and would have appeared discriminatory [iii]. Female leaders and mediators such as Chandrika Kumuratunga in Sri Lanka or Madeleine Albright in Dayton have often displayed similar gender blindness either through lack of exposure, lack of interest or a misplaced conviction that gender neutral equals gender sensitive.

The low female representation at peace talks has been marginally better at some points in the last ten years but never impressive. This makes it difficult to collate a substantial body of evidence about the difference that the physical presence of women as mediators or negotiators, or their intellectual contributions might actually make to a peace process.

iv The author is currently undertaking research that examines ongoing and more recent peace processes for concrete evidence which can be brought to bear on the debate. The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue expects to publish an article on this by the end of June 2008.

v An example of this would be the impact of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition on ensuring that social service provision and education during implementation were taken seriously during the Good Friday negotiations.

Most argumentation is currently based on extrapolation from the widespread involvement of women in track two and grass roots peacebuilding and reconciliation activities. It stems from a conviction rooted in a commitment to equality and using evidence on gendered communication and conflict resolution skills drawn from other sectors (such as linguistics and psychological research, private sector negotiations, or professional mediation on civil or family issues) [iv].

Another difficulty in measuring women's contributions to peace negotiations is that existing evidence [v] becomes dated when there is insufficient proof of a trend or theory when that evidence is not reinforced by enough subsequent experience. It is also difficult to measure the impact of any specific group or individual in processes which take years to play out, both in the negotiations and the implementation phase. We are in the very early days of understanding what the contribution of women, or indeed any other significant group, may have been in the cases of Nepal or Aceh, for example. As a result, there is a tendency to merely measure who was or was not present.

There is a history of women organising across cultural, ethnic and political lines to put together platforms and strategies for peace. This continues to happen in Darfur, and was evident in Liberia, South Africa and Somalia, to name a few. While these women are often creative about lobbying for space at peace talks, and are often supported by international actors or figureheads, they are undoubtedly still seen as marginal to the 'real' process, especially if they do not successfully communicate a clear platform or policy priorities. Key actors are still defined in formal peace talks as those with serious "spoiling" potential (normally through the withholding of political, military and financial support, or through the commission of violence) -- which coalitions of women or women from conflict parties have so far not proven themselves to be.

On the positive side, examples like Northern Ireland, Guatemala or El Salvador show that women's inputs broaden the scope of the discussion and have a bias towards a longer term, more developmentally-oriented vision of how a peaceful society might be achieved, rather than simply looking to how an immediate cessation to violence might be accomplished. Balancing these two approaches is no easy task, but if the tendency to favour one over the other is roughly split along gender lines, then increased parity of representation will presumably presage a more nuanced outcome.

What can be safely said is that women -- in this case I refer more to women who are citizens of the conflict area rather than "international" women, though this will depend on the individual -- are better able to frame appropriate responses to gender sensitive issues.

These may typically include dealing with the impacts of and accountability for sexual violence as a weapon of war or meeting the needs of female ex-combatants. In addition single female household heads benefit from gender sensitive approaches to addressing their land and property rights or issues related to access to employment or public services such as justice, health and education. Women also make critical contributions towards the

selection of beneficiaries for relief and reconstruction programmes. It can also be argued that, through their social and kinship networks and habits of communication, women are valuable channels for communicating peace process outcomes into the wider community, thereby increasing the understanding of and commitment to the implementation of that process.

Finally, many women rightly see peace processes as a chance to increase their political participation and as an opportunity to take part in the post-conflict restructuring of society. The fact that their political participation remains so low -- the latest International Parliamentary Union world average figure for women in parliaments is 16.2% -- is the core reason why so few of them, or their views are represented as or by negotiators and

mediators in the first place. If their participation is not increased, the vicious cycle persists thereby excluding them and correspondingly limiting their capacity to collaborate at all levels in forging a sustainable and equitable peace.

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Published in Dilemmas of Negotiation with Non-State Armed Groups, February 2008, Vol 6, Issue 2 – The Canadian Consortium on Human Security.