

Briefing Note for International Women's Day: Bringing women's voices into peace building

International Women's Day, 8th March, is an opportunity for us to overcome differences of nationality, ethnicity, language, culture, class and politics and celebrate the common struggle for gender equality. Having started out as an occasion for women to protest against violation of their rights as far back as 1909¹, today International Women's Day provides opportunity to both assert the rights of women and to recognise the role played by men in redressing gender inequity².

Why dedicate a day exclusively to the celebration of the world's women? In adopting its resolution on the observance of International Women's Day, the UN General Assembly cited two reasons: to recognise the fact that securing peace and social progress and the full employment of human rights and fundamental freedom require the active participation, equality and development of women; and to acknowledge the contribution of women to the strengthening of international peace and security. March 8th each year provides an opportunity for reflection on women's struggle for equality, peace and development.

ActionAids commitment to gender equity is clearly set out in *Fighting Poverty Together*³ where we commit to enhance gender equity by enabling poor women, girls, men and boys to exercise equal rights and achieve equal well-being, influence and status. In our celebrations this year, we look at the importance of peace building for sustainable development and examine how women have contributed across the African continent in building peace.

... peace is inextricably linked with equality between women and men. ... the equal access and full participation of women in power structures and their full involvement in all efforts for the prevention and resolution of conflicts are essential for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.

President, UN Security Council, 2000

The role of women in conflict⁴

That women take on many different roles during wartime and have diverse experiences cannot be denied. Women are often actively engaged in combat, serve as couriers sending messages across camps and in some instances are even leaders of faction groups. However, largely women are affected negatively often displaced along with their children, burdened with the singular responsibility of maintaining their families under situations of physical insecurity, vulnerable to looting and the seizure of assets and susceptible to rape and direct suffering caused by the rape itself, including social stigmatisation, illness (from STDs) and in some cases death (from HIV/AIDs). The experience of conflict and the new roles that women play in conflict situations challenges gender relations, sometimes giving women increased status, skills and power. Yet, in the post-war peace building process, women are often not in the limelight and in some instances suffer a backlash from government and society against their newfound power and status.

¹ <http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/women/womday97.htm>, UN DAW public information website

² The United Nations began celebrating March 8 as *International Women's Day* in 1975.

³ *Fighting Poverty Together: ActionAids Strategy 1999-2003*, p.16

⁴ See *Mainstreaming Gender in Peacebuilding: A Framework for Action*, Donna Pankhurst

Yet, the fact that women are often not in the limelight and are missing from the ‘peace table’ does not mean that women do not play a significant role in building peace and preventing conflict. In the recently published *Peacebuilding in Africa: Case Studies from ActionAid* it is reported that men in Liberia attribute their safety to their women folk.

Most of us were saved from torture and even being killed by our wives and daughters. We now have so much confidence in them and appreciate them for what they are worth.

Peacebuilding in Africa: Case Studies from ActionAid, 2001, p.30

Drawing on experiences from ActionAid Country Programmes we aim to explore the following questions:

- Why is it important to involve women in peace building?
- What role can NGOs and grassroots organisations play in bringing women's voices into the peace building process?
- Why is it also important for men to work with women?

Women in peacebuilding

While it is acknowledged that women act as peacemakers in the family and community, they remain largely excluded from high level negotiations and the decision-making processes leading to peace. The key question is whether it is necessary to have women at these high level negotiations, do women make a difference? The answer is yes. Women articulate conflict and peace differently than men thus ensuring that they compliment each other is essential for sustainability⁵. There is a danger, however, of over-emphasising women's role as peace builders and ignoring women's active participation in conflict. Helping women to work together who have had very different experiences could potentially strengthen peace building.

But there are other roles that women play away from the ‘peace table’ which ActionAid recognises and supports. In Burundi for example, although the council of elders is strictly comprised of men it is known that the

Bashingantahe may suspend debates to privately consult with their wives. Similarly in Somaliland the practice of inter-clan marriage, ensures that women are a conduit for goodwill between clans and a means of reconciliation in the event of conflict initiating discussion and fostering peace.

Because of their dual kinship role, [women] were the only means of communication between belligerent clans at the height of the civil war. Material assistance and information between belligerent affinal groups were carried out by women who were allowed to cross clan border

Farah and Lewis, 1993

What is the role of NGOs

In recognition of the importance of women engaging in peace, ActionAid seeks to support a gendered approach to peace building. As an NGO we have a role to play in helping to ensure that women's political, legal and economic rights are embedded in new constitutions, policies and legislation emerging from the peace building process as well as in local peace making processes. However there is a dilemma here. While we seek to empower women through our work, we have no mandate to impose change.

Will we focus on women only?⁶

⁵ See *Women at the Peace Table: Making a Difference*. Sanam Anderlini

⁶ See *Do Weak States Undermine Masculinities?*, Dec 2000

Taking a gender approach to conflict and peace building means that is not sufficient to focus on women alone. There is increasing recognition that conflict and peace building work needs to explore "masculinities" and their relationship to violence. Gender roles and identities play a powerful role in the construction of values and behaviours that shape actions leading towards or away from conflict, such as honour, respect, dignity and power. Aggressive and dominant behaviours are common features of cultural definitions of masculinity. In some conflict situations, the more violent aspects of masculinity are played out in all aspects of men's lives to an extreme degree.

Work on "masculinities" is also bringing into focus a greater awareness of the implications for men of living in political and economic conditions in which it is virtually impossible to fulfil positive "masculine" roles as providers and protectors, husbands and fathers. This may lead to feelings of fear, intimidation, frustration and anger that is often expressed in alcohol abuse, domestic violence not to mention prolonging the cycle of political conflict.

Important is addressing resistance by male members of the community to enhancing women's formal participation in peace building. Social relationships in post conflict societies are sometimes unpredictable and open to change. There are opportunities for engaging men and women to explore the changes in their relations during conflict periods and to challenge gender stereotypes.



Ex female combatants now part of AA Sierra Leone peacebuilding programme

"Equal access and full participation of women in power structures and their full involvement in all efforts for the prevention and resolution of conflict are essential for the maintenance of peace and security" UN Beijing Platform for Action 1995

In light of this discussion ActionAid will continue to support:

- Understanding the individual role of women and men in conflict resolution;
- Working with women ex-combatants and survivors;
- Building associations for support;
- Providing skills and opportunities for women, young and old people.