Sustaining peacebuilding efforts in post-armed conflict settings

Learning from Nepal, the Philippines and Colombia

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Nurturing creative agency, sustaining peacebuilding efforts, and making use of political windows of opportunities are the crucial ingredients for the foundation of a peaceful post-armed conflict society.

As we witness the alarming increase of armed interstate and internationalised conflicts and the rise of polarised, ultra-conservative ideologies often undermining the rule of law and women's rights, feminist analytics and praxis are more important than ever. Drawing from decades of partnerships with women[1] peacebuilders, our organisation PeaceWomen Across the Globe (PWAG) proposes a comprehensive understanding of "peace processes" that includes all initiatives of formal and informal peacebuilding that strive for transformative structural change by tackling the root causes of conflict and violence before, during and after armed conflicts.

Feminist understanding of peace processes

In our holistic understanding, "peace" is much more than the absence of armed conflict: it is a social process and a way of life that continuously endeavours to promote positive living conditions for all people, focuses on the absence of direct and structural violence, promotes equal economic security, political participation and access to resources and guarantees respect for human rights. "Peace processes" encompass far more than formal peace negotiations leading to photogenic handshakes between (mostly male) signatories: they are composed of complex, dynamic, nonlinear phases[2] that involve building, negotiating, implementing, enforcing, preserving and sustaining peace before an armed conflict erupts, during armed conflicts, during peace negotiations and after agreements are signed. The phases approach allows us to strategically design efforts needed to move from one phase to another towards a peaceful society.

Looking at peace processes holistically enables us to shed light on the mostly invisible work of women. While women are not necessarily inherently more peaceful, their day-to-day experiences (however diverse) often equip them with a capacity for empathy, resilience and even a willingness to confront difficult issues and demand structural changes essential to building lasting peace. Women peacebuilders are engaged in and influence all phases of peace processes, decisively setting the path for peace. Facing great risk to their lives yet receiving little to no recognition, they identify

1 By 'women' we mean people who identify as female, including trans, inter and cis women. In addition, we stress the need to include the voices and experiences of people who were socialised or are on occasions perceived as women, such as trans men, nonbinary and agender people.

2 See PWAG's tool "Understanding Peace Processes" available at: 1000peacewomen.org/en/programmes/participation--in-peace-processes/what-are-peace-processes.

potential tensions, advocate for dialogue and non-violent compromise between conflicting parties, negotiate or facilitate humanitarian access or cease-fires and propose various visions of peace. They may also contribute to the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants or lead reconciliation initiatives.

Post-armed conflict transformation—three key peacebuilding ingredients

While the signing of peace agreements might be a relief, it only marks the beginning of a long societal process of coming to terms with a violent past. The next challenge is to implement the agreement. In the long-term, a pursuit for structural transformation typically addresses the need to seek justice and truth, reconciliation, reparations to survivors and to guarantee non-repetition. These processes may never come to an end but lay the foundations for a transition to a genuinely peaceful society.

As feminists, we perceive the mission of dealing with a violent past as an opportunity for broader transformation[3] of patriarchal war-torn societies. We, however, acknowledge that the fragile "after armed conflict"[4] phase is in need of constant sustained peacebuilding efforts. Relapse into armed conflict remains a real possibility. Post-armed conflict phases often constitute a regression for the feminist struggle towards equity, with "women returning to the kitchen often being taken as a sign that peace has been re-established."[5] We argue that three key ingredients are crucial for the foundation of a genuinely peaceful post-armed conflict society, allowing for lasting reconciliation, the prevention of repetition of violent conflicts, but also enabling women not to be pushed back into traditional roles against their will. These ingredients are: nurturing creative agency, simultaneously sustaining vital peacebuilding efforts, and making use of political windows of opportunities.

We illustrate our argument with examples from Colombia, Nepal and the Philippines. In Colombia, the 2016 peace agreement between the guerilla FARC-EP and the Colombian government was designed to end more than 50 years of armed conflict over complex issues including land and power. Nevertheless, various violent armed groups are still active and territorial peace talks are ongoing. The Nepalese 2006 Comprehensive Peace Accord ended the armed conflict in Nepal led by the Maoist Communist party from 1996 until 2006, which aimed to replace the royal parliamentary system with a socialist republic. In the Philippines, the 2014 peace agreement put an end to over 50 years of armed conflict over self-determination between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Muslim majority region of Mindanao in the Philippines, resulting in the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao.

Nurturing creative agency—unsettling boundaries of women's roles

If individuals and communities affected by armed conflicts are to assert themselves and actively participate in peace processes in a transformative way, they need *agency*. Nurturing creative agency on the basis of collective

3 We prefer the term "conflict transformation" to that of "conflict resolution" as we acknowledge that conflicts are at the base of human relationships and drivers of change. As conflicts often cause destruction and suffering, however, they must be transformed, away from violence and toward dialogue and peace. See Lederach, John Paul: The little book of conflict transformation. New York, NY: Good Books, 2003.

4 We prefer the term "post-armed conflict" to that of "post-conflict" to acknowledge that with the silence of the "big guns," not all conflicts disappear. As feminists, we believe in the need to stay attentive to these nuances, especially since violence against women often remains high in public as well as private spaces after an armed conflict.

5 Enloe, Cynthia: Twelve feminist lessons of war. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2023, p. 10.

healing is our first ingredient. Creative agency is at the core of a feminist vision of a post-armed conflict society in which women disrupt gendered roles and behaviours society attributes to them, leading to structural change.

Annika Björkdahl and Johanna Mannergren Selimovic claim that the agency of women in post-armed conflict settings "has to a large degree been left under-theorized."[6] Anthony Giddens states that "[a]gency has to do with the human capacity to act" and that it is exercised "in a social world in which structure shapes the opportunities and resources available."[7] Women's agency is largely determined by their gender-specific roles in society and a woman will usually act in a way that is deemed acceptable in her specific society. Björkdahl and Mannergren Selimovic define agency as creative when it "unsettles conventional boundaries of women's agency, takes place in novel spaces, and questions predetermined roles of women while opening up new possibilities for women's agency."[8] In that sense, creative agency "transcends spatial divides such as domestic/public."[9] With creative agency, a woman can disrupt gendered roles and behaviours attributed to her by society.

Nagarik Aawaz[10], a long-term partner of PWAG in Nepal, emphasises personal and collective healing as a first step in strengthening agency. Their deputy head Trishna Thapa notes a shift in the mindset of the Nepalese communities affected by the civil war, thanks to continuous work with them.[11] In programmatic *Women's Peace Tables* organised on local, provincial and national levels, conflict-affected women and their children gather to exchange on their experiences of the armed conflict and its consequences today, engage in practices of collective healing and define strategies to make their voices heard politically. For example, whereas the women survivors of conflict-related rape used to be blamed, and also blamed themselves, for the rape, continuous work in safe spaces allowed them to heal, regain their agency and understand that it was part of a wider patriarchal system reinforcing violence against women. This empowerment enabled the survivors to advocate for their rights to government representatives directly. As a result, representatives of local authorities became aware of the conflict's impact on women and started both recognising them as full members of the community and addressing their needs.

Rendered possible by collective healing, creative agency transcends conventional boundaries of women's agency and questions predetermined roles. Women who advocate for their recognition as survivors and demand their rights act contrary to expectations in Nepali society and demonstrate a creative agency that can set a societal change in motion. By refusing to be blamed for the violence, the survivors open new spaces for agency for generations to come. They refuse to return to the old days but rather use the process of dealing with a violent past to uncover—and reject—the deeply rooted inequality and misogyny that they continue to experience. Creative agency based on collective healing is the foundation for sustaining peacebuilding efforts on the long run and for making use of political windows of opportunities.

6 Björkdahl, Annika; Mannergren Selimovic, Johanna: Gendering agency in transitional justice. In: Security dialogue (46/2), 2015, p. 165-82, here p.166.

7 Giddens, Anthony: The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984, cited in Björkdahl/Mannergren Selimovic, 2015 (see footnote 6), here p.170.

8 Björkdahl/Mannergren Selimovic, 2015 (see footnote 6), here p. 171.

9 Ibidem, here p. 177.

10 Nagarik Aawaz (nagarikaawaz.org.np) is a peacebuilding organisation working for conflict transformation and peacebuilding in Nepal since 2001.

11 Trishna Thapa during the public panel Women sustaining peace in Colombia, Nepal & the Philippines, 16.10.2024 in Bern.

Sustaining vital peacebuilding efforts despite impunity and hopelessness

While many actors strive to be involved in the negotiation and signing of peace agreements, only few remain committed to its implementation some years down the road. In Nepal for instance, of the more than 50 peacebuilding organisations founded before and after the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Accord, only a handful remain active today.

Absent a political will to implement a peace agreement and address the root causes of violent conflicts, civil society is often left alone to do both. Vital and durable peacebuilding efforts must be sustained. For example, with the 2022 election of the son of the former dictator as president of the Philippines, addressing past violations by the state is not a priority. Similarly, the fact that parties to the armed conflict now occupy governing positions in Nepal led to a recognised lack of accountability for crimes committed during the civil war. Nepalese and Filipino women peacebuilders are working to demand truth and justice—efforts that do not come without risks. The government in Nepal, for instance, increasingly pressures peacebuilding efforts with bureaucratic burdens such as lengthy and overly complicated accreditation processes for peacebuilding programs.

Sustaining peacebuilding efforts means providing the necessary conditions for peacebuilders to move beyond survival mode. Amidst the various challenges they face (lack of political will, administrative burdens, threats to physical integrity,[12] and/or risk of backlash), they need sustainable incomes, mental and physical wellbeing, motivation, hope, a sense of community/belonging/solidarity and safe spaces to do their work and keep on doing it in the long run. Safe spaces such as the *Women's Peace Tables* created by Corporación Comunitar[13] in Colombia gather diverse women, from urban and rural Colombia, including survivors of the armed conflict and former combatants. According to director Zully Meneses, they are about "transforming the social tissue, transforming the collective imagination that violence is the only way of dealing with things."[14] With these sustained efforts amidst great adversities, women gain hope, a sense of community, experience solidarity and gather strength to work towards peace. While peacebuilders tend to be expected to be "resilient," namely naturally capable to withstand hardships and resist adversity, they should not be left alone in that task. Sustaining peacebuilder's work means addressing and financing all those needs in the long run.

Making use of political windows of opportunities

Amidst the numerous challenges to which peacebuilders are confronted in post-armed conflict (especially the lack of political will to implement peace agreements), they may at times choose to give up on the political actors and power structures. When a political window of opportunity to transform structures, laws or policies arises—a sine qua non for sustainable change—peacebuilders must, however, be able to strategically engage with the relevant political actors and structures. This constitutes our third ingredient.

The GZO Peace Institute[15], a longstanding partner of PWAG in the Philippines, and conflict-affected women activists tirelessly push for the

12 For example, in Colombia, despite the 2016 inclusive peace agreement, armed actors continue to harm civilians, including women, exemplified by the tragic murder of Carmelina Yule Pavi in March 2024, an indigenous Nasa leader, killed by armed actors while advocating for the release of a forcibly recruited youth.

13 Corporación Comunitar (comunitar.org.co), founded in 1986, is a Colombian ecofeminist organisation committed to the defence of the rights of women, victims of the armed conflict as well as ethnic and environmental rights, as a contribution to the construction of peace and the sustainability of life.

14 Work meeting with Zully Meneses, on 19.02.2024 at PWAG in Bern.

15 The Gaston Z. Ortigas Peace Institute (GZOPI, gzopi.wordpress.com) is a Philippine based NGO that supports citizen's engagement in the peace processes in the country.

16 Karen Tañada during the public panel Women sustaining peace... (see footnote 11).

implementation of the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro. "When you sign an agreement, it may not progress for years," explained executive director Karen Tañada.[16] Having identified loopholes in the proposed laws for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region, they advocated for necessary amendments such as the inclusion of more clear-cut recognition of gender-based violence as a grievance of the Bangsamoro people in the law creating a National "Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission for the Bangsamoro." They also recommended that the proposed Commission include at least two women among its five regular members and lobbied for these positions with senators and members of congress. Clear analysis of power structures and engagement with those structures and people at the right time was key to this success.

Similarly, years of persistent fight by Nepal's civil society led to "rape or serious sexual violence" being recognised as serious violations of human rights in a new transitional justice law, even though Nepal's 2006 Comprehensive Peace Accord did not explicitly recognise women survivors of conflict-related sexualised violence as victims of the conflict. Grasping the political opportunity to impact the content of the transitional justice law constituted a sustainable step to the desired transformation. This persistence clearly benefited from peacebuilders' creative agency and sustained post-armed conflict peacebuilding efforts.

Concluding words

We encourage practitioners and donors to engage with the three key ingredients discussed here when planning support in post-armed conflict settings. Allocation of efforts and funds is needed to nurture creative agency and sustain peacebuilders' work in the long run. In addition, when a political window of opportunity arises to engrave a transformation in structures, laws, or policies, practitioners and policy makers should praise and support peacebuilders' engagement with the relevant political actors. We hope that these learnings can also be helpful in previous phases of peace processes, as agreements are negotiated and implementation mechanisms are put in place.

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