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# Women in Conflict and Peace

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## **Editors**

Jenny Hedström  
Thiyumi Senarathna

## **Contributors**

Rosalie Arcala Hall  
Sara E. Brown  
Jenny Hedström  
Anna Larson  
Joanna Pares Hoare



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## Preface

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The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is committed to developing resources and sharing good practices in support of sustainable democracy worldwide. Our aim is to inspire dialogue and to catalyse positive change toward more equitable and inclusive political processes. We believe that increasing marginalized people's participation in politics and securing their access to public life is of particular importance to democratic development and sustainability. To this end, International IDEA is exploring ways in which peacebuilding processes can be supported and strengthened to encourage greater participation and inclusion of marginalized people and minority groups.

In this context, International IDEA strives to promote participation and representation of women. We recognize that democratic reforms will be flawed if they exclude women from participating effectively. The research presented in this publication focuses on women from marginalized communities. It aims to increase their visibility and recognition as stakeholders in political reforms and to raise awareness about strategies and practices to enhance their participation in political life. This publication brings together original research from four conflicts in which differences based on intersections of identities, such as class, religion and ethnicity, have played a crucial role in the sustainment of the conflict and the subsequent success or failure of democratic interventions.

Drawing from a spectrum of case studies, including Afghanistan, Myanmar, the Philippines and Rwanda, this publication examines the complex role that women play as agents in both peace and conflict, concluding with lessons that both international and local communities can apply to future peace- and democracy-building initiatives. We hope that our readers will find this an illuminating and insightful publication.

*Yves Leterme*  
*Secretary-General*  
*International IDEA*



## Acknowledgements

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## Abbreviations and acronyms

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<b>AERG</b>	Association of Student Survivors of the Genocide ( <i>Association des Étudiants et Élèves Rescapés du Genocide</i> )
<b>ANA</b>	Afghan National Army
<b>ANP</b>	Afghan National Police
<b>ANSF</b>	Afghan National Security Forces
<b>AOG</b>	Armed opposition group
<b>ARMM</b>	Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao
<b>AVEGA</b>	Association of Genocide Widows ( <i>Association des Veuves du Genocide</i> )
<b>BBL</b>	Bangsamoro Basic Law
<b>BDA</b>	Bangsamoro Development Agency
<b>BPE</b>	Bangsamoro Political Entity
<b>BTC</b>	Bangsamoro Transition Commission
<b>CAB</b>	Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro
<b>CBDR</b>	Community-based dispute resolution
<b>CDC</b>	Community development council
<b>CNLG</b>	National Commission for the Fight Against Genocide (Rwanda)
<b>DDR</b>	Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration
<b>DDRRR</b>	UN Disarmament, Demobilization, Repatriation, Reintegration and Resettlement
<b>DOWA</b>	Department of Women's Affairs
<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of the Congo
<b>FDLR</b>	Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda ( <i>Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda</i> )
<b>FPA</b>	1996 Final Peace Agreement
<b>GAD</b>	Gender and development
<b>HPC</b>	High Peace Council
<b>ICTR</b>	International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda
<b>IDP</b>	Internally displaced person
<b>ISI</b>	Pakistani intelligence service
<b>KIA</b>	Kachin Independence Army
<b>KIO</b>	Kachin Independence Organization




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<b>MILF</b>	Moro Islamic Liberation Front
<b>MILF-BIAF</b>	Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces
<b>MNLF</b>	Moro National Liberation Front
<b>MP</b>	Member of Parliament
<b>MPC</b>	Myanmar Peace Centre
<b>MRND</b>	National Revolutionary Movement for Development ( <i>Mouvement Révolutionnaire National pour le Développement</i> )
<b>MTF</b>	World Bank Mindanao Trust Fund
<b>NCCT</b>	Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organization
<b>NSP</b>	National Solidarity Programme
<b>PDPA</b>	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
<b>PPC</b>	provincial peace council
<b>RAWA</b>	Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan
<b>RCBW</b>	Regional Commission on Bangsamoro Women
<b>RPF</b>	Rwanda Patriotic Front
<b>RTLMT</b>	Free Radio and Television of the Thousand Hills ( <i>Radio-Télévision Libre des Milles Collines</i> )
<b>SPBC</b>	ARMM Special Pre-qualification Bids and Awards Committee
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNPO</b>	Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization
<b>UNSCR</b>	United Nations Security Council Resolution
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme
<b>WIN-Peace</b>	Women's Initiative Network for Peace
<b>WLB</b>	Women's League of Burma



# Introduction



## Introduction



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This study highlights a variety of ways that women, specifically, have experienced conflict and peacebuilding, and offers new insights and provides important lessons for international and national agencies promoting democracy reform and peacebuilding. Its purpose is twofold: first, to increase the visibility and recognition of women from marginalized communities as stakeholders in peace- and state-building activities, as actors who both disrupt ('spoilers') and work toward ('facilitators') peace and security; and, second, to raise awareness about strategies and practices to enhance their participation.

International IDEA has identified *Political Participation and Representation* as one of its four key impact areas, and the strengthening of democratic governance structures to manage and accommodate diversity as a crosscutting objective of all its work. To this end, this study explores ways in which peacebuilding and democratization processes can be supported and strengthened to improve their capacity to generate greater participation by, and inclusion of, marginalized groups. In particular, the study will: identify constraints to and opportunities for the inclusion of women from marginalized communities in peacebuilding initiatives; examine the consequences of women's inclusion and exclusion for democratic practice and development; and formulate recommendations for the increased inclusion of women from marginalized communities in peace- and democracy-building initiatives.

## Methodology

The study draws on four case studies that analyse the role that women from marginalized groups have played in conflicts and peacemaking in intrastate conflicts, past and present. The research pays particular attention to women's impact, as spoilers and facilitators, on the development of democratic institutions and sustainable peace following the cessation of armed conflict. Specialists were commissioned to undertake research in Afghanistan, Myanmar,<sup>1</sup> the Philippines and Rwanda. The case studies were completed

in 2014,<sup>2</sup> and are based on primary qualitative research, with researchers opting to conduct semi-structured interviews and focus groups, as well as supplementary secondary desk research. The researchers paid close attention to differences based on an intersection of various aspects of social identities, including, but not limited to, class, religion and ethnicity. Gender was applied as a conceptual category that guided the focus of the research.

## **From conflict to democracy: why diversity and gender matter**

International recognition and acceptance of women's inclusion in peacebuilding activities has increased globally, bolstered by the development of a policy framework on women, peace and security that began with the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in 2000, followed by a further six resolutions on women and peacebuilding.<sup>3</sup> While a consensus among international actors has been built around the need to involve women in peace processes more proactively, their experiences in both peace and conflict remain largely unnoticed by international actors and policymakers. For instance, it is remarkable that more than a decade after the adoption of UNSCR 1325, women have participated as negotiators in peace agreements in only 9 per cent of cases. Less than a third of agreements signed during this period contain any references to gender (UNPO Secretariat 2011: 12; Noma, Aker and Freeman 2012: 21; Ellerby 2013). As a consequence, women's agency and their contributions to peace and democratization processes have been severely restricted. Where women have taken part in peace negotiations and peace agreements including gender-sensitive provisions, these processes tend to reflect the concerns of women from dominant and elite communities only. Limiting women's participation in peacebuilding processes excludes the opinions of women from poor and marginalized communities, denying them the opportunity to define and address their own concerns and needs and erasing their experience and knowledge of the conflict in question from the public agenda.

Moreover, evidence suggests that women's activities impact the state of security in their societies. As a result, women need to be included in discussions on conflict and reform processes for them to be effective. For instance, following Sierra Leone's civil war and the signing of the Lomé Peace Accord in 1999, the gendered application of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration initiatives meant that a significant proportion of women combatants were largely excluded and thus neither demobilized nor desecuritized (MacKenzie 2009). In Northern Ireland between 1974 and 2006, women set out to



disrupt four peace negotiations that they believed were not conducive to their interests (McEvoy 2009). And in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the framing of women's inclusion in the state security apparatus as having a pacifying and 'humanizing' effect risked destabilizing the reforms enacted, as violence committed by women soldiers has been ignored (Eriksson-Baaz and Stern 2013). Research undertaken for these case studies indicates that nationalist identities and politicized ethnic and religious cleavages inform choices made by women to participate in war efforts in places as geographically and politically diverse as Myanmar, the Philippines and Rwanda. As such, they have an impact on the state of security in their communities and should be identified as stakeholders in the respective conflicts.

## Understanding conflict

A straightforward definition of armed conflict is 'a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year'.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, a violent or deadly conflict can occur with only one armed party as in the case of genocide. If a broader approach is taken, however, it is important to recognize that security and insecurity are connected to the concept of conflict. For this study, they are considered to be related to intrapersonal security, which implies that, although conflict between armed groups may have ceased, violence and insecurity can still prevail (Chinkin and Charlesworth 2006; Jarstad and Sisk 2008; True and Krook 2012). As conflict is often triggered by behaviours and events at the community level, understanding and addressing discrimination, marginalization and insecurity experienced by women at that level is crucial for the development of sustainable peace (Barnes 2009: 7). In addition, as the case studies on Afghanistan and the Philippines show, local understanding of what conflict is varies from context to context. Given the influence that this will have on the success of democratic interventions, or lack thereof, international actors must consult and include local communities in conflict-resolution and state-building activities for them to be successful.

In the context of gender and women's rights, it is also important to recognize the productive qualities of conflict: there is a general consensus in the literature on gender and conflict that conflict has the potential to transform gender relations and may create opportunities for women to challenge restrictive gender roles and assume leadership positions (Rehn and Johnson Sirleaf 2002; Cheldelin and Eliatamby 2011; Mannergren Selimovic, Nyquist Brand and Söderberg Jacobson 2012). A positive example of this can be seen in the Rwanda case study, where the country's pre-genocide norms of gendered

behaviour were disrupted in parallel with the breakdown of society and the rule of law in general. However, several studies have highlighted how these opportunities are typically missed, as the return to ‘normalcy’—including in regard to gender roles—is heralded as a key priority in times of transition and peace, and gendered stereotypes about women’s and men’s roles usually resurface at the end of the conflict (Lukatela 2012). Accordingly, women who have gained increased space to act during a conflict tend to be marginalized and disempowered (Alison 2009; Qazi 2011: 42), and their access to power in post-conflict processes is restricted (Weber 2011).

## Understanding peace

This study applies a broad and ambitious idea of peace that takes into consideration values and norms related to gender, human rights, justice and conflict resolution. The construction of this broader notion of peace includes processes of democracy and state building, acknowledging and addressing ‘sources of inequality and injustice based on ethnicity, religion, gender, and class’ (Björkdahl 2012: 309).

Such an understanding of peace reflects shifts in international norms and strategies on peace and conflict management, from an exclusive focus on conflict prevention toward an emphasis on what has come to be referred to as peacebuilding (Diehl 2006; Mason and Meernik 2006). In the landmark report *An Agenda for Peace*, former Secretary-General of the United Nations Boutros Boutros-Ghali defined peacebuilding as the ‘construction of a new environment’ (UN General Assembly 1993). In other words, the term evolved from a singular focus on the cessation of hostilities to include issues concerning reconciliation, justice and trust building, as well as economic development and social welfare (Mason and Meernik 2006). Given that, on average, a country coming out of civil war has a 50 per cent chance of relapsing into conflict in the first five years of peace, it seems that more comprehensive peacebuilding strategies that encompass all of the aspects mentioned above would be better able to support the development of sustainable peace than a focus on military intervention alone (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall 2009).

However, peacebuilding processes are gendered processes that often reinforce existing power structures and elites by upholding the influence of recognized (male) stakeholders (Björkdahl 2012: 291). Consequently, Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s ‘new environments’ tend to exclude women in general and women from marginalized groups in particular, resulting in a perpetuation of gendered inequalities and political cleavages (Björkdahl 2012: 290). Moreover, in such



environments, the insecurity and violence faced by marginalized communities are often ignored. Indeed, ceasefire and peacebuilding negotiations are often premised on the need to end (male) public violence, although gender-based violence in other spheres (including the home) continues (Ní Aoláin and Rooney 2007) and, in some cases, actually increases after peace agreements have been signed (True 2009). For example, recent investigations into the occurrence of conflict-related sexual violence by state and non-state armed groups found that violence committed by state troops against women lasts an average of five years beyond the discontinuation of public conflict (Cohen, Nordås and Wood 2014). The impact of this violence is typically multiplied by the absence of psychosocial support for survivors, the lack of accountability, the stigma related to rigid socio-cultural norms and the shame caused to the victims' families and communities. Moreover, as research from the former Yugoslav republics has found, domestic violence tends to increase during and after conflict (Ćopić 2004). It is therefore important to recognize a gendered continuum of insecurity that does not end when the formal conflict ends (or indeed begin when a public conflict commences), but that exists on both sides of ceasefire and peace agreements and encompasses both the public and private spheres (Chinkin and Charlesworth 2006; True and Krook 2012).

## Understanding democracy

Democracy is commonly understood as a system in which diverse interests are managed through ongoing negotiations and accommodated by accountable and legitimate institutions (Jarstad 2008: 18). There is no single and universally applicable mode of democracy, but the key democratic principles are, according to International IDEA (Landman 2008), those of popular control and political equality. Although conflicts are seldom fully resolved—instead, they exist on various levels throughout society—democracy (in theory) manages them by peaceful means (Commission on Global Governance 1995; Przeworski 1991). In this way, democracy and peace reinforce each other. Democracy is only consolidated when peaceful means of conflict management are accepted as 'the only game in town' (Linz and Stepan 1996: 5). Sustainability presupposes a system of governance in which diverse interests and grievances are accommodated by negotiations and compromises (Licklider 2005: 35; Wallensteen 2002: 139–44). Democratization and peacebuilding have been thought of as mutually beneficial processes, and democratic peace theory holds that consolidated democracies do not go to war with one another.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly enough, researchers have identified an apparent paradox: while democracy is associated with peaceful conflict management (both within a state and between states), the road to democracy is often conflict-ridden



(Brass 1991; Brown, Lynn-Jones and Miller 1996; Gleditsch and Hegre 1997; Mann 2005; Mansfield and Snyder 1995; Maoz and Russett 1993; Snyder 2000). This is evident in our case studies, which highlight the difficulties policymakers face in managing transitions from authoritarianism or conflict to stable and inclusive democracies. In Afghanistan, the rushed transition to a democratic system has resulted in a fragile state that is unable to resolve political grievances by democratic means, while in Myanmar, the absence of strong and sustainable institutions to accommodate ethnic and religious diversity—despite a return to democratic practice by the central government—means that armed conflict is continuing in many parts of the country. In Rwanda, the failure of the 1993 Arusha Accords and the rush to establish a multiparty system accentuated political cleavages, culminating in the 1994 genocide. In the Mindanao region of the Philippines, the central government failed to deliver on its promises of development, rights and security in the region, thus further marginalizing the populace.

Existing research has found a strong and significant link between gender equality and lasting peace, showing that countries where women are experiencing high levels of violence are more likely to engage in conflict and war (both within and between countries) compared to countries with low levels of violence against women (Hudson et al. 2012). Countries where women have greater equality and greater political representation are also less likely to become involved in wars (Hudson et al. 2012). As there is a relationship between marginalization, gender inequality and conflict (Caprioli 2005; Hudson et al. 2012), and studies have shown a correlation between the organized participation of women's groups and greater gender sensitivity of the text of negotiated peace agreements (UN Women 2012a: 4), there is a need to increase women's participation in peace talks and in post-conflict recovery in order to make visible and address exclusive normative gender roles and behaviours (Ellerby 2013). As these case studies illustrate, the failure to do so can compromise the legitimacy and sustainability of post-conflict democratic institutions and increase the risks of further conflict.

## **Synopsis of the case studies**

This section provides a short overview of the case studies that were chosen for this report, presented within the framework of gender and conflict. It briefly discusses overlapping commonalities and convergent points that have emerged from the research. By drawing on the voices of women from diverse backgrounds, these studies show how women's experiences are integral to the wider goals of state building and sustainable peace and development, and



demonstrate that women are protagonists with the ability to actively shape not only narratives but also developments in conflict and peace.

## Afghanistan

In this case study, Anna Larson documents how women's roles in conflict and peacebuilding in Afghanistan have often been overlooked in favour of a view of Afghan women as passive victims. The conflict in Afghanistan over the past 40 years can be broken into roughly four periods: resistance to Soviet occupation (1978–89), the civil war (1992–5), the Taliban regime (1995–2001) and the post-2001 insurgency (2001–15). As Larson writes, women's roles have, not surprisingly, evolved with the change of regimes despite a widespread narrative portraying Afghan women as victims without political agency: from women enjoying greater access to public spaces during the relative security in earlier periods, through active participation in the resistance against the Soviets, to the restrictions placed on women under the Taliban regime.

The category of 'woman' has typically been applied as a one-dimensional concept, used to justify both international and local interventions, which illustrates how gender is at the heart of the conflict in Afghanistan, as it is in the other country case studies in this publication. The US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, for instance, was partly justified as a necessary step in the 'liberation' of Afghan women. Larson cautions against treating women as a homogeneous entity in this way, and stresses the importance of recognizing diversity, which in Afghanistan includes different age, ethnic and social groups; urban and rural geographical areas; family groupings (*qawms*) and levels of educational attainment. These identities inform women's ability to exercise agency in both the family and the community. Larson notes, for example, that older women are typically afforded greater space in which to act, and women from minority Hazara communities exercise relatively high levels of agency in comparison with women from other ethnic groups. Recognizing this highlights the importance of taking the intersection of identities into account in order for democratic interventions to be successful. Interestingly, she notes that local forms of conflict resolution in the Afghan context are neither inherently peaceful nor static, but may provide marginalized groups with space in which to act if change is leveraged from within. For example, women are most effective as participants in conflict resolution at the family and village levels. This is in contrast to their presence at the national and provincial levels, which, as in the Philippines, is largely symbolic due to prevailing societal attitudes and the existence of powerful tribal networks. National and international efforts to encourage peace and

democracy, Larson argues, would have a greater chance of success if they involved local communities and were responsive to the diversity inherent in these communities.

Despite these limitations, certain democratic practices have served to create legitimate public roles for women, for example as civic educators or election monitors. Larson believes that this could potentially lead to women accessing greater public space in the future, such as in Rwanda where political space for women after the genocide was greatly expanded.

## Myanmar

In this study on the conflict in the state of Kachin, Jenny Hedström highlights the involvement of women in both the peace movement and the armed struggle, and argues that the exclusion of women from formal peace talks is undermining the possibility of achieving sustainable peace and obstructing the development of democratic practices and processes.

The Kachins in Myanmar are predominantly Christians—a minority religion in a country where close to 90 per cent of the people are Buddhists—who live in an area rich in natural resources. The territorial conflict over the Kachin region dates back to 1961, when the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) launched an armed struggle for independence, provoked by the central government's attempt to establish Buddhism as the state religion and to ban the use of minority languages in state schools. In 1989, the leadership of the KIO changed its goal from independence to self-determination, and in October 1993 signed a ceasefire agreement with the government, which allowed the group a degree of local autonomy. Violence reignited in 2011, however, as the political reasons for the conflict had never been addressed.

Hedström argues that the participation of women from religious and ethnic minority groups in the armed struggle is motivated by their experiences of injustice, oppression and gender-based violence, framed by a language of ethno-political nationalism. As with women in the Moro armed struggle in the Philippines, women's participation in the KIO is motivated largely by political and ideological purposes closely related to their marginalized position in society vis-à-vis majority groups. This means that the women have expectations for what peace and security mean to them, and as political agents, are able to act on their motivations when the opportunity arises.

Normative gendered expectations have served to limit women's access to leadership positions, within both the civilian and military administrations. As women are expected to retire upon marriage or childbirth, a gendered



dichotomy of the roles of women and men in Kachin society is upheld despite women's widespread active participation in the conflict. These gendered restrictions also ensure that women are prevented from taking up combat positions, or that their combat experience is not recognized as such. Women have been excluded from the ongoing ceasefire discussions, although they hold leadership positions in informal peace discussions initiated by civil society groups. Hedström argues that Myanmar's peace process demonstrates significant gender biases. In its focus on (male) public violence, the process fails to address security issues as experienced by women. However, the interviews conducted for this case study reveal that gender-based violence not only informs women's participation in the conflict as violent actors, but also influences women's groups' tacit support for armed ethnic minority organizations. This illustrates how ignoring gendered concerns can undermine opportunities for sustainable peace.

## The Philippines

In this study, Rosalie Hall and Joanna Pares Hoare examine opportunities and challenges for women to influence peace- and state-building processes in the aftermath of the civil war, arguing that, although access to formal political institutions is important, gendered networks of elites have obstructed women's ability to shape and benefit from reforms.

Mindanao, the second-largest island in the Philippines, is rich in natural resources. However, it is also the most underdeveloped of the major islands, with the lowest literacy rates and shortest life expectancy. Although multiple conflicts can be identified in the south of the country, an entanglement of Moro Islamic identity, shared grievances, regional and global struggles, and the existence of a common enemy in the Armed Forces of the Philippines have provided common ground for diverse groups to mobilize for a joint cause and fight for independence.

The study focuses on women within the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Echoing the experiences of female soldiers in the Kachin movement, women can be found across these organizations and in the armed struggle, albeit not in leadership positions. The authors call attention to how clan, religion and ethnicity have shaped women's experiences and expectations of conflict and peace settlements within the context of an overarching Moro identity. Women's participation is then informed by their experiences of social injustice and the lack of recognition of their distinctiveness as Muslims. Despite the widespread involvement of female combatants, reintegration programmes

have not provided equal opportunities, with many women excluded from participating in rehabilitation measures and from accessing benefits.

Applying a broad definition of security, Hall and Pares Hoare argue that women have disproportionately borne the adverse consequences of conflict in Mindanao. Armed confrontations between government troops and non-state armed groups have produced large-scale displacements, primarily affecting women and children. Gendered roles and expectations ensure that women, rather than men, remain in camps, responsible for the welfare of their extended families, as in the state of Kachin in Myanmar. In addition, *rido* (inter-clan violence) have gendered impacts, as women are left as single heads of households, thus exacerbating their financial insecurity. However, these experiences have occasionally had a positive impact on women's leadership roles in civil society and in the camps.

The study notes that formal electoral and governance structures are now in place to ensure women's effective political participation. However, given the current realities of clan- and family-dynasty-dominated elections and the short time frame for regional party building, the study indicates that it is unlikely that the number of women will increase in the immediate future. Parallels can be drawn with the experiences of women in Afghanistan, for whom substantial inclusion has been circumscribed by the existence of informal tribal and family networks exercising power in their own interests.

## Rwanda

Sara Brown's study documents women's participation in the Rwandan genocide, as well as the accompanying shift in gendered norms and restrictions that led to the active inclusion of women after the genocide. She argues that women played and continue to play important roles as both spoilers and facilitators of peace and development in the country, and, as such, must be taken into consideration for any attempts at long-term state building to be successful.

Divide-and-rule tactics used by colonial rulers served to entrench ethnic distrust in Rwanda, contributing to a post-independence period characterized by violence and polarization along ethnic lines. Brown argues that without the buy-in of powerful elites, subsequent peace talks failed to resolve any underlying grievances. Without a functioning political environment that includes established institutions able to resolve conflicts peacefully, the ushering in of a multiparty system led to the development of extremist Hutu political parties and facilitated the formation of neighbourhood defence units



under the Rwandan armed forces, which later made up the core of the killing militias during the genocide.

As seen in the other case studies in this publication, gender in Rwanda was used for nationalist purposes. For instance, Brown shows how, in the run-up to the genocide, Tutsi women were portrayed as sexually promiscuous, and thus as threatening outsiders, while Hutu women were positioned as the keepers of the family, responsible for ensuring the ‘purity’ of their male relatives by preventing relationships with Tutsi women. Contrary to common perceptions of women as victims or innocent bystanders, women living through the genocide in Rwanda exercised considerable political agency as both perpetrators of violence and rescuers, although gender-based blindness has facilitated women’s impunity for crimes that they committed. Often, gendered essentialist perceptions served to facilitate certain actions during the genocide, such as women hiding Tutsis in their kitchens or bedrooms (considered female domestic spheres and thus, places male militia members would not enter), or using their maternal roles to lure and then expose or kill children.

Brown argues that the upheaval of the genocide created temporary space for the inclusion of women in previously restricted public spheres. Leveraging the momentum for change, women in public office introduced a number of policies to ensure the continued presence of women in democratic processes, such as parliamentary quotas. Drawing on gendered assumptions of women’s maternal nature, these women were also able to successfully organize women across the country in interethnic community groups to care for orphaned children, contributing to the development of several multi-ethnic women’s organizations.

However, the silencing of women *genocidaires* and the perpetuation of ethnic hatred threatens sustainable and lasting peace. Without acknowledgement of the crimes committed by women during the genocide and individual ownership of agency, meaningful rehabilitation and reconciliation is compromised, not least because women are the primary gatekeepers of the home and the transmitters of culture to the next generation.

## Conclusion

While small in scale, the studies included in this publication provide many valuable insights into the importance of recognizing the multiple roles that women from marginalized communities play in times of conflict and democratic transition. They facilitate a greater awareness of the importance

of including and addressing gendered issues of marginalization and diversity, and implore us to acknowledge women as political actors and stakeholders. In doing so, they offer recommendations for policymakers working in this field and contribute to further dialogue on this topic.



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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In this study, Myanmar will be used rather than Burma, although both names have been used to describe the country since it gained independence from Great Britain in 1948.
- <sup>2</sup> In some cases, the researchers also drew on earlier fieldwork undertaken in the relevant countries.
- <sup>3</sup> UNSCR 1325 was unanimously adopted by the United Nations Security Council in October 2000 and was the first resolution to recognize the gendered impact of war and conflict on communities. It highlights the importance of including women in peace processes and stabilization efforts. It was followed by six additional resolutions (1820, 1888, 1889, 1960, 2106 and 2122) that call for the full and equal participation of women at all levels of peacebuilding, from early conflict prevention to post-conflict reconstruction. See UN Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) [on women and peace and security], 31 October 2000, S/RES/1325 (2000), available at <<http://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f4672e.html>>, accessed 28 May 2015.
- <sup>4</sup> See the Uppsala Conflict Database Programme, available at <<http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/definitions/>>, accessed 22 January 2015.
- <sup>5</sup> For more on democratic peace theory, see Newman, Paris and Richmond 2009; Brown, Lynn-Jones and Miller 1996; Ray 1995; Chan 1997.



# Afghanistan



# Afghanistan

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Anna Larson



## Abstract

Successive regimes in Afghanistan over the last 30 years have systematically marginalized women to the point that they are often portrayed collectively as the victims of violent conflict, harmful cultural practices and/or religious extremism. Afghan women remain subject to gross human rights abuses, gender-based violence and systematic discrimination, but this perspective of women as victims overlooks their agency. This includes participation in conflict and conflict resolution—which are seen as part and parcel of the same process—within the household and at the local level in community disputes and mediation, as well as a more limited role in the intra-state armed conflicts that have dominated Afghanistan since the late 1970s. Despite this failure to acknowledge Afghan women’s involvement in existing processes of conflict and conflict resolution, international and Afghan civil society actors have, in recent years, placed much emphasis on the need for women to play a role in the peace process. The implicit assumption is that they can and will contribute to building a meaningful political settlement. However, women remain excluded from important negotiations, and it is generally assumed that they play a limited role in sustaining the conflict. In addition, peace-and state-building initiatives at the national level are seen by many Afghans as the preserve of elites who pursue their own interests rather than as inclusive processes for the benefit of the country as a whole, and women’s involvement in these national-level processes has remained largely symbolic.

## Methodology

For this case study, primary qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 59 respondents. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the most appropriate method for the kind of data required, as

their loose conversational style allowed respondents to determine to a large extent the content of the interviews. This minimized the extent to which the interviewer's preconceptions of what constitutes involvement in conflict, for example, could influence the responses given (as more structured interviewing techniques might have done).

A team of three experienced, male, Kabul-based Afghan researchers led the data collection by travelling to the field sites. Men were selected because women in Kabul often have limited ability to travel outside the city on their own. Each male researcher was accompanied by one or two female research assistants based in the field sites. Working with female research assistants was essential, as it meant that women could be well represented in the study. These research assistants were able to conduct interviews with female respondents in conservative areas (particularly with women based at home), where access to women can be difficult. The author provided guidance over Skype and email to offer feedback on the interview transcripts submitted.

Interviews were conducted in three locations: Herat (the province of Herat, western Afghanistan), Jalalabad (the province of Nangarhar, eastern Afghanistan) and Ghazni (the province of Ghazni, central Afghanistan). These provincial centres were selected for their mixed populations of marginalized and socially privileged communities,<sup>1</sup> because they all have recent or current experience of conflict and because they have all sent delegates to take part in local- and national-level peacebuilding initiatives. In addition, the areas selected are home to all of Afghanistan's major ethnic groups; thus while the interviewees were not representative of Afghanistan as a whole, the data present insights into the way in which a range of different communities have experienced conflict.

Interviews were conducted in the cities and surrounding districts in order to compare urban and rural perspectives, although interviewers were not able to travel more than 35 kilometres away from the provincial centres due to security concerns. Approximately 20 people were interviewed in each area, and the sample comprised women and men from a mixture of social standings, occupations and ages. The sample was not intended to be in any way representative, on account of its small size, but aimed to provide a snapshot of a variety of different views on the subject of women's involvement in conflict and peacebuilding. Table 1 provides a rough sample guide that was used for each area:

**Table 1: Research sample guide used for each district**

Occupation/social standing of respondent	Total	Women	Men
Area representative in national-level peace programme	2	1	1
Member of parliament/provincial councillor	2	1	1
Influential local figure (e.g. community development council (CDC) or local council member)	4	2	2
Locally renowned persons involved in conflict/peacebuilding or security personnel (e.g. police/Afghan National Army (ANA))	4	2	2
Literate professionals (e.g. teachers, government workers, NGO workers)	3	2	1
Illiterate workers (daily-wage labourers, housewives)	5	3	2
TOTAL	20	11	9

Security concerns make collecting primary data in Afghanistan difficult, particularly in areas that are experiencing ongoing, serious conflict. Great care was taken to ensure the safety of the researchers (for instance, security information on the regions covered was collected in advance, and researchers travelled in low-profile vehicles and did not carry any material that might have compromised their personal security), and they worked in areas with which they were already familiar. Inevitably, this meant that those areas most seriously affected by current conflict were not chosen for data collection, limiting the study to areas of relatively low-intensity insurgent activity.

Finally, great care was taken to ensure that all data were collected with the fully informed consent of the respondents. Names were not attached to interviews either in notes or in the final report.

### ***Defining ‘conflict’, ‘insecurity’, ‘peace’, ‘peacebuilding’***

Academic literature in the fields of post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding provides a wealth of different interpretations of these terms, and of peacebuilding in particular.<sup>2</sup> In this case, however, context-specific definitions provide a more useful means of understanding exactly what people mean when they talk about conflict, peace and security. The methodological approach taken in this study allowed respondents to define these terms for themselves, and several observations can be made about the ways in which they used the terms.

‘Conflict’ (*mokhalifat* or *nakhata* in Pashto; *monaziha* or *jangjal* in Dari) was used primarily to refer to conflict within the community or between



groups at the local level. This could include disputes over land or ownership of development project funds or tensions within the home. It was used in the same way by both the men and women interviewed; in Dari-speaking areas, for example, both used the word *jangjal* when talking about arguments between husbands and wives that may or may not have included domestic violence, and also when talking about disputes between neighbours. To indicate larger-scale violence, people talked more about fighting (*jangi*), and used this to refer to the civil war, for instance (*Wakht-e Jangi*, or ‘in the time of fighting’).

Interestingly, when relating stories about the current insurgency, many people chose to talk about insecurity (*namniyat*) rather than conflict, partly because the insurgent activity was sporadic and unpredictable rather than a known activity in a specific location. Also, insecurity better encompassed a more general sense of disruption—not only the threat of violence but also a more general interruption of daily life—affecting the economy, education, health care and travel, for example. Again, both men and women used this word in the same way, specifically for broader, societal unrest rather than personal insecurity resulting, for example, from domestic violence. Domestic violence did not come up at all; instead, if a woman was not subject to violence in the home, then she was living a ‘calm life’ (*zendagi aram*). For the purposes of this study then, ‘conflict’ will be used to refer to local-level tension, which may or may not include violence, while ‘insecurity’ will be used to denote the social and economic environment created by violent insurgent activity.

Also interesting was the way in which people used the same word for conflict and conflict resolution, rarely using the word ‘resolution’ (*fisala* or *tasmim*). This indicates that conflict and conflict resolution form part of the same process for the respondents interviewed. They are both elements of negotiated outcomes, and they exist along a spectrum of discussions, through argument to violence, with the latter simply being an extension of the former. This is important because it inherently connects conflict with a resolution of some kind, but it does not portray conflict resolution as an entirely different process, nor does it imply that conflict resolution is somehow inherently peaceful (which invariably it is not, in spite of the common association of the English term with agreements attained peacefully).

For peace, respondents used the word *solha* (in Dari and Pashto) to refer to a calm or peaceful (*aram*) environment, in which people’s livelihoods and personal well-being were safe. Indeed, the words ‘peace’ and ‘safety’ were often used interchangeably. *Amniyat* (security) was also commonly used as a way of expressing an absence of insurgent activity and a context in which



economic and social activities (going to work or school, running a business, etc.) were uninterrupted.

Finally, ‘peacebuilding’ was used in two ways: first, to refer to the process of conflict/conflict resolution or negotiation at the local level; and, second, to refer to the national-level process of negotiating with the Taliban, or the ‘Peace Process’, as it was commonly termed. As such, both kinds of peacebuilding will be referred to and explored in this chapter, with a focus on women’s involvement in each.<sup>3</sup>

## Background

It is common in Afghanistan to hear people talk about the ‘30 years of war’ that have ravaged the country, terrorized its people, and impeded social and economic development. This time period spans a great many different kinds of violent conflict, however, under different regimes and with a vast number of key actors. Conflict between ruling powers and other groups can be roughly broken up into four eras: resistance to the Soviet occupation, the civil war, the Taliban regime and the post-2001 insurgency. These are briefly outlined below.

### *1978–89: resistance to the Soviet occupation*

President Daoud Khan’s assassination in 1978 was followed by a decade of Soviet interventions to prop up a puppet Communist government. Islamist groups that had been in exile in Pakistan and Iran under Daoud’s reign were able to mobilize armed opposition to the government with financial backing from the United States, filtered through the Pakistani intelligence services (ISI), as part of the offensive against communism in the Cold War.<sup>4</sup> In an attempt to quell the resistance, the Soviet forces made use of carpet-bombing across Afghanistan, along with ground troops, ultimately killing almost 1 million Afghans (Rubin 2002: 122).

The departure of Soviet troops in 1989 allowed the Islamist mujahideen to portray themselves as victors, saving Afghanistan from an infidel invader, and many former mujahideen commanders still generate respect and authority as a result of their role in this conflict. Connection with the resistance is highly regarded, and there is a general sense (in retrospect at least) that this was a collective Afghan war against an invader.

This sense of resistance to Soviet occupation as a national, collective struggle may have contributed to facilitating women’s involvement in violent conflict during that time. This involvement—which is not widely spoken of today—

largely conformed to gendered expectations in that it did not include a role in direct combat. However, the roles that women did play were often active and included nursing wounded combatants, transporting weapons hidden in cooking pots and, according to some accounts, luring Russian soldiers to secluded areas with the promise of sex before killing or maiming them (Shakib 2002: 16–17). That women were allowed to undertake such activities reflects the fact that the narrative of this war as a collective, national and also religious struggle was so strong in many rural areas that, contrary to Roy's (1994: 158) blanket overview, it justified the breaking of some social norms relating to women's mobility and conduct, if not those concerning combat roles. Yet, this war came at a time when many women, especially in urban areas, had become used to greater access to public spaces during the relative security of King Zahir Shah's reign, under Daoud's leftist rule and under the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Rubin (2002: 157) notes that, after the Soviet withdrawal, the PDPA armed all party members, including women, although he is dubious as to the spread and efficacy of women's militias.

During this period of relative freedom, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) was formed in 1977 by student Meena Kamal to promote women's rights and protest the Soviet invasion. While their work involved peaceful demonstrations for the most part, building on earlier urban protests at the start of the invasion that had seen female students in particular vehemently opposing the regime (Rubin 2002: 137), Kamal's political activity and anti-government stance led to her assassination in 1987.<sup>6</sup> After this, RAWA continued to operate out of Pakistan, organizing conferences on women's rights and working secretly within Afghanistan to record and publicize the abuses against women that were taking place under the mujahideen and Taliban governments. The group remains active today.

### *1992–95: civil war*

The removal of a common enemy left heavily armed Islamist resistance groups, which were also divided along ethnic lines, warring with one another, primarily over the control of Kabul. During this period, great atrocities were committed by all sides, and many people in Afghanistan look back on this period with a sense of bitterness. At this point a deep distrust between people of different ethnic groups emerged as the conflict took on a distinctly ethnic narrative (although coalitions of various ethnic groups emerged at different points), and memories of violence committed at this time are entrenched.

Having enjoyed relatively open environments under the king and successive leftist governments, women's freedom of movement was now restricted by the



threat of physical and sexual violence and by decrees limiting their activity outside the home. In Kabul and several other cities, particularly in the south, women were subjected to mass rapes and maiming, in some cases the brutal political symbols of the strength of different ethnic groups and, in others, simply the victims of a complete lack of the rule of law (Rashid 2008: 13). Women were often unable to leave their homes for fear of abduction. According to one estimate, 25,000 people were killed in Kabul during the three-year war (Barfield 2010). In addition, a staunchly Islamist quasi-government under Burhannudin Rabbani's leadership published a decree confining women to private spaces and essentially branding them as second-class citizens. The anarchy that this war encapsulated was in great contrast to the organized resistance against the Soviets and had a critical, negative impact on women's role in the public sphere, not least because of the pervasive insecurity that was a constant threat.

### *1995–2001: Taliban regime*

The Taliban initially provided a panacea for the violent frenzy that had come to characterize the mujahideen's attempt at government: their brutal form of justice introduced a sense of calm and order following the chaos of the early 1990s. In addition, they claimed the moral high ground in insisting on the enforced application of their own brand of strict sharia law. Following on from the subjugation of women by the mujahideen, the Taliban maintained that women should be confined to the private space of the home and inflicted severe punishments on any woman who left home without a male relative, or *mabram*. Armed resistance to the Taliban took place largely in the north of the country, and women were generally excluded from active combat. However, resistance in the form of underground schools and clandestine women's organizations existed across Afghanistan, with many women defying the strict social norms imposed.

### *2001–15: post-2001 insurgency*

The US invasion in 2001 followed the 9/11 attacks in the United States and the Taliban regime's subsequent provision of a safe haven to Osama bin Laden. The military intervention was also later justified on the grounds of liberating Afghan women from the constrictive norms imposed by the regime.<sup>7</sup> Once a military victory over the Taliban had been secured through a series of air strikes, the internationally overseen Bonn Agreement was reached between 25 key Northern Alliance<sup>8</sup> actors (notably excluding the Taliban) and other political figures, including two women. A subsequent state-building programme, the Bonn Process, commenced. This included provisions for an elected head of state and legislature in a new constitution that would

guarantee women's participation in the democratic process, largely as a result of international pressure on leaders to redress their subjugation under former regimes. To this end, a reserved-seats system allocated 27 per cent of all seats in the lower house of parliament to women candidates, along with a further one-sixth of seats in the upper house. Quotas for women were also used in the process of drafting the constitution (Larson 2012).

Inflated expectations of what the new, post-Taliban administration would be able to deliver under President Hamid Karzai were soon replaced by the realities of continued poverty, unemployment and poor services, allowing the Taliban to fill vacuums that state-led justice and service delivery had not penetrated. In spite (and indeed because) of an international military presence that continued to expand in size until 2010, Taliban activities became increasingly sophisticated and spread across the country, with spectacular attacks occurring sporadically in Kabul and other urban centres, and sustained campaigns in the south and east of the country. Other insurgent groups also flourished in areas that lacked governmental authority. In contrast to earlier eras of conflict, even women's indirect role in supporting the armed insurgency was limited, as all armed opposition groups used a narrative of traditionalist Islam (in which women were excluded from public spaces and forbidden from coming into contact with men to whom they were not related) to lend authority to their causes. This meant that the Afghan Government's official attempts to negotiate with these groups through the High Peace Council allocated only symbolic roles to women, who were selected to sit on the council but had no role in peace talks.

### ***Conflict in the case study areas in 2014***

Herat, in western Afghanistan, has a reputation as a national centre for culture and heritage. It is an education hub with a plethora of private schools and universities that have emerged in the last decade. It is also known as a religious centre, and many mosques in Herat adhere to a relatively conservative school of Islam. At the same time, there is a large Shia population that is influenced by neighbouring Iran. A former governor and regional strongman, Ismail Khan, holds some local influence still, although the increasing power of wealthy businessmen has begun to replace the previous generation of leaders. Insecurity increased in 2014 with the political uncertainty surrounding elections held in April, but the counting of votes, recounting of votes and negotiations between the two leading candidates lasted a further six months. Insurgent activity in the form of kidnappings, assassinations and roadside bombings has increased, with some attacks taking place in the city itself. These normally target wealthy businessmen and their families or representatives of the government and government security forces, but they have also included



foreign aid workers. Of all the areas examined for this study, however, Herat is the most secure, with violent conflict only minimally affecting people's business and daily routines. Ethnically, Herat is very mixed, with Hazara, Pashtun and Tajik groups predominating. Outside the city, however, levels of insecurity are very high, particularly in the southwest toward the provinces of Farah and Nimroz. In November 2014, Taliban forces attacked a police checkpoint in a remote district of the province of Herat and killed a policeman. In retaliation for her son's death, the policeman's mother, Reza Gul, took up arms herself and claims to have killed 25 Taliban in an ensuing gun battle (Ziaratjaye 2014). The extent to which this was reported by local and international news media, however, attests to the fact that it is very rare for women to behave in this way.

The city of Jalalabad, in Nangarhar, eastern Afghanistan, is renowned for its rich agricultural lands and favourable climate. As a small province on the border with Pakistan, land is a premium commodity in Nangarhar, and much of the conflict between tribes and influential figures is taking place over land-ownership disputes and water supplies.<sup>9</sup> Governor Gul Agha Sherzai has been in power since 2004 and is widely perceived to be corrupt, with close connections to a small cadre of key businessmen in the province. The recent conflict in the province has included increased insurgent activity in districts bordering Pakistan, as well as tribal conflicts in the district of Hesarak. In general, respondents talked about levels of security decreasing in the last year, partly as a result of a protracted election process and the lack of capacity on the part of the state to combat insurgents. This insecurity has affected daily life to a greater extent than in Herat, causing families to be less willing to send girls (in particular) to school or to allow women to work outside the home. The majority of the population is Pashtun, with Shinwar, Momand, Khogiani and Ghilzai as the main tribal groups. Other ethnicities represented include Tajik, Pashai and Arab.

The city of Ghazni in the province of Ghazni, central Afghanistan, is the least secure of all the areas in which interviews were conducted, with insurgent activity taking place across the province and with very limited government influence in some districts (namely Qarabagh, Moqur, Andar, Giro, Gelan, Aband and Waghaz). Compared with Jalalabad and Herat, the city is very small (with a population of only around 150,000) (Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, cited in World Food Programme (WFP) 2013b), and the province as a whole derives most of its income from subsistence agriculture. Ethnically, the province is divided almost equally between Pashtun and Hazara residents, with the Pashtuns divided into Ghilzai and Kuchi tribes. The province has a history of conflict—particularly

over land—between the nomadic Kuchi and settled Hazara communities. Many study respondents reported increased conflict in the last year as a result of the declining economy and the departure of many international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Currently, the provincial governor is General Mohammed Musa Khan Ahamdzai, who was appointed in 2010.

### **Summary**

To varying degrees, residents of all three case study areas have both current and historical experience of conflict and insecurity. Women have played different roles in facilitating this conflict and insecurity, and in bringing about peace, largely at the local level. It should be emphasized, however, that during all four eras of conflict described above, clientelistic, quasi-feudal governments have presided, and there has been minimal space for women to influence decision-making at the highest levels. The aim of this chapter is to explore and better understand the nuances of women's involvement in these processes, as well as their strategies for obtaining influence in a predominantly patriarchal society.

## **Mapping women's involvement in conflict**

### ***Women's roles in promoting insecurity (conflict between the state and insurgency)***

From the 59 interviews conducted, it is possible to conclude that Afghan women play, or at least are perceived as playing, almost no role at all in promoting or facilitating the current insurgency. This is the case across all major ethnicities and classes. Rare exceptions include occasional female suicide bombers being used in high-profile urban attacks (for example, in a Hezb-e Islami attack on Western security personnel in Kabul in September 2012 (*Daily Telegraph* 2012)).

Women's lack of involvement in direct combat is largely the result of a number of barriers. First, as mentioned above, insurgent groups such as the Taliban, Hezb-e Islami and others invariably use the narrative of traditionalist, highly conservative Islam to lend credence to their cause, and in doing so essentially exclude women from all public roles. Second, since the rule of King Zahir Shah and that of later Communist governments in Afghanistan, social norms regarding women's behaviour in most parts of the country have become more conservative and remain so, in spite (or perhaps even because) of the efforts of international actors to change them. This has meant that, while space



has been opened up for women in the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP), for example, very few apply as a result of the social stigma attached to these positions. A woman working in such a male-dominated environment typically attracts a lot of criticism from relatives and can be branded unmarriageable or adulterous, for example. This stigma has been strengthened by international approaches toward policing that have turned the ANP into an auxiliary of the ANA, and thus a quasi-military organization that has little room for women instead of one that focuses on civil policing with more non-combat roles.

Although women have not generally been involved in direct combat, a number of respondents across all three provinces told stories about women being involved indirectly, in nursing wounded combatants or actively assisting fighters in other ways, through delivering weapons or even killing enemy personnel themselves in the past, in particular during the Soviet occupation. The following statement summarizes the activities women were considered to have been involved in during this era:

During the Russian invasion, women were working side by side with men and played their own roles. For example, if men were fighting the jihad, women were helping to nurse the injured mujahideen and provide food, clothing and bedding for them. So, they were working together, and they succeeded in bringing about a great victory. (Male shopkeeper, Ghazni)

Importantly, however, women were not involved in combat. As Olivier Roy points out, this war against the Soviets was a ‘traditional war’ in the sense that social codes remained largely unbroken:

Spontaneously, the majority of local resistance commanders endeavoured to avoid any professionalization and militarization that would call into question the structures of the traditional society. Rather, they attempted to translate into traditional terms the new state of affairs brought about by modern war...There were no women fighters. The respect of the *haram* and of *pardah* (confining women to the private space) was part of what the Afghans were defending against the Soviets. Integrating women into combat would have negated the reason for the combat. War’s influence on the modernization of the society reached its limits here: women are part of the private sphere. (Roy 1994: 158)

For this reason, then, women were not incorporated systematically into the military during the resistance to Soviet rule. And even the auxiliary roles that women played during this period are not considered something that women



could undertake now to help the current insurgency. Again, this is likely due to the attitudes of insurgents toward acceptable social roles for women, which are even more extreme than those of their traditionalist counterparts who organized military campaigns during the Soviet occupation. This is also possibly due to the way in which, as the respondent above implies, the conflict against the Soviets was seen as a collective struggle of national and religious pride, as opposed to the attempts of a relatively small group of fundamentalists to impose their own brand of Islam on an otherwise unwilling population. Most women respondents interviewed for this study were unhappy with the ultra-conservative social norms inflicted on them by the Taliban in the region. While they felt powerless to stop them, and even supported them in some areas through the provision of supplies—either due to the threat of violent repercussions if they refused or to the belief that they were likely to be the most prudent group to support in terms of future security—the women interviewed said they would not have been motivated to support the insurgents even if they had had the opportunity.

### ***Roles of women in conflict at the local level***

At the local level, respondents talked in greater detail about women's ability to help resolve conflicts rather than facilitate them. They also talked about these issues together because, as described above, the boundary between conflict and conflict resolution was notably blurred, with the word 'conflict' used to refer to both. Women's role in local conflict resolution is discussed in more detail below.

Respondents' views on women's involvement in local conflicts were largely similar: across the board, it was assumed that, if women were involved in disputes, they were only among women themselves and concerned family issues:

If there is a problem between two women or maybe two close family members, then it is possible that an older, highly educated woman might try to solve the problem. This would not be a very serious or important problem, however. Women are not involved in serious problems. (Female civil society activist, Herat)

Respondents also drew attention to the risks that women could face if they did become involved in conflict:



Women do not play a role in conflicts even between women, because women are afraid that if they contribute to conflict men will beat them. (Female teacher, district of Surkh Rod, province of Nangarhar)

In all the provinces in which interviews were conducted, socially conservative values predominate, compared to Kabul or Balkh, for example, where a greater variety of lifestyle choices exists. So in some ways it is not surprising that respondents do not perceive women as playing any role in conflict other than in family affairs. Herat, however, is home to a number of prominent women who run their own businesses, lead NGOs and work as prosecutors in the state courts in spite of the conservative values that pervade Herati society. This is partly because the city is known as an important centre for business and enterprise and has a very high number of educated women compared to other parts of the country. Proximity to the relatively porous border with Iran means that many Herati families have spent significant amounts of time in Iran. It is interesting, then, that even these women consider (or would like to portray) conflict as the preserve of men.

This concurs with a generally held assumption that women are inherently peaceful and/or honest, an assumption overwhelmingly expressed in interviews across all research areas and regardless of the age, ethnicity or gender of the respondent.

Women's role is passive as regards bringing about any conflict; they always want peace. They are even against any justified conflict and I think women and children are more affected than men from the current insecure situation...The role of women during conflict is limited to advising their sons, husbands, brothers, fathers and uncles and other relatives not to take part in any kind of conflict or dispute that might threaten or endanger their safety. (Male civil society activist, Ghazni)

For some respondents, this meant that women had the potential to exert significant influence in the peace process:

In the peace process, women could play a very important role because women have soft hearts, and they are not involved in corruption. If our leaders gave real authority to women they could play an even more important role than men. The peace process begins [in] the home. (Female member of parliament, Jalalabad, province of Nangarhar)

Summarizing these perspectives, one male respondent in Ghazni used a well-known proverb, which says: 'water extinguishes fire, and the voices of women

make men calm and peaceful'.<sup>10</sup> These essentialist assumptions about women's nature and character go some way toward explaining why respondents did not provide examples of women being involved in conflict. In addition, if most of the conflict in which women are involved takes place inside the home, then it makes sense that it is rarely seen by outside observers, and while respondents may have had examples from their own families, it is unlikely that they would share these with strangers.

While such widespread notions about women's inherently peaceful nature do not sit comfortably with contemporary feminist scholarship, this attitude toward women's role as peacemakers in the home may create a space for their involvement in dispute resolution that might not otherwise exist. This type of 'strategic essentialism'<sup>11</sup> appears to have contributed to the creation of space for women legislators in Afghanistan. Very little popular resistance, if any, was mounted against the introduction of a constitutionally guaranteed 27 per cent quota for women parliamentarians in 2004, partly because, for many people, women were the 'clean' vote, with no history of human rights abuses or corrupt activity.

Furthermore, women's role in resolving conflict within the home should not be dismissed as irrelevant to conflict in public spaces. As with other social phenomena, the public/private divide is more porous here than it might otherwise seem. Women's intervention in talking to their husbands and sons and convincing them not to participate in violent conflict outside the home appears to be a common occurrence, and quite successful in many cases. One respondent, a female civil society activist with her own NGO in Herat, talked about a project she had implemented that was designed specifically to take advantage of this role that women play in the home. The project trained community midwives with access to local women to discuss the consequences of their husbands or sons joining armed opposition groups, emphasizing the economic risks of this activity to women themselves. These included the likelihood of these men dying in combat and leaving women and children vulnerable to forced marriage and/or poverty. The aim of the project was to try to convince women to talk their husbands and sons out of engaging in violent conflict. The fact that such an approach was taken by this NGO indicates that women can have some voice in, and influence over, family decisions concerning conflict-related issues.<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, respondents' general portrayal of women as having a minimally visible role in local conflict outside the home and of their being inherently peaceful should not be interpreted to mean that women rarely or never engage in conflict with one another. As demonstrated below in respondents' views on conflict resolution, many cases of conflict within families, and in



particular between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, are brought to local interlocutors or even to *jirgas* or *shuras* (local councils) for resolution.

## Mapping women's involvement in peace

Women's involvement in peacebuilding in Afghanistan can be divided into two categories. First, there is women's involvement in informal peace processes at the local level—those that respondents referred to as an inherent part of 'conflict'. The term 'conflict' was used in interviews to denote argument, negotiation and resolution as a holistic process involving the same group of actors. The second category, by contrast, includes women's involvement in the formal peace process that is currently taking place in Afghanistan in the form of government attempts to negotiate with the Taliban. Respondents discussed these as entirely separate processes; the key difference was that local conflict was seen as a familiar, everyday process involving ordinary people, whereas the peace process was a matter of high politics for leaders and governments, with no role for local involvement at all.

### ***Women's involvement in local conflict (resolution)***

Perspectives varied as to whether or not women had a role to play in local-level mediation and dispute resolution. For some, particularly from the Pashtun communities in Ghazni, women had no role at all in these processes simply because their public role in general was extremely limited.

[In our district] women's role outside the home is very limited because most families do not allow their women to go out freely, and men do not want their womenfolk to appear in public. Even in Ghazni city we have very strong and capable women but they do not have the chance to participate in important meetings. Only a few women, myself included, are able to even visit public areas. (Female Peace Committee member, Ghazni)

For others, such as women connected with the provincial Department of Women's Affairs (DOWA)<sup>13</sup> in Nangarhar, space for women in resolving local disputes over family issues specifically was considered critical because of the different set of incentives women brought to the table. According to these women, women have a greater interest in achieving peaceful settlements among and within their families simply because most of their time is spent within the household. Whereas men have the opportunity to come and go as they wish and 'escape' a difficult home environment during the day or even for extended periods of time, this is not an option for many Afghan women.

Women were also seen as having significant influence over their husbands and sons at home.

DOWA staff interviewed in Nangarhar—who, as government employees working on local conflict resolution, had had extensive exposure to the resolution of family disputes themselves—had been implementing a programme to encourage women’s participation in dispute resolution, supported by UN Women, which involved the establishment of women’s committees at the district level. By contrast, respondents from Pashtun districts in Ghazni had very little experience of government programmes in general, and the provincial DOWA had little if any influence in these districts. It was generally thought that Hazara areas in Ghazni and Herat were more open to women’s involvement in dispute resolution, in part because Hazaras (who are Shia rather than Sunni) are considered to be more open to women’s involvement in public affairs more generally, and, in cities at least, more liberal in their interpretation of sharia law.

There was no stark difference between wealthy and poorer respondents as to their views on women’s role in peacebuilding: some wealthy, urban, educated men in positions of government authority were very dismissive of women’s role in local dispute resolution (and probably had very limited exposure to it), whereas some rural men and women from poorer backgrounds were more affirmative about women’s role in local-level mediation. Across all interviews, however, there was the opinion that women’s role in resolving local conflicts was limited, with examples given largely as interesting exceptions rather than commonly accepted occurrences.

Women are not involved in conflict [resolution] at the community level because, as I mentioned earlier, Herat is a religious and traditional community. Women are not able to interfere. But within families women have some influence and they are trying to take part in conflict [resolution]. For example, if a girl or a woman has a problem at least she will discuss it in the family *jirga*...[But] it depends on the community context. For example, in Hazara areas, women have a very active role and many conflicts are solved by women. (Female madrasa teacher, Herat)

Women are considered to be the managers of the home and so external problems are deemed not to be their responsibilities. This applies to all women in my community, none of them play a role in times of conflict. But in some areas women do participate in the dispute resolution process with men, especially in the Hazara *qawm*, because they are open and they do not adhere to old customs. (Female teacher and CDC member, Ghazni)



These quotations reflect a widespread perception among respondents that Hazara communities have more inclusive attitudes toward conflict resolution than other groups. This does seem to be borne out in the interviews conducted with Hazara respondents, and seems to be related not only to differences between Shia and Sunni practices but also to the way in which Hazara communities as a whole attempted to compensate for their historical exclusion from central government by pursuing greater representation in the Karzai administration. This involved a considerable investment in education for girls and boys and the arrangement of organized voter blocs that gained many parliamentary and provincial council seats for Hazara candidates, both men and women.

While conflict-resolution roles for women are not restricted to Hazara areas, in more conservative communities, and in more insecure areas, there are fewer opportunities for women to get involved. In these spaces, it is generally specific women who already have influence or a reputation in society who are able to take on these roles:

Many tribal conflicts in the districts and villages are [resolved] by women when men have failed to [resolve] them, and these women are mainly elders who are respected by all the villagers. In our village about six years ago there was a woman called Bibi [Gul]—she has died now. But she [resolved] [at least] six very big disputes. Many times disputants took their problems to the district government but they could not [resolve] them. Then both parties took their conflict to [Bibi Gul] for a solution, and she conferred with other influential elders as well and [resolved] the problem. (Male shopkeeper, Ghazni)

For some communities, when a specific woman (or group of women) is identified as responsible for resolving disputes, she is seen as an option of last resort, in situations where men have been unable to resolve the issue (as evident in the quotation above). It should be noted, though, that these women may, unbeknownst to male respondents, be regularly involved in resolving disputes between women and within the family.

For others, government or NGO programmes have helped create spaces in which women can take on a more formal role in dispute resolution, as in the case of the DOWA programme to set up women's committees in Nangarhar, or the women's *shura* of the National Solidarity Programme (NSP).

Women do have a role in conflict [resolution]. The Department for Women's Affairs has set up women's committees in 11 districts [in the

province of Nangarhar]. When a conflict occurs, for example, like an argument, then a volunteer representative from the women's committee goes to try to mediate. If the conflict cannot be [resolved] locally then the representative informs the directorate and people contribute from here. But these committee women are unique in this role, not all women in the community intervene in conflict. (Female Provincial Peace Committee member, Nangarhar)

In some of these and other cases, specific women have a continuous role and reputation as community dispute resolvers, and yet this role is not one that is open to all women. For yet other communities, there is no role at all for women to get involved in these local disputes, and they are at most given symbolic roles to attract NGO funds:

At the community level, women do not have a role in dispute resolution. Due to tradition, their participation in public among men is very difficult. Where there are women's *shuras* [councils] in communities these only exist on paper. Some NGOs come and ask about the women's *shura* and so this is why villages have them: they [are] just [complying] with the formality for donors to get assistance, but nothing more. (Male civil society activist, Ghazni)

There is thus considerable variety of perceptions of women's role in local conflict resolution. Across the board, however, several conclusions can be drawn.

**1) In the current environment, women's role in local-level dispute resolution is the exception rather than the rule:** For most of the respondents interviewed, women taking on a public role in the community risked bringing shame to the family due to traditional *purdah* norms connecting women's honour with their confinement to the private sphere. Also, women taking on a public role in dispute resolution brings with it the perceived fear of disputants potentially causing physical or reputational harm to a woman's family if, for example, they are unhappy with the resolved outcome. However, the risk involved here increases with the rise of insecurity more generally, as the more insecure an area is, the easier it is for people to carry out violent actions against others with impunity (because it is easy to blame 'insurgents' for any wrongdoing, and because there is no recourse for victims in the form of police or other government bodies).

**2) The more insecure an area, the less likely women are able or willing to play a role in conflict resolution:** An overwhelming majority of respondents connected women's ability to take on public roles with the levels of security



in a given region, making the case that insecurity affects women more than men. This perception appears to be the result of both the Taliban targeting girls' schools and women in public roles, and the way in which society views injured men and women differentially:

If a boy is wounded on the street, everyone expresses their condolences and treats him as a martyr. But if a girl is wounded on the street, this is very bad in our culture and brings a lot of shame to the family. If security levels are not suitable, no one will allow their women to go out of the house because we are still living in a traditional community. Thus, insecurity returns women's role to zero. (Female teacher, Ghazni)

The corollary here is that this situation is subject to change as security increases. Such an observation was made by Deborah Smith in a comprehensive study of community-based dispute resolution (CBDR) in Afghanistan, in that CBDR processes are not fixed to static traditions or customs but 'are instead continually revised over time to adapt to changing social relationships, political structures and new problems' (Smith 2009: 3). Space for women's involvement in CBDR could potentially increase as security levels rise.

**3) Hazara areas in general have more space for women's role in conflict resolution:** Evidently, some variance exists between different Hazara communities but, relative to other groups, Hazaras tend to have a more open approach to women's role in dispute resolution. The Jibarkhil area of Herat and the Dasht-e Barchi area of Kabul, for example, are largely populated by Hazara communities, many members of which have relocated from Iran. Iranian influence is notable to the point where, as one respondent noted, 'their style of life is totally different from other Herati people'. Of a total of 19 provincial councillors for the entire province of Herat, of which five are women, two women come from the Jibarkhil community. In Ghazni, all of the 11 elected representatives to the lower house of parliament are Hazara, largely because the districts in which the Hazara population live in the province of Ghazni tend to be more secure than those with majority Pashtun or Tajik residents, and thus coming out to vote in the elections in 2010 was less risky in those areas. Furthermore, due to their history of subjugation in Afghanistan, the Hazara community appears to have taken the opportunity of open elections to gain influence in the state apparatus very seriously, and is over-represented in national and provincial legislative bodies (as compared to the proportion of Hazara members of the Afghan population as a whole, approximately 10 per cent). It appears that while there is a generally more open attitude toward women's public participation in Hazara areas, at least in cities, Hazara women themselves may well be motivated to pursue public



office on account of their historical ethnic and gendered marginalization, although this was not explicitly stated in interviews.

**4) While women respondents generally talk more favourably of women being involved in conflict-resolution processes than male respondents, both were critical of women's ability:** As one woman respondent noted, even when women do get involved in resolving a local conflict, 'women do not accept each other in this role and often refer the issue to men instead' (housewife, Jibarkhil area, Herat). This being the case, it is important not to assume that all women will necessarily welcome other women into roles of conflict resolution in the community on the basis of their gender alone.

**5) Where women do play a role, they are often specific women, such as an elder or an experienced woman in the community, who have been assigned the task of resolving conflicts among women:** Where this is the case, individual women appear to have been able to legitimize their role in the community by creating a unique task for themselves, either through having successfully mediated between women for many years or by already having a position of influence, such as being the wife of a prominent leader or being an elected councillor or member of parliament themselves. As such, the space for women to be involved in conflict resolution is largely limited to individuals who already have influence rather than being open to any woman who might want to be involved. This means that older women, in particular, dominate the space that exists for women's participation in conflict and conflict-resolution processes at the local level—not only as a result of their experience, reputation and influence in the community but also because their interaction with men to whom they are not related is less likely to spark rumours of sexual impropriety. The stigma attached to young women associating in public with men who are not related can be so strong in some rural areas that women rarely go beyond the walls of their home compound. As such, it acts as a practically impermeable barrier to young women participating in public life.

### ***Women's involvement in the peace process***

Quite distinct from respondents' portrayals of women's role in local-level conflict (resolution) was their conceptualization of women's role in the peace process. In Afghanistan, this process currently involves attempts by the government to reconcile with armed opposition groups (AOGs), particularly the Taliban but also other groups, including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami and parts of the Haqqani network. To date, reconciliation has officially taken the form of negotiations led by the High Peace Council (HPC), a body of 70 influential individuals selected by the president that was formed in 2010. The HPC has nine women members who form a women's committee,



which recently promoted a countrywide campaign to gather (literate) women's signatures on a petition for peace (see Government of Afghanistan High Peace Council 2014). Altogether, 250,000 signatures were gathered in early 2014, with the petition presented to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in New York in March of the same year.

In addition to the central body of the HPC, provincial peace councils (PPCs) also exist, each with 20–25 members in total, selected by provincial governors. Both the central and provincial branches are officially tasked with talking to AOGs and convincing insurgents to disarm. Financial incentives are offered to those willing to join the process. To date, however, the HPC—largely comprising former combatants and warlords (Van Bijlert 2010)—has not managed to convince members of the public of its achievements. Many respondents viewed the HPC with some scepticism, seeing its efforts as largely futile against a generally uncooperative insurgency. As one respondent stated, 'the members of the peace council are not real representatives of the community, they have not achieved anything in the years since it was established, and people do not trust them because they are warlords' (female teacher, Ghazni). Many respondents claimed that HPC members did not really do anything and were just pocketing their salary, while others have called the whole process corrupt (Mahbub 2012).

A considerable number of respondents across each province were aware that women were involved in the PPC in their province. A quota stipulates that two to five women should be appointed to every PPC, although the reason why a maximum of five women participants is given remains unclear. By far the most common view of their involvement, however, was that they could not have any influential role in bringing about peace simply because the Taliban do not accept the validity of their place at the negotiating table, and because negotiating peace was an activity for men:

As a woman, I [am a member] of the provincial peace committee. [My] other women colleagues [and I] have shared our ideas with other committee members, and our male colleagues [have] accepted our opinions. But unfortunately the insurgents do not believe in women's role in society...We participated in a meeting about the conflict in Andar district but were unable to meet the insurgents face to face. (Female Provincial Peace Committee member, Ghazni)

In essence, women's role at this level of peace talks was largely perceived to be symbolic rather than substantive. This is particularly problematic when considering the nature of the peace talks, which concern the character of

the state and the extent to which insurgent demands on the role of women are met. It is critical that women themselves play a role in determining this, yet it appears that they will have very limited influence on the outcome of peace talks. Much will depend on new President Ashraf Ghani Ahamdzai's approach to women's rights and his willingness to act as a champion for women during negotiations. The president will have relatively limited control over the actual implementation of any new legislation to promote women's rights (for example, the Elimination of Violence Against Women law, which has presidential approval but has not yet been passed by parliament), as a result of the limited reach of the government. Nevertheless, his stance on women's rights in talks with the Taliban will be critical to safeguarding the gains that have been made for women in the last 14 years. That said, the likelihood of Ghani being able to influence the Taliban on this subject, even if he attempts to do so, is relatively slim. The Taliban have not shown any real change in their attitude toward the role of women in society, and it is difficult to see them ceding to demands for gender equality, particularly when it is unclear what they might gain in return, and when they are not in a weak enough position to be forced into accepting the conditions of the Afghan Government.

Also clear from respondents' answers to questions about the peace process and reconciliation more generally was that this was perceived to be an elite process, reserved for a select few notable, wealthy or famous individuals with little space for ordinary people. As one man in Ghazni stated: 'I think taking part in the peace process is beyond women's ability, but at the same time, ordinary men do not have a role either. This process is completely related to politics, and ordinary men and women do not [play] any role at all' (male civil society activist, Ghazni). Rather than an inclusive process of reconciliation, including public participation and redress for past wrongdoings, the 'peace process' in Afghanistan simply represents an elite bargain between leaders (Gossman 2011). This is not dissimilar to the way in which other political processes, such as elections, have come to be perceived by Afghans, as manipulated events that are staged for appearance but have little meaning, when the actual outcomes are negotiated by elites and do not reflect the result of public votes.



## Consequences for state building (democratic institutions and processes)

State building in Afghanistan since the beginning of the Bonn Process in 2001 has included the establishment of executive, legislative and judicial branches of government and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF),<sup>14</sup> legislative elections for parliament and provincial councils, and considerable international investment in the capacity of line ministries to deliver basic services to citizens. To this end, the government has established several national priority programmes, one of which is the National Solidarity Programme (NSP). Promoted initially by Afghanistan's new president, former World Bank anthropologist Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, the NSP combines service delivery with good-governance principles in its establishment of elected community development councils (CDCs) that make decisions on community development priorities and then apply for government funds to execute them. One of the NSP's key requirements is that women be involved in the CDCs, either elected to the central council itself or to a separate women's CDC.

One of the principal problems with assessing the impact of state building in Afghanistan is that there are sizeable areas of the country that remain relatively isolated from state intervention and that, for all intents and purposes, function in spite of the central government rather than because of any services it might provide. This makes talk of democratic development and state building somewhat limited to urban areas, as, with the possible exception of occasional elections, people living in other areas have very little connection with the state apparatus (for more on this, see Rubin 2004). As one man in Ghazni described it: 'in Ghazni province, there are 17 districts, but I challenge the government to even leave Ghazni centre. When the government does not have control over its territory, how can they claim to be a democracy?' (male government worker, Ghazni).

### ***Impact of democratic institutions and processes on women***

The most obvious impact that the introduction of democratic institutions and processes has had on women has been the creation of space for their participation at the national and provincial levels. Reserved seats for women in parliament and in the provincial councils in particular have opened up electoral competition to women, and have created incentives for parties and other interest groups to support women's campaigns (for more on this, see Larson 2015). The substantive impact for women in general of having women representatives in parliament is yet to be seen, however, and

many women interviewed for this study saw female parliamentarians and councillors as having symbolic roles with little impact on decision-making or legislation. Flawed election processes have meant that wealth and influence are considered to determine who wins; thus even before they take up their seats, a gap exists between elected female officials and the constituents they supposedly represent. Afghanistan's clientelistic political system has not been displaced by the introduction of democratic institutions; rather, democratic institutions have been adapted to fit existing political structures, meaning that elected representatives serve as patrons to their constituents, channelling state resources to their immediate communities and personally undertaking favours, but rarely bringing community issues to parliament with the aim of altering legislation (see Coburn and Larson 2014: chapter 1).

Nevertheless, the impact of universal suffrage in elections has been groundbreaking. In many communities, women who had previously not left their homes decided to exercise their right to vote in order to see a particular candidate win. A number of respondents talked about the way in which women had contributed during the recent presidential elections:

In the election, women played a very good role. I contributed in the community during elections and provided some training to motivate people to take part in the democratic process, and to help them understand how important women's role was. In the election, I saw women who had never left their homes before come out and vote for the candidate of their own choice. (Influential local woman, district of Behsood, province of Nangarhar)

While the electoral process in Afghanistan is deeply flawed and has been a disappointment to many Afghans, it has also facilitated the enfranchisement and inclusion of a great number of women who are otherwise excluded from public life entirely. As the respondent above also indicates, election processes helped to create many 'legitimate' public roles for women as civic educators, election monitors and security personnel checking women at polling stations. These roles could potentially lead to greater space within their own communities for women to take on advisory or decision-making roles.

A large number of women are working in governmental and non-governmental organizations. Many women have also established their own organizations, and this means that women have contributed significantly to democratic processes in Afghanistan. Also, the widespread participation of women in the election process has changed the elections dramatically. (Male Provincial Council member, Ghazni)



One tangible vehicle through which women have been affected by state-building processes has been the NSP, which has been rolled out in communities countrywide and which has created new access to decision-making roles for women. Most respondents interviewed, however, did not consider the NSP to have altered existing structures of authority in the community:

In our community, we have two NSP *shuras*, one for men and one for women. But in fact the NSP programme has made women's role in decision-making even more limited than it was before, because the men's *shura* makes all the decisions. The [women's] *shura* exists in name only, just to meet the NSP requirement. Although it may be a good chance for women in the future. (Male civil society activist, Ghazni)

In most cases, it appears that the CDCs were either comprised of the same influential individuals who were already making most of the decisions in the community or simply added to a growing number of different decision-making bodies that held largely symbolic roles. Some CDCs appear to have provided a means for women to raise their concerns and needs, but this has depended very much on existing community attitudes toward women and their roles, and on external factors such as security.

Unfortunately, women do not have any value for our people. I am a woman, and the villagers voted for me in the CDC election. They selected me as the CDC president. My deputy is male, and he is totally illiterate, but I am educated, and I have a lot of experience working with NGOs, the government and with the community. Still, the villagers are always sharing their issues with my deputy because he is male and I am female. I know my role in the community and know the importance of other women, but our men are ignoring us. In our society, men think that women are inferior to them...Not much has changed in this regard. In the past, women worked in offices and they went to school as well. Just on...paper, women have more value now, but [in practice] we do not have a role in the community. (Female head of CDC, Ghazni)

## Conclusion

Critically, most state-building programmes in Afghanistan, including support for elections and legislative bodies, stem from a Western understanding of ideal, interactive state-citizen relationships that promote individual citizen rights and duties. In doing so, they sideline the role that communities can play in developing democratic governance. The NSP goes some way toward

garnering community involvement in state building, but it has not managed to provide a reliable vehicle through which women can voice their development needs and concerns. Furthermore, there are inherent contradictions between state-building initiatives, which in theory attempt to cultivate the active citizenship of ordinary women and men, and the peace process, which has been elite dominated and exclusionary with respect to women. This research has highlighted some of the ways in which women are involved in conflict resolution at the local level, and how they have made significant contributions to community cohesion when they have been given the space to do so. And yet the opportunity for their participation in national-level processes remains largely symbolic, partly because the government is trying to negotiate with a group that considers women's role to be confined to the private sphere.

If peace is reached with the Taliban, it may well be at the expense of gains in women's rights that have been made over the last ten years. But even now, many years into the insurgency, it is unclear what a sustainable peace in Afghanistan will look like, how Taliban demands will be met and how these demands will affect the building of a publicly legitimate Afghan state.

## Recommendations

Several key lessons can be drawn from this research.

For those concerned with overcoming barriers to participation and inclusion in peacebuilding processes:

- **Knowledge and use of existing structures of power and influence within communities is paramount.** Women in Afghanistan are most effective as participants in conflict resolution at the local level, where they already have a reputation for assistance in the community. The creation of new structures often leads to tokenistic mechanisms for inclusion and parallel institutions that rarely influence one another.
- **Local forms of dispute resolution are rarely static and evolve with the political, economic and security environment.** This opens up the potential for change and inclusion of previously marginalized groups, particularly as the security situation improves. It should not be assumed that traditional methods of dispute resolution are necessarily long-standing practices.



- **National and local processes for overcoming conflict should be more closely connected.** In Afghanistan, the national peace process has become detached from local concerns. Although there are branches of the High Peace Council in all provinces, it has simply become another national-level body to which an appointment means access to government patronage. Greater involvement of local communities could facilitate more effective dialogue.

For international actors engaged in democracy building and post-conflict development:

- **Elections and other democratic proceedings must be seen as continuous processes** that take place in a political environment, not just technical events that occur on a single day on a regular basis. Women's participation on election day does not in and of itself bring about greater empowerment at the community level, but it does have wider ramifications in that it creates opportunities for women to adopt public roles, e.g. as candidates, observers, security personnel and candidate agents. The symbolic value that elections present to women to take public positions of authority like these and demonstrate their knowledge and skills to other women and men should not be underestimated. Women who take on these roles could also be provided with subsequent post-election support and training, as there is the potential to take advantage of the political capital women can gain during these brief periods of electoral activity. Oftentimes, international funding for electoral processes stops in the immediate aftermath of an election, and yet this is when capacity can be at its highest. Continuing with programmes to train monitors and observers *after* elections, for example, could help build more permanent roles for women within their communities.
- **Winner-takes-all, first-past-the-post elections are not the most logical way to elect leaders in many contexts.** In Afghanistan, most people are more familiar with consensus building than majority rule. This being the case, elections are often adapted at the local level to fit more familiar means of electing leaders, through bloc votes, for example, or community consensus over who a village should vote for, or inclusive power-sharing agreements. This was evident in the 2014 presidential election, and has a direct impact on the perceived legitimacy of elections.



- **There can be inherent contradictions between state building and peacebuilding**, not least when the parties to the conflict do not agree on the kind of state that should be in place to facilitate peace. It is very likely that some gains that have been made for women in Afghanistan will be lost in the negotiation process, for example, especially as women themselves have no place at the negotiating table. Furthermore, peacebuilding is often a process involving ongoing conflict, which in itself can negate state-building achievements. For example, the escalation of violence in the lead-up to peace talks is often due to weaker parties attempting to strengthen their bargaining position.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> 'Marginalized' is used here to refer to communities that, for ethnic, economic or religious reasons, have not had the same access to resources and opportunities as other groups in the same area.
- <sup>2</sup> On peacebuilding, for example, see Galtung (1969), Lipson (2002), Paris (2004) and Barnett et al. (2007). In addition to the academic literature on the subject, various international organizations, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office and the United States Institute of Peace have their own definitions of peacebuilding.
- <sup>3</sup> Rosalie Arcala Hall and Joanna Pares Hoare make a similar distinction in their case study on the Philippines for this publication, and distinguish informal, individual and/or community-based peacebuilding efforts from attempts by agencies and organizations to create formal rules, approaches and methods of peacebuilding.
- <sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of the ways in which groups were able to mobilize with ISI support in Pakistan, see Rubin (2002: chapter 9), and of how this support divided mujahideen leaders (in Pakistan) and fighters (in Afghanistan), see Barfield (2010: 239–40).
- <sup>5</sup> For more on this era, and on reforms toward women's relative freedom at the time, see Dupree (1980: chapters 23–5 and pp. 530–3) for examples. For contemporary photographs, see Konishi (1969).
- <sup>6</sup> For more on the RAWA, see Brodsky (2003).

- <sup>7</sup> See Laura Bush, 'Radio Address by Mrs. Bush', 17 November 2001, available at <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=24992>>, accessed 12 December 2014.
- <sup>8</sup> The Northern Alliance, or, officially, 'The United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan', which emerged in 1996, was a military coalition formed in resistance to Taliban rule. It comprised several former leaders of the Islamic State of Afghanistan who had been in power during the early 1990s, including Burhannudin Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Massoud, both of Tajik ethnic origin. The leaders of other ethnic groups also joined at various points, including Mohammad Mohaqqiq and Abdul Rashid Dostum.
- <sup>9</sup> In theory, women are legally allowed to own land and are also entitled to a share of inherited property from deceased parents or husbands. In practice, however, few women own land in their own right.
- <sup>10</sup> *'Ab atesh-ra khamosh mekonad, wa sokhanan-e zanan-ra mardan aram mekonad, wa mardan-ra ba solha wadar mekonad'*.
- <sup>11</sup> Eide, Elisabeth, 'Strategic Essentialism and Ethnification: Hand in Glove?' *Nordicom Review*, 31 (2010), pp. 63–78, available at <[http://www.nordicom.gu.se/sites/default/files/kapitel-pdf/325\\_eide.pdf](http://www.nordicom.gu.se/sites/default/files/kapitel-pdf/325_eide.pdf)>, accessed 23 March 2015.
- <sup>12</sup> One reviewer of this paper made the excellent suggestion that it might be possible to establish a continuum of conflict/conflict resolution from the household up to the community, regional and national levels in order to ascertain at what points within these women *are* able to influence the uptake, continuation or cessation of conflict. This would provide a very helpful framework for further study.
- <sup>13</sup> Departments of Women's Affairs (DOWAs) exist in all provinces as provincial arms of the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Kabul.
- <sup>14</sup> As opposed to Afghan National Army (ANA), Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) also includes the police.



# Myanmar



# Myanmar

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Jenny Hedström



## Abstract

Based on primary interviews conducted with women involved in the Kachin armed resistance movement and in Kachin women's peace networks, this article explores the many roles women play in the armed conflict in Myanmar, highlighting how identities shaped by ethnicity, religion, gender and class influence participation in the armed struggle and inform women's actions. This article<sup>1</sup> will show how, in Kachin state, the reasons why women from religious- and ethnic-minority groups enlist in ethno-political organizations include experiences of oppression, a dearth of social services, poverty, gender-based violence and nationalism. In other words, these women's participation in the armed struggle is motivated largely by political and ideological purposes closely related to their identities as members of ethnic and religious minorities. Interestingly, this also seems to inform the motivations of women who join the peace movement, and who advocate the inclusion of women in public deliberations on the conflict and for an end to the war. This means that women have expectations for what peace and security means to them, and as political agents, are able to act on their motivations if needed. This research will bring to the forefront the narratives of religious- and ethnic-minority women in Myanmar, who are typically sidelined from public discussions and state-building exercises in post-conflict settings. In doing so, it will highlight their expectations for political action and settlements, enhancing and broadening analyses of the conflict in Myanmar.

## Introduction

During the research on women's involvement in nation-making projects undertaken by opposition groups on the borders of Myanmar (Hedström 2013, 2015), and in discussions on the development of country programmes in Myanmar with institutional partners working in the policy field, it became

clear how marginalized and sidelined the women's movement was. To the extent that women were taken into consideration in programmatic decisions or discussed in academic analyses, a disproportionate amount of interest seemed to be focused on urban women of Bamar<sup>2</sup> descent, such as Aung San Suu Kyi. The perspectives and opinions of religious- and ethnic-minority women were then not heard unless those women were seen as victims. As a consequence, the conflict and subsequent (multiple) ceasefires in Myanmar have largely been discussed from the perspective of the nation state and institutions dominated by men. These discussions have failed to analyse both the impact of gender relations and norms on the conflict, and the opposite: the impact of the conflict on gender relations and norms. In contexts such as the conflict in Kachin, however, women's presence along a continuum of violence and nonviolence, militarism and pacifism, suggests the need to take the concerns and opinions of minority women seriously.

In Kachin, women participate as soldiers or military-trained members of the civilian administration of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the political entity that is seen as representing the Kachin people. The military wing of the KIO, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), is currently the only non-state armed group in Myanmar that actively drafts women. Kachin women are also members and leaders of a multi-ethnic women's peace movement involving Myanmar women from different ethnic groups, including the Bamar majority. Despite their multiple roles in the conflict, women have not been invited to participate in the ceasefire process currently taking place between the KIO and the Myanmar Government,<sup>3</sup> and Kachin women's input in transitional governance processes has similarly been severely circumscribed. The erasure of women's experiences and knowledge from the public agenda has denied Kachin women the opportunity to define and address their own concerns and needs. As argued by D'Costa (2006: 131), this does not appear to be an oversight but rather a deliberate attempt by dominant groups to set the agenda by controlling the agency and voice of women from ethnic- and religious-minority communities. This will have consequences for how norms relating to gender roles, inclusion and participation are framed and conceptualized in public negotiations and discussions, a particular concern for women from ethnic and religious minorities.

## Methodology

This chapter is based on qualitative research data collected through interviews with key informants and supplemented by a desk review of grey and academic literature. Semi-structured interviews were guided by a set of general, open-ended questions, allowing the interviewer to elaborate on issues when needed,



while ensuring that the interviews remained grounded in the general topic of interest for this research project, namely the motivations, experiences and security needs of Kachin women. Employing quantitative methods to study the structure and make-up of the KIO and KIA would probably enhance the analysis provided in this study. However, the collection of quantitative data proved too difficult in practice, as the KIO and KIA consider demographic data related to their organizations a military secret, and limit access to, or the collection of, such data accordingly.

The data for this study were collected on two field visits to Myanmar, Thailand and the United States in 2013 and 2014. In all, 22 interviews were conducted with 25 women and one man currently or previously working in key Kachin resistance or civil society organizations. These included the KIO, KIA, the Kachin Women's Association, the Kachin Women's Association Thailand and the Kachin Women's Union. In 17 cases, the women interviewed were former or current soldiers or reservists. In addition, 16 interviews were also conducted with 23 women and three men who were active in Kachin religious associations, multi-ethnic civil society organizations and peace missions, as well as with external human rights groups and other non-state armed groups not associated with the KIO.

Each interview began by explaining the purpose of the fieldwork and the motivations for undertaking the research, and then giving the respondent some information about the interviewer's background. The study subjects gave their consent to carry out and record each interview and to use quotes in subsequent publications, and were assured that the recordings would be kept confidential. The interviewer attempted to build trust by referencing her decade-long involvement with Myanmar pro-democracy activists on the Thailand-Myanmar border, particularly her familiarity with Kachin women's groups and individuals, as well as previous research trips to areas where Kachin people reside. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and three hours, with most lasting just over an hour. To ensure the safety of the individuals who contributed to the study, neither their real names nor their whereabouts are divulged in this chapter.

During the research trip to Myanmar in 2013, three of the interviews were conducted in English. The rest were conducted with one of two local interpreters—one woman and one man—arranged by a gatekeeper.<sup>4</sup> Both interpreters self-identified as Baptist Kachin and were Jinghpaw speakers; consequently, all interpreted interviews were conducted using Jinghpaw, including those of two minority language speakers who said they felt comfortable speaking Jinghpaw. The male interpreter, who interpreted 15 interviews, may be connected to, or work for, the KIO's intelligence service.



The veracity of this suggested association has not been confirmed, but it raises questions concerning the validity and truthfulness of some of the responses provided by the interviewees. Attempts were made to take this into account when analysing the data by looking for inconsistencies and convergences between transcripts of the interviews interpreted by the two interpreters and those conducted in English.

For the trip undertaken in 2014, 14 out of 25 interviews were conducted in English with no interpretation needed; 11 interviews were conducted in Myanmar language rather than Jinghpaw, as the interpreter, a woman, was not proficient in any of the languages spoken in Kachin. This interpreter identified as Karen, another ethnic-minority group in conflict with the state. This led the interviewees to conclude that she was not only a member of an ethnic minority, like them, but also a Christian. The fact that the interviewees identified with the interpreter in this way helped to create a safe space in which to discuss experiences and issues of gender-based discrimination.

## Background

### Ethnicity and gender in Kachin

While the many conflicts in Myanmar are usually explained in terms of ethnic cleavages, the notion of ethnicity—in Myanmar, as well as everywhere else—is complex and multifaceted. It is informed by religious norms and traditions (Buddhism, Islam and Christianity, predominantly) as well as by a recent history of anti-imperialist struggle, which in Kachin society is strongly associated with a proud history of male fighters in the colonial forces, akin to the Gurkhas in Nepal. Kachins in Myanmar are predominantly Christian, unlike their relatives in neighbouring China, where many are Animists, and in India, where Theravada Buddhism dominates (Sadan 2013). The association between Kachins and Christianity is important in the context of the dominance of Buddhism in Myanmar, as the KIO and KIA were formed on the eve of the planned enforcement of Buddhism as the state religion in 1961 (a policy that never entered into force) (Lintner 1990). Moreover, the Kachin language was first written down by a Baptist missionary in 1885 and consequently, religious texts were the first to appear in Kachin (see Hanson 1913). Ethnic nationalism is therefore not easily separated from religion in the context of Kachin identity and the conflict in Kachin, and churches play an important role in the construction of Kachin identity and nationalism. They feature as political spaces in which information about Kachin culture, history and language is disseminated: recently, churches have hosted ceremonies where devotees prayed for success in the war and independence



from Myanmar.<sup>5</sup> The dominance of the Myanmar language in state schools means that tuition in minority languages has often taken place in civil or religious settings in Myanmar (Sadan 2013); in Kachin, the churches provide this instruction. Attacks by the Myanmar Army against Kachin communities have included the deliberate targeting of Christian places of worship and the torture of civilians using methods alluding to Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

The term 'Kachin' typically refers to a number of linguistic groups and clans or families that have historically lived in the India- and China-Myanmar border regions. Kachins were first categorized by the British colonialists who governed the country as part of British India from 1886 until independence in 1948, and the term was used later by the post-independence, national governments. In Myanmar, Kachin came to be used as an overarching, unifying identity, while in China and India the term 'Jingpo' is used instead (Lahtaw 2007). Jinghpaw is the main language used by the Kachin people, and it is commonly used to refer to all Kachin living in Myanmar regardless of their linguistic affiliation (Lintner 1990).

Leach (1954) has argued that Kachin identities are fluid and unstable, informed by relationships that structure access to power. Perhaps in response, the British attempted to impose some rigidity onto this fluid social organization through the application of fixed categories of racial identities, as used in censuses in colonial Burma (Ikeya 2011). Consequently, ethnicity, at least officially, ceased to be interpretative. It came to be seen as connected to claims of indigeneity (Sadan 2013), and therefore strongly associated with specific territories. In the case of the Kachins, this association was with the 'ungovernable' Frontier Areas, which were ruled separately from lowland Burma by the British (Hlaing 2007).

This is important because, as Yuval-Davis (1997) notes, the construction of ethnic and racial identities delineates and situates collective interests in relation to the 'Other'.<sup>7</sup> In this way, ethnicity can be seen as a political project that can be utilized for nationalistic purposes to advance rights or power, and adapt to shifting landscapes and political environments (Cockburn 1998: 36). The centrality of gender roles in these nationalistic projects is highlighted if one sees ethnic communities as an extended family or religious body writ large, as suggested by Moghadam (cited in Alison 2009: 107). This approach demonstrates how the very construction of womanhood and manhood lies at the heart of Kachin society, as elsewhere in Myanmar (Ferguson 2013). Women in Myanmar have been used as symbols in nationalist narratives, branded as traitors to the race by both the Myanmar state and by ethnic-minority groups when they have subverted traditional gender roles (usually by engaging in public political activities) (Ikeya 2011; Hedström 2015).

## The conflict in Kachin

The Kachin armed uprising was one of the last to begin in Myanmar, ignited by the government's attempt in 1961 to expand Buddhism as the state religion and ban the use of ethnic-minority languages in state schools. The primary objective of the revolt was to defend ethnic- and religious-minority interests against central Bamar Buddhist oppression (Lintner 1990). Four decades of conflict followed until the KIO signed a ceasefire agreement with the ruling military regime in 1994. No women were involved in the ceasefire negotiations, and issues related to gender or women's rights do not appear in the agreement. In fact, the ceasefire agreement did not allow for any political discussion concerning ethnic- and religious-minority rights to take place at all, although it did include a statement confirming that these issues would be addressed in second-stage negotiations, for potential inclusion in Myanmar's revised constitution.<sup>8</sup> However, any attempts on behalf of the KIO to influence the writing of the 2008 Constitution were disregarded by the military government. Of particular concern to the KIO, as well as to other armed groups, was a clause in the proposed constitution stating that there should only be one army in the country, resulting in an attempt by the central government to assimilate the country's many non-state armed groups into units controlled by Myanmar's military. The KIO refused, along with several other groups, and in 2011 the conflict began anew (International Crisis Group 2013).

Despite being engaged in civil warfare, the KIO was able to set up a full civilian administration in the areas of the states of Kachin and Shan that it controlled, an administration that expanded during the ceasefire period. The KIO provides essential services for people living in these areas, including in education, health, infrastructure development and the judiciary.<sup>9</sup> The KIO's armed wing, the KIA, is one of the country's largest armed forces, rumoured to have 20,000 troops (including civilian reservists).<sup>10</sup> It earns revenue through tax collection, visa fees and natural resource management. The KIO's official women's wing, the Kachin Women's Association, which is mainly responsible for providing clothing, food and emotional support to KIA troops, has seats on the Central Committee, the KIO's highest decision-making body, but at the time of writing these seats were vacant.



## Barriers to women's inclusion and participation

When men talk a lot they will bring more profit, when women talk a lot they will bring more damage.

Kachin proverb (cited in Minoletti 2014: 30)

Structural barriers restrict women's political participation in Kachin, as is the case elsewhere in Myanmar. Paramount among these is the 2008 Constitution,<sup>11</sup> which guarantees the military 25 per cent of all seats in the national parliament, endorses the appointment of men to positions that are 'deemed suitable for men only' (p. 150) and holds that the president and the two vice-presidents must be 'well-acquainted' in military matters (p. 15). The constitution also states that key ministerial positions are reserved for military personnel, and that the military must approve the appointment of ministers, the president and vice-presidents. The dominance of the military and the insistence on military experience effectively disqualifies most women from gaining strategic positions in the government, as women were, until October 2013, barred from entering Myanmar's army apart from as members of the medical corps or as administrative assistants (McLaughlin 2014). The parliament in Myanmar has one of the lowest levels of women's representation in the world: the average member is a middle-aged Buddhist Bamar man, and less than 6 per cent of seats are occupied by women (Global Justice Center 2013). Only two out of 33 ministerial positions are filled by women: the Ministry for Education and the Ministry for Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, both of which focus on areas that gender norms suggest are particularly suitable for women.

Despite evidence to the contrary, a recent debate held in the Lower House concluded that women in Myanmar do not suffer from discrimination.<sup>12</sup> This argument has been echoed by officials attending international forums to counter claims of sexual violence committed by Myanmar's army, thus rendering as unnecessary the need for policies advancing women's equality and addressing issues of gender-based violence and marginalization:

Gender equality has never been a big issue in Myanmar mainly due to the fact that Myanmar women traditionally enjoy [a] high degree of equal rights with men. Their rights are being protected by tradition and the existing laws. (Myanmar delegation, 67<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly)

Another potentially discriminatory clause in the constitution holds that ministerial and presidential candidates must be 'loyal to the Union', which could be used to disqualify those involved in political opposition activities, such as women participating in struggles on the part of ethnic and religious minorities. The constitution also states that political parties must demonstrate loyalty, and may not directly or indirectly contact or abet non-state armed groups, organizations or people associated with them. This provision could be used to prohibit or control the formation of ethnic- and religious-minority political parties, such as Kachin political parties, that may be deemed to have links to the KIO or the KIA. Language may also be a barrier prohibiting Kachin and other ethnic-minority women's full political participation, as Myanmar is used as the *de facto* official language in government proceedings, thereby discriminating against minority-language speakers.

In addition to the legislated obstacles mentioned above, cultural norms serve to inhibit women's public roles. These hold that men are more suitable for leadership positions than women, as reflected in proverbs and practice. For instance, no women are employed in decision-making positions at the township level in Myanmar (Minoletti 2014: 10). Women often lack the time and income to participate in decision-making processes, as many are the primary breadwinners in their families. This is due to the high numbers of male drug addicts, and men working in jade and gold mines located in remote areas of the state. The number of female-headed households in Kachin ranks second in the country after Yangon, according to a report published by the United Nations Development Programme in 2011.<sup>13</sup> This number is probably under-reported, however, as it does not take into account families with members conscripted into the KIA, with male soldiers often based away from their families for most of the year (Minoletti 2014: 27). The lack of inheritance rights in customary law also means that many women may be financially dependent on male family members, which has a negative impact on their ability to bargain in the household and participate in public life. Women may also have to struggle to maintain an income after the death of male family members (Minoletti 2014: 19). Poverty experienced by Kachin women is thus closely intertwined with structural gender inequality and access to, and influence over, decision-making processes.

Religious norms also act as barriers to women's full political participation in Kachin communities. Within Kachin Baptist congregations, women cannot become pastors, and the lack of female leadership in churches is reflected in the very low number of key positions filled by women in Baptist community organizations (Minoletti 2014: 13). One woman interviewed explained that she wanted to attend Bible school but was initially denied the opportunity,



as she was told that women should get married and not undertake higher education. She persevered and was finally able to go but could not serve as a pastor upon graduation, as this was reserved for male graduates. During her period of study, she felt discriminated against by her teachers, who thought women were unfit for religious leadership positions within the community. This made her aware of the unequal position of women and men in her community, and eventually led to her becoming involved in the women's wing of the KIO.

Religion is one of the most fundamental reasons why women and men have different roles...Male ministers become pastors, women cannot become pastors and are only responsible for traditional [women's] issues [such as children's and women's affairs] and cannot move away from there. Their career has ended. So men are more powerful. This is the most obvious [form of] gender segregation. Kachins are very Christian, so this has big impact, and...the pastors are very influential. (Reservist, KIA)

Gendered dichotomies are also enforced by other means. Women in active service in the KIA are expected to retire once they get married in order to fulfil their duty to have children. In other words, women are wives and mothers first and soldiers second. This practice maintains traditional family values, which perceive women as the cultural and biological reproducers of the nation, and men as their primary defenders and protectors.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, this means that women cannot become leaders in either the civilian or the military administration, as extensive military experience, including official combat experience, is a *de facto* prerequisite for high-ranking positions. The gendered division of labour is thus ensured:

They say women are not qualified enough...If you are serving and then your wife is also serving in [the] KIA, you know, you cannot both serve after marriage, so many women quit their job...And because you have to have many years of the military experience...after they get married, mostly the [women] have to quit their job, so how can they get many years' experience? Right? Because first they have to take care of their family, they have to take care of their kids so they will get no more chance to be a leader or a [high-ranking] leader in the military. Only men. Why do these men not quit their job? (Community activist)

## Mapping women's involvement in conflict

Women have been part of the KIO and KIA since their inception in 1961. In the beginning, however, women were banned from undertaking military training or using weapons. Instead, they were to be involved in support roles that mirrored women's traditional family duties: they were encouraged to provide food, clothing and shelter for male soldiers and to nurse injured and disabled veterans. The division between combat and support roles reinforced a gendered division of labour, as women's roles in the movement were structured as an extension of their domestic duties, and kept them out of decision-making positions. They were not given status in the army, as their contribution was not recognized as soldiering. This compartmentalization into combat and non-combat positions was largely fictional, however, as women experienced conflict both on and off the front line:

On the way to the military camp, we were ambushed by the Burmese troops. We had to run [through] the middle of an opium field, in...plain open sight. We were chased, and I fell down, pretended to be dead, stayed flat on the ground...I managed to escape, but, in the evening, Burmese troops also came to the camp. They started shooting, so we had to flee into the forest. I got lost in the forest, [separated] from my friends. I stayed the entire night with leeches sucking on my blood. In the morning, when I removed the leeches, the bleeding could not be stopped. (Unranked member of the KIA)

After lobbying by female recruits who argued that they needed to learn basic military skills in order to survive, military boot camps opened for women at the end of the 1960s, and are still operating today. Recruits at the military camps are taught the organizational mandate, purpose, and structure of the KIO and the KIA, learn about Kachin history and military tactics, and undertake physical drills and weapons training. They sleep in barracks, salute the flag and carry a wooden rifle with them at all times. At the end of the training, each recruit swears an oath on the Kachin flag, promising to put the defence of the Kachin motherland and Kachin community before her own individual safety. This mix of political lectures and cultural rituals, with a strong religious emphasis, has helped to foster a high degree of political consciousness and community awareness among the graduates. The basic training is offered to everyone working within the KIO, whether they are to serve as soldiers or not, contributing to the growth of a nationalistic spirit among members of the community. Additionally, since early 2003, high school and university students have been undergoing basic military training on a voluntary basis outside of school term times.



In 2011, the KIA Defence Academy began welcoming women recruits to participate in its officer cadet training. Combat positions are still restricted to men only. The reason for the change in policy is not clear, but as it coincided with a renewal in the conflict between the KIA and Myanmar's army, it might relate to a need to increase the number of people serving in the Kachin army. Additionally, there was a generational shift in the leadership in the KIO and KIA around this time, resulting in the recruitment of leaders frequently referred to as younger and more liberal-minded and inclusive compared to the older generation of KIO leaders.

### **Reasons for participation in the conflict**

Each family living in KIO-controlled territory is requested to contribute resources such as a family member to the organization. Consequently, the majority of women interviewed came to the KIO or KIA through this drafting process. However, they would often frame their conscription in voluntary terms, emphasizing that they had volunteered on behalf of their family or in addition to other family members already in the KIO. Despite a lack of basic democratic rights, such as being able to vote for the KIO leadership, the organization is largely seen as the legitimate representative of the Kachin community. When asked to describe what the KIO meant to them, the women interviewed frequently used the words 'mother', 'defender' and 'protector'.

I am connected to the KIO as a mother organization. It's more emotionally connected, not like officially connected, not like you have to go and do training, you know, it's more about being emotionally involved, an awareness of being an ethnic minority, and that we are an oppressed people. (Reservist, KIA)

Many of the women interviewed spoke about their desire to defend the Kachin people and the Kachin homeland and religion against the Bamar-dominated government. They grounded their motivation to join the KIO or KIA in the concept of the national cause or the national interest. Some referred explicitly to self-determination, but most spoke in terms relating to freedom, ethnic- and religious-minority rights and access to, and control over, land, in particular land rich in natural resources.

Accounts of oppression experienced either by the women themselves or by other people in their community during the conflict and the period of the ceasefire frequently informed the women's narratives. This oppression was felt



in both the public and private spheres, encompassing a range of interconnected issues, including the labour market, education, health and infrastructure development. In this way, class is a factor informing their decision to join the KIO: as members of a marginalized group, they lack opportunities for educational and economic development. In addition, the trafficking of young women and heroin use by young men, seen either as a direct consequence of the conflict or as a consequence more generally of Bamar oppression, was mentioned by several of the interviewees.

Young boys, they became drug addicts, lots of girls are exploited because we don't have many business or job opportunities in our area, because there are not many Kachins in government service...A lot of women, they lost their regular jobs, their regular life, so they don't have [an income] because of the conflict, so a lot of people, especially from the IDP camps, they went to other areas, some people even have to sell their bodies. A lot of Kachin women move to big cities in search of some income to support the family. Most of them ended up in brothels. (Captain, KIA)

The conflict itself and the suffering it has caused the community have also helped motivate Kachin women to join the army. All interviewees raised the issue of women-headed households as a consequence of husbands being stationed at the front line, or disabled or killed in the conflict. This was frequently linked to poverty and the trafficking of young women.

Women would discuss the situation involving refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in general or refer to their own or their families' experiences of being forced to flee from the fighting. Some women interviewed had male family members working for the KIO or KIA or mobilized in village home guards, and they mentioned threats and violence encountered by male soldiers on the front line. A few women also brought up issues of sexual violence against Kachin women. They referred to accusations made by Kachin women's organizations that rape was being used as a strategy of warfare by Myanmar's military against women from ethnic and religious minorities. One woman discussed her own fears in this regard:

I was very afraid of being captured by the Burmese army. So sometimes [on] the front line I had a pistol, a handgun to protect myself. I always thought if I [were] captured by the Burmese army, I would use this to commit suicide...Sometimes I had to go to the village to find things, like supplies, medicines and batteries and some cigarettes...but even though I had a pistol, I felt unsafe and very nervous. (Corporal, KIA)



These experiences of oppression, whether experienced communally or individually, suggest that these women's position in a religious- and ethnic-minority group was a significant contributing factor in their initial and continued involvement in the KIA or KIO. Their ability to practise their religion or speak their language has been circumscribed by the dominance of the Myanmar language and Buddhism. This is attributed to decisions enforced by the regime, who the Kachin people hold responsible for their marginalization, and, importantly, for the conflict. The women described the central government as an unaccountable and illegitimate entity, in stark contrast to the KIO. The KIO, then, is the only organization they feel they can depend on to protect their interests and their community in the conflict:

The Kachin society has to continue the resistance, whether it is led by the KIO or not, but right now this is the organization we have, so we have to support [the] KIO. This is the legitimate organization to resist the Burmese; we must have an organization to do so. (Reservist, KIA)

All women interviewed agreed that women should be allowed to fight on the front line if they so wished, and several of the younger recruits stated that they would like to engage in combat. Some had lobbied their superiors to get access to combat positions. They thus expressed the opinion that women had the same basic capacity for violence as men, and reasoned that gendered norms describing women as vulnerable and weak were behind the ban on women in combat positions:

I want to be a very brilliant fighter in combat, but as a woman I cannot go... When I was in the [Defence Academy], the other [women] cadets and [I] demanded, 'Let us go to the battlefield', because a lot of our schoolmates, the male soldiers, went to the battlefield, but we were left behind at the school...We were just very excited to go. We wanted to go very strongly. We wanted to go to the battlefield. (Second Lieutenant, KIA)

The importance of both seeing and including women as political agents in discussions linking conflict, nationalism and gender is clearly illustrated here. The women interviewed positioned themselves as protectors of the community, alongside men. They claimed roles as military defenders of Kachin identity, arguing for women's equal capacity for violence and political action, upsetting dominant notions stating that "protection" is the sole domain of men and masculinity and "being protected" that of women and femininity' (Eriksson-Baaz and Stern 2013: 721).

In sum, the motivations for women to enlist, conscription notwithstanding, ranged from a sense of duty to experiences of oppression and insecurity, feelings of trust and dependence, and nationalism. Only oppression and insecurity, as articulated in actual or perceived threats of sexual violence, trafficking and forced sex work, stand out as gender-specific reasons for women enlisting in Kachin military organizations. These motivations are linked to the women's position as members of a marginalized ethnic- and religious-minority group, as well as to class: Bamar women and men were perceived as having access to opportunities and recourses closed off to people belonging to the Kachin community.

### Mapping women's involvement in peace

The space for civil society and local activism seemed to expand during the ceasefire period, as women were exposed to the idea of gender equality and gender politics, resulting in an increase in the politicization of women.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the steep rise in female-headed households and female responsibility in the family—due to the inability of men to move about freely for fear of being arrested as KIA or KIO spies or of being used as porters by Myanmar's army, the drafting of male soldiers to the front lines and the prevalence of drug addiction among young men—has resulted in a shift in responsibilities:

During this conflict and the last one, women [have been taking on] the role of community [leaders]. For a long time...many women have been village [leaders]. But when the conflict is over, then [the] men come and take [over these roles]: 'women, come back to [the] kitchen, and then we will take our role again'. But during the first war, women, you know, organized relief aid, organized local people and people from abroad, Kachin people from abroad and people from China...And in government-controlled areas [too]...At that time, we women [didn't] know about, you know, [women's issues], [women's] rights, we [didn't] know, but now the situation has changed. We mobilize women. We are [raising awareness] of gender [issues], women's rights. So now women have woken up. Women know. (Community activist)

The absence of a clear division between the front and the home may have facilitated the increase in women public figures, since a perceived threat or an actual attack on the KIO and KIA could be interpreted as an assault on all Kachin people. Therefore, Kachin women feel they have a responsibility to defend their home and do their duty alongside Kachin men.



As a Kachin, we have to serve, we have to struggle for our people...because in [a] serious situation like this, all Kachin families have to [provide] at least one or two family members [to serve] because we need to protect and defend our motherland. (Second Lieutenant, KIA)

In this context, the increase in the number of women active in both the military and in civil society is framed as an anomaly, ensuring that their inclusion does not upset gender roles but is rather seen as an exception: in times of national crisis, everyone is responsible for defending the nation (Jacoby 2010: 82). Accordingly, despite a reported change in gendered perceptions and abilities, women are still prevented from participating in formal ceasefire negotiations in any great numbers, as normative gendered perceptions prevail. Until May 2013, no women had taken part in the Kachin negotiations with the government. In late May, a technical team to advise on the peace process was formed. After lobbying from women's groups, a third of the seats were allocated to women, although, as of 2014, only two of the 15 seats had been filled.

All of the women interviewed agreed that women should be involved in the ceasefire process; however, most concluded that they did not personally have the capacity to participate, indicating an internalization of normative gender roles that deem women unqualified for political discussions. High-ranking military experience as a prerequisite for participation was also brought up as a reason for excluding women, although, as indicated above, women are often unable to reach high-ranking positions due to gendered expectations of family responsibilities. Additionally, arbitrary selection criteria for participation in the ceasefire talks make it difficult for women's groups to become involved:

[The KIA says] if you are too young, then the other side [the government] will look down on you and also if you are too young then you don't have enough [experience] and then knowledge to compete with the other side. And if you are too old, they meant for the women, then you can't concentrate... (Central Committee member, Women's League of Burma)

The lack of women's participation in formal ceasefire processes at the local level is mirrored at the national level. In August 2011, Myanmar's president declared a peace plan for national reconciliation. A number of institutions were established to further this aim, such as the Union-Level Peace Team, made up of a Central Committee that is responsible for designing policies related to ceasefires, and a Working Committee that is responsible for implementing the policies designed by the Central Committee, and the Myanmar Peace Centre (MPC), which coordinates the government's peace

activities and reports directly to the Office of the President (Hedström 2013). In 2013, a joint committee called the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) and made up of representatives of armed ethnic groups was formed to agree on a common position on the peace process in negotiations with the government. Out of a total of 82.5<sup>16</sup> strategically important positions across these institutions, women hold 3.5 seats—less than 5 per cent of the positions.<sup>17</sup>

Interviews with women's groups indicate that even when women are physically included in meetings, their ability to provide input has been effectively circumscribed by male leaders leaving the room or removing their earphones when women's groups are presenting. When women's groups initially approached the government in 2011, requesting a 30 per cent quota for women in the negotiations, the response was that the government's chief negotiator would bring his wife, suggesting that if women wanted to be involved they would have to talk to her and let the men talk politics:

We met with the [government's chief negotiator]...and then we [talked] about women's participation and then he said that next time he [would] bring his wife. Then they [laughed] every time we [spoke] to them...nearly everyone at the Myanmar Peace Centre says the same words...‘The military [is] asking for 25 per cent in the Parliament and women [are] also [asking] for 30 per cent. So where does that leave us [men]’, they joke, ‘how about [quotas] for us [men]?’ (Central Committee member, Women's League of Burma)

## Reasons for participation in the peace movement

Although women are *de facto* excluded from participating in formal ceasefire processes, they are organized in informal peace movements across the state and the country. As mentioned above, the space for civil society has widened, resulting in the politicization of women, who are now leading peace efforts through informal channels. Key among these are two multi-ethnic and multi-religious women's peace networks, which include ethnic Kachin women: the Women's League of Burma (WLB) and the Women's Initiative Network for Peace (WIN-Peace), totalling 51 member organizations between them. They are demanding a quota for women's participation in the ceasefire and peace processes, and lobbying both the non-state armed groups and the government for the inclusion of more women. In addition, there is a Kachin women's forum that is working on coordinating efforts inside the state to include the women's perspective in the peace process, with assistance from both



the WLB and WIN-Peace. In this way, ethnic Kachin women are working together with ethnic Bamar women and women belonging to other ethnic and religious groups to multiply the demands for gender-just peace.

I mean, you can have peace, but if you cannot [include] women, [it won't work]. Why? It's because...who is going to speak out about a woman who is raped? [Or] a woman who has to struggle through domestic violence? [Or] a woman that doesn't have the right to [an] education? (Advocacy group member)

The women interviewed for this study who are active in civil society highlighted the importance of collective action to influence local leaders and enact change. This might not be so surprising given the women's movement's 20-odd years' worth of experience of cooperating across ethnic and religious divides. The current negotiations were deemed not conducive to women's interests and unlikely to ensure long-term peace and development in the country. The proposals advanced by the women's peace movement emphasize the importance of paying attention to human security and transitional justice, the rehabilitation and reintegration of both soldiers and refugees, and just land reforms and development initiatives that are inclusive of social-service needs.

It is not just about stopping the fighting. There should be a guarantee of security for the people and also [a guarantee of everyone's] livelihood [and land]...We also must be able to ensure that there is no need to worry about [our] children's education...Without justice, there is no meaning of peace...Otherwise by the interpretation of lasting peace would be like just stop fighting. That's why we [are trying] to emphasize how justice is important in the peace process. That's what we do. (Community activist)

As such, the women interviewed chose to be active in civil society on strategic grounds. They judged that the women's peace movement's assessment of what it takes to end the conflict and transition into a post-conflict Myanmar was better suited for long-term peace and development than the perspectives put forth by the actors involved in the current ceasefire discussions. An understanding of gender-based inequalities and the impact of gender relations on both conflict and democratization efforts informed their narratives.

In order to overcome politicized cleavages, the women involved in the peace movement frame the conflict in Kachin as representative of how the central government treats marginalized groups elsewhere in the country. They also apply the concept of 'woman'/'women' as a collective identity, existing

alongside and in dialogue with collective ethnic and religious identities. As such, many of the women interviewed professed support for the conflict in Kachin as self-identified members of marginalized ethnic and religious groups. Military action is then interpreted as self-defence, and so women's involvement in the peace movement cannot be interpreted as a rejection of conflict *per se*, but as a rejection of the actions of the central government. In other words, although they criticize non-state armed groups for not including women in the ceasefire discussions, they also support Kachin military actions taken in defence of ethnic- and religious-minority rights.<sup>18</sup> This highlights the need to see and include ethnic- and religious-minority women as stakeholders in the conflict; support from these women bolsters and legitimizes decisions taken by the KIA and KIO, potentially prolonging the ongoing conflict. Moreover, women civil society leaders may influence the opinions of community members, and by extension, influence the actions, violent or otherwise, taken by the KIA and KIO.

## Consequences for state building

Concerns raised by the WLB and WIN-Peace illustrate the significant gender biases inherent in Myanmar's peace process. With its focus on (male) public violence, the process fails to address issues related to security, and the lack thereof, as experienced by women and, importantly, fails to understand the connection to sustainable peace and democracy. In silencing the experiences of marginalized women from ethnic and religious minorities, the negotiations are not taking into account (gendered) structural inequalities that have shaped not only the continuation of the conflict but also women and men's roles in it. The interviews reveal that gender-based violence informs women's participation in the conflict as violent actors but also influences the women's groups' tacit support for armed ethnic-minority organizations. As such, ignoring gendered concerns can undermine opportunities for sustainable peace. Moreover, unless women are included in the deliberations, they will be unable to influence the conceptualization of norms—and the design of subsequent policies—related to gender roles, inclusion and participation. This is a particular concern for women from ethnic and religious minorities.

The definition of security and conflict used in the discussions taking place between the non-state armed groups and the government does not reflect women's realities, and has belied calls by women's groups for attention to be given to violence as experienced by women in both the public and private arenas. The use of sexual violence against women belonging to ethnic minorities during the conflict, identified by women's groups as a strategy of warfare used by Myanmar's army, continued during the ceasefire period, as



ethnic-minority areas saw an increase in the number of battalions posted to these regions, ostensibly in order to secure and monitor the ceasefire in resource-rich areas. The use or threat of sexual violence undermines women's ability to participate effectively in peace- and state-building activities, such as elections and governance processes, as do other forms of gender-based violence that go unaddressed. Dominant norms concerning family and gender relations have resulted in widespread acceptance of domestic violence, which, studies have shown, often increases in ceasefire and transitional periods as former soldiers return to their families (Call 2007). Intra-family bargaining power is informed by these gender norms, and impacts women's ability to address domestic violence and participate fully and effectively in public life. Women, and in particular women from ethnic- and religious-minority backgrounds, face serious barriers to accessing justice. In areas under KIO control, issues related to gender-based violence are often delegated to customary authorities or, if the case involves KIA soldiers, are dealt with by a KIO military court. Kachin women's groups have accused both of these systems of discriminating against women by not taking issues of sexual violence or domestic violence seriously enough. On the national level, women in Myanmar lack legal protection in the form of laws penalizing domestic violence and marital rape<sup>19</sup> (Gender Equality Network 2013). In addition, the current constitution includes a clause that effectively absolves the state military of any responsibility for crimes committed against women from religious and ethnic minorities during the conflict.<sup>20</sup> However, the demands of women's groups that the ceasefire negotiations take into consideration the need for transitional justice and legal reforms related to gender-based violence have been sidelined from the discussions.

If women are excluded from the process, then in the transitional or post-conflict plan, there might not be included a consideration for women, a truth and justice commission, for example, looking at violence against women...Even some of the ethnic armed groups do not want to talk about these issues, [such as] sexual violence against women, because they are afraid the finger will be pointed at them also. So, you know, these issues will definitely not be brought to the table if women are excluded. (Central Committee Member, Women's League of Burma)

Many of the women living in the conflict areas are affected by poverty, reflecting the gender-based discrimination that they experience as it intersects with ethnicity and religion, as well as class. This results in women experiencing exploitative work situations or struggling as single heads of household to provide for their families. The renewal of the conflict has exacerbated economic insecurity, as many rural families have had to leave their farms and



businesses behind when fleeing attacks. Men face restrictions on travel, as they can be accused of being KIA associates, or they might be drafted to the front lines for either army. This means that it is mostly women who travel to secure food, water and firewood for their families, leaving them vulnerable to gender-based violence: as mentioned above, sexual assaults against Kachin women have continued during the ceasefire and the current conflict period. Additionally, the land around the IDP camps is pocketed with landmines, adding a further threat to women's security (Htoi Gender and Development Foundation 2014).

[Men] might disappear for one whole season [for] mining and [logging]... So [this] means it is really putting [a] burden on the [women] in the camps. That's why...it's usually [women] [stepping on landmines]. [Because] they are trying to find bamboo shoots, or...forest [products] like mushrooms or firewood or [vegetables]...Sometimes also they try to find a job in China...and sometimes [at] sugarcane [plantations] for one season, and then they were trafficked...Sometimes they were raped and sometimes they were taken by the soldiers or arrested... So in terms of the burden, day-to-day burden...many people thought that men risk more in the war zone, but actually from my point of view [women] [face graver] risks, day to day. (Community activist)

Interviews also revealed that women, rather than men, stay behind when villages are attacked to care for people who are unable to flee—the elderly, young children and people with disabilities—thus increasing their susceptibility to gender-based violence. Pregnant women may face additional challenges in and around IDP camps because of their inability to access health services. This may also be a problem for women during menstruation:

When they run to the IDPs camps from the conflict, on the way, if the women have monthly menstruation, and they don't have anything to cover themselves with, in that instance, in our culture, it can be seen as bad luck or stigma, so sometimes women are left behind because of the blood. (Community activist)

In this way, structural income inequalities intersecting with gender restrict poor and rural women's ability to participate in public life. This has a negative impact on their opportunities to influence transitional policy frameworks and, by extension, the development of institutions and norms related to human rights and gender in a democratic Myanmar.



Moreover, the exclusion of the women's movement from the official peace process means that women's considerable expertise in peacebuilding is being ignored: the women's movement has been involved in community peacebuilding projects for almost two decades, facilitating the meeting of people from both majority and minority groups to identify commonalities in their views and needs resulting from the conflict. All the major non-state armed organizations with the exception of the women's movement have fallen apart or have had open disagreements. Consequently, for the peace process to be sustainable, the experiences of the women's movement concerning how to build lasting and inclusive alliances need to be taken into account.

## Conclusion

Public discourse on the conflict in Myanmar has been dominated by men in military uniforms and by men in public office, with the latter predominantly (although not exclusively) Bamar, Buddhist and from urban settings. Women, particularly those belonging to ethnic- and religious-minority groups residing in rural areas, have been prevented from participating in the negotiations in any meaningful way despite their involvement in both military ethno-political organizations and civil-society-based peace organizations. This marginalization risks undermining the democratic process that follows the signing of peace agreements, as women's input into the design and development of democratic institutions and practices will be severely circumscribed, resulting in weak support for democratic processes. This highlights the need for policymakers and academic researchers alike to apply a more complex framework of analysis in their work on the civil wars in Myanmar that includes gender and identifies women as politically motivated actors who can inhibit or foster transitions from war and conflict to peace and stability.

## Recommendations

- Myanmar's nascent democratization, including the ceasefire, should be supported and the process be made legitimate, accountable and inclusive, by *building the capacity of interethnic networks and minority women's grass-roots organizations* to enable them to participate in the democratization process. Without the full and substantial inclusion of women, particularly women from ethnic- and religious-minority backgrounds, the current democratic deliberations risk losing relevance (and thus momentum), which will have a negative impact on the sustainability of peace and contribute to a lack of legitimacy for state building.

- As the conceptualization of norms and the design frameworks related to women's human rights, gender roles, inclusion and participation have a direct impact on the quality of democracy and the successful management of diversity, these processes must be inclusive of women from ethnic and religious minorities. It is therefore imperative that *funders be supportive and inclusive of locally led, multi-ethnic women's movements.*
- Unless women's groups are consulted, interventions will fail to address women's needs in both conflict and non-conflict areas. *International agencies and actors must therefore include women's voices in their planning and execution of country programmes in order to visualize and address the impact of interventions on women and gender relations within communities.*
- Importantly, *the capacity of women's networks needs to be strengthened* so that they can influence the design and execution of domestic policies and interventions.
- *The experience of the women's movement in building alliances across ethnic and religious divides needs to be used to enhance the prospects of sustainable peace.* The importance of having indigenously crafted and substantially inclusive agreements cannot be underestimated.
- Women's groups stress the need to *recognize women's insecurity in deliberations on peace and democracy*, arguing that violence against women as experienced at the hands of military actors can be used as a marker of the country's lack of progress. *Outside actors need to highlight the status of women's human rights as a marker of progress toward peace and democracy, and to recognize and address human rights violations perpetrated by military personnel stationed in ceasefire areas, as well as in areas of active conflict.*

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Additional analysis based on the underlying research discussed here will be published in Hedström, J. "Before I joined the Army, I was like a Child": Militarism and Women's Rights in Kachinland' in Sadan M. (ed.), *War and Peace in the Borderlands of Myanmar –the Kachin Ceasefire 1994 -2011*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2015.
- <sup>2</sup> In this case study, 'Bamar' is used to refer to the ethnic majority in Myanmar, and 'Myanmar' to describe all men and women from Myanmar without specifying ethnic or religious origins.
- <sup>3</sup> For information about the ceasefire process, please see the Myanmar Peace Monitor website, which provides updated information about the conflict and peace process, available at <<http://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/component/content/article/57-stakeholders/155-kio>>.

- <sup>4</sup> The gatekeeper was someone with strong connections to the leadership of the KIO.
- <sup>5</sup> Author's interview with a KIA reservist, Kachin, Myanmar, 2013.
- <sup>6</sup> See Asian Human Rights Commission (2014), Fortify Rights (2014) and Christian Solidarity Worldwide (2013: 23–4).
- <sup>7</sup> The 'Other' is a relative concept that is defined in relation to the 'Self/Same', which it is not, as, in this case, a group (ethnic) identity as defined in relation to another identity. For the Kachin in Myanmar, for example, Sadan (2013: 38–9) has argued that Christianity has become a marker of difference vis-à-vis the Buddhist majority population. The 'Other' is often portrayed as different and negative. See Beauvoir (1997: 16–21) and Yuval-Davis (2012).
- <sup>8</sup> See Euro Burma Office, 2010.
- <sup>9</sup> Kachin National Organisation, 'The Republic of the Government of Kachinland', available at <<http://www.kachinland.org/>>, accessed 5 January 2014.
- <sup>10</sup> Myanmar Peace Monitor, 'Stakeholder Overview: Kachin Independence Organization', available at <<http://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/stakeholders/stakeholders-overview/155-kio>>, accessed 2 July 2014.
- <sup>11</sup> The full text of the 2008 Constitution can be found at <<http://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/asia/MM/Myanmar-Constitution-2010/view>>, accessed 21 January 2015.
- <sup>12</sup> Euro Burma Office, 2014, p. 2.
- <sup>13</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 'Integrated Household Living Conditions (IHLCA) Survey in Myanmar (2009–10): Poverty Profile', Yangon, Myanmar, June 2011, available at <[http://www.mm.undp.org/content/dam/myanmar/docs/FA1MMRPovertyProfile\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.mm.undp.org/content/dam/myanmar/docs/FA1MMRPovertyProfile_Eng.pdf)>, accessed 29 June 2015.
- <sup>14</sup> See Enloe (2000), Jacoby (2010) and Yuval-Davis (1997).
- <sup>15</sup> Sebastian Rumsby et al. 2013.
- <sup>16</sup> One position is part time (0.5).
- <sup>17</sup> Calculated based on the NCCT (13 members, of which one is a woman), the Union Peace Central Committee (11 members, all male), the Union Peace Working Committee (52 members, of which two are women) and MPC (7.5 positions, of which one part-time position is filled by a woman).
- <sup>18</sup> See Ferguson (2013) for an analysis of this on Shan women.
- <sup>19</sup> Marital rape is only criminalized if the wife is younger than 14. See Gender Equality Network (2013).
- <sup>20</sup> Article 445 of the 2008 Constitution states that, 'No proceeding shall be instituted against the said [previously ruling] Councils or any member thereof or any member of the Government, in respect of any act done in the execution of their respective duties'. Moreover, article 381 states that '[e]xcept in the following situations and time, no citizen shall be denied redress by due process



of law for grievances entitled under law: (a) in time of foreign invasion; (b) in time of insurrection; (c) in time of emergency'. Article 382 states that, '[i]n order to carry out their duties fully and to maintain the discipline by the Defence Forces personnel or members of the armed forces responsible [for ensuring] peace and security, the rights given in this Chapter [Citizen, Fundamental Rights and Duties of the Citizens] shall be restricted or revoked through enactment [of] law'.





# Philippines



# Philippines

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Rosalie Arcala Hall and Joanna Pares Hoare

## Abstract

This study examines the opportunities and challenges for women in the areas of peacebuilding and democratic processes, in light of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) signed between the Philippines national government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in 2014, as well as the 1996 Final Peace Agreement between the government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). It addresses the dynamics of women's formal participation in civil society groups that have a peace and development agenda, in government and MILF-affiliated agencies and negotiation bodies and as electoral candidates and elected officials. The study maps the resources, skills and capabilities at women's disposal in the Bangsamoro area as a result of their participation in these institutions, and the ways that women are using these to address the insecurity and violence that they continue to face as a result of the ongoing insurgency, *rido* (inter-clan violence) and widespread lawlessness. In addition, the study explores how women's participation in the peace agreements is informed by their affiliation or linkages with the MILF and the MNLF. The mobilization and recruitment of MNLF women into the army and police are also examined in order to identify future opportunities for community reintegration or integration of MILF female combatants and auxiliaries into the new police force in the proposed Bangsamoro Political Entity (BPE) that will replace the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). At present, the absence of an open list of female ex-combatants and the opaque nature of the process of demobilizing and disarming MILF combatants create a danger of rendering women invisible in the process of crafting reintegration schemes.

## Methodology

This study is based on qualitative data collected in interviews with women involved in or working in official institutions, government bodies and civil society groups in Bangsamoro. These included elected government officials, programme officers from the ARMM Bids and Awards Committee and the Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA), a Bangsamoro transition commissioner, a representative of the regional Akbayan Party (a national party with a strong gender platform) and a local MNLF community organizer. In addition, two focus group discussions were conducted, with eight to ten participants from women's NGOs involved in work on peace and development, and based in Cotabato City, Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur. The study also draws on interview materials from previous research projects (Hall 2011, 2012, 2014). The interviews and focus group discussions took place in Cotabato City and Marawi City between August and November 2014.

A particular limitation of this study is that it was not possible to interview MILF women auxiliaries despite attempts made through formal and informal channels. More specifically, the MILF Central Command did not grant permission to interview the women due to a scheduling conflict (the troops were attending a training session).

## Background

### The Mindanao conflict

While Muslims—known as Moros—are a minority in the predominantly Christian Philippines, they are the majority in Central Mindanao and the island provinces of Sulu, Basilan and Tawi-Tawi. Within the Muslim population, there are also distinct ethno-linguistic tribes (e.g. Maguindanawon, Maranao, Tausug, Yakan, Iranun). There are also indigenous peoples living in Mindanao who never converted to Islam and whose cultures are also distinct. Collectively known as 'Lumads', these indigenous peoples also have historical claims to the land. The reference to tri-people (Muslims, Christian settlers and Lumads) is often used to describe the diversity of the many communities in Mindanao.

The conflict in Mindanao is usually depicted as vertical—that is, between the Philippines state forces and the Muslim secessionist insurgent groups present in the region. Narratives of this vertical conflict point to the historical status of Muslims in Mindanao. In the pre-colonial and colonial periods, the region



was governed by autonomous political structures, the Sultanates of Sulu and Maguindanao, which enjoyed territorial suzerainty and traded extensively with other South-East Asian maritime kingdoms. Having not been fully assimilated under Spanish and American colonial rule, Muslims were able to develop a cultural identity and patterns of political rule distinct from the rest of the country. Following independence in 1946, however, state policies encouraging Christian migration to the region and large-scale agricultural development led to the economic displacement of Muslims, who, in many areas, became a minority.

In the post-independence era, Muslim-dominant communities were ruled by *datu*, traditional leaders descended from the families of the former sultan (or who had claimed the title, in some cases). These *datu* were tied to the state in a clientelistic fashion, brokering deals with their local population and delivering bloc votes for national candidates (Abinales 2004: 8). During the Marcos dictatorship (1972–81), traditional leaders were superseded by local strongmen who focused on extracting the natural resources from their areas (Sidel 2000). These warlords (e.g. Ali Dimaporo of Lanao and Ampatuan of Maguindanao) ruled under the proverbial ‘guns, goons and gold formula’: their control over public resources (including the local police) was matched by the strength of their own private armies. These politicians-cum-warlords were President Marcos’ institutional ally in suppressing insurgents and dissidents alike.

The armed secessionist movement had its beginnings in the Moro National Liberation Front led by Nur Misuari, which drew attention both to the close relations between national and traditional politician-warlords and Muslim oppression by the Christian-dominated national government. The MNLF’s demands for a separate Bangsamoro state resulted in intense fighting between the MNLF and Philippine government troops in the early 1970s. The campaign also prompted parallel communal conflicts in many mixed Mindanao communities. In 1976, the MNLF negotiated and signed the Tripoli Agreement with the Marcos government, but the dictatorship failed to implement the terms of autonomy under the agreement. The Muslim secessionist cause later splintered with the emergence of the MILF led by Hashim Salamat, which comprised predominantly ethnic Maranao commanders and supporters (Abinales 2000: 10).

Following the democratic transition in the Philippines in 1986, the ARMM was created under the 1987 Constitution, initially covering the provinces of Maguindanao, Lanao del Norte, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. Later negotiations with the MNLF yielded the 1996 Final Peace Agreement (FPA), which provided for interim governance arrangements for the MNLF to lead the Southern

Philippine Council for Peace and Development and an expanded ARMM (adding the province of Basilan and the cities of Marawi and Lamitan), with greater fiscal and administrative reach. The FPA did not provide for the disarmament and demobilization of the MNLF, but included the integration of MNLF combatants into the Philippines Army and police. MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari ran for, and was eventually elected as, ARMM governor in 1996, and remained in power until 2001. But under Governor Misuari, the ARMM was adjudged 'corrupt and mismanaged' (Bertrand 2000: 37), and saw the centralization of fiscal power in the hands of the executive (i.e. the governor) (Gutierrez and Vitug 1999: 193).

As the MNLF was being integrated into the state apparatus, the MILF was growing in strength and consolidating control over communities in the provinces of Maguindanao and Lanao. Negotiations between the Philippine government and the MILF proceeded sporadically, producing two agreements, the 1996 ceasefire and the 2001 Tripoli peace agreements, which yielded some security gains on the ground and institutional innovations (e.g. the BDA) for rehabilitation and development in MILF-controlled areas. By early 2000, the emergence of the terrorist-labelled Abu Sayyaf Group and Mindanao's inclusion in the US war on terror as a 'minor front' further militarized and amplified the general deficits in governance in the region (San Juan 2007). This group continued to be particularly active in the island provinces of Sulu, Basilan and Tawi-Tawi. The MNLF leadership, meanwhile, splintered further between Nur Misuari and the so-called Council of 15, which had represented the MNLF in negotiations with the central government under then-President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

After stalled negotiations beginning in 1996, two interim wars (the 2000 Camp Abu Bakar and 2001 Buliok offensives) and numerous localized violent engagements between government troops and the MILF, a peace process was restarted in 2010 under President Benigno Aquino III. The Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro was signed in October 2012, and the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) (including their annexes) in March 2014. The CAB reframes the relationship between the national government and the proposed Bangsamoro Political Entity, which will supplant the problem-ridden ARMM. With a ministerial form of government, proportional party representation system in the legislature and definitive control over shared wealth, the establishment of the BPE—and the MILF's presumed control over this governance apparatus—is expected to definitively end the ongoing conflict in Mindanao.



At the same time as the insurgency, ongoing inter-clan violence—*rido*—affects the lives of people living in Mindanao, and is considered by many locals to be a more serious threat to security and well-being than insurgency-related conflict. There are no formal conflict-resolution mechanisms in place in regard to *rido*, victims receive little state support, and perpetrators of *rido* are not included in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes.

## Gender in Mindanao

Women are important in defining Moro identity, but often their value remains anchored to traditional, patriarchal views in which ‘honour’ is very important (Siapno 1994: 195). Indeed, the defence of *maratabat* (family honour) against a perceived injustice or slight committed against female relatives remains one of the main causes of *rido* (Dwyer and Cagoco-Guiam 2013: 19). In many cases, women’s opportunities for professional advancement remain circumscribed by conservative attitudes. That said, unlike many other Muslim communities, the persistence of armed conflict in the area has meant that more Bangsamoro women than men (who were otherwise recruited to fight) have made use of educational opportunities. Female Muslims in general face fewer barriers to education and employment than in other Muslim-dominated areas; families generally support the education of girls and their entry into paid employment, and women have visible roles in society. In fact, many are drawn to work overseas as domestic helpers and health-care providers, particularly in the Middle East. An indication of the public visibility of Bangsamoro women was apparent in the designation of Yasmin Busran Lao, a woman, as head of the Philippines delegation for the 2014 *Hajj* (annual pilgrimage to Mecca). While her appointment was unofficial, it was nevertheless seen as a symbolic affirmation of the importance of Bangsamoro women.

Among the indigenous Teduray (who also live in Mindanao), gender is not seen as a key dimension, given their culture’s emphasis on communal ownership and communal life (F. Mendoza, personal communication 22 October 2014). In their culture, men and women can both be leaders, and women’s capacity for arbitration and their role in officiating at ceremonies is recognized. That said, while Teduray men and women are expected to work together for communal well-being, patriarchy remains evident. The male *timuay* (elder) is considered superior to the female *kafuduan* (justice officer). That many Teduray women are married off at a young age under a commercialized dowry system is also indicative of their culture’s lack of consideration for gender issues.

## Gender dimensions of the Bangsamoro conflict

The long history of armed conflict in Mindanao has had profoundly gendered effects. As detailed below, many Muslim women participated in the conflict itself, while others have found roles in formal peace processes and grass-roots conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Still more have been and continue to be affected by *rido* and conflict.

In addition, as in many other contexts, women not directly involved in these localized armed conflicts have disproportionately borne their brunt ever since the beginning of the insurgency. Young men, many under the age of 18, were recruited into the MNLF in the 1970s in large numbers, choosing to join out of a sense of injustice, because other male relatives had done so or as a result of militarization in their communities. Others felt they had no choice: remaining would likely have led to arrest by the military or police on suspicion of being covert operatives. This left many women as heads of household, who had to provide for their families and raise their children by themselves. Many women and their families were displaced as a result of the fighting and were prevented from returning due to sustained military operations. Canuday (2009) documents these gendered effects among the intermittently displaced (called *bakwit*) in Maguindanao and North Cotabato. The *bakwit* live in temporary shelters, dependent on relief assistance from the government and international donors, and are psychologically traumatized by their experiences of war.

More recently, armed confrontations between government troops and the MILF produced large-scale displacements that affected a large number of women and children. It is often the women who remain in evacuation camps while the men go into hiding. In this context, women take on the role of providing for their families, including making sure that they get on the list for any government or donor-funded assistance to internally displaced persons (IDPs). Previous studies by Dwyer and Cagoco-Guiam (2013: 13) and Cagoco-Guiam (2013) revealed that women were adopting interesting leadership roles in IDP camps (e.g. managing the camps, ensuring equitable relief distribution, gathering information on safe returns, and leading cooperative or livelihood projects), although these generated more burdens for the women, and provided few guarantees of sustained income.

Women are also adversely affected by *rido*, as they have to assume the task of earning income for their families when male family members go into hiding or are imprisoned. Unlike IDPs in evacuation centres, no support infrastructure is in place for displacements arising from *rido*; rather, women are left to fend for themselves.



## Mapping women's involvement in conflict

Women have been active in both the MNLF and the MILF in a variety of combat and non-combat roles. In addition, both the MNLF and MILF have women's committees that, during the height of the armed conflict, mobilized resources across communities to provide support to displaced families, particularly the families of male combatants. Members of the MNLF Women's Committee interviewed for this project were also the wives of important MNLF commanders and political officers.

### Recruitment into the MNLF

Many Muslim women joined the MNLF as combatants, medics, informers, couriers and collectors of alms. Coughlin (2000) notes that, in the case of the MNLF, Muslim women members recruited, organized and conducted consciousness-raising sessions in rural areas, moved information across army checkpoints, trained and served in a combat capacity and assumed key responsibility in the MNLF's organizational structure. Siapno (1994) notes the existence of a military sub-organization called Subong Bangsa Bai within the MNLF whose female members trained as first-aiders, combatants and in intelligence units.

Two female MNLF ex-combatants were interviewed for this project: Norma Mohamad Amiril (personal communication, 6 August 2014) and Giobay Diocolano (personal communication, 8 October 2013); while not representative, their stories illustrate some of the motivations behind women's decisions to enter the conflict, the activities that women combatants and auxiliaries undertake, and how participation in the MNLF shapes their life after their involvement in the conflict has ended.

In both cases, the women's entry into the armed wing of the MNLF came about following personal experiences of injustice at the hands of government soldiers and the militarization of their communities. Government soldiers came and stole their farm animals. Norma's brother was killed by soldiers, while young Muslim girls in Giobay's village were sought out by Christian soldiers, with either good or bad intentions. Either way, a Muslim girl meeting a Christian man was unacceptable to many conservative Muslim families at that time.

Although both women were then minors, they volunteered in the MNLF and underwent training (including how to assemble and fire a gun) for six months. The unit they were in was led by men but had female members,



who were primarily medics accompanying an armed group of male MNLF combatants. Although they participated in unit operations (retrieving and treating the wounded), they chose not to carry firearms themselves. When their unit stayed at the base camp, the women cooked and cleaned. They also periodically undertook courier jobs for the MNLF (e.g. illicit transportation of munitions across military checkpoints). Giobay went on to become part of the Bangsamoro Women's Committee, which collected rice (alms) from communities for the armed unit's food and medical supply. To Giobay (personal communication, 8 October 2013), these activities amounted to substantial participation in the movement even when the women did not actually engage in combat operations.

Both Norma and Giobay stayed in the armed wing for 12 years but left during the ceasefire in 1986, when MNLF members were no longer in danger of arrest. Giobay went back to college, while Norma returned to her family, worked as a farmer briefly, and later took a job as a domestic helper abroad. Giobay went on to build a career organizing cooperatives under the auspices of international donor-funded peace and development initiatives that target MNLF communities. Under the army-integration scheme (discussed below), Giobay was offered a slot, i.e. the chance to join the army, on account of her position as chair of a provincial revolutionary committee, but she decided not to take this up, unlike her husband (an ex-MNLF commander), who became an army officer. For Giobay, this was a rational decision because her husband (who did not go to school) had better opportunities inside the army, while she, with a college degree and technical skills, had better civilian employment prospects. Giobay gave her slot to her nephew as a way of offering an employment opportunity to a family member. Norma was not offered a slot, and would not have taken one anyway, as she felt that only men should be eligible to serve in the army.

The two women became important pillars in their communities. Giobay became the head of the Kadtabanga Foundation, an NGO organized by ex-MNLF combatants who became peace and development advocates, and in turn facilitated various projects supported by international donors in MNLF communities. Her appointment as chair was decided by the predominantly male ex-combatant group on the grounds that 'when we males lead this group, we will go nowhere...but if you speak, we all believe you'. Giobay's organization independently documented and profiled the former MNLF combatants in the course of their community organizing work. Kadtabanga continues to exist and thrive, and has implemented camp-to-community projects targeting MILF communities in partnership with the Philippine Government. Similarly, Norma's credentials as a former MNLF combatant



propelled her to leadership opportunities in community work. With her connections to Kadtabanga, she became the contact person and community organizer for women in various projects (livelihood, the water system, core shelter, health services).

Although no longer in contact with fellow MNLF members (some of whom are still in the armed movement), both women identified valuable lessons from their MNLF years: (1) commitment to the Bangsamoro cause, which continues to fuel their desire to help their communities, even in the face of local resistance and corruption and (2) gender equality, i.e. that men and women can work together and be valued for their contribution. While Giobay places equal weight on fighting and supporting the troops, Norma maintains that it is not appropriate for women to become combatants, although she accepts that there are some circumstances when women must take up arms to assert their rights and freedoms.

## **Women's activities in the MILF**

The MILF also has women's units organized as auxiliaries responsible for medical services, fundraising and education (Abubakar 2005: 10); however, very little is known about their activities. There is no open official list of members of the MILF's Women's Auxiliary Force, although its existence as part of the MILF's armed outfit (Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Force, MILF-BIAF) is recognized. The request to interview the head of the auxiliary force of female combatants for this project was turned down by the MILF-BIAF deputy chief of staff. MILF female combatants are never openly identified, although one NGO representative from Marawi who participated in this research revealed that, in the course of her community work, she had stumbled upon some women homemakers who, after long talks, revealed that they were members of the MILF auxiliary force. This secrecy around women's activities in the MILF may indicate a reluctance to acknowledge that women have been active in the movement at all.

## **Mapping women's involvement in peace**

### **Women's involvement in formal peace processes**

The Philippine Government pursued peace negotiations with the MNLF and MILF separately. The inclusion of gender provisions in the final agreements illustrates both gains and deficits in women's involvement in these processes, while the absence of clear criteria or quotas for including women ex-

combatants and auxiliaries in programmes integrating MNLF and MILF members into the army and the police means that many women missed out on these opportunities.

## **Peace negotiations with the MNLF**

The 1996 FPA between the Philippines Government and the MNLF contained only one provision relating to women (section 130: equal opportunity for all inhabitants in areas of autonomy regardless of ethnic origin, culture, sex, creed and religion). While the agreement contained details on the design of entirely new (e.g. Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development) or revamped institutions (e.g. integration of former MNLF combatants into the army and police), it was silent regarding women's participation in these institutions. For the most part, this can be attributed to the fact that no women were included on the negotiating panels, and because Muslim civil society organizations with a peacebuilding agenda were not yet established during this period.

The ARMM (Republic Act 9054 and 6734) laws that followed the FPA contained only one provision that directly addressed gender concerns (Basic Rights, art. III, section 5: prohibition against discrimination on account of sex), although the ARMM legislature approved the creation of a Regional Commission on Bangsamoro Women (RCBW) and committed to spending 5 per cent of its annual budget on gender and development (GAD) programmes and activities. Past ARMM governors also appointed women as department secretaries, but they were invariably given stereotyped portfolios like tourism, social work and development (Maglangit, personal communication, 15 October 2014). Former Regional Assemblywoman Zenaida Bubong (personal communication, 15 October 2014) held the view that the male MNLF leaders were not receptive to gender issues. Despite women's active role in the MNLF, many found that, within the formal institutions of political power like the ARMM, the male leadership of the MNLF tended to revert back to conservative Islamic cultural notions of the role of women when it came to policy agendas and assigning tasks. This attitude stemmed in part from perceived notions that creating a separate women's body within the ARMM or committing to a specific gender agenda would redirect public resources away from other priorities.



## Peace negotiations with the MILF

The 2014 CAB between the national government and the MILF contains many more gender-specific provisions, including women's right to meaningful political participation and protection from violence (VI.1.g), equal opportunities and non-discrimination (VI.1.i), a commitment to the use of 5 per cent of official development funding to support programmes and activities for women (Annex on Revenue Generation and Wealth Sharing, section XII) and mechanisms for women's political participation in the form of reserved seats (Annex on Power Sharing, part 2, section 3), one each as sectoral representatives in the Bangsamoro Parliament and the Bangsamoro Council of Elders. Unlike the 1996 FPA, the 2014 CAB Annex on Normalization provides for special economic programmes for decommissioned women auxiliary forces of the MILF (G.3), while women constitute a target sector for trust-fund-based reintegration programmes for communities (G.5). In and of itself, the inclusion of gender-specific provisions reflects substantial inroads into the mapping of gender concerns onto the formal peace process.

### *The draft Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL)*

Local civil society groups and other advocates have mobilized to support the inclusion of gender issues in the draft BBL that came out of the formal peace process. Following the creation of the Bangsamoro Transition Commission (BTC), whose task was to draft the BBL, women's groups came together at a workshop organized by the NGO Conciliation Resources and drafted a set of recommendations for inclusion in the BBL.<sup>1</sup> These recommendations are unique in that they recognize the common issues facing all women in the Bangsamoro area—Moro/Muslim, indigenous peoples and Christian settlers—and also because they proceeded from the assumption that women are the primary caregivers for their families, as well as victims in times of conflict.<sup>2</sup>

Reflecting this advocacy work, as well as that of individual women BTC commissioners, the proposed BBL (submitted to the Philippine Congress in September 2014) contains a much broader articulation of the rights of women under the proposed BPE than under previous ARMM legislation. Its provisions are similar to those of the CAB, including meaningful political participation, protection from all forms of violence, equal opportunities and non-discrimination in social and economic activities and public service, and upholding the right of women to engage in lawful employment.

The BBL also provides for more specific measures to encourage and monitor women's participation in politics—again reflecting the clauses included in

the CAB—such as the inclusion of a women’s representative on the Council of Elders, which advises the Chief Minister, one reserved seat for women as a sectoral representative in the Bangsamoro Parliament and at least one woman cabinet minister. There are also provisions committing the Bangsamoro Government to pass a law recognizing the role of women in governance and the fundamental equality of men and women before the law, and to ensure that women benefit equally in the implementation of development programmes and projects. The BBL also sets quantitative targets for gender-based spending (5 per cent of all government spending), and includes a commitment to create a mechanism for consultation with women and local communities regarding the allocation and proper utilization of funds.

The inclusion of these policy commitments and quantitative guarantees for women is no small victory. Like their MNLF counterparts in the early stages of the ARMM, the predominantly male MILF leaders were resistant to many of these provisions but responded to pressure from international donors and women’s NGOs in Bangsamoro. Apart from the consolidated recommendations under Conciliation Resources’ initiative, many women’s NGOs submitted position papers to the BTC on these concerns (F. Mendoza, personal communication, 22 October 2014).

On paper, many of the recommendations set out by the women’s NGOs have been incorporated into the proposed BBL. One clear loss, however, was recommended quantitative targets for parliament (in terms of reserved seats) and management-level positions. Many of the NGO representatives interviewed felt that having one reserved seat in parliament and one female Cabinet minister (both of which will most likely be given to MILF women) were token gestures, and that the MILF leadership remains conservative in its position regarding women’s political participation. The 5 per cent spending allocation is a carry-over from the previous ARMM arrangement, which many argued was flawed because it was not subject to monitoring (T. Maglangit, personal communication, 15 October 2014), and very much depended on the willingness of local chief executives for implementation. The lack of a provision for specific accountability mechanisms (beyond consulting with women in communities on where money could be spent) means that civil society groups will have to do the monitoring, if only to ensure that the Bangsamoro Government meets its obligations.



## Reintegration of women ex-combatants and auxiliaries

### ***Integration of MNLF ex-combatants into the army and police***

The 1996 FPA between the Philippines Government and the MNLF included a provision for the individual absorption of 5,750 MNLF ex-combatants or their proxies (usually a relative) into the Philippines Army, and 1,500 into the police. This included women recruits in the last round of army integration; in the police, the women proxies were included in the police's regular recruitment cycle as an additional quota.

The MNLF independently decided which ex-combatants should be put forward for integration, and the military required candidates to surrender a weapon as a precondition to training admission (no weapon, no integration). The peace agreement did not specify how many women ex-combatants should be included, and the MNLF commanders tasked with deciding who should be offered integration slots gave preference to men, although some female members of the State Revolutionary Committees managed to assert their claim to integration slots (Hall 2014). MNLF leaders and commanders interviewed on the subject in 2008 said that they had dissuaded women combatants in their ranks from joining the integration due to their perception that the army and police are difficult places for women, and that, in many cases, women who were offered slots were dissuaded by their parents. Female proxies of MNLF ex-combatants were not sought out until 2008 in the final round of integration, when 28 slots were opened for female Muslim enlistees.

In earlier studies, Hall (2011, 2012) examined the recruitment, deployment and advancement patterns of women who *did* participate in the integration programme and tracked down 11 women who had joined the army as proxies for male relatives (fathers or uncles). Their stories revealed interesting nuances in their family backgrounds, motivation, recruitment and deployment patterns. They were all recruited in their late teens or early 20s, with strong support from their families. Most families had at least one male member who had gone on to fight under the MILF. Not unlike the process of identifying clan candidates to contest electoral positions, the male family members encouraged the young women to apply, as having family in the army was a source of prestige. Many had been cadets or officers in school military organizations and had not been raised in conservative families that restrict women's gainful employment. They joined the army because it provided well-paid and stable employment, although some of the women had reservations about how they were treated by male cohorts. While legally allowed to take up combat and non-combat roles, many Muslim female army recruits ended

up relegated to desk jobs, as their commanding officers were too protective or wary of injury. There were a few cases of Muslim female enlistees being sent on patrol duties or into combat support roles, but this was a small number compared to the number of Muslim male recruits who were widely utilized in civil-military and combat operations against the MILF (Hall 2014).

Inside the police force, the national mandate for the establishment of women and children's desks gave female police officers real police duties and command posts rather than administrative tasks, and increased the quota for the recruitment of women officers to 10 per cent (Philippine National Police National Headquarters 1997; Racasa n.d.; Aviles 2006). Female Muslim police officers from Lanao del Norte interviewed in 2010 stated that their being female and Muslim made it possible for them to be accepted and work in conservative Muslim communities, where they were deployed for searches, serving warrants and law-enforcement operations where women were involved (Hall 2011).

### ***Reintegration programmes targeting MILF ex-combatants***

The 2014 CAB between the Philippines Government and the MILF contained specific provisions for special economic programmes for decommissioned MILF women auxiliaries, and women's inclusion as a target sector for community-based reintegration programmes. The process is called normalization, rather than disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, because it involves not just the MILF but also all other armed groups (e.g. civilian volunteer organizations, politician-controlled private armed groups, the Abu Sayyaf Group) operating locally in the conflict zone. Gun proliferation is a distinct phenomenon in the conflict zone: many men own guns, which are considered important family assets that can be used for self-defence or lent to clan members during *rido*, making disarmament on an individual basis a difficult proposition. Given this, normalization is projected to be the last stage to be completed in the peace process, with the Joint Normalization and Joint Peace and Security Committees (with MILF and Philippines military membership) making decisions as to how this could be carried out.

Of all the aspects of the formal peace process, the normalization programme stands out as the most closed and opaque. With MNLF integration, the recruitment, training, development and dispersal of the ex-combatants taken into the three-year programme was handled exclusively by a Joint Integration Board (MILF and Armed Forces of the Philippines) and was closed to any kind of civil society involvement or scrutiny. Under the terms of the 2014 CAB with the MILF, it is not known how many women ex-combatants will



be able to participate in the normalization process or on what grounds these women will be selected.

### ***Integration programmes: lessons learned***

The MNLF and MILF integration programmes illustrate how a lack of transparency in the decision-making regarding who to include in programmes to integrate ex-combatants creates inequalities in the post-conflict integration or reintegration prospects for male and female combatants. As the MNLF case shows, unless serious efforts are expanded to ensure that women are included on the list of candidates for such programmes, they will simply be left out, as male commanders will not consider women auxiliaries to be equally deserving as male combatants. In the case of the Bangsamoro police, it appears that this lesson has *not* been learned, as the force is not bound by any quotas for MILF female auxiliaries in its recruitment.

At the same time, unless reintegration programmes specifically target women, they will also yield differential access to community-based development projects. In one example, the Kadtabanga Foundation did not distinguish between male and female ex-combatants as peace and development advocates or in its choice of community organizers. Designing gender-specific indicators for community-based reintegration schemes under the BBL (discussed above) would go a long way toward ensuring that women are not left out of this process. This is an important step in ensuring that the long-term gains from the peace agreements will also be available to a greater number of women. Community-based, rather than ex-combatant-based, reintegration schemes are more inclusive and supportive of renewed social relations within the community.

### **Peacebuilding at the grass-roots level**

From conflict monitoring to involvement as mediators in *rido* to assisting women victims outside of the formal peace process, women are involved in local-level peacebuilding and conflict-resolution initiatives across Bangsamoro, individually and as members of a diverse range of women's NGOs.

### **Women's NGOs**

The emergence and growth of women's NGOs was due in large part to the opening up of democratic space after 1986, and the onset of peace talks between the national government and the MNLF thereafter. The pace set by the 1996 FPA provided fertile ground for grass-roots activism in the



autonomous area. Today, the diversity in women's voices is as much about what kind of advocacy or assistance is appropriate within the understanding of women's role under Islam as it is about access to funding sources (that is, whether they can access multi-year external donor funding or have to make do with limited and intermittent locally raised funds). The MILF's adherence to conservative Islamic tenets that anchor the role of women in the home, and that see women's involvement in livelihood and community activities as secondary and supportive to men, does not reject the gains already made but affords more policy preference toward projects that do not contradict these tenets.

The women's NGO representatives who participated in the focus group discussions that Hall facilitated in Cotabato City and Marawi City illustrate the diversity of civil society groups involved in advancing women's concerns in the issue of security and peace. Some of the NGOs were founded by MNLF women leaders after 1996 (e.g. the Bangsamoro Women Solidarity Forum). Others (e.g. the Mindanao Human Rights Action Network, the Kadtabanga Foundation, the United Youth of the Philippines-Women) came about because of the exigencies of the all-out war by the Philippine military against the MILF in 2000, and the violence in 2008 following the failed Memorandum Agreement on Ancestral Domain. There were also some NGOs formed as NGO partners in the implementation of the Philippine military's new Internal Peace and Security Plan.

These NGOs conduct a wide range of activities at the community level relating to gender, security and peace, such as the establishment of an early-warning response system for cases of violence against women or children, as well as strengthening village-level women and children's protection units, traditional conflict-resolution structures and local government units by providing training on human and women's rights, conflict management, and gender-based planning and budgeting. NGOs have also organized public forums, dialogues and consultations with community women on issues such as violence against women, and organized women's committees, conflict-management committees and 'peace mothers' at the village level tasked with monitoring and diffusing clan feuds. Some of the NGOs are also direct service providers to IDPs, running food assistance programmes and livelihood projects. The NGOs are generally affiliated with the MNLF or the MILF or with specific politicians or parts of the government administration. The MILF-affiliated NGOs are usually small operations meeting basic needs (e.g. providing food or clothing), with funding raised locally or from Islamic charities. NGOs identified with the MNLF, on the other hand, are seasoned partners of foreign donors, and benefited significantly from the influx of official



development assistance following the 1996 peace agreement. The NGOs by and large are dependent on outside funding, and face great difficulties in becoming financially independent once donors' project timetables end. This has inevitable implications for the sustainability of the community projects that they run.

### ***Linking peacebuilding to gender equality***

These NGOs have found women in the communities very interested, committed and sincere. Many NGO representatives noted that, when they call for meetings and training courses, it is often the women who show up with their children and stay on for the training (Russell 2014: 64). Generally, they find the women most interested in livelihood projects, particularly in remote areas and indigenous communities. In their experience, women clients are very appreciative of exposure to gender issues and concepts when they are encouraged to reflect on what they really want and to consider their roles in their village and community (Dipunudum Maruhum, personal communication, 19 October 2014). Even so, there are issues that remain sensitive, such as gender-based violence. As shared by NGO representatives, it is unclear whether the gender-based violence in their project communities is linked to the ongoing vertical conflict between the Moro insurgents and government troops, or is more a consequence of traditional cultural attitudes. According to Asna Adi of United Youth of the Philippines-Women (personal communication, 6 August 2014), there are also conservative Muslim and indigenous communities with distinct gender dynamics that make it difficult for women to speak up even when they are invited specifically to a forum. In such settings, the men are also close by listening and are often asked by the women to speak on their behalf. In her experience, holding public consultations in indigenous communities for the BTC, Commissioner Mendoza (personal communication, 22 October 2014) also observed that more women attend than men, yet they are conspicuously absent or silent when it comes to decision-making.

Even in their role facilitating gender awareness at the community level, however, representatives of women's NGOs recognize that there remain tensions between their own definition of women's rights (which they use in their advocacy, mobilization and livelihood interventions) and the meaning as understood by their women clients under Islam. A more Western and liberal definition—centred on equality in all aspects—is used by NGOs based in Maguindanao that were established after 1996. This definition is strongly influenced by international NGO perspectives and legal instruments such as the Women in Nation Building Act (Republic Act 7190). But many Moro women from remote communities share a more conservative view, and see

women as occupying a supportive role vis-à-vis their husbands and families. Among MILF-affiliated NGO representatives, it is accepted that the specific circumstances of Mindanao—where, because of the conflict, many women have had to take up economically active roles to provide for their families—have made it permissible for women to adopt a more public role than, as they see it, would generally be allowed under Islam (R. Macabunlar, personal communication, 19 October 2014). While they accept the idea that women have a right to do something to address community problems, some question whether this should involve women taking up leadership roles. Some were of the opinion that this is only allowed under Islam if no male leader is present, when the group or community members are all women and when it does not get in the way of women's primary domestic role. Aida Silongan, Zainab 'Jane' Mohammad and Ruby Andong (personal communications, 5 August 2014), who are members of the MILF Social Welfare Committee, argued that, in principle, livelihood interventions should help women perform their domestic roles better. In their view, training for Muslim women should not be about teaching them the skills to become overseas contract workers but should be aimed at their improvement as mothers and providers of supplemental income for their families.

Some of the Maranao MNLF women expressed apprehension that a Bangsamoro Government under the MILF would bring about greater control over women's morality, such as forcing women to have a male relative as an escort and to wear full *abayas* or *burkhas* when out in public. To Adele Ditokalan of the Bangsamoro Women Solidarity Forum (personal communication, 19 October 2014), there is ambiguity in regard to the parameters of women's roles under the current MILF administration, because the definition of women's rights passed down to the communities is provided by male religious scholars. Women's NGOs with knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence have not offered alternative interpretations.

### **Women's involvement in conflict-prevention mechanisms**

Women are also active in informal conflict early-warning systems as leaders and volunteers. All-women Civilian Protection Units deployed by NGOs in five sites (in the Lanao del Norte, North Cotabato, Sarangani, Sultan Kudarat and Davao areas) under the Bantay Ceasefire<sup>3</sup> initiative conduct regular patrols, make community visits, and generate daily and weekly reports. Their involvement has been credited for sensitizing male counterparts in the armed forces and the MILF about the special needs and concerns of women in conflict zones (Arnado 2012: 13).



*Rido* does not generally target women and children, but when violence erupts between clans, Muslim women act as pacifiers and documenters. Those with titular positions and those who are married to powerful male clan leaders act as mediators and functional go-betweens due to their relatively neutral position (Constantino 2014: 383). In one example, in Misamis Oriental (Doro 2014: 175), communities assign cases of rape, domestic abuse, child abuse and marital problems to women, as such cases are seen as too sensitive for men to tackle. In *rido* settlements, women prepare the *kanduli* celebration (a feast marking the conclusion of the settlement), yet they remain in the background, as the men take centre stage in the event (Torres 2014: 409). Unlike vertical conflicts (involving the military, insurgency and other armed groups), in which NGOs lay much of the groundwork in conflict monitoring and management, the resolution of *rido* conflicts relies more on customary rules, enabling an important role for well-positioned women as mediators (Russell 2014: 76).

Women NGO representatives working on security and peacebuilding are cognizant of the serious challenges faced by IDP women and *rido*-burdened Muslim women. Nonetheless, they have not been able to map these out in the formal peace process in terms of specific mechanisms or programmatic commitments by the future Bangsamoro Government. There is no direct reference to *rido* in the existing formal peace-process tracks, although there have been some interventions (monitoring and settlement) by the ARMM and other NGOs (e.g. the Asia Foundation).

## Consequences for state building

The peace process in Bangsamoro has been accompanied by the establishment of new institutions of governance and democracy, in which women are claiming their place. But many challenges remain, not least the ongoing struggle to ensure that budgetary allocations for gender and development work are met and spent effectively, as well as the intransigence of the existing, clan-based political elite and its hold on the region's representative institutions. These challenges make it unlikely that all women belonging to the diverse ethnic and social groups living in the region will benefit from the gains made in the peace process in the near future.

## Gender mainstreaming in state institutions

Two formal institutions in Mindanao, the ARMM Government and the Bangsamoro Development Agency have both taken steps to integrate gender

into their development activities, and women are well represented in both. To a certain extent, these gains were the product of groundwork laid by MNLF women activists post-1996, but they are also the outcome of requirements from international donors to mainstream gender into development programmes. The creation of the RCBW, the inclusion of gender-based criteria in the bids and awards for ARMM projects on health and education, and the immersion of Bangsamoro professional women into NGO work with a gender focus were the fruits of years of mentoring and socialization between older MNLF women and younger women. In the course of this project, some of the young women NGO workers Hall spoke to had mothers or aunts who were also active MNLF members, working through the ARMM or in NGOs. The MNLF women activists, many now in their 60s and 70s, opened proverbial doors for today's educated and economically mobile Bangsamoro women to see the link between the development of their war-torn communities and the improvement of conditions for women. This fortuitously coincided with the influx of foreign assistance into Mindanao at a time when gender concerns were also being mainstreamed in the international donor community.

The ARMM Government introduced structural shifts that brought gender concerns into the mainstream. Currently, the RCBW is tasked with ensuring that the requirements under the Republic Act 7190 (Women in Development and Nation-Building Act) are realized at the local level, i.e. that all regional bodies allocate 5 per cent of all government spending to programmes supporting women and gender equality.<sup>4</sup> The BDA, meanwhile, is an institution created under the 2001 peace agreement between the MILF and the national government, with a mandate to undertake relief and rehabilitation projects in conflict areas. Created in 2002, the BDA is officially a non-profit organization but is strongly influenced by directions from the MILF leadership. Since 2004, the BDA has had a gender focal person, a position created under the terms of the World Bank Mindanao Trust Fund (MTF), working specifically on gender concerns in the proposed Bangsamoro Development Plan.<sup>5</sup> It has also become standard for BDA staff to undergo basic gender-sensitivity training as part of their employment requirements.

These institutions integrate women's rights and gender into peacebuilding and state building in post-conflict societies in Mindanao by supporting gender-equality-focused development projects, in line with donor requirements and with the Women in Development and Nation-Building Act. These projects provide important resources for Bangsamoro women to gain access to social services.<sup>6</sup> NGOs and community-based organizations implement projects such as health-care service delivery (maternal and childcare), relief provision for the internally displaced and livelihood creation. As these projects



invariably require the use of gender-sensitive policies (in terms of beneficiary selection and project design), they are important platforms for women to be made more aware of their situation and to be mobilized as a group. Through these projects, many women in Bangsamoro have become active in their communities.

In terms of BDA project implementation, for example, Programme Division Chair Windel Diangcalan (personal communication, 25 October 2014) observed that 80–90 per cent of their community volunteers were women. Women participate more in training and are the ones tasked with project organization and financial management. Most Bangsamoro men prioritize earning a living, Diangcalan explains, so it is women who are more likely to have time for community work. He affirms, however, that the Bangsamoro women volunteers are very effective and that most community organizations that remain functional to date are led by women. Given this trend, it has become standard for BDA projects to target women for participation and implementation of projects at the community level, although they still occasionally come across conservative communities where males expect to lead.

Educated Bangsamoro women are recruited into, and find employment in, the ARMM and the BDA. As professionals (lawyers, engineers, educators, managers), Bangsamoro women, who often have implicit political (MNLF or MILF) or clan connections, find their way into these steady-paying jobs, which are highly prized, given the above-average unemployment within the conflict zone. That said, professional Muslim women who find employment in these formal institutions still encounter strong cultural beliefs that challenge their right to take on leadership roles. For instance, while there is almost equal representation of women and men in the BDA's main and programme offices, there is a clear gender divide when it comes to the roles they play. Women lead the finance, administrative and human resource departments of the BDA, and, in the field, they work as community organizers and programme coordinators. By contrast, all the BDA division directors are men, and it is mostly these male leaders who engage with partner organizations. This trend is explained by Diangcalan as consistent with the Islamic beliefs guiding MILF policy, whereby leadership is seen as a male role, albeit premised on consultation with women, and taking into account their perspective. In his view, gender is a cross-cutting concern; hence, there is no need for a specific gender section within the agency.

The Chair and Deputy Chair of the five-member ARMM Special Pre-qualification Bids and Awards Committee (SPBC) are both women, and they are assisted by a two-woman personnel secretariat. When queried, attorney

Honey Subiera was of the view that gender was not an issue when it came to her work in the SPBC, but she found solidarity with other women employed in the ARMM by joining in the activities organized by the RCBW.

While these gains are important, the wider engagement of professional Muslim women inside these agencies remains circumscribed by conservative Islamic beliefs within the organizations and the communities they serve. Progress has been made in terms of increasing gender awareness among client populations as part of the normative and legal requirements of the government and donors. But inside the ARMM and the BDA, there does not appear to be any push to articulate a distinct women's voice in policies apart from these mandates. Professional women, either due to Islamic conviction or deferment to given donor mandates, appear not to capitalize on these platforms to advance a distinct peacebuilding agenda. It suggests that perhaps formal institutions do not lend themselves to women's participation as much as civil society organizations and elected office.

By contrast, women's participation in transition bodies like the Bangsamoro Transition Commission (whose task is to formulate the BBL) and the Bangsamoro Transition Authority is less established. Of the 15 BTC Commissioners, only three are women (two appointed by the national government and one by the MILF). While this meets the requirements included in the CAB in regard to women's representation, such a low number points to insufficient leverage in advancing the women's agenda within the organizations.

One BTC Commissioner, Froilyn Mendoza (personal communication, 22 October 2014), a member of the indigenous Teduray community, revealed that her appointment was the result of pressure from the national government to appoint a woman commissioner. Commissioner Mendoza observed that, as far as her community was concerned, her role was to advance indigenous rights within the draft BBL first and the rights of indigenous women second. In this framework, she was successful in pushing for the allocation of greater financial resources for GAD projects from the Bangsamoro Government. However, in the course of her work, she observed that the BTC followed typical gendered patterns in terms of assigning roles: women are assigned as secretaries in charge of documentation and presentation before local government units and the Senate. Drawing attention to the barriers women face in the BTC, she recalled occasions when female commissioners were laughed down by male commissioners (for instance, while making a presentation on female sharia judges), and noted that the BTC only discussed gender issues when external proposals or submissions were made. Commissioner Mendoza also observed that, while there is a provision for the political participation of women in the



CAB, the BTC Commissioners appear to understand the concept narrowly and in formal terms (e.g. seats in parliament or appointment as a cabinet member). For instance, she had great difficulty convincing male colleagues of the more practical concerns of indigenous women for inclusion in the BBL, such as livelihoods, gender-based violence and security. These issues are particularly important to the Teduray, whose remote settlements often make them vulnerable to militarization and sexual violence.

## Women's political representation

The participation of women in politics in Bangsamoro is embedded within an informal power structure defined by clans, ethnicity, and affiliation to either the MNLF or the MILF. The importance of political families and clans is rooted in the old sultanate and *datu* system of personalized leadership upheld by systems of patronage and deals brokered by the *datu* between the Muslim population and the national government (Sidel 2000; Abinales 2000) over access to public resources for private and/or clan gain. Clans continue to dominate local electoral politics in the Bangsamoro area, with elected positions effectively rotated between family members in order to bypass constitutional limits on electoral terms (*Our Mindanao* 2013). The clan, in turn, is located in a specific ethnic group within the Muslim Mindanao population. For Gutierrez (1999: 323), this ethnic identity (Maguindanawon, Maranao, Tausug, etc.) persists and is a much more grounded identity than being Moro, which he argues is an artificial construct resulting from the nationalist political project of the MNLF and MILF. In this context, the ARMM became another venue for families of royal houses (those descended from pre-colonial rulers of the Sultanates of Sulu and Maguindanao) and ethnic groups to provide employment and distribute benefits to political allies and relatives, most of whom are unqualified for the post.

In theory, the mixed system of representation in the proposed Bangsamoro Parliament should provide more opportunities for women to increase their presence in political decision-making. Of the 60 parliamentary seats, the 50-40-10 per cent distribution (party list, district-based and sectoral seats, respectively) should provide female candidates with more opportunities to compete, particularly under a *regional party list system*. However, because parties have always been nationally organized, and were of little importance in the previous ARMM and local elections (which continued to be dominated by clans and family dynasties), it is a tall order to expect that regional parties will be formed in time for the projected 2016 synchronized elections, much less that they will help women get onto the ballot and win. Akbayan, a national party with a gender focus, has started to build links



with women NGO activists in Bangsamoro, but these links are informal and based on personal connections. Recognizing the very tight time frames, Maglangit (personal communication, 15 October 2014) was of the view that ‘One year is not enough to prepare women for party building and formation’. As local elections in the Bangsamoro area under current rules have tended to follow male-dominated, clan-based affiliations between candidates and their respective supporters, it is expected that regional political parties will follow the same trend for the parliamentary elections, as loose affiliations of clan-based networks conveniently set up to contest seats, not to advance specific platforms. Within these loose, clan-based regional parties, only women belonging to important clans will likely run for office. In the long term, regional parties can provide limited added value in broadening women’s political participation beyond clan affiliation. As such, in the interests of advancing a gender-sensitive agenda within the limits posed by the nature of local politics in the Bangsamoro area, finding women from dominant clans with a gender agenda is the most practical path, but as the following three case studies illustrate, this is likely to have little impact in terms of ensuring the broader participation of a diverse range of women in formal politics or improving the situation of women in the region overall.

### **The political trajectories of three women in Bangsamoro**

The diverse experiences of three women elected to office in Bangsamoro are illustrative of these dynamics and of the limits of relying on the election of women from within existing power structures to advance the interests of women overall. In all three cases, the women came from established political families and/or were married to men of considerable political standing in their communities. Congresswoman Sandra Sema is a Sinsuat and married to one of the leaders of the MNLF Executive Council. Former ARMM Assemblywoman Zenaida Bubong is also married to an MNLF commander. Village chief Cabai Canaya is a member of the Balabaran clan that has ruled their village for many years<sup>7</sup> and is married to a Christian army officer. This status enabled these women to attain elected office, and while all three have in some ways worked toward improving the situation of women in their communities, they have done so very much within the existing patronage-based political system, and without seeking to contest this system in any significant way.

Assemblywoman Zenaida Bubong’s (personal communication, 19 October 2014) entry into electoral politics came about because her husband turned down the slot (i.e. promised electoral support from the MNLF), and she took



it instead. But by her account, she had to argue with the MNLF leadership to allow her to run. Both she and Sandra Sema had already been active members of the MNLF Women's Committee, having joined the armed movement at its inception as auxiliaries. Cabai Canaya (personal communication, 20 October 2014) was an apprentice to her grandfather, Datu Mohakmad Balabaran, who was active in politics for many years. In her account, she accompanied her grandfather and observed first-hand how he engaged with people. It came as no surprise that she was anointed as successor.

In elected office, former Assemblywoman Zenaida Bubong worked consciously to promote women's interests. Her commitment to gender equality stems from the long period she spent inside the MNFL Women's Committee and as a commander's wife, which gave her insight into the special needs of women in Bangsamoro. Bubong was the principal author of the law creating the RCBW, which was established to replicate the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women as the anchor point for GAD initiatives. While the law was passed, significant concessions were made limiting the RCBW's fiscal autonomy and its control over the mandated 5 per cent GAD budget out of the national subsidy. The RCBW continues to function, but, due to budget constraints, has only one commissioner instead of four, representing the ARMM provinces. While Bubong was assemblywoman for her district over a long period, she admits that her lack of access to ARMM infrastructure funds limited her capacity to pursue projects for women while in office. At 53 years old, Bubong ran for the post of village chief in her hometown of Buadi Alao. By providing an example of stepping down from office, she facilitated the entry of other women into village politics. She was twice president of the village council in Buadi Alao. In her capacity as a board member of the Bangsamoro Foundation for Peace and Development (an NGO), she channelled assistance and projects funded by international donors toward her municipality. Her job includes helping negotiate settlements on rape or elopement cases, accidents and even shootouts between rival groups. In her words, 'I am becoming the policeman in my village'. She also helps settle clan wars brought to her attention, often using her husband's name in making decisions.

Three-term village chief Cabai Canaya defeated her rival clan candidates and male members of her own clan in electoral contests. Her approach to governing is that of the typical strongman: she is dismissive of the village council and instead relies on a coterie of armed civilian volunteers and appointed trusted hamlet leaders. Canaya involves women in government projects where they can obtain benefits (such as the government's conditional cash transfer programme) or get a job in the village administration (as cleaners, health

workers, madrasa teachers), but she does not agree that women necessarily need special attention. However, Canaya sees that, as a woman, she brings sustained dedication to her job. She is available at any hour of the day, puts a premium on her visibility in all village activities and has done a better job in improving security in her district than her male predecessor, whose term was characterized by a rise in holdups, drug pushing and kidnappings. In accordance with clan-based political tradition, she has already anointed her son as successor (as of 2014, he was acting as her informal adviser and head of the armed civilian volunteers). Yet she also sees her role as the ‘mother’ of the village, whereby she provides jobs and benefits to as many residents as possible, Muslim or Christian, and helps to improve security and access to public services (e.g. sanitation facilities, education through madrasas).

Of the three women, Canaya’s model of leadership—mimicking that of a male strongman—in particular does not bode well for expanding women’s political participation. The ‘goons, guns and gold’ formula will likely attract similarly positioned women inside powerful clans that have these resources. It will be more difficult to recruit women candidates with a gender-sensitive agenda or to have women candidates who are electorally competitive where this strongman template remains the norm. In this status quo, only women who are kin to female politicians like Canaya or her loyal followers will likely benefit.

## Conclusion

Formal and informal processes to secure lasting peace in Bangsamoro have created opportunities for greater participation by women in electoral politics, government administration and the women’s NGO sector, building on 20 years of activism and donor pressure to ensure women’s rights in the region. Gains have also been made with regard to securing women’s legal rights, through provisions included in the draft BBL, and ensuring the allocation of financial resources for gender-focused development projects. In particular, the formal peace process between the Philippine Government and the MILF enabled women’s NGOs to mobilize and articulate their positions on crucial security concerns faced by their clients—principally through providing recommendations on the draft BBL—while continuing their grass-roots work in conflict monitoring and conflict resolution. In addition, individual women in leadership positions in the various transitional bodies and government institutions and in elected office have worked hard to promote women’s interests.



Despite these gains, serious limitations remain with regard to consolidating women's involvement in the ongoing project of state building and securing lasting peace in Bangsamoro. The conservative views of the current MILF leadership are making it difficult for women leaders to assert their right to a role in public life in the region, and there is a strong underlying tension between the MILF leadership's conservative views and many women's NGOs' more progressive ideas about women's leadership role in the public sphere. The ongoing dominance of clan-based politics means that women who are elected to office are likely to be those belonging to the existing political elite. While individual women politicians may adopt a gender-sensitive agenda, the current patronage-based system leaves little room for the emergence of a progressive alliance within the Bangsamoro Parliament that could be inclusive and representative of a broader spectrum of women in the region, including those belonging to indigenous groups. The lack of sustainability of many externally funded peacebuilding projects for women reduces the likelihood that lasting peace will take root at the community level, as does the silence on women's involvement in the MILF auxiliary forces and the opacity around the normalization process, and the failure (on the part of state bodies and international donors alike) to address the impacts of *rido* violence on women.

Bangsamoro is at a historic crossroads. All indications point to better prospects for women in formal positions, government bureaucracies and civil society than those afforded during the 1996 Final Peace Agreement between the national government and the MNLF. However, much work remains to be done to ensure that the gains are at least not eroded and at best further improved upon.

## Recommendations

- The structures and mechanisms under the current ARMM Women's Commission should be reviewed for retention under the Bangsamoro Political Entity, with more robust mechanisms to monitor and account for the BPE's compliance with gender-related requirements (5 per cent GAD plan-based budgeting and spending and a 5-20 per cent allocation for gender-based activities for external donor-funded projects administered through the BPE).
- Women's NGOs should lobby the new BPE Parliament to legislate detailed accountability mechanisms on the BBL's provisions for gender-related requirements, particularly on GAD planning, budgets and programmes.

- A women's party should be formed, with a specific agenda to compete in BPE elections at the village level. The party should actively recruit NGO women activists, including those outside political clans and indigenous women, to run for positions as village chiefs and councillors. As an alternative strategy, there should be an attempt to encourage the MILF Women's Committee to work toward an inclusive, gender-sensitive agenda within the MILF political party platform, including women's representation among the political leadership, as well as some mechanism (quota, twinning of male/female candidates) in their roster of candidates to enhance women's political participation.
- Parallel structures and mechanisms should be created to identify and support women victims of *rido*, as well as peacebuilding projects that provide support to work done by women mediators in *rido* conflict settlement.
- Projects should be promoted that encourage a conversation across women's organizations (MNLF, MILF or unaffiliated) about women's roles in development and in the community to establish common ground in advocacy for GAD projects under the BPE. This type of consensus-based undertaking is important leverage in making sure that the guidelines and procedures for meeting gender-related requirements under the BBL are localized and grounded.
- The MILF should draw up an open and public list of female combatants and auxiliaries for guaranteed inclusion in the normalization process. NGOs should monitor the normalization process to make sure that women auxiliaries are not left out of the recruitment process for the new Bangsamoro police force and to ensure that gender-specific indicators for community-based ex-combatant reintegration schemes are met.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The recommendations came out of 72 consultations funded by Conciliation Resources with 2,750 women from a diverse range of backgrounds and ethnicities, including government employees, academics, religious and tribal leaders, politicians, businesswomen and former combatants. The recommendations were pared down and agreed upon during a summit of women's NGOs held in Cotabato City in March 2014.
- <sup>2</sup> Among the key recommendations were: (1) a women's desk in every precinct of the Bangsamoro police; (2) the institutionalization of women's counselling units for victims of violence, human trafficking and armed conflict; (3) ensuring participation of women as judges, paralegals and lawyers in the sharia justice system; (4) to reserve 50 per cent of management-level positions in the bureaucracy of the Bangsamoro Political Entity for women; (5) the establishment of mechanisms to monitor the utilization of the GAD Fund; (6) the creation of a Department of Women's Affairs; (7) local government units to have women's centres for capacity development and platforms for knowledge sharing; and (8) the establishment of funds for livelihood generation, targeting widows and women victims of conflict. Their recommendation on the normalization programme (discussed above) included: (1) the inclusion of MILF women's auxiliary forces in the normalization; (2) the inclusion of females from MNLF and MILF ranks in the Joint Normalization and Joint Peace and Security Committees (both provided for in the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro); and (3) for the Bangsamoro police and protective services to hire more women as first-line responders for gender-based and women-related concerns. The recommendations were formally submitted to the BTC by female commissioner Johaira Wahab.
- <sup>3</sup> Bantay Ceasefire is a grassroots-based ceasefire monitoring group composed of volunteers.
- <sup>4</sup> This 5 per cent budgetary allotment is detailed in the *Philippine Commission on Women, National Economic and Development Authority and Department of Budget and Management Joint Circular 2012-1*. The circular calls for 5 per cent of the total government agency budget under the General Appropriations Act to be spent on GAD plans and programmes. The 5 per cent GAD allotment is subject to gender auditing. The circular also calls for the appointment of an agency GAD focal point and the collection of sex-disaggregated data.



- <sup>5</sup> It can be argued that the adoption of various gender-based indicators inside the BDA resulted from both donor pressure (since most of their programmes are foreign funded, which in turn entails built-in requirements, including gender equality) and acculturation. Ideas about gender travel widely among young Bangsamoro professionals who were exposed to these ideas during their college years and who have worked previously in foreign-funded projects all over Mindanao. The young Bangsamoro female professionals who participated in the Cotabato focus group discussion for this project had very mature perspectives on gender issues that were very different from those of the older Bangsamoro women, particularly those allied with the MILF.
- <sup>6</sup> Both institutions receive external (international government, NGO or national government) funds for development projects to be carried out within the Bangsamoro area. The ARMM and BDA programmes and staff work with the gender indicators required by specific donors. According to Programme Division Chair Windel Diangcalan (personal communication, 25 October 2014), part of the BDA's management style and leadership procedure involves consulting with women in programme development. During programme implementation and monitoring, attention is paid to the composition (membership and leadership), number and gender roles within the community organizations they support. The latter point is subject to a regular programme review by the European Union for projects funded under the World Bank-administered MTF. A similar insight is shared by attorney Honey Subiera (personal communication, 5 August 2014) of the ARMM Special Pre-qualification Bids and Awards Committee, who said gender-related standards (e.g. birthing facilities or educational materials that are sensitive to gender concerns) form part of the committee's technical requirements, especially for the Australian Government-funded ARMM HELPS, and are subject to a compliance check among bidders.
- <sup>7</sup> The Balabaran clan's openness to women members holding office is further attested by the earlier election of a woman, Haji Soraiba Balabaran, to the position of village chief.



# Rwanda



# Rwanda

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Sara E. Brown

## Abstract

During widespread conflict and mass atrocities, socially prescribed and perpetuated norms of gendered behaviour are often suspended, modified or dissolved alongside the rule of law and state institutions. The 1994 genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda created a space for the inclusion of women in previously restricted public spheres and capacities, albeit within the context of a deeply entrenched patriarchal system that limited their agency. Though a much greater number of men took part in the genocide than women, who were marginalized socially and economically within Rwandan society, women also played a significant role in the genocide either as perpetrators or as rescuers. Rwanda stands out as a unique case because the space created for women was not temporary. Following the genocide, Rwanda's state organs, organizations and community members did not advocate the return of girls and women to pre-genocide gender structures and patriarchal practices. While women continue to be marginalized, though to a lesser extent, they have played a substantial role in the country's renewal as peacemakers, particularly in the government, but also, in the instance of women who join rebel movements or resist reconciliation, as spoilers. Exploring the ways in which women participated in the genocide, the implications of their varied involvement, and the roles they went on to play in post-genocide reconstruction and rehabilitation processes, this case study will examine how women perpetrators, rescuers, spoilers and peacemakers have influenced Rwanda's post-genocide trajectory. Lastly, it will make recommendations for the meaningful and sustainable inclusion of women in post-conflict societies.

## Methodology

This case study is based on an analysis of 77 semi-structured interviews, 15 oral testimonies provided by the Association of Genocide Widows (Association

des Veuves du Genocide, or AVEGA Agahozo, meaning ‘dry one’s tears’ in Kinyarwanda, Rwanda’s main language), ten oral histories provided by the Kigali Genocide Memorial and the Genocide Archive of Rwanda, archive materials and six meetings with individuals living in Rwanda who were able to speak about women spoilers and peacebuilders during and after the Rwandan genocide. The selection criteria for research respondents was limited to the following: men or women who were community and government stakeholders, women who were perpetrators or rescuers during the genocide, men or women survivors of the genocide, women who were combatants with the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda, FDLR), and women involved in NGOs who have participated in the post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation of Rwanda. As the emphasis of this study is on the participation and impact of women, just 16 interviews were conducted with male respondents. Of the 77 respondents, 75 were Rwandan, representing a broad spectrum of Rwandan society with respect to socio-economic status, access to power and influence, formal education and age. Respondents were not asked to identify their ethnic background, but many voluntarily identified themselves as Hutu, Tutsi, Twa or a combination thereof. In-country research was conducted over the course of a total of five trips in 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2014, when two trips were made.<sup>1</sup>

Research respondents were identified through a variety of means. Obtaining letters of support and permission from existing institutions in Rwanda facilitated reaching out to survivors, witnesses, rescuers and perpetrators. Research respondents were contacted by telephone or email when possible or met in person and asked to participate. The recruitment process varied according to the population. For those with Internet access, a letter of introduction and a request for an interview were sent in English. For those without Internet access, an introduction was offered by telephone in either English or Kinyarwanda, depending on the native language of the individual in question. Interviews were conducted in person. Government and community stakeholders were identified through extensive profile research and through the snowball method of sampling. Women perpetrators incarcerated for genocide crimes were identified through the Rwanda Correctional Service. Women rescuers were identified through genocide survivor aid and advocacy organizations, including IBUKA (‘remember’ in Kinyarwanda), the Association of Student Survivors of the Genocide (Association des Étudiants et Élèves Rescapés du Genocide, AERG), the Association of Genocide Widows, the government’s National Commission for the Fight Against Genocide (CNLG), the Kigali Genocide Memorial, the Genocide Archive of Rwanda, survivors who were able to identify



their women rescuers and members of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Survivors were identified through IBUKA, the AERG, AVEGA Agahozo, the CNLG, the Kigali Genocide Memorial, word of mouth among survivors and the Genocide Archive of Rwanda. Before each interview, the research respondent received an explanation of the research project and gave consent to be interviewed. Community and government stakeholders were informed that the results of the interview would be published with their organization's name included. Individuals who qualified as survivors, witnesses, rescuers or perpetrators were informed that their names and any identifying information would be systematically removed upon transcription of the interview and that they would be given a code number and a pseudonym. With the exception of community and government stakeholders and Valerie Bemeriki, a well-known journalist incarcerated for genocide crimes, the names of the respondents have been changed in order to protect their identity.

The author conducted 62 interviews in Kinyarwanda with the assistance of an interpreter. In order to maintain consistency, accuracy and a high ethical standard, the same interpreter was used throughout the project, beginning in 2010, who was hired upon referral from another organization working with survivor and rescuer populations in Rwanda. The interpreter received extensive training in specific interviewing techniques, the importance of ensuring the anonymity of the participants and the content of the research. In order to mitigate any influence that the author's preconceptions might have on the research findings, a semi-structured interview style was used that produced an interpersonal exchange between the interview participant, interpreter and author. This exchange strengthened the content of the interview and often prompted participants to divulge more information than in previous conversations with other interviewers. Equally significant, the non-uniformity of their answers, encouraged by open-ended questions and a dynamic question-and-answer format, allowed for the expression of variation in intention, thought and self-awareness using the respondent's mother tongue.

Whenever possible, testimonies were triangulated with archive sources, corroborating testimony and transcribed documents. In Rwanda, this included materials held at the Information and Documentation Center at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR); the Kigali Genocide Memorial; the *gacaca* court archives, which houses the minutes of the *gacaca* courts, the hybrid judicial mechanism established in Rwanda to try suspected perpetrators of genocide; and the National Museum. Other oral testimonies were made available by IBUKA and AVEGA Agahozo.

This multidisciplinary approach and means of triangulating evidence provides an effective way to explore the ways in which women participated in the genocide and in the post-genocide development of Rwanda. As such, this case study adds a much-needed layer to the understanding of the myriad of women's roles during war and peace.

## Definitions

The main language spoken in Rwanda, Kinyarwanda, has no word for 'genocide'. Following the events of 1994, people in Rwanda began using the word 'genocide', often rendering it into its Rwandan-French variation *jenocide*. In rural regions of Rwanda, where English and French are not as prevalent, however, Kinyarwanda speakers often described the genocide as an instance of *intambara*, or 'war', a term many survivors feel is used to diminish or deny the horrors of the genocide. At the same time, Kinyarwanda terms were coined to describe the people who were affected by the genocide. Victims were referred to as *inzirakarengane*, or 'innocent people'; survivors were *abacitse kw'icumu*, or 'those who escaped the spear' (spear here refers to an assortment of calamities). Perpetrators were *abakoze jenocide*, the 'genocide workers/doers', or more generally *abakoze ibyaha*, the 'sin workers/doers'; and rescuers were *abarokoye abatutsi muri jenocide*, or 'those who hid Tutsi during the genocide'. Though Kinyarwanda has a word for rescuers, *abatabazi*, this term has a complicated history, as it was part of the official title of the genocidal government (*Guverinoma y'Abatabazi*) that took over after the assassination of President Juvénal Habyarimana (see below) and perpetrated the genocide (Brown 2015, forthcoming).

Specific to this case study, agency is defined as the deliberate choice to take action at great personal risk to oneself and, in some instances, one's family. For women, agency was limited as a result of pre-existing patriarchal norms of behaviour that restricted their capacity to make autonomous choices, which will be explained in detail below, along with the conscious and deliberate effort to empower women that took place following the genocide.

While they are not the focus of this study, bystanders made the conscious and active choice not to take action during the genocide in Rwanda. They are individuals who were aware of the violence taking place and chose not to rescue victims or to perpetrate crimes. This decision to be a bystander is considered here as the exercise of a form of agency.

Perpetrators in Rwanda included women who participated in acts of direct person-to-person violence that included murder, assault, theft and exposing



those in hiding. In keeping with the approach of the *gacaca* courts, Rwanda's national courts and the ICTR, acts of indirect violence, including planning, organizing and inciting violence perpetrated by others, are considered to be perpetration (Brown 2015, forthcoming).

Interviews with survivors guided the development of the parameters for acts of rescue used in this study. As a result, a similarly broad net was cast when defining women rescuers and their acts of rescue, including harbouring, aiding, protecting and otherwise preventing the victimization of a targeted person or group.

In keeping with International IDEA's approach, a broad definition of peacebuilding is used in this study: proactive measures taken to ensure post-genocide recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction of the country and the people. Peacebuilding occurs at the local, regional and national levels. It requires individual and group efforts to develop successful and sustainable initiatives that contribute to the development of inclusive and peaceful cohabitation and cooperation among Rwanda's inhabitants. Central to this sustained peace and inclusion is the development of a civic-minded and engaged society to buttress democratic institutions. Peacebuilders are those who proactively participate in, promote, and facilitate the success of these post-genocide reconstruction and rehabilitation processes. Spoilers are women who prevent, inhibit, resist or otherwise jeopardize the successful post-genocide recovery, reconstruction and rehabilitation initiatives currently under way at every level of society in Rwanda.

## Background

### Historical context

Placing the events in Rwanda within a broader historical context is fundamental to understanding how and why the genocide occurred, Rwanda's democratic transition following the genocide and the significant shifts that occurred with respect to the role of women in society.

The pre-colonial and early colonial periods and processes were crucial to shaping conditions in Rwanda today. Prior to colonial rule, an organized and established Rwandan kingdom competed and traded throughout the region. The kingdom resembled a modern nation state and contributed to a group identity based upon shared culture, language and leadership. Colonial rule (1897–1962) and Christian evangelism radically changed the systems of power and influence that had been established throughout the kingdom



(Chrétien 2003; Des Forges 2011). Scholar Mahmood Mamdani (2001: 103) notes that, 'Rwanda was anything but a standard colony, that it was more of a halfway house between a direct and indirect-rule colony'. This is evident in the divide-and-rule tactics of the German and later Belgian colonial rulers, in their use and manipulation of the Tutsi minority as a ruling class over the Hutu majority and the interference of the White Fathers, a Catholic missionary group, in the affairs of the state, particularly against the Tutsi-led monarchy that led by proxy during the colonial period.

Belgian colonialism brought a form of paternalism that influenced the post-independence state. The intermeddling and influence of the Belgian state and the Catholic Church continued throughout a transition to independence that was marred by ethnic violence and polarization, as the foreign powers shifted allegiance from the Tutsi rulers to the Hutu majority (Chrétien 2003: 299–309). Dubbed the 'Hutu Revolution', the violence was led by Parmehutu, a Hutu nationalist party that ruled from independence in 1962 until a *coup d'état* in 1973 and perpetuated ethnic extremism and violence against Tutsis. Approximately 20,000 Tutsis were murdered, and over 300,000 were forced into exile in Uganda and other countries (Des Forges 1999: 40). The ascent of General Juvénal Habyarimana to the position of president in 1973 and the institution of single-party rule by the National Revolutionary Movement for Development (Mouvement Révolutionnaire National pour le Développement, MRND) constituted a continuation of the dictatorial politics that had shaped Rwanda since independence.

Habyarimana's reign in Rwanda remained largely unchallenged until October 1990, when a band of exiled Tutsis known as the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), a rebel group based in Uganda, invaded. Demanding, among other things, the right to return to Rwanda and a role in its governance, the RPF advanced swiftly, only to be rebuffed by French military forces, long-time allies of President Habyarimana. The resulting stalemate eventually led to the 1993 Arusha Accords, a peace agreement between the RPF and the Rwandan Government that was rejected by the Hutu elite, who were unwilling to share power. While individual women did participate in some of the negotiating teams, the discussions were male-dominated. President Habyarimana's popularity was further diminished when international pressure resulted in Rwanda's transition to multiparty democracy, forcing the Hutu elite to share power. The formation of a number of political parties neither ushered in democracy nor brought about peace. Instead, alongside the development of moderate parties, Hutu extremist parties were formed that fought one another for power but were united in their promotion of violence against Tutsis. It was during this time that Rwanda's national army began training young men



and forming militias under the pretence of defending neighbourhoods; these same men would later comprise the core of the *Interahamwe* killing militias during the genocide (Des Forges 1999: 140).

During the early morning of 6 April 1994, a plane was shot out of the sky as it approached Kigali International Airport. Everyone on board, including President Habyarimana, government officials and the president of Burundi, was killed in the crash. The assassination of President Habyarimana proved to be the catalyst for a pre-planned genocide; radio news bulletins immediately blamed the RPF rebels for his murder, roadblocks were set up, and lists of prominent Tutsis and politically moderate Hutus were distributed to armed militia groups overnight. By the early morning of 7 April, Kigali was a zone of death and killing; the genocide quickly spread, and over the next three months, more than 800,000 Tutsis and upwards of 50,000 moderate Hutus were deliberately and systematically massacred. Despite regular updates on the genocide and the existence of a United Nations (UN) peacekeeping force stationed in Rwanda to monitor the Arusha Accords, the genocide continued without interruption or interference. The RPF forces eventually took control of the country, which effectively ended the genocide. One hundred days after the genocide began, Rwanda began its long road toward reconstruction.

## **Gender norms pre-genocide**

The role of women and the gendered nature of recruitment and mobilization during the pre-genocide and genocide periods must be understood in order to place and understand women and their actions during the genocide in Rwanda. In Rwanda in 1994, a deeply entrenched patriarchal system comprising prescribed and proscribed norms of behaviour limited women and their capacity to exercise agency (as defined above). Alongside cultural norms that restricted women to the domestic, private sphere, women were further marginalized within their homes through law, as the Family Code of 1992 legally recognized men as the heads of households. An elaborate legal framework further cemented women's marginalization in the larger Rwandan society. In 1994, Rwandan women were prohibited by law from inheriting property, opening a bank account without the consent of their husband, and, representing just 5 per cent of the executive branch of the Hutu-controlled MRND government, they were not in a political position to advocate change (Sharlach 1999: 391).

A woman headed the Ministry for the Family and Women's Development, but, as this was a post focused on women and the domestic, private sphere, it was considered appropriate for a woman to be in charge. Remarkably,

the early 1990s saw Rwanda's first and only woman prime minister, Agathe Uwungilyimana. Initially appointed minister of primary and secondary education in 1992, she was a popular representative of the Republican Democratic Movement and was named prime minister in July 1993 (Des Forges 1999: 54). While this was a significant achievement, Prime Minister Uwungilyimana was reviled and repeatedly sidelined by Habyarimana's government and targeted for assassination on the first day of the genocide because of her moderate political beliefs (Kigali Genocide Memorial Exhibit 2014). One respondent observed that, in pre-genocide Rwanda: 'Whatever men could do, a woman should and must obey. And then there is a saying in Rwanda that there is no mistake for men. Even beating a woman, even wasting money, even doing whatever he wants, there is no mistake for a man' (interview with 'D E', Kigali, 2011). As a result of these restrictive norms and the existing legal framework, women's agency was constrained, leaving them little latitude for autonomous action.

By contrast, the RPF included women from the very beginning, including in leadership positions, though rarely on the front lines. Beatrice Mukasine (2014), the head of the executive committee at the National Women's Council, theorized that this might have been a result of their refugee experience in Uganda. She noted that: 'many of today's leaders were raised by single mothers in the pre-genocide refugee camps. The hardships these young widows faced as a result of exclusion from their country stayed with their sons who were building the movement'. This then informed the leadership's gender policies and led to the active recruitment of women into the RPF. Early leaders, including Tito Rutaremara, actively recruited young men and women who were living as refugees in Uganda to join the RPF.<sup>2</sup>

## Mapping women's involvement in conflict

### Gender and genocide

Despite their marginalization in Rwandan society, women were not ignored by the extremists, who utilized radio, print periodicals and local party meetings to appeal to women as subordinate members of society. Pornographic cartoons demonizing Tutsi women as sexually promiscuous or meretricious whores were utilized to portray them as threatening outsiders (Lemarchand 2009: 63). *Kangura*, a popular print periodical that served as the mouthpiece for Hutu extremists, published the 'Hutu Ten Commandments' in 1990 to promote Hutu unity and hatred of Tutsis, particularly women. The first two commandments specifically addressed the threat of Tutsi women, while the third commandment encouraged Hutu women to take action, stating 'Hutu



women, be vigilant, and try to bring your husbands, brothers, and sons back to reason' (Bartrop and Totten 2008: 200–1). The third commandment relieved women of the societal constraints that normally required their passivity; instead, they were actively incited to take action (Brown 2014: 8–9). The broadcaster Free Radio and Television of the Thousand Hills (Radio-Télévision Libre des Mille Collines, RTLM) had one particularly charismatic woman announcer, Valerie Bemeriki (who will be discussed later in the study), who, in the context of inciting hatred toward Tutsis, served as a role model for Rwanda's Hutu women and would passionately call on Rwandans, men and women alike, to take action against the Tutsi. One woman survivor described how the mobilization impacted the school where she worked as a teacher:

We went through hard times. The newspapers from Kanguka and Kangura were united in using the ethnic weapon to create conflict among the population. There were also political parties...There were people who spent the whole day having discussions, telling people that the enemy was still that of 1959.<sup>3</sup> In short, they incited the killing and extermination of this enemy. At work also, it was not better. The teachers, my colleagues insulted us all day long. We had no peace. ('Torri', interviewed 2011)

By the time the genocide began in April 1994, the multifaceted campaign of hatred employed by the extremists had taken root, indoctrinating Hutu men and women against their Tutsi compatriots. Even rescuers who chose not to participate in the violence spoke of the widespread propaganda campaign; however, they chose another course, risking their lives to show their humanity toward their Tutsi compatriots.

The Rwandan genocide served as a catalyst for the suspension of many of these socially prescribed and perpetuated gender norms and roles in Rwanda. In the same way that the genocide upended the rule of law and state institutions, it tore at the social fabric of the community and suspended, modified or dissolved accepted gendered behaviours. The genocide created a temporary space for the inclusion of women in previously restricted public spheres and capacities, albeit within the context of a deeply entrenched patriarchal system that limited their agency (as previously defined). Though many more men took part in the genocide than women, who were marginalized within Rwandan society, the women who did participate in the genocide played significant roles at that time and continue to influence Rwanda today.

## Women perpetrators during the genocide

Next, the question of the specific crimes committed by women perpetrators and their influence during the genocide against the Tutsi is addressed. The crimes committed by women can be categorized into two main forms of violence: acts of direct violence and acts of indirect violence. Utilizing Johan Galtung's (1969: 169) definition, acts of direct violence require, and are perpetrated through the use of, physical force, including killing, torture, rape, sexual assault and beatings. Indirect violence does not require the use of physical force, and, in the context of the Rwandan genocide, it included looting; theft; inciting violence; knowingly exposing those in hiding to the *Interahamwe* militias, Rwandan military and other extremists; and supervising and ordering instances of direct and indirect violence (Brown 2014: 11). When I interviewed them in 2011, Odette Kayirere, executive secretary of AVEGA, and Sabine Uwase, AVEGA staff attorney, were able to classify and rank according to frequency and intensity the crimes perpetrated by women. They asserted that, first and foremost, women participated in the genocide by exposing those in hiding. They would ululate (a high-pitched repetitive howl specific to women) whenever they found a Tutsi in order to alert the *Interahamwe* militias, who would carry out the killings. Second, they stole resources and looted victims' bodies and homes. Lastly, women murdered Tutsis, often children because of their smaller stature. This indicates that women participated primarily in acts of indirect violence, likely a result of gender norms that limited women's participation in the *Interahamwe* militias, which were predominantly male. However, this does not mean that their crimes produced benign consequences; such indirect crimes committed by women often facilitated murder, from which they certainly profited.

It is difficult to ascertain exactly how many women actually participated in the genocide due to a lack of documentation and disclosure in Rwanda. In 2001, just 3.4 per cent of Rwanda's prison population comprised women incarcerated for genocide-related crimes, or fewer than 3,000 women (Adler, Loyle and Gliberman 2007: 212). Such low numbers would normally indicate a low level of women's involvement in the perpetration of genocide. However, these statistics are incomplete, as they preceded the implementation of the *gacaca* courts (Brown 2014: 13). *Gacaca*, a pre-colonial, community-based dispute-resolution mechanism popular in Rwanda, was ill equipped to address the issue of genocide. Still, as early as 1996, the ad hoc utilization of *gacaca* by local communities at the grass-roots level was documented by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. By 1998, the efficacy of adapting *gacaca* to expedite the trials of nearly 130,000 individuals in jail for genocide-related crimes was debated at the highest levels of government



(Ingelaere 2008: 36–7). After considering various transitional and retributive justice models at work in other post-conflict societies, Rwanda adopted a modified version of *gacaca* that was implemented nationwide from 2006 to 2012. During this period, over 10,000 courts tried 1,958,634 cases and brought to dock 1,003,227 suspects.

Hutu women did not remain passive bystanders; instead, they played a significant and substantial role in the perpetration of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda that has been overlooked by scholars and policymakers alike. At the *gacaca* courts' closing ceremony in June 2012, a report published by the Government of Rwanda recapitulated its activities and provided basic demographic data on the people tried. Of the 1,003,227 suspects brought before the *gacaca* courts and tried for crimes of genocide, 96,653, or nearly 10 per cent, were women (Rwandan Government 2012: 8–10). These recent statistics show that a significant percentage of women was tried by the *gacaca* courts and belies the gendered women-as-victims or women-as-bystanders categories so often employed in the genocide literature (Brown 2015, forthcoming).

In the present research, interviews with 26 women incarcerated for genocide crimes elucidated the level of agency they exercised during the genocide. Of the 26 interviewed, 25 were serving time under the second category of offenders, a broad category that includes murder, torture, dehumanization of a corpse, accomplice to murder and violence without intent to murder (Rwandan Government 2012: 6). Within this category are women who exposed others in hiding or participated in mobs that perpetrated massacres. All 26 women identified themselves as Christian, affiliated with the Catholic, Protestant, Seventh Day Adventist or Pentecostal churches. The overall level of education among the second-category offenders interviewed was low, ranging from no formal education to partial completion of primary school. Just one woman had completed primary school and obtained a certificate in sewing from a trade school. This woman was the only one of the second-category offenders interviewed who did not identify herself as a farmer prior to incarceration; 25 of the 26 women came from low-income backgrounds, relying on subsistence farming or a trade to survive. None of the women had received their secondary-school certificate. The women interviewed constituted a geographically diverse sample, coming from cities, towns and small villages throughout the country.

Overall, the women interviewed described their participation in the genocide as voluntary. It could be argued that women's participation could not be voluntary due to their subordinate status in society, which required obedience to men. While women's agency was constrained, however, the existence

of women rescuers means it was not wholly compromised (Brown 2015, forthcoming). The 26 women interviewed did not allude to a direct threat of violence or coercion as motivation for their participation, with the exception of a convicted perpetrator serving a 10-year sentence, who described that:

They forced me to bring the stones...The reason why I'm here [is] because during the genocide I was at home and then I heard an alarm...I found they had thrown a person in the well and they were throwing stones at that person...I was ordered by the men who were throwing stones at the person in the well who was drowning—they ordered us to bring stones. So I went to bring the stones. That's why I'm accused, that's why I'm here. ('Jennifer', 2011)

Jennifer's testimony was the only one that indicated involuntary participation, though two other women indicated that their participation was not intentional: one as a result of trickery ('Elaine', interviewed in 2014) and the other by accident ('Rose', interviewed in 2011). The other 23 women who provided testimony described their participation, if they were willing to admit it at all, as a result of their own (admittedly gendered and therefore constrained) volition.

In the majority of interviews, women described their participation in ambiguous terms, often contradicting themselves mid-interview. Of the 26 women interviewed, 22 denied their involvement in the genocide on some level—often entirely—and insisted that while they had confessed their guilt before the *gacaca* courts, often in great detail, they were not truly guilty. Still, when pressed, the women recounted participating in mobs that murdered with machetes or by drowning, exposing Tutsis in hiding, encouraging others to participate in killings and stealing. In some instances, it was possible to verify their testimony by accessing the *gacaca* court archives and reviewing their court case. Nine of the 25 interviews were randomly selected and verified in the *gacaca* court archives located in Kigali, Rwanda (the 26<sup>th</sup> case was tried by the national courts for category 1 crimes and was thus not available for cross-reference in the *gacaca* court archives). Of the nine cases reviewed, translated and analysed alongside each woman perpetrator's interview, seven of the nine cases exposed substantial inconsistencies in testimony. In some instances, the women omitted a portion of the accusation levied against them or corroborating details provided by witness, survivor or perpetrator testimonies that were documented in the archived court transcripts (Brown 2015, forthcoming). For example, one woman, 'Kristen', described her crime as watching as a mob drowned a man in the Nyabarongo River, and she insisted upon her innocence. When her case was reviewed in the *gacaca* court



archives, it was found that multiple witnesses described her not only as a participant in the drowning of the man but also as an enthusiastic supporter of the genocidal government, who regularly intimidated and harassed young Tutsi women (*Gacaca* Court Archives).

For most of the women who perpetrated crimes of genocide in 1994, the relative anonymity that they experienced following the end of the genocide enabled them to blend back into society. For most, life returned to normal: they married, they moved, they bore children, they worked, and they lived full lives right up until the establishment and implementation of the *gacaca* courts. With only two exceptions, the women interviewed were not incarcerated following the genocide and only one woman was a fugitive outside the country before incarceration. The remaining 23 lived their lives in the open, made safe by a culture of gender-based blindness that facilitated their impunity. Even though the *gacaca* courts have since caught up with many women, and the statistics indicate the significance of their role in the perpetration of the genocide in Rwanda, women perpetrators continue to remain anomalies in the dominant narrative of the genocide. One survivor who served as the IBUKA executive secretary explained their absence, noting that, ‘it’s somehow very difficult for us to understand how a lady can become a killer, as a mother’ (Janvier Forongo 2011). The invisibility of women perpetrators in the narrative of the genocide continues to threaten Rwanda’s long-term peace, which relies primarily upon the next generation of youth that will take the helm in the coming decades. Gender-specific gaps in the historical record make a comprehensive and holistic rendering of the genocide impossible and inhibit those who would like to learn from it from building a better future. Additionally, Rwandan women continue to be the gatekeepers of the home and the primary transmitters of culture, identity and ideology; while it is difficult to measure the impact on future generations of women perpetrators who deny their crimes and are thus unable to repent and be rehabilitated, it cannot be ignored (Brown 2015, forthcoming).

## Mapping women’s involvement in peace

### Women rescuers during the genocide

In some instances, rather than follow the orders of the genocidal government, women would instead participate in acts of direct and indirect rescue. Acts of rescue included harbouring, aiding, protecting and otherwise preventing the victimization of a targeted person or group. Women rescuers showed bravery and a tenacity against societal pressures and constructs that sanctioned violence (Brown 2015, forthcoming).



Small acts of rescue, including providing shelter for a night, providing food and water or tending to a wound, often meant the difference between life and death. In one instance, a Hutu woman bought food from an *Interahamwe* militiaman to feed Tutsis who were in hiding ('Charles', interviewed in 2011). In another case, 'Rachel' (interviewed in 2014), six years old during the genocide, credited her survival, in one instance, to a cup of water given to her by an elderly woman.

All of the 16 women rescuers interviewed identified themselves as Christian, affiliated with the Catholic, Protestant or Seventh Day Adventist churches. The level of education among the majority of women rescuers and their geographic distribution throughout the country, in cities, towns and small villages, mirrored that of the perpetrators; however, one woman had obtained a teaching certificate and another a PhD. With the exception of these two women, the rest were farmers from low-income backgrounds. Overall, the women interviewed described their acts of rescue during the genocide as voluntary. Women who chose to hide someone targeted by the extremists in their homes did so at great risk. As one rescuer explained, 'if they found out that you [were] hiding [someone], that was well known—you would die with them. That was obvious' ('Joan', interviewed in 2014). One survivor, 'Gabriella', described multiple instances when women offered her food, something to drink or water to bathe her newborn baby in, but only one woman ever tried to hide her from the *Interahamwe*. She was living in the forest and nearly dead when:

God sent me a Muslim woman who took me out of the forest during the rainy season and took me to her house, without anyone seeing us. She washed me, she washed my clothes and then she washed my baby and clothed him. ('Gabriella', retrieved in 2011)

Despite the fact that those found harbouring Tutsis were often subject to the same fate as their charges, the unnamed woman hid Gabriella and ensured that she and her baby survived the genocide. While most women rescued in secrecy, others were more brazen. Sula Karuhimbi, an elderly traditional healer, threatened the *Interahamwe* stationed outside of her home with witchcraft should they approach, thus protecting over a dozen Tutsis hiding in her compound (Kigali Genocide Memorial interview with Sula Karuhimbi, 2011). While both women rescuers were Muslim, it is unclear if their religious affiliation influenced their decision to rescue others. Gabriella does not allude to the motivations of her rescuer, and Sula, while clearly a devout woman, emphasizes her experiences as a young girl observing her



in-laws as they rescued Tutsis during the early independence period as a primary motivator (Brown 2015, forthcoming).

Another woman, 'Joan' (interviewed in 2014), hid five Tutsis in her home for a week, claiming that four of them were family members, while the fifth person hid in the goat shed. Because four of the people hiding in her home were from an adjoining hill and were relatively unknown to her neighbours, Joan was able to pass them off as family relations to the local *Interahamwe* when they twice searched her compound. She relied upon the hill-centred knowledge of the *Interahamwe* killers. Known as the 'land of a thousand hills', most rural Rwandan communities orient themselves around their local hill as the primary nexus of society and are not as intimately connected with inhabitants of other hills unless by family relation. Because the fifth person was known in the area and would have been readily identified as a Tutsi, she hid him with the goats in the hopes that the *Interahamwe* would overlook the shed (Brown 2015, forthcoming).

While men and women alike hid their charges in their homes, be it under the bed, in the latrine, in the garden, under banana leaves in the beer fermentation pit, in the goat shed or in the rafters of the home, women often relied on gendered perceptions of the domestic, private sphere and restrictions that existed within the home (Brown, forthcoming). When the *Interahamwe* came to search 'Nicole's' (interviewed in 2014) home, where she lived with her children, she invited them in, saying, 'Please search the house'. Because she bade them enter her private space so directly, a practice considered both uncommon and cause for discomfort for men who are not kin, the men felt embarrassed and avoided the interior of the home (where she was hiding a Tutsi child under her bed), preferring to search the outside compound instead. 'Martha', another rescuer (interviewed in 2014), decided to hide one woman and her child in the kitchen since, 'the men, they rarely went to the kitchen, they thought the kitchen was for babies, so they never checked most of the time the kitchen' (2014). Relying on gendered demarcations of and within the domestic sphere increased the chances that these women would successfully rescue others during the genocide.

Other women rescuers relied on their sex-based underestimation in the eyes of society and of those participating in the killing in order to rescue Tutsis. The *Interahamwe's* recruitment processes utilized a combination of coercion, economic incentives, threats of violence and a manipulated translation of *umuganda*, a centuries-old state-instituted practice of mandatory labour, to pressure reticent individuals to join. While some women did join the *Interahamwe*, recruitment focused primarily on men, thus providing women rescuers living alone or apart from their husbands a window of opportunity.

A woman's home was more likely to be overlooked by the *Interahamwe* as they made daily rounds in search of recruits and Tutsis in hiding, and women were less likely to face the barrage of hate ideology faced by those working with the *Interahamwe*. In some instances, the *Interahamwe* came anyway, either because they were alerted to the fact that someone was being hidden or due to their own suspicions (Brown, forthcoming). When the killers came to 'Ruth's' home (interviewed in 2014), she was breastfeeding her child, as well as the infant that she had rescued from the back of the baby's dead mother after a massacre. When the men saw Ruth, a frail woman, holding both babies, they insulted her and exclaimed, 'Ah, just leave them, they will die very soon anyway'. As a result of their underestimation of Ruth, the men left the infant unharmed, and she survived the genocide.

In every interview, identifying the motivations of the woman rescuer is of primary importance in order to determine why these women rescued others when most women chose to stand by or actively participate in the genocide. In the southwest region of Rwanda, 'Wendy', a religious mother of three, sat in her living room and quietly narrated her story. When a Tutsi family fleeing the killings that were devastating the region arrived at her doorstep, she did not hesitate to offer them refuge in her home. She hid them in her bedroom as the *Interahamwe* searched the property and when her Hutu neighbours would come for regularly scheduled Bible studies and prayer. She never betrayed the family, and they survived the genocide as a result. When asked what prompted her to rescue others while so many of her neighbours stood by or, worse, perpetrated genocide, she asserted that her readiness to help was the only conceivable response. From her deeply religious perspective, there was no choice to make (Brown 2015, forthcoming). Women were motivated by a host of reasons. Religion played a primary role for many rescuers; incidentally, interviews with rescuers, perpetrators and survivors did not reveal a single instance in which a church leader preached an ideology of hatred, contrary to popular portrayals in Rwanda. Other women referred to their own maternity and popular gendered perceptions of motherhood (e.g. mothers as nurturers, mothers as peaceful, mothers as gentle) as the reason for their acts of rescue. In interviews with older women, their memories of ethnic violence and the acts of rescue committed by their parents and grandparents during Rwanda's early independence period influenced their decision to protect Tutsis during the genocide. In nearly half of the interviews, women referenced the importance of sharing salt, water and other necessities with their neighbours. During the genocide, their interconnectedness with their Tutsi neighbours trumped extremist propaganda, and these individuals assisted as much as they would during other, albeit less violent, instances of need (Brown 2015, forthcoming).



It is much more difficult to locate women rescuers for a number of reasons. First and foremost, the absence of a nationwide mechanism for recognizing and verifying instances of rescue that is comparable to the *gacaca* courts has made it easier to locate perpetrators than rescuers, thus skewing scholarship and the narrative. Additionally, despite Rwanda's post-genocide stability, some women continue to hide their acts of heroism for fear of retribution or alienation from their Hutu neighbours, a topic that will be addressed later in the study. It has thus far been impossible to determine exactly how many women rescued others. As a result, many women rescuers go unrecognized by society and remain undocumented by scholarship.

## **Consequences for state building (democratic institutions and processes)**

### **Post-genocide reconstruction and rehabilitation**

Following the end of the genocide, the RPF went to great lengths to establish a Government of National Unity that shared power between the ethnic groups and was in keeping with the 1993 Arusha Accords. If Rwanda was to develop into a democratic state and guarantee the long-term investment of Rwandan resources, time and effort, it needed to implement inclusive policies that would ensure peace and stability. In order to achieve this and overcome the culture of hatred and discrimination that had pervaded Rwandan society, eventually leading to the genocide, Rwanda's state organs, organizations and community members worked to ensure that women played a role in the reconstruction of the country. As part of their effort to reverse prior practices of marginalization and discrimination based not only on ethnicity but also on sex, the government did not advocate the return of girls and women to pre-genocide gender structures and patriarchal practices. As a result, while women are still marginalized by gendered norms and behaviours, albeit to a lesser extent, they have played and continue to play a substantial role in the country's renewal as peacebuilders, but also, in the instance of women who join rebel movements or resist reconciliation, as spoilers. The following sections will explore the diverging roles that women spoilers and women peacebuilders went on to play in Rwanda's post-genocide reconstruction and rehabilitation processes.

### **Women spoilers following the genocide**

A disconcerting trend among the 26 women perpetrators interviewed was a reticence to speak directly about crimes committed during the genocide. This

was the case when interviewing Valerie Bemeriki, a former radio journalist for RTLM, a station created by extremists in the government as a mouthpiece for their genocidal ideology. While Bemeriki was comfortable speaking in general terms about the genocide, she was less comfortable when asked about her role in perpetuating genocide. She repeatedly positioned herself as a victim of the pervasive hate propaganda of 1994 rather than one of its leading protagonists. Bemeriki attempted to downplay her role, asserting that she was not the only person calling for genocide and that: 'if they [the Hutu population] killed, it is because they also wanted to do it themselves...you cannot tell someone to do something that they do not want to do. They did it because they believed in it, because it was in their head' (interviewed in 2014). These efforts to rewrite, review or reject history threaten peacebuilding efforts in Rwanda.

This trend is not exclusive to perpetrators alone, and some go so far as to refuse that anything was wrong with the genocide. Alexander Gromo, a humanitarian worker with the UN's Disarmament, Demobilization, Repatriation, Reintegration and Resettlement (DDRRR) programme in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, noted in an interview in 2011 that, 'People that deny what they did in 1994, the biggest problem is getting them to acknowledge that what they did was wrong'. The women interviewed would often resort to indirect terminology and euphemisms for their crimes, often referring to the genocide using the aforementioned term *intambara*, or 'war', and spoke of what they were accused of doing rather than what they actually did. 'Sally', a convicted perpetrator interviewed in 2014, insisted that she was merely standing by the side of the road when a man fleeing the *Interahamwe* ran past her. When asked if she did something to the man, she insisted that she did nothing. But when asked what she was accused of by the *gacaca* court, she explained during an interview in 2014 that, 'In my [*gacaca*] dossier, in my file, they say that I was standing by and I was raising the alarm', pointing out where the man was for murder by the *Interahamwe*. Though Sally admitted her guilt to the *gacaca* court and even begged for forgiveness, she refused to acknowledge her actions in direct terms during her interview for this study. While some allowance must be made for Rwandan culture, whereby people often speak around a topic rather than address it directly, these interviews go beyond a cultural reticence to speak in indirect terms and indicate an unwillingness to acknowledge crimes perpetrated during the genocide. Without acknowledgement of the crimes committed by women during the genocide and individual ownership of agency, meaningful rehabilitation, reconciliation and long-term peace with their Tutsi compatriots is compromised.



In other parts of Rwanda, sustainable and lasting peace is threatened by those who remain in the community and continue to perpetuate ethnic hatred (Brown 2015, forthcoming). 'Martha' (interviewed in 2014) remains traumatized by her post-genocide experiences at the hand of her godson, a former *Interahamwe* member. When he found out about her acts of rescue, he beat her violently. While Martha had once been a close friend of her assailant's mother, she did not receive any assistance from the mother, who stood by and encouraged her son as he assaulted her. Though Martha has since moved to another village, she lives in fear of her former neighbours and walked 18 kilometres to the interview for this study in secret so that her new neighbours would not know that she had rescued Tutsis. In Kibuye, Ruth, the woman who rescued the infant described above, recounted the repercussions of her actions in detail, from the beatings and broken arm she suffered to the continued hostility of her neighbours following the genocide. When asked if she felt secure, she replied, 'How would you feel secure when you are in a community that is always cursing you?' (interview conducted in 2014). This hostility is further illustrated by Clementine, one of the genocide perpetrators interviewed by journalist Jean Hatzfeld (2005: 233), who noted that: 'The wives of the killers never talk about the genocide. They never mention this word among themselves. It no more exists than the repentance that goes with it...they feel more furious than guilty.' Other women rescuers echoed this concern for their security and the hostility of their neighbours. Joan's home was destroyed by her neighbours, men and women she had been close to before the genocide, after they learned of her actions (interviewed in 2014). Another woman, 'Golda' (interviewed in 2014), has been threatened and shunned by the women in her area because she rescued Tutsis, but still she refuses to give up on the possibility of reconciliation and offers them drinking water when they pass her home.

This insecurity is not limited to women or to rescuers. Men who survived the genocide have recounted similar hostilities. When 'Carlisle', a widower who survived the genocide, returned to his village, he went to the authorities to report the people who had murdered his wife and children, demanding that they be imprisoned. His neighbours shunned him, angry that his accusations had resulted in the arrests of their family members and friends and reticent to face their own complicity in the genocide. While Carlisle refused to be silenced and has since rebuilt his life and home, he acknowledged that, 'My relations with [my] former neighbours are bad because they don't want to admit their guilt' (interview retrieved in 2011). The insecurity experienced by rescuers and survivors has far-reaching implications for Rwanda's long-term stability. So long as rescuers and survivors are unable to live in peace

and security in their homes, Rwanda remains vulnerable to a resumption of violence born of this hatred and hostility.

Widening the geographical lens to the Great Lakes region of Central Africa, sustained peace in Rwanda is threatened by the existence of rebels comprising former *genocidaires* and fighters committed to its destruction. The FDLR is the most recent incarnation of two decades of rebel activity based primarily in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), but with supporters around the world. The FDLR, formerly led by Paul Rwarakabije before his defection to Rwanda in 2003, has, more recently, made headlines for resisting international demands to disarm and face justice for crimes committed both in the DRC and, for a smaller number of individuals, crimes committed during the genocide in Rwanda. Despite Rwarakabije's insistence (during an interview in 2011) that the women who accompanied the FDLR were civilians, were not deliberately recruited by the FDLR and did not fight, a reported 57 women ex-combatants who had fought for the FDLR had been demobilized by the Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission by July 2011 (Jane Karera, interviewed in 2011). One ex-FDLR combatant, 'Libby' (interviewed in 2011), described her flight into the DRC with her family following the genocide, becoming an orphan, and being forced against her will in 1998 at the age of 14 to fight for the FDLR. Often unaware of who she was fighting, 'Libby' achieved the rank of sergeant and was one of seven women fighting alongside approximately 1,600 men. Reluctant to describe in detail her activities with the FDLR, instead referring generally to 'fighting the enemy', Libby fled to Rwanda with her brother in 2002. In contrast to her earlier reticence, Libby was eager to describe her time in Rwanda. Another former member of the FDLR, 'Kendra' (interviewed in 2011), described her time fighting for the FDLR with bellicose pride. Kendra voluntarily crossed into the DRC at the age of 17 and joined the FDLR along with her brother. Although she denied, throughout the interview, reports of FDLR atrocities in the DRC, she did not deny attacking villages, so long as they had orders to do so, and explained that the enemy was whoever her commanders identified as such. Rising to the rank of corporal and commanding a team of four men, she defected after eight years because: 'I saw they didn't have any strength. They [FDLR] had become weak and they didn't seem to be in a position to capture anything.' During the interview, Kendra's aggressive manner, reasons for defecting and apparent continued support for the FDLR's ideology did not inspire confidence in the eventual success of Rwanda's peaceful reconstruction processes. Though few in number, the women ex-combatants who experienced the anti-Tutsi ideological conditioning that accompanied FDLR military training and predilection for mass violence and cruelty may have an impact on society. Additionally, women ex-combatants represent a



small percentage of the women who accompany the FDLR in non-combatant roles. While they may not take up arms and fight, they are subjected to their ideological indoctrination, which is not addressed in the same manner as that of ex-combatants upon their return to Rwanda.

Rwanda has achieved significant gains in the past 20 years of post-genocide reconstruction and rehabilitation. But the democratic processes under way in the country require the buy-in of the entire population, not least of all the women who participated in the genocide or in the fighting that took place in the DRC following the genocide. Should these women continue to reject their role in the genocide, the existence of the genocide or crimes committed in the DRC in the name of the same ideology that facilitated the genocide in Rwanda, the future stability and peace in Rwanda will be adversely impacted.

## **Women peacebuilders following the genocide**

We believe traditionally that women are peacebuilders, they are peacemakers, they are called *Nyampinga* [one who belongs everywhere]. *Nyampinga*, for example, is a woman who doesn't belong anywhere so you are everywhere. Which means you can build bridges, you can bring people together, so we had to build around those positive values within our culture that encourage women to be peacebuilders. (Fatuma Ndangiza, interviewed in 2014)

In July 1994, Rose Kabuye, then a major in the RPF, arrived in Kigali and was appointed the mayor of the capital city. Everywhere she turned, she faced seemingly insurmountable challenges. Bodies were piled around the city, there was no running water, limited electricity, and people continued to die from their wounds and from starvation. Within the first year and without money for salaries, Kabuye put people to work cleaning the city, repairing its infrastructure and maintaining security, often relying on the World Food Programme's Food for Work initiative, which offered food instead of a salary. Every Wednesday, she held town hall meetings with the residents of Kigali, arriving in person and assigning issues raised by the community to a member of her staff for follow-up. When asked if she ever faced discrimination or resistance as a result of being a woman leader, she laughed, 'I was a major, I was from the RPF...I think everybody knew that we [were] not coming to joke, they knew that we [were] coming to work' (interviewed in 2014). When Kabuye left the mayor's office to serve as a member of parliament, Kigali was a city with a growing economy, a strong security apparatus, functioning roads, a rising skyline and a sense of hope for the future.



Women's inclusion in Rwanda's public and political spheres was not accidental. Following the end of the genocide, the RPF-led government was faced with a choice: they could return to the prior practices of sex-based discrimination and marginalization or they could adopt inclusive policies. The government created a space that was quickly filled by women, who played a founding role in Rwanda's post-genocide reconstruction and rehabilitation and democratic transition. This tight-knit group of women—with Aloisea Inyumba at the helm—is regularly cited by Rwanda's current women leaders as the inspiration for their continued involvement. A founding member of the RPF, the former minister of gender and social affairs, a senator and the first minister for gender and family promotion, Inyumba filled a host of leadership positions within the post-genocide government and was one of the women leaders behind the concerted effort to empower women in Rwanda post-genocide. Inyumba firmly believed in the capacity of Rwandan women to unite, regardless of ethnic differences, to rebuild the country. Citing a nationwide initiative to care for the hundreds of thousands of children orphaned by the genocide, Inyumba noted in an interview for this study (in 2011) that the campaign proved a starting point for women's interethnic collaboration: "The fact that women, irrespective of their background, whether they are Hutus or Tutsis, were willing and were going to respond to children...we managed to close 80 orphanage centres". In an effort to engage and empower women to become leaders, Inyumba helped to found a number of women's groups that continue to be active in Rwanda, including the Nyamirambo Women's Centre, a forum dedicated to women's rights and capacity building, the women's umbrella group Pro Femmes Twese Hamwe and the Rwanda Women Parliamentarian Forum, comprising women from the numerous political parties in Rwanda. These initiatives were comprehensive and inclusive of all women interested in participating, regardless of ethnicity, socio-economic status or disability, in the processes of peacebuilding and reconstruction. Ever conscious of developing a sustained peace in Rwanda, Inyumba and others mentored women from the grass-roots level who would eventually fill their shoes and promote peace throughout the country.

The professional trajectory of Oda Gasinzigwa, the current minister of gender and family promotion, illustrates this deliberate effort and provides an early example of grass-roots civic engagement within Rwanda. For Gasinzigwa, engaging in the political process was a means of ensuring lasting peace in Rwanda. Elected at the cell level, the lowest level of governance in Rwanda, to be a representative to the Nyamirambo Women's Centre in 2001, Gasinzigwa was later elected at the national level and became the council's chairperson. Mentored by Inyumba, she was eventually nominated to head the Gender Monitoring Office, served on the National Unity and



Reconciliation Commission and, more recently, was appointed minister of gender and family promotion. In all of these capacities, Gasinzigwa asserted, when interviewed in 2014, that: ‘My intention was not to be a leader. It was to contribute. It was to be part of the challenges I was seeing. It was this motivation of seeing that we are coming from a difficult situation. Everybody is busy doing something. What am I doing?’ This perceived responsibility to serve, contribute and play a role in the reconstruction of the country was evident in conversations throughout Rwanda and was a sentiment echoed by both men and women. For many women, participation in the democratic processes developing in Rwanda provided a vehicle for that contribution. Also driving women’s involvement was a desire to create a better future for their children. ‘If Rwanda is peaceful and more reconciled and more focused about the future, the young generation will lead better lives than we went through’ (Fatuma Ndagiza, interviewed in 2014).

While the government encouraged women to assume leadership roles, the majority of Rwandan society was unused to women as power brokers and primary decision-makers. A former ambassador and deputy CEO of the Rwanda Governance Board, Fatuma Ndagiza, described the strategy undertaken by women leaders to avoid confrontation when implementing gender empowerment initiatives:

We [women leaders] said, ‘Look here, if really we want to promote participation of women and these equality issues, gender equality issues, we have to be very careful. We have to understand the context. We have to also take into consideration the concerns and the fears of men. We shouldn’t be seen as people who are confrontational, people who want to create chaos and now, change the positions and the gender roles. (Fatuma Ndagiza, interviewed in 2014)

In an effort to mediate these concerns, women leaders advocated gender equality and complementarity. In order to avoid a ‘tug of war between men and women’ (Oda Gasinzigwa, interviewed in 2014), Ndagiza explained the approach as a strategy to actively recruit men as well as women who remained reticent to challenge the pre-genocide patriarchal norms.

We said [to the men], ‘the equality that we want is equality in terms of opportunities...not equality for us to be like men. We are biologically different—we don’t want you to take our biological roles nor do we want to take your biological roles. But then we know there are some gaps in opportunities, in access to resources, in human rights treatment and all this is what we want to change. And we cannot do this without getting the support of men.’ (Fatuma Ndagiza, interviewed in 2014)

This is where they introduced the concept of complementarity, of working together to improve the lives of men and women. Connie Bwiza, a member of parliament in Rwanda since 1999, explained in an interview in 2014 that, in Rwanda: 'Equality is some kind of [idea] that brings us some confusion. But complementarity is the best! I need you, you need me, for one reason or the other, so as to make life around us possible. But it doesn't mean that being a man, it gives you any additional benefit or opportunity that I'm not supposed to have.' According to the women interviewed, the complementarity approach facilitated the successful gender-mainstreaming initiatives of the past two decades.

While the complementarity strategy was conceptualized and implemented by women leaders, many of them were quick to credit the RPF for including women in the public and political spheres in the first place. According to Oda Gasinzigwa, the RPF's 'ideology of inclusiveness' meant that everyone had the same rights, including women. 'And that's why we see we had women in the movement of RPF, we had women in the leadership of RPF. It was not something new' (Oda Gasinzigwa, interview, 2014). This inclusion of women is essential to a successful democratic society: if half of the population is marginalized or restricted from spheres of influence and power, the state cannot be democratic. As MP Connie Bwiza explained, inclusive rights for all is a necessity since, 'you can never talk about democratic governance when you have a part of the society left behind—over 50 per cent [of] women are [members of Rwandan society]' (interviewed in 2014). Mary Balikungeri (interviewed in 2014) attributed the shift in community perceptions that enables her organization, the Rwanda Women's Network, to appeal for women's empowerment to President Paul Kagame, who 'keeps driving all of us' and serves as a role model for men and women alike throughout Rwanda. Variations of this sentiment, crediting the government, the RPF and its leader not only for the development in post-genocide Rwanda but also for its gender-mainstreaming processes, were repeated in nearly every meeting with community or government stakeholders, many of whom are members of the RPF. This deliberate engagement with women resulted in Rwanda making headlines in 2008 when it became the first country in the world to elect a majority-women parliament, with 56 per cent women, including the speaker's chair. In the 2013 elections, 64 per cent of the available 80 seats went to women, a remarkable achievement indicative of the success of gender mainstreaming and equality in Rwanda.

Women's involvement in the country's reconstruction stems from women leaders, the government and from ordinary women who have taken full advantage of the opportunities provided. Coming from all over the country



and a broad spectrum of backgrounds, women serve as leaders in a variety of sectors. Odette Kayirere, Rosine Urujeni and Mary Balikungeri have assumed leadership positions in non-governmental capacities. Connie Bwiza, Oda Gasinzigwa, Fatuma Ndangiza and Beatrice Mukasine have served in a multitude of high-ranking governmental roles. Others, including Rose Kabuye, who owns her own company, and Usta Kaitesi, the current principal of the College of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Rwanda, have taken on leadership roles in the private sector and in academia, respectively. Their empowerment was born of necessity. Following the genocide, women made up nearly 70 per cent of the population, upwards of a third were widowed, and many were, for the first time, the heads of their households (Kumar et al. 1996: viii). Beatrice Mukasine (interviewed in 2014) explained how women became involved and eventually achieved leadership positions, stating that: ‘women played key roles at the grass-roots level of reconstruction and were among the first leadership appointments. They formed local councils, headed judicial proceedings, tilled the land, and were thus at the centre of rebuilding the country, creating a basis for the level of peace and reconciliation the country experiences today.’ MP Connie Bwiza noted that women got involved in the political sphere for a host of reasons, including to combat the remaining *genocidaires* threatening the country along its borders. Working toward a sustained peace, ‘We said, “Ok, enough is enough. How do we get women in civil society organizations so that we come up as members of parliament to fight insurgency?”’ (Connie Bwiza, interviewed in 2014). Facing instability in the north and the west, women came together as a result of their shared sex and maternity to prevent a resumption of violence. ‘We said, “No. Women, mothers, enough is enough”’ (Connie Bwiza, 2014).

## Conclusion

Describing her work with women entrepreneurs, Rosine Urujeni (interviewed in 2014) noted that while women became involved in business post-genocide, ‘It’s not because women couldn’t do it before, it’s because they weren’t given the opportunity to go into it before’. In 1994 Rwanda, women were restricted by socially prescribed gender norms that limited their agency and their opportunities to thrive independently of men. The genocide in Rwanda suspended these restrictive norms in part. Contrary to the commonly cited narratives of passivity and victimization, women played a significant role during the genocide, some as perpetrators and others as rescuers. This case study documents their participation in the genocide as well as the accompanying gender norms and restrictions that shifted to actively include women in the national discourse following the end of the genocide. In contrast

to prior practices, the RPF government enacted measures to reverse the deeply patriarchal practices that had dominated Rwandan society and to ensure that women played a role in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the state and the people. While some women embraced these opportunities, others denied that the genocide had occurred or actively participated in rebel groups battling the new state. Exploring the myriad of ways women participated in the genocide in Rwanda, the consequences of that participation and the roles they have played over the past 20 years of reconstruction and rehabilitation, it is evident that women played an important holistic part in the country's progress, some to its detriment and others to its benefit. It is imperative that women continue to be addressed, engaged and empowered in order to guarantee a lasting peace in Rwanda.

## Recommendations

The 20<sup>th</sup> Commemoration of the Genocide against the Tutsi took place in April 2014. In the past two decades, Rwanda has taken enormous strides toward peace and reconciliation, embracing measures and implementing initiatives that have contributed to its security, steady economic growth and rapid development. Still, Rwanda has a long journey ahead of it to ensure a sustainable peace and progressive democratic state. The following are recommended measures and justifications that could benefit Rwanda and successful measures undertaken in Rwanda that could be adapted and adopted by other post-conflict transitioning states.

### Identifying rescuers

- A nationwide formalized mechanism for identifying women (and men) who rescued others during the genocide should be developed.
- Rescuers, especially women rescuers, should be documented, publicized and celebrated much like the stories of rescue during the Holocaust.
- Rescuers should be identified who could serve as peace brokers between survivors and perpetrators and help to unify the country.



## **Empowering women in similar post-conflict scenarios**

- In order for a country to rebuild after a conflict in an inclusive and sustainable manner, it should assure the rights of all of its citizens, women and men alike. Women should advocate for positions with decision-making capacities, and governments, intergovernmental bodies and NGOs should consciously and proactively prioritize gender mainstreaming and gender-equality initiatives.
- The governing mandate for each and every agency, ministry and organization should include language that guarantees the inclusion of women in the decision-making process.
- Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should include a measure for the inclusion of women in decision-making processes at every level of governance. Gains made toward achieving gender mainstreaming and gender equality should be used as internal and external indicators of post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation.
- Laws should be enacted that correct any gender-based marginalization or discrimination that was in place pre-conflict, and additional laws should be drafted that ensure women's participation in state building and reconstruction.
- In order to ensure that the rhetoric produces results and is tied directly to decision-making bodies, every governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental agency should be gender inclusive in its representation.

## **Gender-sensitive reintegration policies**

- In order to prevent a recurrence of violence in a post-conflict state, measures should be undertaken to ensure the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of combatants.
- Women who participated in rebel groups as civilians in an auxiliary role cannot be overlooked by DDR initiatives; they should also go through a modified DDR process in order to rejoin Rwandan society.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The first four trips were conducted as a Stern Family Fellow for Comparative Genocide Studies at the Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Clark University. With the exception of ten interviews conducted in July/August 2014 on behalf of International IDEA, the research belongs exclusively to the author.
- <sup>2</sup> Rutaremara would engage young people by telling them about the history of Rwanda, the flight of the Tutsis into Uganda in the 1950s and 1960s, the reason the RPF had emerged and the primary issues that it planned to address, including the right to return, the end of discrimination against Tutsis and inclusive governance in Rwanda (Connie Bwiza, interviewed in 2014). In this respect, the RPF was not strictly a rebel movement; it also served as a social and cultural anchor for displaced persons living outside of their home country.
- <sup>3</sup> The respondent is referring to Tutsis targeted during Rwanda's pre- and early independence periods. In the decade that followed, nearly 20,000 Tutsis died and over 300,000 fled the country.



# Conclusion



## Conclusion

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As shown in the four case studies included in this report, women are not just passive victims in conflict. As catalysts for peace, women have built inclusive alliances across conflict lines, and as instigators of (and participants in) conflict, they have encouraged and perpetuated violence.

Although men are the main perpetrators of violence, it is imperative to recognize that women also participate in conflict and uphold gendered patterns of discrimination and violence. The same gendered patterns also cause women to suffer disproportionately from insecurity and violence in ways that are particular to women as a group. Thus, women are stakeholders in peace and conflict because they are impacted by, and have an impact on, violence in very specific and gendered ways. Analyses of peace and war should therefore include the experiences of women.

Issues of identity, specifically gender as it intersects with religion and ethnicity, have shaped the roles women play and have helped to define their actions, both peaceful and violent. Class, as expressed through experiences of economic insecurity and social injustice, has also been instrumental in informing women's positions. Clearly then, women from marginalized communities have been shown to occupy roles as integral actors in conflict and peacebuilding, but their perspectives on how to achieve and practice democracy are marginalized, as they are rarely included in peace negotiations and public-policy formation processes.

National governments' obligations under international agreements, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, hold that women have the right to participate in political processes on equal terms. This is particularly urgent for women from marginalized ethnic and religious groups who cannot expect to be represented by majority communities (UNPO 2011). If women do not contribute to these political negotiations, they will be unable to influence how norms relating to gender, justice, inclusion and participation are conceptualized and framed, which is a particular concern for marginalized women. The exclusion of women

from these processes also means that they will be unable to influence the development of democratic institutions. As such, their exclusion directly affects the quality of democracy, including successful diversity management and respect for human rights.

Inclusion in these processes should never be reduced simply to numbers; instead, it should entail the much more difficult task of changing norms and values embedded in political institutions, such as parliaments and transitional structures mandated to negotiate peace settlements. If norms and existing gender and social hierarchies are replicated in these democratic institutions and peace processes, individuals will find it difficult to exercise, influence and enact change (see Bjarnegård and Melander 2013).

Several themes and recommendations have emerged from this research. Consideration of these themes will help policymakers and practitioners working in this field to better design interventions aimed at supporting women from marginalized groups to participate in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peacebuilding activities, helping to contribute to sustainable democracy, diversity management and state building.

## Themes and recommendations

### Women's motivations to participate in armed struggles

Women participate in and support the conflicts discussed in each of the case studies covered in this report. In the Philippines and Myanmar, women are choosing to join resistance movements, just as women in Afghanistan chose to support mujahideen groups in the 1980s. At the same time, accounts of women who participated in acts of genocide in Rwanda indicate that, for the most part, this participation was voluntary and therefore has to be recognized as an active choice. Strategically, women's participation in armed movements tends to be supported by the armed leadership when the number of male recruits is dwindling, as exemplified in the Myanmar conflict, where women's participation was initially not encouraged, but, as the conflict continued and male participation decreased, women were recruited in greater numbers. Nationalist rhetoric framing conflicts as concerning everyone in a community or group also facilitates women's involvement, as seen in the Afghan resistance movement against the Soviets and in the Kachin struggle against the Bamar-dominated government. In Rwanda, the portrayal of Tutsi women as sexual deviants who enticed Hutu men, thus threatening the homogeneity of the Hutu community, was used to encourage Hutu women to target Tutsi women.



Often, marginalization from socio-economic and political processes has contributed to the politicization of group identities and the outbreak or continuation of conflict. For the Kachin in Myanmar and the Moro people in the Philippines, a lack of recognition of collective human rights, inadequate access to basic services, the inability to influence policymaking processes and sustained poverty contributed to the establishment of armed groups and the outbreak of conflict. Indeed, women's decisions to participate in or support armed struggle often stem from their own experiences of poverty, marginalization and discrimination. This is the dominant theme that emerges in the accounts from Myanmar and the Philippines, where women's experiences of discrimination as members of marginalized communities (Kachin and Christian in Myanmar, Muslim in the Philippines) were important motivations for joining the armed struggle. At the same time, a complex range of factors may lie behind women's participation in armed struggle or violence, including coercion and necessity. State violence targeting male relatives may leave women with few options but to join resistance movements for protection and/or their livelihood, while pressure on households in rebel-held areas to provide at least one member to fighting units can result in women being coerced into combat or auxiliary roles: examples of both trends are recounted in the case studies on Myanmar and the Philippines. In Rwanda, the dangers of not supporting genocidal activities pushed some women into participating or standing by as atrocities were committed.

### **Recommendations for local-level leaders and international actors**

- *Recognize women as stakeholders in conflict.* Women have participated as active combatants in Myanmar and the Philippines, as *genocidaires* in Rwanda and in auxiliary roles in the conflict in Afghanistan. They are therefore integral actors who can contribute successfully to the prevention of violence, not least because failure to include them might mean that they become potential security threats, but also because, as political agents involved in military organizations, they can contribute intelligence to analyses of security and conflict issues.
- *Recognize the human rights of marginalized groups as markers of progress and development.* In addition to strengthening the rights of minority women, recognizing the collective rights of marginalized communities may also minimize the impetus for future conflict.

- *Include women's voices and concerns in the public agenda.* To understand, recognize and address gendered drivers of conflict, women from marginalized communities need to be included in setting the public agenda, including negotiations for political settlements, from the very beginning.

## **Women's inclusion in armed movements**

While some women take on active combat roles, most women participate in and support conflict indirectly, often in ways that reflect their traditional gendered roles as carers. In Afghanistan, during the Soviet invasion, women nursed wounded mujahideen or cooked for them. In addition to being active in combat units, even more women are active in auxiliary roles in the resistance movements in the Philippines and Myanmar. Often though, when men take on auxiliary roles, these are typically recognized as another form of soldiering, while women's auxiliary roles are seen as supporting the struggle rather than being central to it. Examples of this can be found in the Kachin study, where male medics were recognized as soldiers, while female medics were seen as participating indirectly. In these ways, the recognition and analysis of women in militias and resistance movements is often based on existing gender stereotypes. Indeed, normative gender roles may mean that women's activities in combat or violence are not recognized, resulting in women being passed over for promotions within resistance movements, as in Myanmar, or not included in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) processes, as in the Philippines. In Rwanda, efforts to rewrite or reject a narrative of the genocide that includes female perpetrators of violence threaten the sustainability of peace, since, without acknowledgement of the crimes committed by women during the genocide by either the community at large or by the women themselves, meaningful rehabilitation and reconciliation is likely to be compromised. Likewise, by reassuming traditional gender roles once the conflict has ended (or once their participation in the conflict is over), and by drawing on essentialist views that women are inherently peaceful, women combatants or perpetrators of violence can 'fade into the background' and escape identification, as exemplified in the Rwanda and Philippines case studies. However, failure to include them might mean that they continue to be potential threats to long-term stability and reform efforts, with the potential to disrupt negotiations and settlements.



## Recommendations for local-level leaders and international actors

- *Recognize women's decisions in choosing to participate in or support armed struggle or violence.* Women involved in the conflicts covered in this publication assert political agency in choosing to support violence. However, their participation—and recognition of their work—is typically restricted by gendered notions that relegate women's involvement to the private/non-political sphere. In order to prevent further conflict, it is imperative that women's political agency be taken seriously.
- *Ensure the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of female perpetrators of violence.* Women who participate in auxiliary roles must be identified and included in DDR processes, including those who do not take up arms and those without rank who nevertheless participate in the armed forces. Participation in DDR processes must not be contingent on access to weapons or military rank.

## Women's security needs

Women's security is related to the recognition and application of their human rights. Importantly, all case studies included in this publication have applied a broad interpretation of security, which recognizes that there is a continuum of insecurity that exists both before and after peace agreements have been signed. Insecurity encompasses not only the threat of violence from armed forces but also a more general interruption of daily life, often affecting women as individuals and as members of a marginalized community. This is clearly reflected in the Myanmar case study, where Kachin women are at risk of sexual violence at the hands of Myanmar's armed forces because of both their gender and their ethnic- and religious-minority status. Gender-based violence violates women's fundamental human rights and constrains their freedom of movement and their ability to participate in local-level political practices, as the risk of sexual and gender-based violence has at times prohibited women from travelling outside their communities. This was exemplified in the case study on Afghanistan, where there is a strong correlation between experiences of insecurity and women's involvement in decision-making processes. In this way, the case studies highlight how women's experiences of insecurity before, during and after conflict differ in many aspects from those of men because of gendered socio-economic spheres and structural violence and inequalities. Examples of vulnerabilities associated with inadequate or restricted access to



education, employment and health services were provided in the case studies on Afghanistan, Myanmar and the Philippines.

The abuse of women's human rights can serve to incentivize both individuals and state and non-state actors to engage in conflict. In Myanmar, the experiences of marginalized women of sexual or gender-based violence at the hands of government forces were cited as motivating factors for joining armed groups, and in Afghanistan, the abuse of women's human rights under the Taliban regime was used as justification for international armed intervention. Thus, the denial of human rights leads to marginalization and experiences of insecurity, which, based on the case studies reviewed here, is a driver of conflict. It is clear from all the case studies that women from marginalized communities are particularly vulnerable to human rights violations and suffer the greatest abuse and discrimination both within and outside their communities. Gender-based violence against minority women is related to women's human rights, as well as to the lack of recognition of the collective rights of people who are marginalized as a result of their ethnic or religious identities, as seen in Myanmar and the Philippines. In this way, it is clear that women are impacted by violence in very specific and gendered ways, and that this violence is related to their status as members of minority groups. For example, in Myanmar and the Philippines, Kachin and Moro women's experiences of violence cannot be divorced from their identity as members of ethnic- and religious-minority groups.

## **Recommendations for international actors**

- *Include women's security needs in discussions on reform and development.* Peace and reform processes should take into account women's experiences and address security issues affecting women both as individuals and as members of a marginalized community.
- *Analyse the effects of international interventions and reform initiatives on women from different ethnic, religious and class backgrounds.* Inequalities are structured around multiple identities, and unless this is recognized and addressed, outcomes will be flawed.
- *Utilize the status of women's human rights as a marker of progress toward peace and democracy.* Gender-equality indicators must be developed and utilized to assess the success of reform initiatives or the lack thereof.



## Recommendations for local-level leaders

- *Include women's voices and concerns in the public agenda.* To understand, recognize and address gendered drivers of conflict, women from marginalized communities need to be involved in setting the public agenda, including negotiations for political settlements, from the very beginning.
- *Recognize and address human rights violations perpetrated by military personnel stationed in ceasefire areas, as well as in areas of active conflict.* Sexual violence targeting women and girls living in conflict areas must be identified and addressed, and transitional justice processes need to include these instances of violence.
- *Recognize and address gender-based violence experienced by women after conflict and in the home.* Gender-based violence occurring ostensibly after a conflict has ended must be identified and addressed.
- *Collect information on violations committed against women* to generate evidence for legal actions and policy reforms.
- *Reform or enact gender-sensitive laws* to ensure that women do not suffer from gendered structural and direct violence.

## Women in peacebuilding and democratic reform processes

Women's resistance to violence and conflict can take many forms but may not involve open rejection or challenge. Nevertheless, women who take such actions often do so at great personal risk. In addition, these actions tend not to be highlighted in analyses of wartime contributions. In Afghanistan, women's involvement in running and teaching at underground schools during the Taliban period was an act of resistance. In Rwanda, some Hutu women protected and hid Tutsis from genocidal militias, and in Myanmar, ethnic Kachin women joined forces with Bamar women to end the conflict in informal peacebuilding networks. Women may be involved in conflict resolution and peacebuilding outside of formal processes. In Afghanistan, women appear to be highly active in inter- and intra-family and community conflict resolution, but this is not recognized as part of formal peacebuilding processes despite the importance of families in Afghan politics. Likewise, in the Philippines, women community leaders are active in resolving *rido* that can have a devastating impact on women's security and the wider community but that, again, fall outside of the remit of formal peace processes. In the state

of Kachin, women are active in informal peace networks spanning ethnic and religious cleavages. The experiences of the women's movement of building alliances across ethnic and religious divides can provide important lessons related to trust building and conflict resolution, particularly at the national level in Myanmar.

Gendered assumptions about women's role as 'peacemakers' can be a source of strength and legitimacy for women's participation in peacebuilding processes. This was the case in the accounts from Rwanda, Afghanistan and the Philippines, where individual women and women's organizations, by drawing on the association of women with peace and motherhood, utilized and embraced positions that highlighted their role as mothers in order to legitimize their demands for inclusion in conflict-resolution mechanisms at the local or national level. It is important, however, that these assumptions do not reduce women's roles in peacebuilding to the purely symbolic, or divert attention away from addressing the actions of some women as perpetrators of violence and conflict, as has been the case in Rwanda and Myanmar.

Formal peacebuilding and democratic processes are often deeply flawed. For instance, they may fail to take any account of the gendered violence that women experience in conflict (as in Myanmar and the Philippines), or they may be marred by cronyism and corruption (as in Afghanistan and the Philippines). Formal, post-conflict democratic structures may replicate or reinforce existing hierarchies, including gender hierarchies, as has been the case in Myanmar, where women's political participation is the lowest of any democratic country in South-East Asia. In Afghanistan and the Philippines, democratic institutions have been adapted to fit existing political structures, meaning that representatives are often elected on the basis of wealth, clan affiliation or ethnicity and serve as patrons to their constituents. That said, in contexts such as Afghanistan where women's freedom of movement and participation is so limited, these processes, although flawed, can open up space for participation and expression for women. This is also true in contexts where women are able to participate more openly in public life, such as in Myanmar and the Philippines. However, considerable political will is needed for women to be integrated into formal peacebuilding and longer-term democratic processes. Rwanda provides an example of what can be achieved in this area when political will is present. By contrast, women's integration into formal peacebuilding and democratic processes in Afghanistan, Myanmar and the Philippines has been marred by tokenism and a failure to take women seriously. In Afghanistan and the Philippines, this is in part because the impetus for including women is mainly the result of pressure from international donors and NGOs and is therefore perceived



as externally imposed. In Myanmar, neither the non-state armed groups nor the international community is pushing for the engagement of women in the peace process, thus making it difficult for women to be involved. Finally, it is important to remember that women entering formal peacebuilding and democratic institutions can be just as complicit as men in upholding existing discriminatory power structures, as has been the case in Afghanistan, the Philippines and Rwanda. Making assumptions that women are naturally less corrupt, self-interested or prone to discriminatory practices may serve to jeopardize the success and sustainability of these institutions, pointing to the need to reform values and norms embedded within institutions.

### **Recommendations for international actors**

- *Utilize existing structures for conflict resolution* and understand that these evolve incrementally and are not fixed or static. National and local processes for conflict resolution need to be connected.
- *Support locally led multi-ethnic women's movements for peace and conflict resolution.* The capacity of women's networks needs to be strengthened so that they can influence the design and execution of policies and interventions.
- *Protect and include women peacebuilders* to ensure that they can continue their work in a safe and sustainable way.
- *Develop post-election support for women* such as training, in order to build more permanent roles for women within their communities after reform processes have been initiated.

### **Recommendations for local-level leaders**

- *Take women's peace movements and reconciliation efforts seriously,* as they may create opportunities for sustainable peace. Women have played important roles in promoting reconciliation and in rebuilding societies, as seen in Afghanistan, Myanmar, the Philippines and Rwanda. The considerable experience of women rescuers and the women's movement in building alliances needs to be utilized in order for peace and reform processes to succeed.

## Opportunities provided by conflict

The period following a public conflict opens up political space for the development of areas relevant for democratic development and reform processes, and it is therefore important to act on the momentum for change that conflict often presents. Membership of a marginalized community group may afford women opportunities to participate in armed struggle—and/or in later peacebuilding and democratic processes—that are not available to other women in society. In Afghanistan, minority Hazara women are recognized as having greater freedoms than those belonging to other ethnic and religious groups due in part to their more liberal interpretation of sharia law, giving women more opportunities to participate in formal and informal conflict-resolution and peacebuilding activities, and in wider democratic processes. In Myanmar, Kachin women's status as members of a religious and ethnic minority enables a degree of public participation—including in the armed struggle—that is not available, to the same extent, to majority women. In order to identify and take advantage of the opportunities for women's participation that do exist, even within marginalized communities, it is important to recognize how situations can be simultaneously restraining and enabling. Associated with this, conflict can enable women to take on decision-making roles where they may not otherwise. In Myanmar and the Philippines, women's roles in civil society have expanded, with women becoming effective civil society leaders in the state of Kachin and involved in refugee camp committees in Mindanao. As described in all the case studies included in this report, women took on additional responsibilities as heads of households, although in some contexts this served to restrain their ability to participate in public decision-making due to time and financial constraints. In Rwanda, however, where women made up more than 70 per cent of the post-genocide population, the absence of men provided space in which women could act to rebuild society on new terms.

## Recommendations for international actors

- *Ensure that gender is mainstreamed in reform processes.* In order to be representative and therefore legitimate and sustainable processes, electoral systems, service-delivery policies and constitution-building processes should take into account the rights of marginalized women.
- *Recognize and support women's leadership opportunities* by identifying and developing locally led women's networks, including women's peace networks, community conflict-resolution mechanisms and civil society initiatives, thereby capitalizing on the change in gender roles that conflict often provokes.



## Recommendations for local actors

- *Enact laws that will enable the inclusion of women at all levels of decision-making.* Legal frameworks, including the constitution, electoral processes and other initiatives, need to ensure the participation of women from marginalized groups in decision-making processes, for example through the use of positive-action policies.
- *Guarantee an independent judiciary* in order to strengthen women's access to justice.
- *Establish an independent ombudsperson's office* to assess and address instances of gender-based discrimination.

## References and further reading

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## About the authors

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**Rosalie Arcala Hall** is a Professor of Political Science at the University of the Philippines Visayas. She finished her PhD in Public and International Affairs at the Northeastern University of Boston, Massachusetts in 2002. She has published book chapters and journal articles on local civil-military relations, disaster response and rebel integration in state security forces. Dr. Hall has been a recipient of research grants from the Fulbright Program, the Nippon Foundation, the Toyota Foundation, the Asia Foundation, the Global Development Network, and the Austrian Agency for International Cooperation in Education and Research.

**Sara E. Brown** is the Stern Family Fellow and the first comparative genocide doctoral candidate at the Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Clark University. Her dissertation, *Gender and Agency: Women Rescuers and Perpetrators during the Rwandan Genocide*, explores women who exercised agency during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Brown has been working and conducting research in Rwanda since 2004.

**Jenny Hedström** is a Programme Officer for International IDEA's Democracy and Diversity Programme and a PhD candidate at Monash University, Australia, where she is carrying out a research project on *Gendering Security: women and ethno-political mobilizing in Kachin State, Burma*. Jenny has more than ten years' experience working on issues concerning gender and ethnicity, primarily in the context of Myanmar. She has published extensively on issues concerning Myanmar, gender and ethnicity, most recently an article on Myanmar's women's movement, published by the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*.



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**Anna Larson** is a research associate at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. She worked in Afghanistan from 2004 to 2010, conducting research on parliament, elections, democratization and women's role in the public sphere. She is one of the co-authors, along with Noah Coburn, of *Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan: Elections in an Unstable Political Landscape*, published by Columbia University Press.

**Joanna Pares Hoare** has written extensively on the subject of women's activism and wider participation. Having previously been employed by various development and human rights organizations, including Oxfam GB, Minority Rights Group International, and the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, she now works as a consultant on gender, women's rights and development. Joanna received her PhD in Development Studies in 2014 from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London.





## International IDEA at a glance

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The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization that supports democratic institutions around the world.

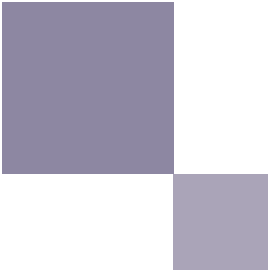
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- increased capacity, legitimacy and credibility of democracy;
- more inclusive participation and accountable representation; and
- more effective and legitimate democracy cooperation.

Based in Stockholm, Sweden, International IDEA has offices in North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean.



What is the role that women from marginalized communities play in conflict, peacemaking and democratization? Which factors lie behind their involvement in armed conflict? What are the consequences of women's inclusion and exclusion from peacebuilding activities? These are some of the questions explored in *Women in Conflict and Peace*.

Drawing on four case studies from Afghanistan, Myanmar, Rwanda and the Philippines, this publication analyses the impact of women on intrastate conflict and peacebuilding, concluding with recommendations that international and local actors can implement to enhance the participation of marginalized women in future peace- and democracy-building initiatives.



International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance  
(International IDEA)  
Strömsborg, SE-103 34 Stockholm, Sweden  
Tel: +46 8 698 37 00, fax: +46 8 20 24 22  
E-mail: [info@idea.int](mailto:info@idea.int), website: [www.idea.int](http://www.idea.int)



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