

Women's Organizations: A Driving Force Behind Women's Participation and Rights

Civil society is a key arena for women's engagement in public and political life in many conflict-affected societies. Often unnoticed by official political actors, women participate actively in informal peacebuilding and policy-related activities, and women's civil society organizations are an important vehicle for the promotion of women's political participation and 'gender-friendly' policies, both of which are crucial for the establishment of long-term peace and democracy. Burundi and Nepal are two post-conflict countries that are notable for the large numbers of women engaged in civil society. In these countries, women's organizations have been a driving force behind women's engagement in public and political life, as well as for the adoption of laws protecting women's rights. Yet, the impact and sustainability of these organizations are hampered both by a lack of political will and by insecure and inflexible funding regimes. □▷

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Women's Informal Channel for Influence

Since the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in October 2000, there has been increasing interest in the role of women in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Resolution 1325 recognized the relevance of gender in peace and security matters, and mandated all United Nations member-states to ensure full participation of women in conflict resolution and peace processes. Another groundbreaking aspect of Resolution 1325 is that it officially endorsed the inclusion of civil society groups in peace processes and called on all actors involved in such processes to adopt mechanisms supporting local women's peace initiatives. This is the first time that non-state actors have been acknowledged under international law to have a right to be included in peace processes.

While women are often excluded from formal peace negotiations and only marginally represented in political decision-making structures, the experiences of various conflict-affected countries show that women often engage vigorously in informal peacebuilding and policy-related activities. Although often not recognized by formal political structures, women are active in community peacebuilding, and through women's organizations and networks they work collaboratively across ethnic and religious lines to make valuable contributions to peace both during and after conflict.

Burundi and Nepal are two conflict-affected countries in which women in civil society have been heralded for their efforts throughout peace and post-conflict processes. In both countries, the expansion of women's public roles and responsibilities during armed conflict laid the ground for the establishment of an array of women's organizations and networks. In these networks, women engaged in peacebuilding activities during the conflict, mobilized actively for the integration of a gender perspective and women's participation in the peace negotiations, and continued their advocacy for women's political participation, rights and needs throughout the post-conflict period.

Burundi. By the time that the Burundian peace process started in 1998, Burundian women's organizations had already been mobilizing for peace for several years. In response to the civil

war that began in 1994, women came together on a multi-ethnic basis to create a number of associations and two umbrella organizations – Collectif des Associations et ONGs Feminines du Burundi (CAFOB) and Dushirehamwe – which united diverse women's groups in their advocacy for peace at the grassroots and national levels. Throughout the post-conflict period, women's organizations and networks have been an important arena for women's mobilization and action in Burundi. Women's organizations have adopted a variety of mobilization strategies, including organization of workshops, conferences and demonstrations, submission of statements and propositions to political leaders, and targeting journalists to create media publicity around their programmes and activities. Through this work, they have created space for women to engage in public and political life, played a key role in placing issues related to women's rights on the political agenda, and raised awareness and openness around issues of particular concern to women.

Throughout the peace and post-conflict processes, one of the main topics on the agendas of Burundian women's organizations has been the promotion of women's participation in politics. Women's organizations have lobbied political leaders for increased representation of women in formal decision-making structures, and were instrumental in the introduction of a constitutional quota for women's representation in national political institutions in 2005. Through nationwide campaigns to inform women about their rights to vote and to encourage them to stand for elections, women's organizations have also played an important role in enhancing women's participation in politics, both as voters and as political candidates. Women's organizations have also mobilized against the persistent gender discrimination in Burundi's legal framework, and with the Association des Femmes Jouristes du Burundi (AFJB) at the forefront they have campaigned for equal inheritance rights and for legal sanctions against rape and other forms of gender-based violence, as well as developing proposals for more gender-responsive legislation.

These efforts notwithstanding, the efforts of Burundi's women's organizations have been more fragmented and less visible in the past five years than during the peace efforts. Despite their expertise and knowledge on issues related to gender, peace and security, women's organizations are seldom consulted by government institutions, and politicians' follow-up and sup-

port of their initiatives have been characterized by limited action. Furthermore, while funding from the international community has been instrumental in the development and strength of the Burundian women's movement, competition over funding has led to infighting among women's organizations, making it difficult to identify joint agendas for which to exert political pressure.

Nepal saw a wave of women's political engagement during the peaceful mass protests of 2006 that initiated the country's peace process, with women from civil society taking to the streets and demanding peace and democracy. Since then, a myriad of active women's organizations with a diversity of priorities, activities and target groups have been operating in Nepal. Although there are no formal linkages for communication between political institutions and civil society groups, many women's organizations have pushed persistently to get access to political leaders and institutions, using an array of methods (including petitions, media publications, workshops, seminars, signature campaigns and street demonstrations) to be heard. Women's organizations have also gathered to work for joint causes related to women, peace and security through networks such as Shanti Malika, Women's Alliance for Peace, Power, Democracy and the Constituent Assembly (WAPPDCA), and WomenAct.

As in Burundi, the demand for increased women's participation in political decision-making has been a key topic on the agendas of women's organizations throughout the post-conflict period. Nepali women have traditionally been marginalized from political life; as a case in point, no woman participated in the 2006 peace negotiations. In response to this marginalization, women's organizations mobilized to demand increased women's representation, organizing weekly street demonstrations and successfully petitioning the government in 2007 to establish a minimum requirement of 33% women's representation in political institutions. Women's organizations and networks have continued to work for equal and more meaningful participation of female politicians, and have engaged in capacity-building and leadership training for current and potential female political candidates.

Many women's organizations have also engaged in the struggle to end gender discrimination within Nepal's legal framework, particularly through the new constitution that is currently



Nepali women's organizations demonstrating against violence against women. Photo: WAPPDCA.

under development. Specializing in the promotion and protection of women's rights, several women's organizations have advocated for reform of discriminatory laws, including recognition of women's human rights, equal inheritance rights, equal citizenship rights, rights for widows and single women, redress for crimes committed against women during the civil war, and sanctions against human trafficking and gender-based violence against women. This work has been instrumental in the government's adoption of laws and regulations over the past four years to protect women's rights, and early indications suggest that many of the recommendations of women's organizations will be incorporated into the new constitution.

Nepali women's organizations have been successful in drawing policymakers' attention to gender-discriminatory laws and practices. Yet, the government's efforts to incorporate women's organizations' initiatives into decision-making have been marked more by rhetoric than by the undertaking of substantive action, raising doubts as to whether legal advances have contributed to actual improvement in the lives of women. Since the end of the conflict, Nepal's women's movement has fragmented, with different groups focusing on different interests, approaches and agendas. Tensions between women in political parties and women's organizations have also weakened the political influence of women's organizations since the 2008 elections. Further-

more, as in Burundi, Nepali women's organizations' dependency on international financial support has complicated long-term planning and decreased their legitimacy vis-à-vis national policymakers, who tend to regard them as representatives of the international community rather than of Nepali women.

Lessons Learned

The cases of Burundi and Nepal demonstrate that civil society can be an effective arena for creating space for women's participation in public and political life. In both countries, women's organizations and networks constitute a nurturing ground for women's political participation. Women's organizations have assisted in raising the visibility of women as agents for change in civil society and have functioned as a stepping stone for many women's entry into formal politics. They have also been key actors behind the adoption of affirmative action for women's political representation, leading to an unprecedented entry of women into political life in the wake of the first post-conflict elections in the two countries.

Burundian and Nepali women's organizations and networks also stand out for the work that they have done to promote a variety of other issues related to Resolution 1325. Through their organization of meetings, workshops and discussions, women's organizations have generated awareness among women about their political

situation and informed them about their political and social rights. Many women's organizations have also lobbied political institutions for reforms designed to eliminate all forms of gender-based discrimination and to protect women and girls from gender-based violence. Accordingly, they have both politicized a number of issues that traditionally have been deemed beyond the remit of public decision-making and been a driving force behind legal reform and the adoption of policies to enshrine women's political, social and economic rights. For instance, in Nepal, women's organizations' persistent lobbying has forced the government to adopt laws and regulations against gender discrimination, domestic violence and human trafficking, and in Burundi their demands for a law sanctioning perpetrators of sexual violence led to changes in the penal code in 2009.

Yet, while women's organizations' initiatives and demands related to Resolution 1325 have brought many positive results, it is also important to note their limitations. Since the end of the conflicts in their respective countries, the women's movements of both Burundi and Nepal have fragmented, and owing to diverse affiliations and interests they have faced difficulties in synchronizing their strategies for political advocacy, weakening their influence on political decision-making. Male-dominated political cultures also continue to constitute a challenge for women's organizations' influence on decision-making in each country. In Nepal, women's organizations' demands are often received positively by policymakers but lack follow-up and action. In Burundi, women's organizations have encountered considerable resistance to and lack of awareness of the gender issues that they have brought forward to policymakers. Accordingly, while we may celebrate the progress achieved with regard to increased women's political representation and legal protection, these results should not cause us to shy away from the many remaining challenges to women's right to protection, participation and decision-making in Burundi and Nepal.

Furthermore, while international support undoubtedly has increased women's organizations' operational capacity, ideas and activities, the prevalence of short-term and project-based funding leads to insecurity regarding the sustainability of their activities, making it difficult to engage in long-term planning. And, because women's organizations are heavily dependent on external support, a funding environment characterized by hard competition and narrowly



Local women's organizations in Burundi during a workshop on women, peace and security. Photo: Dushirehamwe.

defined calls for funding means that international donors often overly and overtly influence local agendas, squeezing out local solutions. International funding opportunities also tend to favour well-established women's organizations that operate in the capital cities, undermining smaller women's organizations operating at the grassroots level. While the sustainability of women's organizations in Burundi and Nepal is of paramount importance for increasing and upholding women's engagement in public and political life, the current system for financing makes this sustainability uncertain. Most organizations continue to depend largely on international assistance, and the inability of external donors to make long-term commitments is a persistent problem for many women's organizations. These organizations need international support and encouragement, but they should not be deprived of their initiatives, which is often what happens when international actors seek rapid results.

Emerging Recommendations

Governments and Political Parties

- **Consult with women's organizations.** The Burundian and Nepali governments should acknowledge women's organizations as a significant

source of expertise and experience in dealing with issues associated with gender, peace and security. Accordingly, they should ensure regular, systematic and long-term consultation with and engagement of women's organizations to gain a better understanding of women's concerns and needs, which should be integrated into policy formulation and implementation.

- **Incorporate women's views in policy agendas.** Political parties should utilize the experience and knowledge of women's organizations, which also have ties with women at the grassroots level, to facilitate incorporation of local women's concerns and needs into their policy formulation.

Women's Organizations

- **Monitor governments' actions.** Women's organizations should continue to monitor the efforts of governments to implement Resolution 1325; examine to what extent gender-equality legislation and other policies affecting women are put into practice; hold governments accountable for their commitments to international policies on women's rights; and disseminate information broadly.

- **Strengthen women's platforms and partnerships.** Experience from Burundi and Nepal shows that women's organizations have more political leverage when they unite and lobby jointly for issues of concern to women. In order to maintain the pressure on governments to implement Resolution 1325, women's organizations should aim at strengthening joint platforms and partnerships. They should also reinforce their partnerships with political parties, and encourage men and women in political office to develop cross-party cooperation and policies to galvanize support for gender-friendly policies and legal or constitutional reform.

- **Reach out to men.** Engaging men as advocates and allies is crucial for promoting gender equal-

ity. Women's organizations should thus increase their efforts to reach out to male politicians when lobbying for women's rights and concerns; seek to integrate men into their initiatives to promote women's political progress; and highlight and celebrate stories of men who challenge gender stereotypes and demonstrate commitment to gender equality.

International Actors

- **Encourage governments to comply with international policies.** In their dialogues with the Burundian and Nepali governments, international actors should continue to encourage them to comply with international laws and agreements, including Resolution 1325, and to incorporate women's initiatives and demands into decision-making.

- **Promote the sustainability and diversity of women's organizations.** Acknowledging the importance of sustaining women's active participation in public and political life, international partners should review existing funding mechanisms to further strengthen women's organizations in Burundi and Nepal. Importantly, international actors should consider possibilities for allocating more flexible and multi-year funding, such as core grants with less stringent funding requirements, in order to provide women's organizations with the flexibility needed to develop long-term programmes and activities around specific concerns and needs of women as defined by the local community, instead of as defined by funders. Furthermore, international partners should develop strategies aimed at diversifying funding schemes to increase the opportunities of smaller grassroots women's organizations to receive funding. International actors should also support training in alternative ways of generating income, along with efforts aimed at building the operational capacity of women's organizations, so that these organizations can become more self-reliant. ■

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THE PROJECT

This policy brief forms part of a project entitled 'Resolution 1325 and Women's Political Participation,' and is derived from a larger report on women's participation in post-conflict decision-making in Burundi and Nepal. The full report may be downloaded from: <http://www.prio.no/CSCW/People/Person/?oid=77832>.

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