

Women political leaders and peacebuilding

By Clare Castillejo

■ Executive summary

Over the past 15 years there has been growing recognition of the gender-differentiated impact of conflict, the opportunities to promote women's rights that post-conflict peacebuilding processes provide and – crucially – the value that women bring to peacebuilding. Yet in many conflict-affected settings women's participation and leadership in shaping the peacebuilding agenda remain strongly resisted by male elites and are not prioritised by international actors.

This report explores the opportunities for achieving women's meaningful participation and influence in peacebuilding, and the challenges faced by such an agenda. Given the crucially important role that political parties can play in shaping the direction of peacebuilding and post-conflict politics, the report focuses particularly on the ability of women to exercise political voice and leadership through parties and the party system. Finally, it examines why international actors have failed to live up to their commitments on women's inclusion in peacebuilding, and identifies opportunities and strategies to strengthen international support for women's participation and influence in the politics of peace.

The international community first recognised the importance of women's participation in peacebuilding in 2000 in the landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (hereafter UNSCR 1325) (UNSC, 2000). Since then there has been growing understanding of the gender-differentiated impact of conflict, the opportunities to promote women's rights that post-conflict peacebuilding processes provide and – crucially – the value that women bring to peacebuilding. Indeed, a recent UN review found that “the participation of women at all levels is key to the operational effectiveness, success and sustainability of peace processes and peacebuilding efforts” (UN Women, 2015). However, the reality is that women still remain largely excluded from or marginalised in most peace processes.

If women are to influence the direction of post-conflict peacebuilding, capable and representative female political leaders are needed who are meaningfully integrated both into peace negotiations and into political institutions and ongoing political life in post-conflict contexts. However, political systems and parties that both overtly and covertly marginalise and discriminate against women, as well as broader patterns of structural exclusion faced by women, are often powerful barriers to achieving this. Moreover,

international actors have failed to prioritise support for women's participation as they committed to do. Fifteen years after UNSCR 1325 was passed it is now time to take a more political approach to supporting women's participation in peacebuilding and to take effective action to live up to international promises.

Women's leadership in peacebuilding

A growing body of evidence indicates that women political leaders have a crucial role to play in building peace. The participation of women leaders in shaping peace agreements and post-conflict reforms has positive impacts both for sustainable peace and for advancing women's rights in post-conflict contexts. For example, a comprehensive study of peace processes found that if women have the opportunity and capacity to genuinely influence such processes, and particularly if they are integrated across a range of peace process modalities, there is a much higher likelihood of peace agreements being reached and implemented (Paffenholz, 2015). Indeed, women frequently bring important issues to the peacebuilding agenda that male elites tend to overlook, e.g. the inclusivity and accessibility of processes and institutions, the plurality of citizens' voices, or the importance of local and informal spheres.

Women's leadership in peacebuilding can also have positive impacts on gender equality and women's rights, which are both important goals in themselves and critical for democracy and development in post-conflict states. Peacebuilding often involves the renegotiation of the political settlement and social contract, the redistribution of power and resources, and the reform of state institutions. Such processes offer opportunities to strengthen women's political and economic power, rights, and relationship to the state. A UNIFEM (2010) study found that the meaningful participation of women in peace negotiations results in peace agreements that are stronger in terms of women's rights and gender equality. One such example is the participation of senior women in the Kenya National Dialogue and Reconciliation process, which led to the inclusion of women's views and interests throughout the process and in the reforms that followed (McGhie & Wamai, 2011; Domingo & McCullough, 2016).

However, the reality is that in most cases women continue to be excluded from or marginalised in formal peace processes, even those that are internationally supported, such as recently in Mali. Key processes such as negotiating peace agreements and drafting constitutions are mostly controlled by male elites who strongly resist women's demands for inclusion, while international actors have failed to prioritise or effectively promote women's participation. Indeed, a UNIFEM (2010) review of women's participation in 24 peace processes found that "women are conspicuously underrepresented".

Even where they are excluded from formal peace processes, women still mobilise in civil society to influence these processes from the outside. Often this mobilisation is unprecedented, as seen in countries such as Sierra Leone and South Sudan, where women had never before come together to make political demands. Such civil society leadership by women on peacebuilding can take a range of forms, e.g. adopting a brokering role, as the Mano River Women's Peace Network did in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, or lobbying during peace negotiations and constitution-drafting processes to influence the resulting texts, as women did in Sudan, South Sudan and Kosovo. Critically, following conflict, women frequently mobilise to demand greater space in political institutions, usually through electoral quotas, and well as greater representation in the executive, government bureaucracies and judiciary. Such demands often face strong resistance from male political elites and even when women are able to win more space in political institutions they must overcome significant hurdles in order to convert this presence into real influence over the direction of long-term peacebuilding and statebuilding. As O'Neil and Domingo (2016: 10) argue, "women face a double hurdle to power, with formidable obstacles not only to obtaining access to decision-making positions and processes but also to having influence within them. Influential women overcome both hurdles."

Women's contribution to peacebuilding through political parties and the party system

Political parties can play an important part in shaping the direction of post-conflict peacebuilding. They frequently play a central role in brokering an end to conflict, mediating bargaining over the nature of the resultant political settlement, and reshaping the post-conflict state – sometimes in ways that promote sustainable peace, and at other times in ways that fuel further antagonism or violence. Parties therefore offer a potentially important route for women to influence peacebuilding. However, in practice parties in post-conflict contexts tend to be highly exclusionary of women. Indeed, they frequently constitute one of the most formidable gatekeepers to women's political participation and influence in post-conflict settings, given that they control the selection of women candidates at elections, the promotion of women into decision-making roles in a party and government, and the development of policy agendas, as well as in some cases the makeup of negotiating teams during peace negotiations.

The findings of a multi-country study on women and statebuilding (Castillejo, 2011) indicate that women are excluded by both the structure and culture of political parties. In terms of structure, women's participation in parties is frequently mediated through a "women's wing", which, as Cornwall and Goetz (2005) point out, is not intended to provide space for women to emerge as leaders or shape policy, but instead to harness their support for the existing leadership and party structures. In terms of culture, in post-conflict settings political parties are typically highly personalised around male leaders and do business through informal male clientelist networks and in informal spaces that women cannot access. For example, in Guatemala, political parties are effectively "owned" by male leaders, have no mechanisms for collective decision-making, and are continually reconstituted in response to new opportunities for power, while in Kosovo and Burundi, women politicians complain that important party decisions are made in bars by small groups of male leaders (Castillejo, 2011). Women are disadvantaged in multiple ways by such informality and patronage, which frequently prevents them from converting presence in parties, parliament or even the executive into actual influence. In such contexts it is unsurprising that parties mostly do not provide an effective vehicle for women to influence the peacebuilding agenda.

The marginalisation of women in political parties in post-conflict contexts inevitably reflects broader patterns of political, economic and social discrimination, inequality, and insecurity that limit women's ability to influence the direction of peacebuilding. In many post-conflict contexts political violence is common and women are particular targets. For example, in Sierra Leone, female candidates for election are harassed by male "secret societies" that disapprove of their political participation, while in Afghanistan they face threats from both male candidates and insurgents (Kellow 2010; HRW, 2010). Similarly, politics is frequently patronage based or corrupt, which disadvan-

tages women. Women tend to have less financial resources to offer bribes and limited access to and ability to mobilise male-dominated patronage networks in order to get elected or to exert influence once in office. In some post-conflict contexts women also lack political skills and experience, and may face severe social stigma for taking on a public role and confront a range of structural barriers to political participation, such as those related to education, poverty, workload or transport.

Faced with these significant challenges, women in many contexts have campaigned successfully for the adoption of parliamentary quotas as part of post-conflict governance reforms, often with the support of the international community. As a consequence, many fragile states have comparatively high levels of female representation. In countries such as Rwanda and Nepal, where quotas have been part of broader efforts to empower women, they have contributed to a more gender-responsive state.¹ However, in many contexts – from Uganda to Afghanistan – women’s increased political participation through quotas has not translated into substantive influence. Feminist critics increasingly question the international community’s assumptions about the impact of quotas on policymaking. For example, Goetz and Musembi (2008) call for a realistic assessment of what quotas can achieve in contexts of patronage. Clearly, where the distribution of power and resources is managed primarily through male-dominated informal patronage networks and systems rather than through formal channels, women’s presence in formal institutions will not guarantee their influence.

There are various reasons why quotas fail to result in policy impact. Despite increased numbers in legislatures, women are often not given decision-making roles in the executive or key committees. For example, women constitute 27% of the Afghan parliament, but have very limited representation in the cabinet and the high-level policymaking bodies that take decisions about security, counter-narcotics programmes and development (Bochgrevinck et al., 2008). Evidence also suggests that women elected through quota systems often do not champion gender issues. This can be both because political parties deliberately select socially conservative female candidates and because new female parliamentarians are unwilling to challenge party leaders. As Cornwall and Goetz (2005) point out, “winning and keeping office can be contingent on downplaying feminist sympathies”. However, it must be recognised that in many fragile contexts quotas have only recently been adopted and it may take time for their policy effects to be felt.

Given that political parties and formal political institutions in post-conflict contexts tend to be relatively hostile environments for women, as outlined above, civil society activism is an important route for women to influence the peacebuilding agenda. The flourishing of post-conflict civil society as a space for women’s political action and leader-

ship often contrasts sharply with the exclusionary nature of formal party politics, and women can take on leadership roles in civil society without facing the barriers found in formal politics. This is partly because civil society is a newer space with fewer links to traditional power and patronage relations, making women’s participation less threatening. Civil society activism can therefore provide an important route for women to build up a political profile and enter formal politics without having to progress through political parties. For example, in the Philippines women’s civil society alliances have provided a stepping stone for women to get elected and bring a feminist agenda to parties, parliament and the peacebuilding agenda (UNIFEM, 2008).

It must be stressed that despite the significant obstacles described above, women still do manage to influence and lead peacebuilding processes and promote women’s interests in them, from President Ellen Sirleaf Johnson in Liberia to Tunisian women activists who campaigned for a post-revolution constitution that upholds women’s rights. As O’Neil and Domingo (2016) argue, to achieve this influence women leaders need to work in politically and socially strategic ways to advance their objectives. They must build on accepted institutions and ideas, frame their issues in ways that neutralise opposition, make deals and at times accept second-best outcomes, and build alliances with others, including – crucially – male power holders.

Failure to deliver on international commitments

The international community has made commitments to support women’s participation in peacebuilding, notably through UNSCR 1325, which requires “women’s equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security”; in the 2011 New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States, which states that “The empowerment of women ... is at the heart of successful peacebuilding and statebuilding”; and in a range of policies adopted by multilateral and bilateral actors. However, the international community has largely failed to live up to these commitments and make support for women’s inclusion in peacebuilding a priority. Indeed, a UN-commissioned review of the implementation of UNSCR 1325 found that “The failure to allocate sufficient resources and funds has been perhaps the most serious and unrelenting obstacle to implementation of women, peace and security commitments over the past 15 years” (UN Women, 2015).

This failure to support women’s participation in peacebuilding in general, and in particular their participation and influence through political parties, processes and institutions, has a number of causes. The issue of women’s participation in peacebuilding is often caught up in broader dilemmas experienced by international actors between prioritising short-term stability by supporting elite-led agendas and focusing on “bringing in” those groups that can threaten the state, or promoting genuine inclusion.

¹ In both Rwanda and Nepal, post-conflict statebuilding involved a range of measures to promote gender equality, including economic empowerment, legal reform and gender budgeting.

However, this dilemma is increasingly being shown to be in many cases a false one, given mounting evidence that the inclusion of women – and indeed other marginalised groups – can be important for long-term peace outcomes. In addition, promoting women’s participation frequently involves touching on sensitive issues related to tradition and identity, which can provoke resistance from powerful local actors and cause uncomfortable tensions between supporting an endogenous peacebuilding agenda and promoting normative values.² Moreover, international post-conflict support focuses heavily on the centre and on formal institutions, overlooking the informal and local realms where women often take leadership roles and act as peacebuilders. Critically, international actors also frequently fail to recognise or address the structural barriers to women’s participation in peacebuilding.

Fundamentally, however, many international peacebuilding actors simply do not see women’s inclusion in peacebuilding as a priority or appreciate the value it brings to peacebuilding and statebuilding processes. Nor do they understand that women’s exclusion is related to the broader political-economy dynamics of conflict-affected contexts and must be addressed as such. Indeed, Domingo et al. (2013) argue that international efforts to promote women’s leadership in peacebuilding are frequently ineffective and fail to identify either opportunities or sources of resistance because they take a technical approach and are not based on a politically nuanced appreciation of how gender inequalities relate to broader processes of social, political, and economic bargaining and change in post-conflict contexts. For example, in Afghanistan, women’s rights have historically been caught up in contests among various political forces and their international backers – from the Soviet-backed regime to the Taliban – meaning that they “occupy a highly politicized and sensitive place in the struggles between contending political factions in Afghanistan” (Kandiyoti, 2005: vii).

Strengthening support for women’s participation through political parties and beyond

Despite the important role that political parties can play in peacebuilding, they tend to receive little international attention. This is partly because engagement with parties is difficult and risky, given limited entry points and the fact that parties are political organisations with partisan interests and a reputation for corruption. Moreover, where international actors do engage, they frequently lack an in-depth understanding of local political contexts and instead “work with political parties in isolation, using blueprint approaches that assume that the weaknesses of political parties can be treated in the same way in each country” (Wild & Foresti, 2010: 2). International actors have a very limited record of engaging with parties on issues related to the participation of women in peacebuilding and statebuilding processes. In general, when they do engage, the focus is on promoting electoral quotas or providing

capacity development for women party members rather than addressing the exclusionary power structures and lack of internal democracy that keep women marginalised in political parties.

International actors could certainly do more to support parties to become vehicles that both channel the interests of women citizens into peacebuilding agendas and facilitate the participation of women political leaders in peacebuilding processes. This requires working with male party leaders to demonstrate why women’s participation is valuable and to incentivise them to meaningfully include women in delegations to peace talks; constitutional and other reform processes; inter-party dialogues; and the day-to-day management of party, parliamentary and government business. It also requires greater engagement on issues related to party democracy and reform, as well as supporting women in parties to build cross-party alliances to strengthen their collective voice and promote their inclusion, and to push for internal party reforms such as more democratic decision-making, internal quotas, and gender-responsive structures and bylaws (Lukatela, 2012). Capacity-building must be provided not just to leading female members of parliament, but also to grassroots and younger female party members and activists.

International actors should also move beyond a limited focus on quotas and elections and adopt a broader range of measures to promote women’s political influence in post-conflict settings. These would certainly involve getting women elected, but also equipping women to act effectively once in office; linking women politicians with women’s civil society movements; and promoting the inclusion of women in the executive, judiciary and civil service, and oversight mechanisms. It would also involve addressing the entire election process, including through involving women in voter registration or as election-monitoring officials in order to reinforce their public role in political life in post-conflict settings.

Support for the greater inclusion of women in political parties and formal politics in post-conflict contexts must, of course, be part of wider efforts to strengthen women’s ability to shape and lead peacebuilding across a range of arenas, based on an understanding of how their exclusion relates to broader political-economy and conflict dynamics. Such support should involve promoting women’s interests and participation in the most crucial foundational moments of peacebuilding, including pre-negotiation talks, peace negotiations and constitutional reform, because these processes can establish the framework for the post-conflict political settlement. Indeed, the OECD DAC (2013) recommends that its members mobilise their political influence and senior-level commitment to advance both women’s participation and gender-equality issues in crucial peacebuilding processes. According to UNIFEM (2010), such support should include supporting women to

2 For discussion on navigating gender norms in peace mediation processes and situating these in the reality of local contexts, see Palmiano Federer (2015).

demand inclusion, establishing appropriate channels for women to engage with these processes, incentivising the inclusion of more women in negotiating teams (including by linking this to funding), including women and gender experts in the technical work linked to every component of the peace deal and in strategic positions in formal talks, and providing gender training to all mediators.

Sustained support for women's collective voice is also critical if women are to influence the peacebuilding agenda. As O'Neil and Domingo (2016) argue, women's political marginalisation means that collective strength is crucial to amplify their power. Such support should foster broad coalitions of women across civil society, politics, and public institutions, and should encourage these coalitions to develop a common political agenda, to become effective political actors, and to engage with political and institutional change processes. This requires that international actors recognise the plurality of women's voices and interests in post-conflict settings and work with a much wider range of women's organisations than is currently the norm, connecting them to one another and to peacebuilding processes. For example, in Nepal, women mobilise primarily around community identity issues, with Dalit women mobilising around caste discrimination, Madhesi women around language and customary practices, and Janajati women around access to services. However, through long-term and strategic engagement, international donors helped these diverse women's movements to build national-level advocacy coalitions (El-Bushra, 2012). Moreover, recognising that civil society can provide an alternative route for women to enter formal politics and bypass discriminatory party structures, more international support is required to develop leadership skills – and particularly political capacities – among young and non-elite women civil society activists. According to Domingo and Holmes (2013), this support should be targeted at various formal and informal activities at the national and subnational levels, and should enable women to engage effectively with existing systems.

Entrenched political, economic, and social inequalities and discriminatory norms are major barriers to women's participation in peacebuilding, whether in formal peace processes, in post-conflict political institutions or through civil society. It is therefore critical that international actors combine support for institutional reform – whether of political systems and parties, bureaucracies, services, or other areas – with a focus on strengthening women's socioeconomic position and political capacities and addressing discriminatory social norms. For example, meaningful support for women's participation in post-conflict politics must include addressing violence towards women candidates, the economic cost of participation, logistical barriers to participation in terms of transport or time costs, barriers related to education and language, and stigma against women in public life. It is important that international actors understand that women's ability to take leadership roles in politics and peacebuilding is significantly shaped by community and domestic contexts, and

therefore support for women's empowerment is required at multiple levels. As O'Neil and Domingo (2016) argue,

A woman's domestic decision-making power shapes her public power – can she choose to go out alone, attend public meetings or challenge community norms? Education and employment outside the home can increase women's power and status within the family and community.

Finally, it is important that international actors recognise the powerful role that informal and traditional institutions play in shaping political life in many post-conflict contexts, and the fact that such institutions frequently (although not always) discriminate against and exclude women. International peacebuilding actors must enhance their understanding of how informal and customary forms of power shape peacebuilding processes and post-conflict political life, as well as the opportunities and challenges this poses for women's participation. The promotion of women's full inclusion in peacebuilding requires international actors to increase their work in this sensitive and difficult-to-access area, e.g. by supporting women to challenge discriminatory patterns of informality in formal political institutions or engaging with customary institutions in ways that promote women's rights.

Conclusion

The UN's recent review of the implementation of UNSCR 1325 makes a clear case for why women's participation in peacebuilding is important, highlights where the international community has failed to support this and identifies what needs to be done (UN Women, 2015). Moreover the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – notably SDG 5: "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" and SDG 16: "Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels" – provide an integrated, internationally accepted, and universally applicable framework for linking up agendas related to gender and women's rights with those related to conflict and fragility. Hence, a stronger-than-ever international framework is in place, as is compelling evidence about what works. It is now time for international actors to make this a priority and deliver on commitments to support women's political leadership in peacebuilding.

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