# 3. Women's Peace-building Efforts across the Commonwealth

There is clear evidence of women's active local-level engagement in promoting peace, and yet as previously noted this often does not translate into involvement in higher-level peace-building processes. This exclusion can have adverse implications for the protection of women in these societies as well as impede long-term resolution of the conflicts.

Overall, the countries of the Commonwealth have seen a relative decline in the number of conflicts in the 2000s relative to the previous decade. During the 1990s at least 10 Commonwealth countries were engaged in full-scale conflict – including Mozambique, Papua New Guinea, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Uganda – with peace agreements reached in most by the early years of the twenty-first century. Women played instrumental roles in many of the efforts to bring these conflicts to an end. Yet, in a large number of countries women's substantial efforts were not recognised in formal negotiations and their perspectives and insights were not included in the final peace agreements or in post-conflict reconciliation efforts.

The case studies in this chapter show where women's activism during conflict has not led to significant progress on women's rights. Also proffered are reasons as to why activism has failed to yield positive results.

## Examples of limited engagement in peace negotiations

This section reviews the cases of Sierra Leone, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea (Bougainville) as illustrations of this problem.

### Sierra Leone
Between 1991 and 2002 civil war raged in Sierra Leone with far-reaching destructive impacts on the lives of women and girls. Atrocities committed included rape, mutilation and forced enslavement. Some women and girls were coerced into 'marriages' with rebels while others were forcefully conscripted or used as porters and required to carry rebel equipment and supplies for miles. However, women in Sierra Leone were

more than victims. Not only were there recorded cases of willing female combatants (Coulter 2008), but women were also active in other arenas as well. Many became primary breadwinners as men were involved in the war effort, and they were also instrumental in organising for an end to the conflict.

Despite relatively high levels of marginalisation of women from political structures at both the formal and customary levels, stemming from cultural barriers under-pinning a primarily patriarchal society, women nevertheless were able to play instru-mental roles in advocating for the end of violence and building peace. Through civil society organisations such as the Sierra Leone Women's Forum and the Sierra Leone Women's Movement for Peace (SLWMP) women mobilised against war by, for example, organising protests, marches and demonstrations calling for peace; attending forums such as the UN Fourth World Conference on Women (held in Beijing in 1995) to bring the war to international attention; advocating for and playing instrumental roles in two national consultations that successfully called for elections before peace; and promoting women's political participation during the 1996 election campaigns (Jusu-Sheriff 2000; Pham 2004; Ogunsanya 2007; Castillejo 2009).

Such engagement yielded some positive dividends. Although at first women were not part of any of the formal dialogue concerning peace and were excluded from the main peace negotiations of Abidjan in 1996 and Conakry in 1997, at least two female representatives were included in the peace talks held in Lomé in 1999 and the resulting Peace Agreement mentions the importance of paying attention to women's special needs in the post-conflict context (Ogunsanya 2007; Barnes 2010).

Women led efforts of concerted bargaining for inclusion, including sit-ins and marches in front of parliament as well as lobbying key regional organisations involved in peace-building operations. Women's civil society organisations monitored government activities and also contributed to strengthening capacity building for women through the provision of gender-sensitive training at all levels of government including for parliamentarians, the judiciary and the media (Ogunsanya 2007).

However, some activists such as Yasmin Jusu Sheriff (2000) believe that the movement did not translate into greater participation of women in formal peace-building processes due to a combination of the unwillingness of male politicians to disturb the status quo and the reticence of women themselves. For the most part women went back into the private sphere once peace was declared. Levels of sexual and gender-based violence remain high in the aftermath of conflict, with little punitive action taken. The Family Support Unit (a post-war creation within the police responsible for investigating domestic and sexual violence against women) noted that out of 927 crimes reported in 2009, there were no convictions (Jean-Matthew 2010). Women remain underrepresented in governance (accounting for just 17 of 124 members of parliament) and women's groups have been unsuccessful in instituting a 30 per cent quota for parliamentarians.

Such findings are reinforced by those of Barnes (2010), who found that formal insti-tutional mechanisms did little to include women in the peace process. For example, the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) failed to incorporate a gender mandate in its mission, only briefly referring to women. Steps taken to address

the role of women appear to be afterthoughts and were poorly funded, with negative implications for women in the demobilisation process as well as in some types of humanitarian assistance.

Barnes also points to the importance of context-based interpretations of 1325: the absence of domestic actors in the development and implementation of the mandate of UNAMSIL meant there was little consideration of specific ways in which to incorporate local understandings of gender equality or to bring about change (ibid.). What measures were adopted were limited by cultural barriers, and more emphasis needed to be paid to addressing these as well as other underlying attitudes, structures and practices that prevent the achievement of goals to promote women's involvement. Furthermore, it is not enough to simply advocate for women's political participation; also needed is an emphasis on education and training so that women can be effective in these positions. Sustained efforts to address women's lack of economic and social rights, which contribute to women's general marginalisation, are instrumental as well.

Despite these limitations, one could argue that women's activism has paved the way for some changes, at least at the institutional level, to help improve women's rights and standing in Sierra Leone society. They also contributed to the development of the country's National Action Plan (discussed in Chapter 4).

In line with recommendations made in the 2004 report by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which called for the repeal of discriminatory statutory and customary laws and the reduction of sexual and gender-based violence against women, the Government passed three 'Gender Bills' into law in 2007: the Domestic Violence Act, the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act and the Devolution of Estates Act. These Acts address three key areas: greater protection of women from domestic violence, women's inheritance rights, and regulations pertaining to early marriage and divorce.

Although women were not included for the most part in formal peace-building mechanisms during negotiations leading to the end of conflict, the passage of laws aimed at improving their lives as well as the development of the NAP in 2010 – with its focus on mechanisms to prevent conflict, prosecute and punish perpetrators as well as boost women's political participation – are all positive steps. The tangible outcome of these interventions remains to be seen, but the inclusion of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms within the plan means that such assessments should be forthcoming.

## Mozambique

Women have a long history of involvement in conflict in Mozambique, first playing instrumental roles in the Liberation Front of Mozambique (FRELIMO) as part of the national liberation movement (1964–1974) and then during the civil war (1976–1992). They were active in a multitude of contexts including as breadwinners, fighters and advocates for peace. However, despite the apparent visibility of women in these different areas, some authors have pointed out that the prevailing cultural attitudes still either dictated or constrained what women accomplished. For example,

Chingono (1996) found that activities encouraged within the women's wing of FRELIMO included sewing, cooking and dancing and simply served to reinforce women's traditional roles and activities.

In the aftermath of war it appeared that women had made some gains. For example, in the 1994 elections – the first to be held after peace was established – women gained 30 per cent of the seats, second only to Rwanda. Political institutional rules also favoured women thanks to a quota system adopted by FRELIMO, as one third of party candidate lists must be allocated to women. Despite these apparent successes, however, the argument holds that institutional changes that accord political, social and economic rights to women can have limited practical success if there are cultural barriers. For the most part, women were not involved in the reconstruction processes and in many cases they simply reassumed their traditional roles (Barron 1996). Thus, despite their participation in conflict and conflict resolution, many Mozambican women remain subject to patriarchal family authorities and male community leaders who have paid little attention to the new roles women adopted during the conflict (Mzvondiwa 2007).

In addition, the absence of comprehensive gender analysis – or the existence of an analysis that considered women in limited ways, such as simply victims – resulted in the implementation of policies and programmes that did not effectively address their needs. This included demobilisation programmes that failed to recognise that some 'wives' of ex-combatants might have been forced into marriage and so should be given the option of resettlement with their families rather than having to accompany demobilised soldiers who received DDR packages (Jacobson 1999).

## Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe presents another example of the marginalisation of women following involvement in liberation struggles. Again, despite the rhetoric of empowerment of women as part of a broader social justice agenda, it would appear that on achieving independence, such appeals and concerns took a backseat and men were primarily responsible for decision-making and crafting the new regime. Several reasons have been put forward to explain this, including the prevalence of men who fail to acknowledge women's equality (Nzomo 2000).

## Solomon Islands

There are similar findings from Solomon Islands, where despite women's key activities in promoting peace during ethnic tensions between 1998 and 2000, culturally rooted beliefs about the respective roles of women and men did not allow women to play a major role in the aftermath of conflict (Webber & Johnson 2008). Thus, despite women's instrumental roles in lobbying for peace, formal negotiations left women out (Charlesworth 2008).

## Papua New Guinea (Bougainville)

Bougainville in Papua New Guinea offers a somewhat different perspective regarding the role of culture. Central to women's successful engagement there was

their ability to couch their work within the broader idea of motherhood, which had a special local resonance due to the matrilineal tradition in which land, culture and knowledge are inherited through the female line (Saovana-Spriggs 2007, cited in Charlesworth 2008).

Women were very much engaged in peace-building efforts, including peace negotiations at all levels (ibid.). Women's groups such as the Letina Nehan Women's Organisation (LNWDA) and the Bougainville Inter-Church Women's Forum (BICWF) organised a range of activities to promote peace and conflict resolution as well as general development. Even during the most intense violence in the early 1990s, women launched peace activities at village level, including going into the bush to talk to young fighters and try to persuade them to return to their homes (Howley 2002). Later, women organised peace demonstrations, conferences and meetings. Women's church groups were the vehicles for meetings between women from different areas of the island with different allegiances in the conflict. The Bougainville Inter-Church Women's Forum, held over a week in August 1996 in Arawa, became a turning point in the conflict, with 700 women attending from all parts of the territory.

However, even within a cultural context that supported women, Charlesworth (2008) still found that public life was for the most part closed to women; out of 40 members of government, only 3 are women.


## Why women's engagement may be limited following conflict

The above examples show that, in many cases, women's active involvement in various components of conflict and peace do not translate into greater roles for them in formal avenues of peacemaking or political representation. A number of reasons have been advanced to explain this, including the failure of subsequent policies to question gender roles; the prevalence of cultural barriers that impede women's greater involvement; the absence of sustained promotion of gender equality at both the international level and the level of the state; structural constraints on women's time; and differences among women on the objectives and central concerns following conflict.

Regarding the first point on the ascription of gender roles, and despite a plethora of research that has uncovered the various ways in which war affects women, responses to women in the aftermath of conflict still seem to locate them in one category: as victims. Thus interventions, from state-instituted processes to relief projects, put in place policies and projects that neglect the multiplicity of women's experiences and can even reinforce traditional gender roles. This has implications for a host of reintegration efforts including security sector reform, reform of the judiciary and law, and DDR.

Even when women are considered as agents, it is still in a very narrow capacity – for example, as peace-builders who are intrinsically wired toward more co-operative and collaborative behaviour because they are women. This can negatively affect DDR processes, which historically have failed to be gender sensitive (UNIFEM 2004). By ignoring women's roles as combatants, DDR activities disempower women who are not deemed eligible to participate in the reintegration packages received by combatants.

Neglecting the impact of stigma on self-esteem and confidence can also rob women of valuable means to rebuild their lives (M'Cormack-Hale 2009). In addition, reintegration programmes often fail to take into account women's views; this is especially problematic since women are affected by mechanisms set up for ex-combatants to reconcile and return to their communities (Norville 2011).

One-dimensional perspectives of women can also have implications for their political participation. Part of this problem paradoxically stems from the reasons given to explain and support the need to include women in peace-building efforts. One branch of thinking lodges women's instrumental roles in conflict resolution in attitudes that ascribe certain qualities to women: that as mothers, nurturers and so on they are more likely to be consensus-builders and better negotiators.[1] On this basis, women are seen as inherently more peaceful than men. However, as a number of scholars have pointed out, such a perspective can in turn limit women's inclusion in formal peace-building efforts (Barnes 2010) as they are expected to return to what are assumed to be their foremost concerns – home and family – at the conclusion of conflict. As Dianne Otto has written: 'If women are admitted on the understanding that their special contribution arises from their womanly instincts, it follows that their political agency will be limited to what is made possible by that representation and restricted to "feminised" tasks involving nurturing and mothering' (2006, cited in Charlesworth 2008: 350). From this perspective, the expectation that women should not be involved in formal peace-building operations is unsurprising.

There needs to be greater questioning of both masculine and feminine identities and/or roles and of what it means to be a woman or a man. Essentialised understandings of these variable categories – using biology or physiology to explain human social behaviour – can lead to rigidity that does not allow for sustained social transformations to occur but simply replicates old social patterns that continue to marginalise women.

Furthermore, positive advances in women's rights can only be effected with commitment to changes that encompass all sectors of society. As Nzomo writes, 'post-conflict reconstruction and attainment of sustainable peace entail the rebuilding of the social, economic, and political infrastructure and strengthening governance institutions to make them conducive to and supportive of economic and social development on a just and equitable basis, regardless of gender, ethnic, religious, cultural, racial and other social identities within society' (2000: 4). Thus, it is not enough to simply work toward increasing women's political representation or involvement in peace-building; ways must also be found to increase women's access to and participation in all segments of the society, including economic, political and social structures.

For this to occur, interventions must question the broader structures that underpin women's lack of engagement and involvement following conflict. Consequently, social relations are key. An understanding of the gendered power relations that exist at the community level must be interrogated and addressed rather than simply targeting women and/or men in isolation from the larger context (Bryne with Baden 1995).

At present even relief efforts are susceptible to treating women in a one-dimensional fashion. Humanitarian interventions in a variety of country contexts

have been criticised for implementing projects where a focus on 'women's needs' can simply serve to reinforce traditional gender roles as well as contribute to the implementation of projects that are unresponsive to local demands (Baden 1997; M'Cormack-Hale 2009). The proliferation of training in activities such as cooking, hairdressing and sewing does little to transform gender relations and can create an excess of skills that lack a market.

In addition to widely prevalent social norms that locate their primary roles within the private rather than the public sphere, women also face structural constraints that impede their ability to be active in the political sphere. For example, a number of scholars have pointed out that women's time is constrained (see, for example, those cited in Mi-Hye 2006). Their responsibility for the economic and social welfare of their families, and drains on their time such as farm work, cooking and cleaning, do not leave women with much time for more politically oriented activities. Moreover, numbers are not enough – while quotas can ensure women's representation, they might not necessarily translate into effectiveness, which also needs attention paid to capacity building and training of women leaders.

The ad hoc adherence to and implementation of UN resolutions by the international community is another limitation. Even the UN, including the Security Council itself, is not immune. Gender mainstreaming within the UN is only spottily applied and women occupy just a few senior positions. Funding constraints of peacekeeping missions are another problem, and gendered initiatives are often not a priority (Binder et al. 2008).

An analysis was undertaken to commemorate the 10-year anniversary of UNSCR 1325 that aimed, through measuring how gendered UNSCR resolutions have been across the past 10 years, to identify the extent of internalisation by the Security Council of its own resolution. One of its findings was that the Council's country-specific resolutions often did not go far enough in incorporating the ideas or the language of 1325 (Butler et al. 2010). This finding is crucial given that instructions at the highest levels of international security play an instrumental role in guiding implementation on the ground (Barnes 2010) and set the example that gender concerns should be taken seriously at all levels.

Thus, the guidelines for peace support operations must in themselves be gendered as this not only reinforces the point that gender mainstreaming should be implemented at all levels, including the highest levels of international security, but can also direct how women are included in practice. They can guide the mandate of institutions on the ground, and even the makeup of the operation, to ensure that women play central roles and that analysis and activities are fully gendered. For example, because women's work often takes place at the local level or in the informal sphere, it is often still neglected by the international community despite the existence of resolutions that urge the contrary. This point is further underscored by Binder et al. (2008), who note that the lack of consistent implementation as well as language inclusion by the UN of the articles of 1325 is a significant barrier to its impact. They point also to the need for 'farther reaching gender-mainstreaming policies within the UN' (ibid.: 34) and touch specifically on how these limitations have affected women's participation

in the peace-building process, one of the central concerns that underlie many of the case studies above.

Language that stresses the importance of engaging with *all* peacemaking efforts on the ground could be one step toward addressing this. Furthermore, even international peacekeeping efforts fail to put adequate emphasis on placing women in leadership positions, as the example of UNAMSIL illustrates (Barnes 2010). Thus, although the UN pays lip service to the need to incorporate women in key positions, it has failed to follow through on this. According to Anderlini (2007) there were no women among the 18 special representatives in conflict areas in the year she was writing, while a UN Security Council report indicates the number of women peacekeepers is very small – just 3 per cent of overall military contingents in 2010 (United Nations 2010).

Not only has the UNSC failed to consistently mainstream 1325 in its peacekeeping missions, but also specific country mandates and resolutions do not always address women's issues and concerns or refer to gender (Binder et al. 2008). Moreover, some peacekeeping missions do not have any personnel at all with experience on gender issues. This underlines the need for engagement at all levels, with countries that contribute troops advocating for women even among the highest levels of delegations responsible for peace-building and conflict resolution.

This is not to say that advances have not been made. As the 10-year analysis mentioned above points out, the inclusion of gender-sensitive language has increased, with over 80 per cent of the resolutions monitored by PeaceWomen referencing women in 2009 as compared to less than 5 per cent between 1998 and 2000 (Butler et al. 2010). The importance of language is highlighted in the positive impacts that have resulted in the field. As they note:

> 'The incorporation of language on sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) has been important in mandates such as Darfur (UNAMID [African Union/United Nations Hybrid Mission in Darfur]) where Darfur's Gender Advisory Unit is one of the core substantive units and actively undertakes trainings, capacity-building, and technical assistance on gender mainstreaming, and specifically SEA. The peacekeeping mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT [UN Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste]) represents another interesting example. Due to the call for gender mainstreaming in UNMIT's mandate, we saw the subsequent incorporation of gender units from the inception of the mission. Relating to women's participation in the electoral process, language in Haiti's (MINUSTAH [UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti]) resolutions led to ground-level, "long-term training initiatives aimed at developing leadership skills of women throughout the country who wished to serve as candidates for office"[2].' (Ibid.)

Such success reinforces the importance of language and helps underscore the urgency of ensuring that advocacy is undertaken to capitalise on these advances. As Butler et al. note, the situation is improving: for the total period covered (November 2000 to August 2010), 40.3 per cent of resolutions referenced women and or/gender but the number has been steadily growing over the years, with an 87 per cent high noted in 2009 (ibid.).

There are also some examples of women in high-ranking positions within the UN. For example, women have held senior positions on ad hoc tribunals, including as

prosecutors at both the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) as well as one (of four) presidents at the ICTR (Binder et al. 2008).

The international community must also make concerted attempts to identify and document local women's efforts at building peace and include them in programmes and policies aimed at changing gender relations and strengthening women's roles in society (International Crisis Group 2006; Binder et al. 2008). Building on what has already been accomplished is an instrumental way to ensure the success of interventions.

## Notes

1. See Helms 2003 for an excellent review of the literature that supports this thesis.
2. United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations/Department of Field Support-Department of Political Affairs 2007.