

FINDING NEW WORDS, CREATING NEW METHODS. THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN PEACE PROCESSES

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1. Introduction¹

...one does not like to leave so remarkable a letter as yours—a letter perhaps unique in the history of human correspondence, since when before has an educated man asked a woman how in her opinion war can be prevented?— unanswered. Therefore let us make the attempt; even if it is doomed to failure.

[...]

the answer to your question must be that we can best help you to prevent war not by repeating your words and following your methods but by finding new words and creating new methods.

Virginia Woolf. *Three Guineas*

The contemporary world is a world distinguished by armed conflicts and violence. The agenda of international relations and the nation states is to a great degree influenced by the progression of these conflicts and issues such as the so-called phenomenon of global terrorism. But armed conflict in the current world scene cannot be understood without making reference to the many peace processes and negotiations that are presently underway. Proof of this is that although 2005 ended with a total of 21 active armed conflicts² (four less than in 2004), and 56 areas of socio-political tension, there were

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² When we speak of armed conflict we refer to all armed confrontations involving regular and irregular armed groups of various natures that, organized and using arms and other destructive means, cause more than 100 victims per year. The figure of 100 deaths must be put into context with other elements such as the total population of the country and the geographic reach of the armed conflict, as well as the general level of destruction and forced displacement of the population that it entails. (Escola de Cultura de Pau, 2006:17).

also 35 open negotiations³ between the different warring parties (Escola de Cultura de Pau, 2006).

Therefore, the tendency of the latter years appears to show that armed conflicts are more often than not accompanied by peace processes and although the peace processes are not always successful in putting an end to violence they allow, at a minimum, certain glimpses of hope to be maintained and keep the door open for possible negotiated ends to the violence. In fact, over the last few years, peace negotiations have ended some of the worst armed conflicts that have occurred, examples including the southern region of Sudan and the Aceh region³ of Indonesia. It is revealing that data indicates that there are peace negotiations in two out of three armed conflicts (Escola de Cultura de Pau, 2006:45).

With the exceptional case of women occupying high positions in government, the agenda of peace processes and negotiation in armed conflicts and violent socio-political situations traditionally still suffers from a patriarchal vision that has left out the experience and knowledge of women. This has occurred despite the key contributions of women in the building of peace and in the many cases where their presence becomes a guarantee for the sustainability of agreements and peace processes.

This research tries to analyze the participation of women in the peace process and negotiations in present day armed conflicts and violent socio-political situations. This work adopts a feminist perspective, meaning a clear call for changing the circumstances of women that are suffering the consequences of armed conflicts as well as their exclusion from the peace process while taking as a reference the theoretical tradition of pacifist feminism.

³ When reference is made to peace negotiations, we are talking about the process in which two or more parties in conflict agree to discuss their differences in a concerted framework to find a satisfactory solution. This negotiation can be direct or mediated by third parties. Peace process is understood to be the consolidation of a negotiation scheme once the thematic agenda, the procedures to follow, and a timeframe and provisions have been defined. That is, a peace process is all that is followed in the search for an agreement between the parties in conflict in a way that the initial basic disagreement is resolved satisfactorily in achieving this agreement. The process begins with pre-negotiation and the exploration of possibilities followed by the negotiation phase, the reaching of an accord and, finally, with its actual implementation. (Escola de Cultura de Pau, 2006:45 y 152).

Following this introduction, the text is organized into three basic parts. In the first place, this paper includes a section that analyzes: a) how current armed conflicts have a specific impact on women, distinct from what they have on men, and b) what is this impact. In the second section there is a brief review of the relationship that women have historically had with peace as well as the main contributions that they have in the making of it. The third section, which constitutes the central core of this research, analyzes the participation of women in the peace process and negotiation, their contributions to them, as well as obstacles and forms of participation. In conclusion, some final reflections are outlined.

2. The Impact of Armed Conflict on Women

The importance of women's participation in the peace process does not only derive from a question of justice, that is, by merely being citizens in a particular society they should have the right to take part in all political and social processes of change in the society. The participation of women in peace processes and in negotiations attempting to end armed conflicts is crucial also because it responds to particular characteristics of these conflicts and especially to the specific impacts that they have on women, and consequently, on the people that they usually have to care for, particularly children and the elderly.

The primary casualties of the armed conflicts of today are in the civilian population. The figure of civilian casualties may even reach 90 percent of the total casualties. Nevertheless, rarely is this heterogeneous group disaggregated, for example in terms of gender, to analyze the different impacts that these conflicts have on the civilian population.

Armed conflicts undoubtedly affect the population as a whole that suffer from them. However, the patriarchal structures that organize the majority of societies, the different positions that men and women occupy in them, the roles that they play or their ability to access certain resources, influence the way in which the armed conflicts affect one

another. Since most of combatants continue to be men, the direct effect of armed confrontation, in terms of deaths and injuries in war, falls primarily on men.

Nevertheless, women are the primary recipients of the indirect consequences of these confrontations – that on occasion become direct ones since they concern deliberate strategies of war by the combatants themselves.⁴ Among these indirect effects are the consequences that arise from the destructions of cropland or restricted access to certain goods and services such as public health, infrastructure and food. Given the fact that in the course of the armed conflicts women often become the means of holding communities and families together and provide for the basic needs of those in their care, the effects of disturbing vital sectors such as agriculture and healthcare fall mainly on women.

Some authors point out that the indirect consequences of the armed conflicts are often more serious than the direct ones and that the fatalities arising directly from armed violence doesn't remotely account for the true human cost of an armed conflict (Plümper and Nemayer, 2006). Some examples of these costs would be the increase in maternal-infant mortality resulting from the disappearance of sexual and reproductive health services, the increase in malnutrition or the growing impact of HIV/AIDS on women in armed conflicts as a result of the increase in sexual violence. The focus of public health in times of armed conflict shifts to the direct consequences such as attending to those wounded in battle. As a consequence, attention and resources for reproductive and sexual healthcare fades, resulting in serious implications on the lives and health of women.

One of the aftereffects that should be noted is that the armed conflicts reduce the differences in life expectancy between men and women. Absent an armed conflict, the life expectancy of women is usually greater than that of men. However, some studies show that despite the number of combat deaths being higher among men, the combination of indirect consequences have a greater effect since they create greater numbers of deaths among women (and younger women) resulting in a reduction in the

⁴ The case of sexual violence as tool of war, for example, has a direct effect on women since its use corresponds with pre-meditated objectives of the armed parties. Through women's bodies they try to humiliate an entire community as well as cause irreparable damage to those who are usually the primary supporters of the social and familial fabric and upon whom falls the maintenance of the minimal conditions of welfare for the population in times of armed conflict.

life expectancy among them (Plümper y Nemayer, 2006). Furthermore, additional factors, as in the case of ethnic conflicts (with a greater impact on the civilian population and consequently on women) contribute to this reduction in life expectancy.

Finally, it should be added that women usually take care of those people affected by the armed conflict once it has ended, as in the case of the wounded and disabled. The consequences that women must face last longer in time. Those falling on men, which are more related to the fighting itself, tend to be restricted to the duration of the armed conflict and therefore are considerably reduced once the confrontation has ended.

Since women are witnesses to the reality of the aftermath of war, including them in the peace processes creates the possibility that the negotiations won't ignore the legacy of destruction and suffering of the civilian population. Without their participation, it is likely that discussions including the question of how to alleviate some of the more serious consequences of war will be omitted.

3. Women and Peace Building.

Throughout history many women have felt called to and have been linked to the cause of peace. From different social and political backgrounds and almost always in anonymity, women have protested against violence and the consequences of armed conflicts. They have woven support networks to deserters and objectors and have raised their voice in favor of new forms of human dialogue in which violence has not been a instrument of dialogue. (Magallón, 2004).

In the mind of many societies, and clearly in western ones, an idea of the "peaceful woman" has existed, with even biological characteristics attributed to it. Just as men's historical relationship to war cannot be attributed to types of biological reasons,⁵ neither would it be correct to invoke nature to explain why there have been such tight established links between many women and peace. Nevertheless, this relationship is undeniable, although it necessary to flesh it out with subtlety. Therefore, what are the factors that lead many women to have such a special relationship with peace?

⁵ The Seville Statement on Violence, written by various scientists and disseminated by UNESCO in 1989 states that war is not a biological necessity but a social invention and that biology does not condemn humanity to war: <http://www.unesco.org/cpp/uk/declarations/seville.pdf>

In the first place it must be highlighted that this close link comes influenced by a particular type of socialization⁶ that manifests itself in two specific ways. In the first place it is by the experience of maternity and the direct and empirical knowledge that this experience bestows on the value of life. In accepting this notion, the conceptualization of maternity becomes the antithesis of violence. The experience of maternity, and the fundamental acts related to it, care, education, and all that is associated with sustaining life, are attributed to it. As Freixas points out,

“Caring for children is a crucial activity in human development; it shapes us as emotional beings who are empathetic and sensitive to the needs of our fellow human beings. The activities of caring for children include all that we do in order to preserve life and wellbeing: our bodies, our souls and our surroundings. In other words, all that lets us become complete human beings and sustain life on earth.”
(Freixas, 2006: 43)

Some authors have spoken of the civilizing work of women (Bosch and Grau, 1997), referring to the legacy of work and activity done throughout history by women which has been used, as mentioned earlier, to sustain life. Nevertheless, this notion of maternity as an intrinsically peaceful experience has been questioned, basically by pointing out that the participation of men in war or other types of violence has been cheered on many occasions by women. The classic image of women who send their sons to war to defend the homeland is a clear example. On the other hand, and to show that it is not a biological relationship, the philosopher Sara Ruddick developed toward the end of the nineteen-eighties the idea of maternal thinking (Ruddick, 1989: 40, 41), disassociating the "doing" of mothers from the figure of the woman and highlighting that this type of work of sustaining life can also be (and, in fact, is) assumed and carried out in part by men, although traditionally and primarily it has been done by women and primarily from their position as mothers.

⁶ Socialization is the process through which the individual adopts the socio-cultural elements of its environment and integrates them in its personality to adapt to society. To socialize is also the process by which the child learns to differentiate the acceptable from unacceptable and becomes a member of society internalizing norms, customs and values. In this way, a world that pre-exists birth is internalized.

It is necessary to make reference to a second point which is the traditional exclusion of women from the sphere of exercising power. This implies, in the first place, exclusion with respect to the use of violence to achieve power since, throughout history, the use of violent methods has been one of the most important channels to access power. On the other hand, and taking into account that violence always is an exercise of power (Fisas, 1998), the fact of having remained outside of its realm also has limited the possibilities of women to act in a violent manner.

Therefore, these vital experiences of knowing the value of life along with their exclusion with respect to favorable contexts in the exercise of violence have shaped a certain social predisposition in many women to create tight bonds with the idea of practicing peace. Moreover,

“the so-called male commitment to war from time immemorial has been recurrently used, but more since the Modern Age, to justify the privilege that patriarchy has offered them as individuals and citizens to the detriment of women that don't allow themselves to be seduced by flags, banners, badges or emblems. At various times war has dazzled men of all societies for which, one after another, they have offered up their taxes, emotions and blood in tribute”. (Lorenzo, 2003: 85)

A female socialization traditionally tied to values linked to peace can be contrasted with male socialization pervaded with values related to violence and militarism, especially in what is referred to as the transition to adulthood, popularly known as "becoming a man". The practice of violence has been considered as an accepted behavior within the parameters of normal society. It has led to the historic idealization of war and the construction of the heroic warrior figure that finds comfort in the woman who is peaceful by nature. The historic division of social space (not just of work) has perpetuated this dichotomy between peace/violence – feminine/masculine – power/submission.

However, and despite this idealization of the female figure as a peaceful being, the contributions that women have made to the building of peace in their societies have not received equal recognition and very frequently have remained invisible. In other words, when the ideal peaceful woman is transformed into an active political individual with

objectives of social transformation, she then is relegated to the background with hardly any possibility of impact in the public or political realm.

Nevertheless, the frequent political invisibility of many women's movements has been on occasion very useful in the work of peace building. Especially in fragmented and polarized societies, it has allowed them to come closer to women from the supposed enemy community which wouldn't have been as easy between their male counterparts. As many feminist and pacifist authors have pointed out, women, in their special relationship with peace, have been capable of organizing themselves to break down barriers between groups and bring divided and conflicted communities together (Magallón, 2004).

Women have been capable of building bridges of dialogue and empathy in polarized societies that go beyond the reasons for the armed confrontation and the deep seated hatred and polarization, seeking points and positions in common from which to initiate a rapprochement and the search for new ways of living together. The founding Israeli and Palestinian women of the organization Women in Black, women from different warring communities during the armed conflict in the Balkans, Catholic and Protestant women that formed the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, are just some examples of mixed, plural and heterogeneous alliances that have raised their voices for the purpose of putting an end to armed conflicts.

In addition, these alliances established between women have been capable of transcending the core political, ethnic, or religious divisions. This constitutes a palpable demonstration that coexistence, reconciliation and dialogue are possible from recognizing another legitimate interlocutor with whom common ground can be found. At times, however, women that have dared to cross the border and have dialogue with other women have been labeled as traitors to their community, homeland or identity. Women, from their identity as such, and their own socio-symbolic order (from which it is feasible to transcend determined social divisions) have demonstrated that the building of emotional bonds and identification with women on the other side of the battle line is possible.

4. The Participation of Women in the Peace Process

As it has been pointed out in the beginning of this document, through the peace process differences between two parties in conflict are attempted to be resolved satisfactorily. These are enormously complicated processes that must confront numerous obstacles and in which the possibility of failure is not small. On the other hand, once begun they become unique opportunities for transformation of a violent reality into a new context of peace. In addition, they become exceptional opportunities for the transformation of exclusionary and unjust societies into new regimes based on principles of inclusion and participation. However, the peace process, especially in the phases in which formal negotiations to put an end to the violence between the two parties in conflict are carried out, is a sphere characterized in large part by the exclusion of the participation of women.

In very few of the peace negotiations currently taking place or that have been undertaken in the last few years have women participated either as members of delegations charged with achieving an accord or through their own and parallel areas in the central process of such negotiations. Some authors also speak of the masculinization of the very concept of peace process. It is usually resorted to at the time when the military parties and the men who occupy a position of power decide on a joint process of putting an end to the violence (in juxtaposition to the numerous attempts to change or stop it led by the civilian society). In addition, it is also customary to adopt a masculinized concept of the conflict in these negotiations which are perceived only as disputes over access to power and control of territory (Bell, 2004).

What are the Principal Obstacles that Explain this Exclusion and Masculinization of the Peace Process?

The point of departure for this response must be the patriarchal framework in which these processes take place since this continues to be the framework in which most societies are structured. However, beyond this general context, what specific aspects continue to make this participation difficult?

In the first place it should be emphasized that among the factors usually alluded to can be highlighted the fact that women's access to decision making positions continues to be

restricted. The Secretary General of the UN stated this in its report on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action agreements⁷ which was written with the purpose of revising the Platform ten years after its passing. Since most of the people that participate in peace negotiations come from backgrounds where they have the ability to exercise power and make decisions, the result is the exclusion of women.

Here it is necessary to add that this exclusion doesn't refer only to the parties directly involved in the conflict but can also refer to the third part of the triangle, the one occupied by people or institutions in the capacity of mediators or facilitators in these processes. In this area, masculinized work has also been discussed. This has been supported in a study published by the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue (Potter, 2005) in which they analyzed what people constituted the *Track One* or Official Diplomacy mediators, as well as the characteristics required of these people. The aim was to find out why these positions are hardly ever occupied by women. The conclusion of this study was that there were two basic obstacles⁸ that were impeding equitable participation of men and women in the role of mediation: the lack of political will and weak arguments such as the perception on the part of some mediators that the participation of women occupying this position disproportionately diverts the agenda of the negotiations towards so-called "women's issues". In addition, they note factors such as the difficulty of access to common interests which facilitate the establishment of informal relationships (of enormous importance in the peace process), where participants in the negotiation establish bonds of a personal nature and thus are open to greater trust. All this being in addition to the usual reticence of the warring parties to accept outside intervention and compounded by the fact that the intervention is led by a woman.

Finally it should be noted that the leadership of some of the armed groups as well as the governments are distrustful of considering women's participation or including women's issues on the agenda as something relevant or important for the course of the

⁷ The Beijing Platform for Action, passed during the IV World Women's Conference and brings to fruition the international agreement to reach the goals of women's equality, growth, and peace from all over the World. It was the consolidation of the commitments gained during the United Nation's Decade of the Woman, 1976-1985. The Platform constitutes the international agenda for the empowerment of women.

⁸ The study shows that despite the difficulties confronting women in achieving positions of responsibility usually occupied by men as mediators in current conflicts, those that manage to do so are able to thanks to their higher training and technical capabilities. In addition, arguments such as the difficulty in reconciling family life with this type of work would not be valid in this case since the average age of these individuals (from 55 to 75) puts them at a time in life when they are not caring for small children.

negotiations. Questions relative to the emancipation of women have been considered as secondary to many armed groups and always contingent on the attainment of other objectives such as national liberation. Rarely are these issues perceived as a path that can be covered at the same time.

So the challenge is in being able to transfer to all of the parties involved the importance of taking advantage of a key moment such as the peace process in order to encourage room for change that will give way to more equitable structures and relationships. The exclusion from these processes customarily results from previous exclusion from the decision making sphere as well as the institutions that arise from the peace agreements and the consolidation of sexist and discriminatory societies.

The complexity of this type of process where any false step can lead to a break in the negotiations and the restarting of armed hostilities means added difficulties. As Bell points out,

“To impact on the negotiation process, and on the resulting peace agreement and its implementation, women must simultaneously find ways of accessing the process as conceived of without them, while reframing the issues that are at the heart of the process” (Bell, 2004: 99)

Thus, women who participate in the negotiations confront a double challenge. The first being the one of participating in the previously established structures whose organization responds to the needs, interests, and way of doing things of those who initiated the peace process. And secondly, the one of transforming these negotiating structures that in all probability were constructed from patriarchal schemes that haven't taken into account how difficult it is for many women to participate in the negotiations. These can come from various sources. The lack of participation can be due to the direct exclusion of women but also it can result from other causes, such as the lack of available economic resources or other issues such as the difficulty of reconciling family life and the responsibilities of private and domestic life with active participation in the political sphere.

What are the Implications of Women's Participation in the Peace Process?

Having analyzed the obstacles which women must face in order to become active protagonists in peace negotiations it is necessary to answer the question: what can the participation of women bring to the peace process? Often, and with the intention of justifying the exclusion of women from these processes, the fact is put forward that men and women do not have any reason to act differently in the course of these peace negotiations, so that there is no reason that their presence should lead to a different outcome. Furthermore, it is argued that women that have the chance to intervene are not necessarily representative of the rest of the women in their society. It can be added that these questions are never made in the other direction, are the men that negotiate the peace representative of their fellow man? What would happen if there were no men at the peace table?

As has been previously noted, in all societies that see themselves affected by armed conflicts women are the driving force behind a number of everyday initiatives of mediation and peace building, especially in deeply divided societies.

This heritage that women have accumulated throughout history and through their everyday activities means a highly valuable contribution to peace building that, unfortunately, in most occasions, remains hidden and undervalued. If women's mediation activities were to recover a major role in the development of the peace negotiations and bringing together parties in conflict, perhaps some of the difficulties that those who decide to take on resolution of armed conflicts must struggle with (distrust, lack of empathy, disdain for the enemy, preventing their acceptance as a partner in dialogue, among others), would be more easily overcome. Rethinking how to incorporate this knowledge that leaves behind flawed dynamics and insurmountable obstacles represents a challenge that must be confronted if new avenues and tools are to be explored for ending armed violence.

Incorporating the gender perspective in the mediation process of armed conflicts not only represents women's greater participation but the incorporation of a whole series of values that, fortunately and despite all, has remained sheltered from patriarchal societies and its fascination for violence. This implies confronting the process that leads to the

signing of peace accords not only from a new view and methodology, but incorporating issues in the negotiations that are perhaps not on the agenda of higher policy, but that form part of the daily life of the entire population that is affected by the armed conflict.

The difference that the participation of women can mean in the peace process can also come from the fact that women are used to adopting a more inclusive focus with respect to security and tackling key social and economic issues for the population affected by the conflict that would be ignored if not included by them (International Crisis Group, 2006). In addition, most women that come to participate in the peace process have very different backgrounds and expertise from the men, who whether government or opposition, generally come from the political or military sphere. The women usually have activist backgrounds in civilian society and often have experienced first hand the consequences of the armed conflict (Anderlini, 2000). And yet, when the peace agreements are signed without their participation they must face the consequences of decisions that have been made that do not take into account their experiences and opinions. As Hanan Ashrawi, who was spokesperson for the Palestinian National Authority from 1991 to 1994, stated:

“Women come face to face with the realities that are created by decisions made at the peace table. [...] They bear the brunt, they pay the price, they don't always reap the rewards. The rewards are for the men; the consequences are for the women”
(Anderlini, 2000: 34)

But when women have the opportunity to contribute, the chances that the agreements and supporting documents will be designed to achieve more equality and a less discriminatory and more inclusive society are much greater. This doesn't mean that the mere presence of women at the peace table is going to result in this, but indeed it is more likely that a perspective aimed at the transformation of a patriarchal society into another without these rigid values will be adopted. Perhaps the principal difference that women will contribute to the discussions will be the vision of what is the peace and what is the conflict, as noted by Sanam N. Anderlin:

“Given the stark realities faced by many women caught in the midst of the conflict, it is not surprising that women tend to articulate peace in terms of meeting basic security needs. Their vision may be based on a vision of the political, economic, personal, community, food, health and environmental issues that arise in their daily life experiences.” (Anderlini, 2000: 33)

UN Security Council Resolution 1325, A Before and After Story in the Participation of Women in the Peace Process?

In October 2000 the UN Security Council debated for the first time in its history the role of women in various types of peace building initiatives in their societies and at the same time, how due to the very nature of contemporary armed conflicts, the consequences differed between men and women.

The debate and approval of resolutions is part of the daily work of the Security Council. Other than a few well known exceptions, these resolutions rarely have significance beyond the limited political, military and diplomatic circles of the countries that make reference to them. Nevertheless, through the very process of it coming into being and the events leading up to it becoming a basic tool for the construction of peace from a gender perspective, Resolution 1325, has acquired a series of particular characteristics that are distinct from other resolutions approved by the Security Council. These have turned it into a dynamic document as well as a method of pressure that many women’s organizations around the world have converted into their own. What does UN Security Council Resolution 1325 say about the participation of women in peace negotiations?

“[...] Recognizing that an understanding of the impact of armed conflict on women and girls, effective institutional arrangements to guarantee their protection and full participation in the peace process can significantly contribute to the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security., [...] Encourages the Secretary General to implement its strategic plan (A/49/587) calling for an increase in the participation of women at the decision-making levels in conflict resolution and peace processes; [...] Calls on all actors involved when negotiating and implementing peace agreements, to include a gender perspective, including, inter alia:

- a) The special needs of women and girls during repatriation and resettlement and for rehabilitation and reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction;
- b) Measures that support local women's peace initiatives and indigenous processes for conflict resolution, and involve women in all of the implementation mechanisms and peace agreements;
- c) Measures that ensure the protection of and respect for human rights of women and girls, especially as they relate to the constitution, the electoral system, the police and the judiciary;"⁹

As has been mentioned, the very genesis of the Resolution is due to particular circumstances. Its debate and earlier approval by the Security Council are born of a political lobbying process led by women's organizations involved in the area of peace building. They were hoping that the high authority of the United Nations would take up the matter five years after the Beijing Conference had fired the starting gun to begin considering the effects of armed conflicts on women as an area of special concern for the international community. As a result, pressure from the civilian society led to it being taken up by the part of the Security Council that handled this issue. Subsequently, the very Security Council would make a report on the same material that would have to be subject to revision within a few years.¹⁰

After its approval, Resolution 1325 has become a reference document for women's organizations in many countries affected by armed conflicts. They have used it to demand from their governments and those actors in the international community involved in this specific context that the needs of women shall be taken into account and that they have a seat at the negotiating table to end armed conflicts. Resolution 1325 has been translated by women's organizations into 70 African, Asiatic and European languages in an attempt to bring it closer to the local population of those countries affected by armed conflicts or that are playing a role in peace processes.

But how has the existence of this resolution changed the area of women's participation in the peace process? Can it be said that it should have resulted in a tipping point? Since

⁹ The complete text of Resolution 1325 of the UN Security Council can be seen at http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf

¹⁰ The UN Secretary General has created reports on the issue of women, peace, and security in 2002 <http://www.peacewomen.org/un/UN1325/sGREport.pdf> and in 2005 <http://www.un.org.womenwatch/ods/s-2005-636-E.pdf>

its approval in 2000 the questions relative to the link between peace and gender dimension have been earning a relatively important place on international agendas. Without wanting to put an overly positive spin on it, which would not offer a accurate image of the reality, it should be highlighted that this theme has progressively permeated debates, reports, working groups and even certain methodologies in the entire spectrum of areas that can broadly be considered peace building. Of course, it has also touched the peace processes themselves, although paradoxically, perhaps this is one of the areas in which less advances have been made. Thus, and by way of example of this double reality, the language of gender has become more and more present in these areas and many departments of organizations such as the United Nations have created the position of expert or consultant in gender issues. Nevertheless, few women have participated in the negotiation of peace agreements that have been approved and signed over the last six years.

This greater formal presence of the gender dimension has not had a parallel translation with regard to the achievement of specific results; women continue to be absent or in most cases enjoy a marginal presence in the area of decision making and at the formal negotiating table of the peace process. Their influence continues to be limited and with regards to the impact of the violence in most armed conflicts, certain experiences, such as sexual violence, which affect them disproportionately, are not addressed but generalized, as has already been mentioned at the beginning of this paper. As an example of the first issue, one of the most recently signed peace agreements that ended the armed conflict in Aceh, in Indonesia, not only did they not take into account the needs and contributions of women, but the two delegations that signed the agreement (the government and the armed opposition group) were wholly made up of men.

The advances in the formal and organized plan haven't been accompanied by comparable advances in the area of specific actions, thus it is a challenge remaining for the immediate future. Equal conditions for participation of women in the peace process requires a more determined and transforming commitment that goes beyond the good intentions that result only in changes to the language.

Without any doubt, the international community can play a role of enormous importance here and can mean a change of direction. Those who are in a third-party position should incorporate this theme in the agenda and make the parties see the necessity of working from the inclusive approach.

Therefore, what should be the role of the international community to prevent the peace process from becoming a breeding ground for discrimination and exclusion? Resolution 1325 establishes a clear framework in this regard, noting the responsibilities that must be assumed not only by the governments, but also by the UN Secretary General, and in general by all those that in some way take part in these negotiation processes.

In addition, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), recognizing this crucial role of the international community, has drawn up a series of recommendations to achieve the effective participation of women in peace processes (UNIFEM, 2005). With these recommendations it attempts to direct the efforts of the international community into incorporating the gender perspective from the very beginning of the peace processes in which they are involved. In the first place, UNIFEM notes a series of key factors that are necessary as much for guaranteeing the involvement of women as for the inclusion of the gender perspective: the creation of a social foundation of women with an agenda that integrates the gender perspective and its incorporation at the negotiating table (especially in the early moments of the process); the establishment of structures that will facilitate the contributions of women and supply strategic support (through the course of the negotiations); taking on women's priorities in the peace agreement and assuring an implementation of it that is sensitive to gender (to guarantee benefits for women in the post-fighting phase).

In short, it is more likely that the opinions of women will be taken into account if they are available in a common agenda that brings together different groups of women, going beyond their social, political and geographic differences. The international community can play a key role in facilitating the construction of a network between women who are seen as affected by the armed conflict. Other key contributions can be that of offering support so that these groups will be able to ask for a seat at the negotiating table or to put pressure on the armed parties so that they will include them in their delegations.

Their Own Seat or a Shared Seat

The participation of women in peace negotiations is taking place in two basic ways. In the first place they participate as members of the delegations at each part of the negotiations in apparent equality with their male counterparts. That is, the women that are involved do so as another person on the negotiating team. They often participate alone, in other words, there is only one woman per delegation and often she is the only women, being that often the other parties are entirely comprised of men. Women that have been involved in these types of experiences talk about the difficulties they have undergone in order to speak and give their opinions. They talk about the extra effort entailed to be able to show that they are on the same level as their male counterparts. As occurs in other areas, women that participate in basically male oriented surroundings must prove their capabilities in order to become deserving of consideration and recognition since it is not taken for granted that they will be capable of carrying out their responsibilities and obligations in the same way as men. This is confirmed by Luz Méndez, for example, who was the only woman that participated in the peace negotiations that ended the armed conflict in Guatemala in 1996 and formed part of the negotiating team of the then armed opposition group URNG.¹¹

Nevertheless another possible scenario is the one of a seat only made up by women that occurs parallel to the central negotiating table. The example that best illustrates this type of experience is that of the peace negotiations in Sri Lanka. In December 2002, within the framework of negotiations that were trying to end an armed conflict that had started in 1983, the creation of a seat incorporating women in the peace negotiations was agreed to during the third meeting between the Government of Sri Lanka and the armed opposition group LTTE. Until then, in clear contradiction with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 approved two years earlier, women had not been participating in the conversations. The gender subcommittee (as the members called it) that began work in March 2003 was formed by five women of the Government and five by the LTTE and facilitated by an advisor of the Norwegian Government, A. N. Heiberg, former President of the International Federation of the Red Cross.

¹¹ Speech by Luz Méndez in the symposium “las Mediaciones Femeninas, una práctica de paz”, organized in April 2005 by the Institut Català de les Dones.

The committee decided that the subjects that would form part of its agenda would be the following: socio-economic development, political participation, reintegration, reconciliation, health and education. In addition, the subcommittee had to form guidelines for the incorporation of the gender perspective at the different negotiating tables and subcommittees established within the framework of the official process. Nevertheless, the breakdown of official peace negotiations impeded the gender subcommittee (organically linked to them) from continuing its work. They may have been able to continue their work had there not been a direct dependence on the official peace process. The Tamil and Sinhalese women had been able to devise a common agenda on what to discuss, established their own priorities, and with a common point of departure: the recognition of the devastating effects that the conflict had on the lives of women. Perhaps a seat less tied to the official negotiations between the Government and LTTE would have allowed the women to continue with their own process of negotiations.

The creation of parallel and unique women's seats can be a successful formula for giving a voice to women that otherwise would be excluded. In addition it can create a climate of confidence in which women can express their opinions without being uncomfortable or inhibited by the presence of men. Nevertheless, it is necessary that these seats be given authority and that they enjoy recognition by the part of those that constitute the central core of the negotiations. There is a risk that the setting up of gender committees or women's committees will be a mere cosmetic treatment to only give the impression that a peace negotiation is taking place that incorporates the gender perspective and women's opinions but which in fact is not doing so.

5. Final Reflections.

In their transition from defenceless victims of armed conflicts to active participants in peace building, women affected by these conflicts are also reclaiming a seat at the negotiating table when countries decide to start on the road from war to peace. Taking these different experiences of the armed conflict as a starting point, with traditions of providing sustenance to their communities and families in the middle of the savagery of

war and destruction and with a distinct heritage from that of men who presume the active role in the political sphere, many women's and activist organizations for peace want to have the voices of women heard when decisions are made that can lead to the transformation of a society.

The obstacles that they must face are not few, as evidenced by the fact that they continue to be for the most part bystanders to the peace negotiations. It is still mainly men who negotiate the peace and ending of an armed conflict. Nevertheless, and primarily after the approval of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, this issue has been acquiring greater importance on the international agenda. Its importance is still basically formal in character. Nevertheless, it has made it easier on some occasions for women to be able to achieve a seat at the negotiating table from which they can offer their suggestions and opinions on war and peace. There is still a long way to go before reaching full normalization of participation in peace negotiations. Meanwhile, the agreements signed continue to suffer from both excluding women and obeying a patriarchal logic in which there is no room for women's suggestions and experiences.

Understanding that the participation of women can be one of the ways to achieve sustainable peace agreements with greater guarantees of not returning to armed violence must be the first step in the transformation of societies marked by violence. To rebuild from this new inclusive and non-patriarchal view must be the goal.

In the coming years, will we be able to answer the question: where were the women when the peace agreements were signed?

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