

## WOMEN AND POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION: ISSUES AND SOURCES

**By: Birgitte Sørensen**

*© United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) and Programme for Strategic and International Security Studies (PSIS). Short extracts from this publication may be reproduced unaltered without authorization on condition that the source is indicated. For rights of reproduction or translation, application should be made to UNRISD, Palais des Nations, 1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland. UNRISD welcomes such applications. The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, the Programme for Strategic and International Security Studies, or the War-torn Societies Project concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the War-torn Societies Project, UNRISD or PSIS.*

*Photo credit: Bosnia-Herzegovina, UNICEF/95-0538/Roger Lemoyne*

### THE WAR-TORN SOCIETIES PROJECT

The War-torn Societies Project aims to assist the international donor community, international organizations, NGOs and local authorities and organizations to understand and respond better to the complex challenges of postconflict periods. Once fighting has stopped, a fragile ceasefire must be transformed into a lasting political settlement; emergency relief provided; and a process of political, economic, social and psychological rebuilding initiated to lay the basis for future sustainable development. These are gigantic tasks; they are interrelated, with progress in one depending in the others and they must, therefore, be tackled simultaneously.

The project has been jointly initiated by UNRISD and PSIS in response to a widely recognized need for systematic analysis of present experience and practice; it intends to clarify policy options for both international and local actors and to redefine relevant strategies. It also aims to contribute to a better integration of different forms of international assistance - humanitarian, economic, political and military - within a coherent policy framework, to encourage a better alignment of external assistance with local efforts and thus to bring about a more efficient and effective use of limited and seriously overstretched local and international resources.

### **The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNHISO)**

The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development is an autonomous United Nations research organization focusing on the most pressing problems of social development. The Institute emphasizes a holistic, multidisciplinary and political economy approach in its work. Current research themes include gender, poverty and well-being; business responsibility for sustainable development; public sector reform and crisis-ridden states; globalization and citizenship; information technologies and social development; grassroots initiatives and knowledge networks for land reform in developing countries; and emerging mass tourism in developing countries.

### **The Programme for Strategic and International Security Studies (PSIS)**

The Programme for Strategic and International Security Studies is a centre for training, research, documentation and consultation on questions of international and regional conflict and security, arms control and disarmament. It is part of the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva and is financed by public and private contributors.

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Women and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Issues and Sources is a review of literature dealing with political, economic and social reconstruction from a gender perspective. One of its objectives is to go beyond conventional images of women as victims of war, and to document the many different ways in which women make a contribution to the rebuilding of countries emerging from armed conflicts. Special attention is given to women's priority concerns, to their resources and capacities, and to structural and situational factors that may reduce their participation in reconstruction processes. A second aim is to shed light on how post-war reconstruction processes influence the reconfiguration of gender roles and positions in the wake of war, and how women's actions shape the construction of post-war social structures.

Following the brief Introduction is a chapter on political reconstruction. It raises questions concerning women's participation in peace-building and democratization. In order to illuminate women's expectations regarding their roles and status in post-war society, the chapter opens with a brief discussion of how and to what extent various liberation movements have addressed women's issues. While some movements considered women's issues to detract attention from the main goal of their struggle, many movements regarded women's liberation as an integral dimension of their overall struggle for social justice. The fact that women's issues were included on the political agendas and that women themselves were mobilized to participate actively in the fighting is demonstrated to have been instrumental in raising women's political awareness and their expectations of state and society today.

The ensuing discussion of women's participation in formal and informal peacebuilding activities shows that in most cases women are excluded from formal peace negotiations.

Such high-level negotiations are identified as male domains, which means that they also employ discourses and practices that are closer to men's reality than to women's. As a result, women also lack direct influence in the identification of reconstruction priorities that are usually part of a peace agreement. Nevertheless, women are demonstrated to play an influential role through their work in grassroots organizations working for peace and reconciliation. From within these organizations, women constantly challenge the authorities and other members of society with demands for peace, nondiscrimination, accountability, recognition of human rights, etc. While always positioned on the margins, these organizations show their ability to mobilize large numbers of women, and to translate individual grievances into legitimate social concerns. Moreover, many of them play a significant role in building a new culture of peace at the local level by organizing peace education and community-based reconciliation and social reconstruction activities.

Democratization processes are generally applauded, because they are assumed to guarantee accountability and to grant all citizens the possibility to participate in political life. However, studies on elections and decentralization demonstrate several flaws when it comes to women's position. Many countries emerging from armed conflict have adopted new constitutions that grant women equal political, social and economic rights, and many governments have developed new quota systems to ensure women equal representation in decision-making institutions at all levels. However, the implementation of these laws and good intentions often runs into major obstacles. At the government level the problems include a lack of financial resources and a lack of gender awareness or political will among staff. Other major problems are to be found at the social level, where the new discourse of gender equality may run counter to existing social norms regarding gender roles. The examples discussed show that, in some cases, local authorities and male members of society may discourage or prohibit women from participating in political activities. Moreover, the fact that the division of labour has not changed in favour of women, but rather added to their burden, also poses practical limitations on the possibilities for active involvement of women.

Despite these constraints, women have made remarkable contributions in many countries. In the context of elections women have organized civic education targeting women, and they have convinced women of the importance of their vote. Educated women have organized legal counselling to inform women about their rights and to help them exercise these rights.

Chapter three deals with economic reconstruction and the strategies that women develop to cope with war-induced changes in the economic environment and to meet the growing responsibilities for the survival and well-being of family and relatives. The focus is on the relationship between women's economic activities and their socioeconomic position.

The first section of the chapter concentrates on women's involvement in agricultural production, which often constitutes a major source of income. In addition to problems of landmines, a lack of agricultural inputs and farm implements, a shattered infrastructure and the inaccessibility of markets, etc., which equally trouble male farmers, women face a number of particular challenges. First, women often lack legal rights to land and other

resources which, in the context of social disintegration where a large number of women become single providers, may reduce their ability to survive on farming alone. In some countries, women are organizing themselves to lobby state and local authorities for increased access to such resources, but in many cases women are forced off the land and are compelled to seek other sources of income. Another problem facing women in agriculture is the dismantling of traditional work groups due to displacement, divorce, death, etc. This has often resulted in the creation of new co-operative associations and voluntary self-help groups which combine old institutions and current social conditions.

When cultivating the family land is no longer an option, some women join the casual agricultural labour force. While this opportunity enables women to employ their skills and to earn an income, recent analyses suggest that this may in fact mean that women come to occupy a marginal position in the new structure of rural social stratification.

Another area which proved to be of great importance to women's livelihoods was the burgeoning informal sector, with petty trade and small-scale businesses as major sources of income. The documentation of women's involvement in this sector showed a great variety in experiences. Some women took up activities in which they had also been involved prior to the war, but many engaged in innovative projects, even when it meant a break with existing social norms, as they took up jobs perceived to be male jobs. Some women established businesses on the basis of local resources and demand, while others established elaborate trading networks which cut across ethnic boundaries and national borders. Again, women's capacity to build and mobilize extensive social networks had a positive impact. But while women generally proved to be eager and capable entrepreneurs, the sustainability of their enterprises was often constrained by a lack of capital and marketing skills, not to mention the fact that the sector itself is highly insecure and fluctuating. Moreover, women's economic success would in some cases result in social stigmatization and exclusion, due to clashes with prevailing norms or jealousy.

Finally, the formal sector is discussed. For various reasons, societies emerging from war usually experience a high unemployment rate, and women are often particularly marginalized with regard to access to formal employment. In some cases this is a result of the fact that women generally have poorer educational qualifications, but research also suggests that discriminatory practices are still frequent. One of the few areas where women seem privileged is the social sector, but because this sector is often exposed to budgetary cuts, women's access to income and status from this field is reduced. Nevertheless, women continue to perform related tasks, but as semi-professionals or even as volunteers.

The fourth chapter focuses on social reconstruction, specifically on the rehabilitation of social services (health care and education) and wider issues of social integration. With regard to the first aspect, the main questions are whether the social sector recognizes women's particular needs, and whether it seeks to build on women's skills and capacities. The discussion on social integration shifts the focus to how women are positioned in processes of inclusion and exclusion, and to how women's strategies and activities influence social integration.

Studies on the rehabilitation of social services suggest that even though women's needs and rights are increasingly recognized officially, women continue to be discriminated against with regard to access to education for social and cultural reasons. Health care and other social facilities also remain inadequate, with consequences not only for women's health, but also for their ability to participate in political and economic life. The material clearly demonstrates that social issues were generally given high priority by women themselves, and many women in Post-Conflict societies make a major contribution to their rehabilitation. In rural as well as urban areas, women have re-established primary education for children as a means to build local capacities and influence their socialization, and women are often involved in providing primary health care and socioeconomic assistance on a self-help basis to people in crisis. However, as noted above, while such activities are generally welcomed, they are often considered but a natural extension of women's domestic obligations and hence are not remunerated or responded to with offers of training.

In addition to ordinary health care problems, intrastate wars produce a number of specific health problems known as psycho-social traumas. These traumas may stem from experiences of forced displacement, torture, rape, violence, witnessing killings, etc. In some cases, women have been particularly vulnerable to this kind of assault on mind and body. But women have also been very active in addressing the scars that such experiences leave, organizing voluntary organizations which offer medical and psychological treatment. Moreover, they have helped former victims to overcome their distress and reintegrate, by offering skills training and income-generating activities. Another issue which has been addressed by women's organizations is the growth of violence within post-war societies. Through classroom education and workshops, women have sought to raise awareness about violence against women and to change the attitudes that consider such violence acceptable.

As the discussion on social integration points out, there has long been a tendency to focus exclusively on the reintegration of returnees, internally displaced persons and demobilized soldiers, or of persons who have become marked and marginalized due to torture, disability, widowhood, etc. However, to the extent that any post-war society is inevitably undergoing profound changes in its socioeconomic and political composition, the issue of integration is relevant to all members of society. This chapter focuses on this aspect from a gender and family perspective, and shows how integration often also has disintegrative aspects. Newly gained economic freedom and independence, long years of separation and exposure to new social environments and attitudes, new perceptions of the role of the family and its members, and forced migration in search of employment, all contribute to continued dismantling of existing social institutions and the establishment of new ones. Social integration, in other words, is not simply about "coming home", but about defining new guiding social values and establishing corresponding relationships and institutions based on a combination of factors including kinship, socioeconomic interests, and shared experiences and circumstances.

In the final chapter, conventional conceptualizations of women in conflict and Post-Conflict situations are examined. The chapter also contains some suggestions for

alternative concepts and approaches which appear to be better tools for our understanding of women's situation and thus for the development of programmes that will assist women in their multiple efforts to rebuild their lives.

It is pointed out that our understanding of women's roles in post-war societies and of their contributions to post-war reconstruction must go beyond the universalistic narrative of "women's experience of war". The specificity and diversity of women's experiences must be acknowledged. Only on this basis can we conduct comparative analyses and begin to develop a deeper general understanding of post-war reconstruction from a gender perspective. Second, the concluding chapter stresses the need to supplement the image of women as vulnerable victims with an image of women as a highly differentiated group of social actors, who possess valuable resources and capacities and who have their own agendas. Women influence the course of things, and their actions are constitutive of post-war societies. The reduction of women to targets and beneficiaries both fails to recognize their contributions and contributes to their marginalization. A third point stressed in the conclusion is the need for gender-specific data and gender-focused analysis. While special attention is given to women throughout the publication, so as to make visible the previously invisible, the aim has been to see women's situation within a gender framework which pays attention to how gender roles and relationships are continuously constructed and contested by different actors, and which recognizes the gender dimension inherent in all aspects of post-war reconstruction. The gender perspective is also relevant for the achievement of sustainable peace. As the analysis strongly suggests, the failure to recognize gender issues may produce new social tensions and contribute to the differentiating struggles over identity, status and power that are so distinctive for societies which have recently achieved peace.

## **PEACE-BUILDING ACTIVITIES**

*"Women and young people are rarely consulted during the political process of peace negotiations, yet they are often the ones who keep their communities alive - emotionally and physically - during the times of war"*  
(Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 1995: 3).

The process toward peace often follows two parallel paths. One consists of the formal peace negotiations, conducted by political leaders and in some cases mediated by external parties in an attempt to reach a peace agreement. The other consists of a wide range of informal activities, usually orchestrated by a highly heterogeneous group of voluntary grassroots organizations which seek to draw attention to particular issues in the transition to peace, and thereby influence the formal process.

## Formal negotiations for peace

Formal peace negotiations between representatives of the warring parties constitute an important element in the political rebuilding process, as they serve to define the basic power relations and often identify priorities for immediate post-war political activity. Insofar as female citizens have needs and priorities different from those of their male counterparts, they would themselves be interested in participating in such negotiations to ensure that adequate attention is given to their views. However, as most observers to formal national peace negotiations have pointed out, the negotiations tend to be male, high-level activities, and women are typically underrepresented in the involved international authorities, in negotiation teams representing the war-ringing parties, and in any other institution invited to the negotiation table (Ferris, 1993; Byrne, 1996b).

Commenting on the peace negotiations in Israel, Sharoni (1995: 11) writes: "Among the more general points I addressed were the exclusion of women from the negotiation table and how ironic it was that high-ranking Israeli generals, who spent a good portion of their lives waging war, have now become the ultimate voices of authority of peace while the perspectives and experience of women peace activists have been rendered trivial".

One often-noted exception to this rule is Somalia, where an invitation to participate in an early peace conference in Mogadishu was extended to Somali women, on the recommendation of the Ethiopian President and the Swedish Life and Peace Institute, the main conference facilitators (Byrne, 1996c). Women have also been present in later UN-facilitated peace conferences in Somalia and Ethiopia, but, as has been pointed out, their role has generally been restricted to that of observer, which does not allow them to influence the ongoing debate directly (Jama, 1996; Byrne, 1996d). Women's presence at some of these official conferences notwithstanding, it is also true that Somali culture and social structure generally preclude women from participating directly in decision-making processes. When at some point it was recommended that all regional representations to the Transitional National Council should include at least one woman, it turned out that many clans would not accept being represented by a woman (Jama, 1996).

A very different example of women's participation in peace negotiations is that of Palestine. The Palestinian delegation included several female members, among them the spokesperson Dr. Hanan Mikhail-Ashrawi. According to Sharoni (1995), women's high-level inclusion was a direct result of women's general political mobilization and their explicit demand for inclusion in the process which would determine the structure of future social and political institutions.

The inclusion of several women's organizations in the peace process in Guatemala was also rooted in the prior mass political mobilization of women. Women's organizations had already mushroomed during the conflict and many had clear intentions to become involved in the peace process and the shaping of future society. A cross-cultural coordinating committee emerged from these grassroots organizations to represent women's interests during the talks. Among the concerns most clearly expressed were issues of civil power, security, and the establishment of a democratic society (Mujeres Construyendo la Paz, 1995a and 1995b). However, as Krznaric (1997) points out in his

research on repatriation and reconstruction, what initially appeared as a coherent plea for peace and influence in decision-making became a multi-vocal noise when people became entangled in struggles for land and competition for development resources.

### **Work for peace at the grassroots level**

When we shift our focus to informal peace-building activities, often initiated at the peak of atrocities and instability, we see a very different picture. Here, women from all walks of life are among the most ardent participants, involved in a wide array of activities. However, as Ferris (1993: 34) tells us, the value of these activities is not always fully recognized: "One problem in analysing women's political actions is that the term 'political' has been largely defined by men. Women's activities in community or church groups, for example, are often labelled 'volunteer', 'charitable', or 'social' even though they have a political impact".

In discussions of women's engagement in peace-building, reference is often made to their nurturing and caring role, which would render their peace activities but a natural extension of their social domestic roles as wives and mothers. However, the history of internal wars also provides us with contrasting evidence about women's active involvement as combatants. Angola, El Salvador, Eritrea, Kenya, Lebanon, Liberia, Nicaragua, Sri Lanka, Uganda, and Vietnam all had female fighters, in some cases even holding high-level positions (Kanogo, 1987; Bennett et al., 1995). And in Rwanda women shocked the world by actively supporting and participating in the genocide. In still other conflicts, women play roles as mobilizers and support soldiers by providing food, primary health care, etc. As Ferris (1993: 6) points out, "most wars have been fought with the acquiescence and support of women".

The reasons women put forth for becoming combatants are as diverse as those of men and include forced recruitment, agreement with the goals of the war, or economic necessity, pointing to both political and socioeconomic motives. Women, like men, occupy many different roles in society, all of which are culturally and socially constructed (Byrne, 1996a). Thus, when women opt for an active role in peace work or other forms of political action, this too is a choice a choice which may be motivated by a lack of identification and association with the ongoing conflict Or by a personal experience of its socially and economically disruptive consequences and a wish to return to a more stable and less distressing situation (Wallace, 1991).

Summarizing the experiences of women from different battle zones, the editors of *Arms to Fight, Arms to Protect* remark that "many women perceived conflict as something entirely outside their control, a struggle for power at a level beyond their reach. But they recognized the effort that has to be made by every individual to rebuild society after conflict" (Bennett et al., 1995: 16). When women do not identify with the objectives of the war, or feel alienated from the mechanisms of war, its apparent irrationality and its destructive consequences easily overshadow its potential gains, resulting in a wish for its immediate termination and a return to stability.

Reflecting this awareness of the deeply destructive nature of war, the Mothers of Soldiers organization in Russia demonstrates in the streets, lobbies among officials of state institutions and employs other peaceful means to recover youths from the Russian army before they are socialized into the army's reputed culture of violence (Newsheet). In Guatemala, female members of the National Coordination of Guatemalan Widows (CON"IGUA) likewise *campaign against the conscription of young men*, not only to protect them from socialization into army culture, but because the mothers are economically dependent on their sons (In Brief, June 1996; Marcus, 1996c).

In recognition of the close relationship between children's socialization and people's responses to emerging conflicts, Somali women in Mogadishu have formed NGOs which, among other activities, organize *peace education for women*. In the programme, women are first made aware of the cultural values and norms they convey to children in their everyday interactions, and how these may contribute to discriminatory and violent behaviour. Then they learn alternative forms of socialization that stress equity and social justice and non-violent ways of dealing with tensions and conflicts (Jama, 1996; Warsame, 1996).

The fact that women recognize the connection between the domestic and public domains, or between the "home front" and the "war front" (Nnaemeka, 1997) has been noted by many writers on conflict and gender (Bennett et al., 1995; Byrne, 1996b; Jama, 1996). This intimate connection may not only intensify stress, but may also be used actively and strongly by women in their efforts to achieve peace and transformation. "Increasingly, women are realizing that in order to change society, they must begin with the family and the community, for 'women's capacity to challenge the men in their families, their communities, or their political movements will be a key to remaking the world'" (Enloe, quoted in Ferris, 1993: 47). Acknowledging women's contributions to peace, a report from the United Nations (1996) thus concludes that "women make an important but often unrecognized contribution as peace educators both in their families and in their societies".

The conviction that peace should be approached at community and family levels is one shared by many women's peace organizations, which use their central positions and extensive social networks creatively to put pressure on husbands and other male relatives to cease fighting and seek political, more peaceful solutions to conflict. The fact that women in many cases have loyalties to different kin groups as a result of local marriage patterns, increases their bargaining power and their ability to bring together warring parties. In Somalia, for example, women are reported to have played a significant role in the release of several hostages on that basis. However, as the frequency of illegal detention and rape suggests, such an intermediary position is not without danger (Dirasse, 1995).

In a similar vein, a paper prepared by the United Nations (1992) on Women and the Peace Process concludes that in many cases women play a major role in *shaping public opinion*, for example by organizing demonstrations. Reporting on the case of Somaliland, Warsame (1996: 60) remarks that urban women "organise peace demonstrations whenever there is a threat or an actual eruption of hostilities between two clans". Likewise, Power-Stevens (1996b: 95) stresses the active role of women,

recounting that Somali women held a demonstration for peace on International Women's Day in March 1995, chanting slogans such as "Somali women want peace not war". And according to Warsame (1996), women on some occasions physically attacked civilian men carrying arms.

Another example of women's mobilization comes from the local office of the global Women in Black movement in former Yugoslavia, which has constantly protested against the war. The organization initially was a large, ethnically mixed group, but when inter-ethnic co-operation succumbed to the nationalist discourse, it split into separate groups. In Mozambique, women organized demonstrations to protest against the government's failure to end the war. The issue of war and peace was explicitly linked to development and the impact of war on people's livelihoods: demonstrators emphasized the lack of protection for women and the lack of jobs (Chingono, 1996). Reports from Burma, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, and a host of other arenas of war show a similar pattern, reminding us how much is at stake for women.

Building on experiences in other parts of the world, a group of rural women united in the Association of the New Filipina (Kabapa) of the Coalition for Peace in the Philippines attempted to use *health as an incentive* for peace when they asked the warring parties to lay down weapons while children in the region were vaccinated (Peters, 1996). The strategy to use health initiatives to achieve peace has also been adopted in countries such as Afghanistan, Lebanon, the Sudan and Uganda, but the data available do not allow for a gender-based analysis of women's involvement and roles (Peters, 1996).

Focusing on the impact of war on women's health, security and rights, the Mothers for Peace association in former Yugoslavia succeeded not only in achieving the demobilization of thousands of young men, but also in *increasing public awareness* of human rights and landmines (Walsh, 1996). And in, for example, Argentina, El Salvador, Guatemala and Sri Lanka, where disappearances have commonly accompanied armed violence, women have formed nation-wide NGOs which urge state authorities to *investigate human rights violations* as part of the peace and reconciliation process. Moreover, these organizations address the politically sensitive issue of *impunity*, and assist victims with *compensation* claims (Byrne, 1996b; In Brief, June 1996; Ferris, 1993; Maquin, 1994; Schirmer, 1993; Stephen, 1995). The importance of such activities goes far beyond healing personal wounds by putting an end to painful uncertainty; they may help to restore confidence in authorities and regenerate a sense of community, solidarity and trust (Dirasse, 1995).

Although the above examples of peace activities can be said to have long-term consequences, few of them work directly toward the improvement of women's future status. In that respect, the experience of Guatemalan women in exile in neighbouring Mexico is interesting. Not only did they manage to influence quite successfully the conditions for repatriation by becoming represented in the Permanent Commissions and demanding that a *truth commission* be set up to investigate killings and disappearances, they also worked toward securing their *participation in future political institutions* in Guatemala (In Brief, June 1996; Byrne, 1996b; Marcus, 1996c; Maquin, 1994).

But even when political activities do not immediately improve women's situation, it is clear that they *generate or reinforce women's awareness of the political dimension of conflicts and of their own political position*, be it as victims of political violence or as a muted political group. The work for peace has also been identified by many women as *a unique opportunity to become organized*, an experience that can prove useful in other aspects of post-war rebuilding. And when such movements focus on women's shared social experiences, they may contribute both to *counteracting dominant stereotypes* of the "ethnic other" which are reinforced by war-time propaganda, and to *generating greater solidarity among women* across other lines of division. This has been true in Cyprus, Israel, Sri Lanka, former Yugoslavia and many other countries (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 1992; Family Rehabilitation Centre, 1993; Sharoni, 1995; War Report, 1995).

While there are obviously many positive results of women's national and local level work for peace, both for women and for society, it is also important to note its limitations. First of all, women's active efforts to move away from conflict and hatred are, as noted, *seldom matched by an inclusion in formal peace negotiations*. The most serious consequence of women's absence in the official peace process is that they are *deprived of a unique opportunity to include their particular views and concerns in the national political agenda*. Unfortunately there are no in-depth studies yet which indicate what the specific ramifications of women's inclusion or exclusion are.

Women's wish to be included in the peace negotiation process is more than a simple demand for numeric representation proportional to women's presence in a particular society. It is a demand based on the belief that institutions governed by men are unlikely to reflect the specific interests and views of the female population; instead, these institutions may reproduce and even reinforce the marginalized position of women in society. Second, it is a demand reflecting women's increasing awareness of the potential for transformation and reform in periods immediately preceding and following peace. While formal peace processes would undoubtedly benefit from women's participation, this should not divert our attention from the importance of their work at the grassroots level. Instead efforts should be made to find new ways to integrate the work done and the experiences harvested at grassroots level into the main exercise of peace-building.