A growing body of literature explores the causes and consequences of ceasefires, but within this body, little scholarly attention is paid to the role of women in ceasefires. Of the existing work on women in ceasefires, there is a general lack of understanding of how the individual studies relate to one another, and there has been little attempt at a systematic examination of what this body of literature tells us across sites about women’s roles and influence during ceasefire processes. Thus we also explore possible avenues for future research.

Brief Points

- The literature on women and ceasefires is relatively small, nascent, and limited in scope.
- The sources can be roughly split into two categories: those who address the participation of women and those discuss non-participation.
- The role of women in ceasefires is most often discussed within one specific context, and systematic or comparative analyses are rare.
- We identify five topics that are frequently discussed in the literature: the lack of women in negotiations; the perceived role of women in ceasefires as a reflection of ideas of women in society; that exclusion of women can in part be explained by the technical language and military knowledge; how sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is addressed in ceasefires; and women’s role in ceasefire monitoring.
Evidence suggests that there are clear advantages of women’s inclusion in ceasefires: for example, women are more likely to be included in the subsequent processes if they are included in pre-negotiation stages (Barsa et al. 2016: 33), and inclusion of women is likely to increase a more grounded ownership within the local community (Holt-Ivry et al., 2017). Also, including women in the monitoring and verification process will likely enhance the reporting and monitoring of violations (Barsa et al., 2016: 42), and may increase the public awareness of and support for the ceasefire (Barsa et al., 2016: 45). Nonetheless, while we know that there are advantages of women’s participation in both ceasefire negotiations and monitoring, there is little systematic knowledge about how and to what extent these benefits influence both the ceasefires and the people affected by them.

Main Findings

Several of the sources discuss the role of women in ceasefire negotiations only in relation to one specific conflict or process, and more specifically focus on what participation entailed. For example, Tabbara & Rubin (2018) describe how the Syrian women’s organization Damma created a women’s committee and filed a petition to facilitate a ceasefire agreement between government troops and opposition fighters. Muehlenbeck & Federer (2016) quote one key stakeholder in the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in Myanmar: ‘In fact, we find it is better to talk with a woman than a man in a peace negotiation—they are softer’ (2016: 6). Banerjee (2014) describes how some women’s groups in Myanmar have successfully used their traditional role as mothers and protectors through motherhood to enter into peace politics. She outlines how this can be a problematic discourse and that ultimately limits women’s participation within a ‘tolerated’ framework of motherhood. The confines of such a framework is well described by Ellerby, who notes, ‘There are many stories of women’s activism to end conflict, but such activism often appears to be practiced outside the narrow confines of formal peace processes. In other words, women’s peace activism is not treated as a central component of formal ceasefires or comprehensive peace processes’ (2016: 139).

Bell & O’Rourke take interest in the difficult balance of women’s perceived role in peace negotiations:

‘[…] in many processes there is a tension between whether women are present and represented as “women”, or as political actors motivated by other forms of political identity, or by complex combination. The difficulties of navigating the boundary between using gender as a category disruptive of traditional military and political assumptions, and “essentializing” women as bringing a “different voice”, a different set of priorities, and a form of “transcendent” identity politics, is particularly acute in the peace negotiation context’ (2010: 978).

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The Body of Literature

The size of the body of literature on women in ceasefires is very limited: We found 70 sources, comprised of 15 journal articles, 10 reports, 8 policy briefs, 29 other and miscellaneous, and 8 sources which include only cursory mention of the topic. Citations for the most important works can be found at the end of this policy brief.

Some texts take a more explanatory approach and set out to explain why so few women are included in ceasefire processes and mentioned so little in ceasefire provisions. Perhaps not surprisingly, much of the exclusion is related to prevailing ideas about women’s roles in society in the area of the conflict. Unfortunately, in the sources we reviewed, the argument for including women in ceasefire processes is an essentialist one. For example, Avonius et al. write: ‘Women are differently embedded in society than men are, and they have been shown to widen the range of central topics discussed at the negotiation table’ (2019: iv).

Similarly, we also find examples of similar narratives being used to explain why or how women did participate in ceasefire negotiations. Muehlenbeck & Federer (2016) quote one key stakeholder in the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in Myanmar: ‘In fact, we find it is better to talk with a woman than a man in a peace negotiation—they are softer’ (2016: 6). Banerjee (2014) describes how some women’s groups in Myanmar have successfully used their traditional role as mothers and protectors through motherhood to enter into peace politics. She outlines how this can be a problematic discourse and that ultimately limits women’s participation within a ‘tolerated’ framework of motherhood. The confines of such a framework is well described by Ellerby, who notes, ‘There are many stories of women’s activism to end conflict, but such activism often appears to be practiced outside the narrow confines of formal peace processes. In other words, women’s peace activism is not treated as a central component of formal ceasefires or comprehensive peace processes’ (2016: 139).

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The Scope and Methodology of the Literature Review

The aim of this literature review is to look at both academic and grey literature in all shapes and forms, spanning from peer-reviewed journal articles and chapters in edited volumes to blogposts, audiovisual material, and resource hubs. The following is an analysis of an all-encompassing body of literature rather than an exclusively academic one. However, this literature review will not be covering actual ceasefire texts or provisions themselves.1

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This idea has equal relevance for ceasefires. When and how will women be seen as multifaceted actors like men; not simply as women, but as politically motivated actors with numerous interests to serve. Muehlenbeck & Federer (2016: 6) explain the influence of several women in negotiating roles in the Myanmar Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement as a product of how they were perceived by fellow negotiators ‘as representing interests other than a ‘women’s agenda’—an issue, a mandate, their delegation, party, or constituency.’

Several sources argue that the general exclusion of women can be explained in part by the technical language and military knowledge required for participating in a ceasefire process. For example, Bell & O’Rourke argue that “the language and conventions around ceasefires and ceasefire monitoring is increasingly a specialist one, where peace agreement texts specifying violations and forms of monitoring will control what can and cannot be monitored in ways that are difficult for non-military actors to anticipate” (2010: 978). Similarly, Barsa et al. (2016) write that this is a common explanation, and that women are often deemed to be irrelevant to these processes because of their lack of association with armed groups. Other sources that cite the military knowledge explanation are DROPS (2019), Theirin (2019) and Avonius et al. (2019). A quote from the Bantay Ceasefire captures it accurately: “The members of the committee, who were mostly field commanders, simply laughed at us. ‘You do not know anything about what we are discussing here. We are talking about military terms, military language, and situations which are far beyond your comprehension as women. This is not your place’” (cited in Noma et al., 2012: 19).

Another recurrent theme in the literature centers around women’s role in ceasefire monitoring, and Pinaud (2021) provides one sterling example about the role of civil society, including women, in ceasefire monitoring. Manchanda & Kakran (2017) explain how the Naga Mothers Association contributed to the independent monitoring of the Indo-Naga Ceasefire Agreement. Noma et al. (2012) and Santiago (2015) examine how women and women’s groups in the Philippines engaged in activities such as ceasefire monitoring and the protection of civilians (Bantay Ceasefire).

Finally, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is a recurring topic across texts dedicated to understanding ceasefires. Barsa et al. (2016) identify several manuals and guidelines that address how to include SGBV in ceasefires, for example, the UN’s Guidance for Mediators. Addressing Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Ceasefire and Peace Agreements (UNDPA, 2012). Avonius et al. (2019) find that the only mention of gender in more recent ceasefire agreements are present through references to sexual violence in conflict, and oftentimes under the broader umbrella of protection of civilians.

What Are Some of the Gaps or Avenues for Future Research?

Many of the academic sources recognize that there is not enough research on the topic, and several call for more research on the role that women play, both as actors and victims of ceasefire. Holt-Ivry et al. (2017) and UN Women & UNDP (2020) call for “knowledge products” that provide more comprehensive and systematic research on this topic.

Comparative studies could generate some novel insights about the differences and dynamics of women’s inclusion and exclusion. One case of comparison being used is Forster & Bell (2019), which provides comparative data and examples of when and how women are addressed in different ceasefire agreements.

We find overall, much more literature engaged in discussions about gender provisions in ceasefires themselves, rather than studies focused on the role of women in participating and negotiating ceasefire agreements. One exception is the ICAN 10 Steps to Ensure Gender Responsive Process and Ceasefire Agreements (2019). While this is a very useful policy tool, it does not offer the type of insights that comparative studies, or gender theory-informed studies could provide.

In sum, the literature on women’s roles in ceasefires is nascent, modest in size, relatively limited, and usually confined to a single context. Thus, there is a need for widening the scope to obtain a better understanding of ceasefires processes, and without leaning too heavily on the general peace process literature. In the words of Holt-Ivry et al. (2017: 7): “If there is one conclusion we can draw with certainty, it is that more research is needed to better understand how women and attention to gender impact the sustainability of ceasefire agreements. Anecdotal evidence and intellectual analysis suggest tangible benefits, but we are often left trying to prove the counterfactual: were the ceasefire negotiations less successful because women were not included? That piece we will never know.’

Notes

1. We primarily relied on Google Scholar to identify the literature and some reference lists of relevant works. Thus, this review is probably not fully exhaustive. We should also mention that our review has been conducted only in English and thereby we may have excluded potentially significant sources in other original languages. Finally, non-searchable older sources might not have been included.


Literature List


Ceasefires: Comparative Data and Examples


