

Leadership from the ground up: Research on Civil Society Perceptions of the meaning of Sustaining Peace for Local Populations, especially Local Women

Executive Summary

The promise of “maintaining international peace and security”¹ is one of the most important promises of the United Nations (UN), and securing peace one of its most central tasks. Yet, it is also a promise that has proven to be one of the most elusive. Conflict and instability continue to be widespread across the world. According to the Global Peace Index, in 2018, “global peacefulness declined for the fourth straight year (...) as a result of growing authoritarianism, unresolved conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, and increased political instability across the world.”² Recent years witnessed major security crises, such as the continued fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria; the Rohingya crisis, with hundreds of thousands fleeing from persecution in Myanmar to neighboring countries, such as Bangladesh; and further security deterioration in 92 countries.³ Even in countries where peace agreements have been signed – such as Colombia and the Philippines – their implementation remain slow and challenging, and high levels of violence and insecurity persist. In countries that do not experience armed conflict, other forms of insecurity – such as the shrinking of the democratic space, persecution, arrests or even murder of human rights activists – prevent the achievement of a peaceful society. The failure to achieve and sustain peace has devastating impacts on the lives of millions of people. As of June 2017, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees documented 68.5 million individuals forced to flee their homes.⁴ The negative impact of armed conflict on the achievement of development goals has also been documented.⁵

We need to do better to prevent conflict and build peace. Recognizing this, in 2014, the Presidents of the General Assembly and the Security Council requested an Advisory Group of Experts (AGE) to review the UN peacebuilding architecture. Completed in 2015, the review led to the adoption of UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2282 and a substantively identical General Assembly Resolution 70/262, which introduced the concept of Sustaining Peace. The two resolutions put forth a vision of peacebuilding that is context-specific, locally-driven and demands coherence, coordination and concerted actions across the UN system, Member States, civil society and other stakeholders.

We need to do better to prevent conflict and build peace.

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¹ United Nations Charter, Preamble. Available at: <http://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/un-charter-full-text/>

² Institute for Economics and Peace, “Global Peace Index 2018”, <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2018/06/Global-Peace-Index-2018-2.pdf>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, <http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

⁵ United Nations, *Millennium Development Goals Report*, 2014.

Sustaining Peace is a bold and novel agenda. Yet, while in many ways groundbreaking, it is akin to the approach utilized by local women’s rights organizations and other civil society groups, especially in their efforts to implement the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. The Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP), with support from UN Women, coordinates a global research to map and analyze the perspectives of women civil society on what Sustaining Peace means, and how it should be operationalized. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burundi, Canada, Colombia, Liberia, Libya, Mali, Mexico, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Sweden, Syria and Ukraine. A multi-lingual survey was also carried out in these countries, and beyond – receiving over 1,000 responses from 48 countries. In total, over **1,600 respondents from 50 countries** were reached through the survey, KIIs and FGDs.

Key Findings

Key Finding 1: Peace cannot be defined merely as an absence of war or armed conflict. To women’s civil society around the world, human security, development, responsible natural resource management, good governance and a harmonious community relying on non-violent conflict resolution are the true essence of peace.

Key Finding 2: The Sustaining Peace agenda should focus on long-term changes, such as supporting inclusive and accountable institutions; challenging militarized response to conflict and fostering a “culture of peace”; implementing sustainable development programs; and guaranteeing access to education and employment.

Key Finding 3: There has been some progress in the inclusion of women in both formal and informal peace processes. However, women remain excluded many peace processes – for example, in Libya. Moreover, there is still a need to ensure that the inclusion extends to all women – especially the youth, women with disabilities, indigenous women, refugees, internally displaced, and other marginalized groups – are fully included, and that their roles go beyond being observers or advisors to being key influencers and co-decision-makers.

Key Finding 4: Key challenges to women’s participation include patriarchal culture and societal practices, the political and economic exclusion of women, low levels of education and awareness, and the lack of resources and poverty. A key strategy to address these challenges is to create enabling conditions and platforms for grassroots women’s effective participation.

Key Finding 5: Women’s participation in the implementation of peace agreements is generally poorer than their participation in peace negotiations. The lack of political will, and insufficient support from governments, donors and the international community more broadly, were identified as key challenges. This highlights the need to maintain the pressure and provide support for women’s participation in the long-term, beyond the signing of peace agreements.

Key Finding 6: Despite the challenges they face, women are active in building and sustaining peace at both national and local levels. When they participate in the implementation of peace agreements, they help ensure that implementation is effective (especially at the local levels) and that it benefits everyone. Where there are no peace agreements, women work at the grassroots level to advocate and campaign for peace, as well as to deliver relief, promote sustainable development and address root causes of conflict, including climate change and gender inequality.

Key Finding 7: Donors need to ensure that their programming is more inclusive. Local communities, especially women, who have been largely excluded from program design, planning and implementation should participate meaningfully in all programs and projects on Sustaining Peace.

More programs specifically designed to promote women's full and equal participation in political decision-making and peace processes must be implemented.

Recommendations

- 1. Recognizing that peace is more than the absence of war, the UN, Member States and civil society should ensure that Sustaining Peace initiatives focus on long-term goals, such as: strengthening state institutions; fostering a culture of peace and non-violent conflict resolution; promoting access to social services, including health and education; and providing economic empowerment and employment opportunities.** This requires strengthening the nexus between peace and security efforts, in particular between the WPS agenda, and development and humanitarian action. (See Key Findings 1 and 2)
- 2. The UN should put pressure on governments to ensure women's meaningful participation in formal peace negotiations, crafting and implementation of peace agreements and political transitions,** and ensure that women civil society and women of diverse backgrounds are fairly represented. (See Key Findings 3 and 4)
- 3. The UN and Member States should ensure women's meaningful participation in formal peace negotiations, the crafting and implementation of peace agreements and political transitions,** and ensure that women's civil society and women of diverse backgrounds are fairly represented. (See Key Findings 3 and 4)
- 4. Member States should stop the use of violence and military interventions as a means of resolving conflicts.** They should also ensure that they do not contribute to illicit trafficking in arms and instead support non-violent, civil society-led initiatives in conflict resolution and prevention. (See Key Finding 1)
- 5. The UN and civil society should monitor and hold governments accountable for the inclusive implementation of peace agreements as well as other laws and policies related to gender equality and peace and security,** including the WPS Resolutions and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal 5 and Goal 16. (See Key Finding 5)
- 6. The UN and Member States should ensure that women, especially youth, women of all abilities, indigenous women, refugees, internally displaced, and other marginalized groups, are fully included at all stages of the implementation of peace agreements, as well as in all building and sustaining peace and conflict prevention initiatives.** They should guarantee that women's voices are heard, and that their contributions are recognized and supported. This entails making sure that gender-sensitive provisions and language proposed by women are included in the final peace agreement and not removed in the course of negotiations. Civil society should monitor and hold the UN and Member States to account on this matter. (See Key Findings 3 and 7)
- 7. Civil society from countries that have not experienced armed conflict in recent history should organize experience-sharing exchanges with local and grassroots civil society in conflict-affected and post-conflict countries,** to enhance solidarity, build capacity, and develop joint advocacy strategies for Sustaining Peace. (See Key Findings 4 and 5)
- 8. The UN, Member States and the donor community should support the meaningful participation of women from diverse backgrounds and sectors in the implementation of peace agreements after they are signed.** It is equally, if not more, important to ensure that women co-lead the implementation of peace agreements. The donor community should also eliminate socio-cultural and institutional barriers to women's participation including gender norms, lack of resources and lack of clear mechanisms for implementation. (See Key Findings 5 and 6)

9. **The donor community should increase funding for peacebuilding, conflict prevention and Sustaining Peace**, especially for initiatives led by women’s civil society, and make sure this funding is long-term and predictable. Such funding should also be made flexible and accessible to local organizations, and be available at all stages of Sustaining Peace: before, during and after conflict. Women should have access and opportunities to shape donor priorities – including through their meaningful participation in donor conferences. (See Key Finding 7)

The message of local women and civil society is clear: “We want to be heard in the discussions and decision-making on the Sustaining Peace agenda!”

On the eve of the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325, 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action, and 75th anniversary of the United Nations, it is more important than ever to reflect on more effective ways of preventing conflict, building and sustaining peace.

Local women and civil society’s great interest and enthusiastic participation in this research on Sustaining Peace sends a clear message at this historic and critical juncture: “We want to be heard! We want to be part of the global discussions and

decision-making on sustaining peace!” This report presents the key findings and recommendations stemming from the research. We hope that it will become a useful reference for policy- and decision-makers as they develop policies and programs to operationalize the Sustaining Peace agenda. We also hope that it will inform the commitments that will be made ahead of the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 and Beijing +25 commemoration, and the ensuing interventions.

Analysis

Key Finding 1 – Peace cannot be defined merely as an absence of war or armed conflict. To women’s civil society around the world, human security, sustainable development, responsible natural resource management, good governance and a harmonious community relying on non-violent conflict resolution are the foundation of peace.

When asked what it means for a community to be peaceful, less than one-fourth (or 25 per cent) of respondents defined peace in negative terms – as absence of war or violence. The other factors pointed out were: good governance and rule of law (18 per cent); human security, defined as equality, freedom and absence of structural violence (17 per cent), and development (12 per cent). The largest group of respondents (28 per cent) stated that peace means having a “culture of peace” – or, as a Burundian participant of a focus group discussion (FGD) defined it, a “culture of non-violence and an inclusive conflict resolution”.



The main challenges to peace included: bad governance (lack of transparency, exclusion, and authoritarian rule); divisions and tensions in community; inequality, including gender inequality; negative attitudes (greed, lack of tolerance and hatred), and lack of education. Only 4 per cent of respondents indicated insecurity as the main challenge to peace, although this percentage was higher in countries currently experiencing conflict, such as Syria (8 per cent). At the same time, 13 per cent of respondents (24 per cent of respondents from Syria) identified militarized culture and vested interests in the conflict, from both internal and external actors, as a challenge to peace. The FGD participants from Libya indicated the proliferation of weapons, and the involvement of armed militia in politics as the main challenge to peace, while FGD participants from Mali highlighted the disarmament of youth as the main recommendation for building a lasting peace.

Key Finding 2 – The Sustaining Peace agenda should focus on long-term changes, such as supporting inclusive and accountable institutions; challenging militarized response to conflict and fostering a “culture of peace”; implementing sustainable development programs; and guaranteeing access to education and employment.

To women civil society, “sustaining peace” means making **long-term, transformative changes** to address the root causes of conflict through:



Strong laws and inclusive institutions (40 per cent)

“There should be awareness among people that law enforcement is there for our safety and we can seek help from them any time.” (FGD participant, Bangladesh)

“Security cannot be sustainable without an effective judiciary. Accountability systems are key to curb security violations and address its roots” (FGD participant, Libya)



Fostering the “culture of peace” (15 per cent)

“[To sustain peace you need to] Educate young people to believe that non-violent conflict resolution is the only way forward” (FGD participant, Sweden)



Stable economies, access to services and employment (12 per cent)

“When citizens, [especially women], are able to run their businesses, have a flourishing livelihood and access to basic needs such as education, health, food and security, good infrastructure, justice and equal opportunities, they will think twice before engaging in conflict”. (FGD, South Sudan)

Strengthening the nexus between peace and development: lessons from the field

As the respondents from the FGD in Aleppo, Syria, highlighted, “sustainable development generates stability in society and allows individuals to reach a personal well-being, thus reducing the appeal of war and conflict”. In a similar vein, FGD participants from Mali highlighted that “it is key to ensure that communities have access to basic services, such as health, universal education, good infrastructure and employment, so that they can build resilience to conflict”

The main aspects of development that were highlighted as essential aspects of sustaining peace included:

- **Equitable access to resources**
“The profit oriented multinational companies which have headquarters in developed countries are using non-renewable resources in developing countries in an inefficient way, increasing the chances of conflict” (FGD participant, Bangladesh)
- **Protecting the environment**
“Sustainable development requires being cautious about the environment which gives us natural resources. If we are not cautious about the environment, conflict will be inevitable since the local community does not feel they are benefiting from the resources within their own surrounding” (FGD participant, South Sudan)

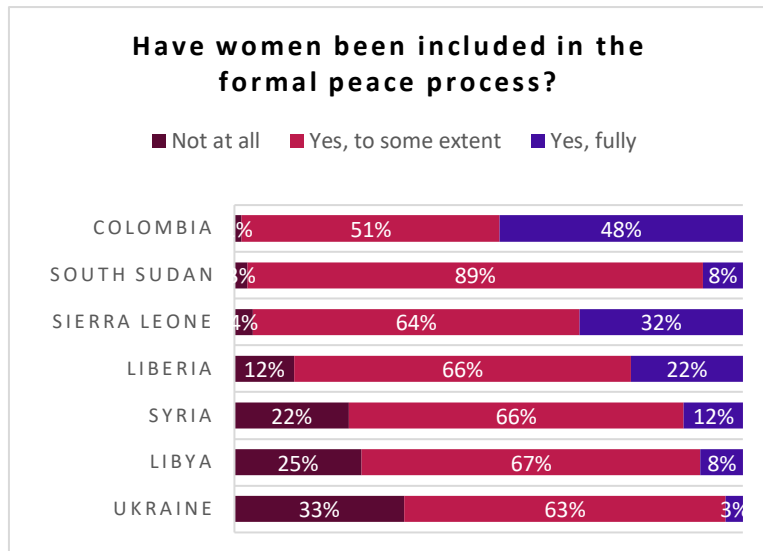
“Climate change affects crops, which increases poverty and increases the rates of crime and looting” (FGD participants, Burundi)
- **Youth education and employment**
“Education and employment opportunities for youth prevent them from entering organizations outside the law and common crime” (FGD participant, Colombia)

Women activists already incorporate development activities into their peacebuilding work, further strengthening the nexus between peace and development. For example, in Burundi, women civil society organizations “worked hard to spark an economic recovery, especially for the demobilized combatants”. Women’s organizations also help other women achieve economic empowerment and independence, for example through savings associations. In Burundi, when many kids dropped out of school in Kabasazi community, women organized lending and saving associations, which allowed other women to generate income, and send their children to school.

In Bangladesh, following the violence outbreak in Chittagong in April 2017, hundreds of households and resources were burned down. With support from UNDP, the local civil society “came forward to establish peace in a different approach. They plan to establish three tube wells and solar powered energy stations for Longodu community, which is in a very remote area with scarce resources. This will force the community to share water and energy resource, thus

Key Finding 3 – There has been some progress in the inclusion of women in both formal and informal peace processes. However, women remain excluded many peace processes. Moreover, there is still a need to ensure that the inclusion extends to all women – especially the youth, women with disabilities, indigenous women, refugees, internally displaced, and other marginalized groups – are fully included, and that their roles go beyond being observers or advisors to being key influencers and co-decision-makers.

The survey respondents recognized the increase in women’s participation in peace negotiations. Sixty per cent of respondents reported that women have been included, “to some extent”, in *formal* peace negotiations in their country, such as the Afghan High Peace Council, in the indigenous Truth and Reconciliation process in Canada, the High-Level Revitalization Forum in South Sudan, and in the Advisory Council and the Women’s Chamber of Civil Society Support in the Geneva Peace Process for the Syrian



conflict. A similar figure – nearly 60 per cent – reported that women were included in *informal* processes. Over 10 per cent respondents felt that women were included “fully” in both formal and informal processes.

However, there are still gaps in terms of women’s participation. On the one hand, 13 per cent believed that women were not included “at all” in both formal and informal peace processes. This was underscored, for example, by FGD participants in Mali who said that while women are included in awareness-raising, there is no formal platform for the discussions between women and the armed groups. FGD participants from Libya also highlighted that women have not been included in meetings organized by UN Support Mission in Libya. On the other hand, even in countries where women were included in formal and informal negotiations, this inclusion was often limited to a narrow circle (i.e., “to some extent”). FGD participants observed that participation was often limited to an “elite group” of women and that young women and youth in general tended to be excluded.

Key Finding 4 – Patriarchal culture and societal practices, the political and economic exclusion of women, low levels of education and awareness, and the lack of resources and poverty prevent women from participating in peace processes and decision-making. To address these challenges, it is necessary to create enabling conditions and platforms for grassroots women’s effective participation.

Cultural norms, such as women not being allowed to enter public spaces, or the uneven share of unpaid domestic labor assigned to them, were indicated as a challenge by 22 per cent (in formal processes) and 31 per cent (in informal processes) of the respondents. Moreover, respondents highlighted that even when women did participate, their opinions were taken less seriously and not as valued as those of men.

The low levels of representation were linked to poverty and lack of funding – for example, to cover transportation, communications, and other costs. As one Burundian FGD participant put it, “**women organizations are short on financial capacities.** (...) Sometimes we are not legally excluded but *de facto* we are.”.

Moreover, there is a lack of coherent strategies for women’s inclusion in peace negotiations, and consultations. If they happen, they are often sporadic and not well-organized. The media could play an important role in promoting women’s substantive participation in peace negotiations. Participants of the FGD in Kherson, Ukraine pointed out that “The Minsk negotiations (...) are not covered in media.” All participants felt they didn’t have complete information about the process, and – therefore

– they had little confidence in it. 9 and 11 per cent of survey respondents also highlighted the **insecurity and fear of violence** as the key challenge preventing women’s participation.

To overcome these challenges, **women’s civil society groups are actively collaborating with local women and other local leaders by creating networks of grassroots organizations and inviting mediators and parties to formal peace processes.** For example, members of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) are invited to meetings with women peace activists in South Sudan to elevate grassroots South Sudanese women’s voices to the peace process facilitated by IGAD. The Sustaining Peace agenda requires creative means to create enabling conditions and build platforms for grassroots women’s effective participation.

Key Finding 5 – Women’s participation in the implementation of peace agreements is generally poorer than their participation in peace negotiations. The lack of political will, and insufficient support from governments, donors and the international community more broadly, were identified as key challenges. This highlights the need to maintain the pressure and provide support for women’s participation in the long-term, beyond the signing of peace agreements.

% of “Not at all” responses on women’s participation in:



When asked whether women were included in the implementation of peace agreements in their country (at either national or local level), 30% of respondents said “Not at all”. This is more than twice as many as those who reported women were not included at all in formal/informal peace processes.

Like in the case of peace negotiations, the main challenge to women’s participation in peace agreement implementation (mentioned by 29 per cent of respondents) was the exclusive nature of peace

process and peace agreements, including the failure to include women living in remote or rural areas; negative stereotypes preventing women’s meaningful participation; and the overall male dominance in the field of peace and security. Other key challenges included lack of political will and support from both national and international actors (21 per cent), ongoing violence and insecurity (16 per cent), lack of access of women to decision-making and political participation more broadly (7 per cent) insufficient resources (5 per cent) and inaccessibility of funding and capacity-building opportunities for grassroots women (4 per cent).

Key Finding 6 – Despite the challenges they face, women are active in building and sustaining peace at national and local levels. When they participate in the implementation of peace agreements, they help ensure that implementation is effective and that it benefits everyone. Where there are no peace agreements, women work at the grassroots level to advocate for peace, as well as to deliver relief, promote sustainable development and address root causes of conflict, such as climate change and gender inequality.

At both local and national levels, women’s civil society play a key role in ensuring that the benefits of peace reach local populations. Their most important contributions are:



Raising local communities' awareness about the peace negotiations, peace agreements (where they exist) and promoting peace (26 per cent)

In Sierra Leone, women civil society organizations contributed to mitigating post-conflict violence “through radio programmes, continuously urging people to be peaceful and accept the election results declared by the National Elections Commission, as well as peace messages in songs and entertainment shows on radio and television”.

In South Sudan, women organized a program “bringing [together] people from different walks of life through intercultural performances using dance [and] inter-clan sport and games [that] promote healthy competition and harmony.

Advocacy and campaigning – including calls for greater inclusion of women and other marginalized groups in peace processes (28 per cent)

In Libya, “women objected to the violence and the proliferation of weapons and distributed pamphlets, participated in sit-ins, issued statements, and initiated contacts with legislative and executive branches to pressure them to abstain from dragging the country into chaos.”



Building grassroots women's capacity to participate in peacebuilding decision-making and in the economy (18 per cent)



Addressing consequences of conflict and supporting development (9 per cent).

In Burundi, “civil society organizations have played an instrumental role in sustaining the negotiated peace. They have worked hard to spark an economic recovery especially for the demobilized combatants”. Women's organizations also help other women achieve economic empowerment and independence through income-generating initiatives and savings associations.

Resolving conflicts at the community level (6 per cent)

Key Finding 7 – Donor programming often excludes local communities, especially women, from design, planning and implementation. Donors need to be inclusive and flexible, and provide support to women's rights organizations of varying sizes – including grassroots organizations – and encourage diverse initiatives.

The donor community's efforts to support gender-sensitive peacebuilding initiatives are appreciated. 23 per cent of survey respondents reported that the donors' approach was “almost entirely” gender-sensitive. However, more remains to be done. For example, one survey respondent highlighted that gendered justice should be seen as more than criminal accountability for sexual violence – it should also include a focus on truth, reparations and guarantees of non-recurrence for all human rights violations, including social, economic and cultural rights violations.

There is a need for stronger local leadership. 20 percent of survey respondents reported that local civil society was not able to influence the design of donor programs at all, and 17 per cent reported they could do so only to a limited extent. An FGD participant from Bangladesh suggested that some donors “have the attitude of previous colonial governments and they always know what is best for us. This attitude should change – they should accept local expertise”.

