TAKING A GENDERED BOTTOM-UP APPROACH TO PEACEBUILDING

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The United Nation's women, peace, and security agenda has brought long-overdue attention to the importance of integrating women and gender issues into peacebuilding efforts, with Security Council Resolution 1889 of 2009 initiating a planning process to achieve this. Efforts have centred on increasing women's participation in various aspects of peacebuilding, both in terms of numbers and in terms of achieving a substantive representation of women's needs and interests. While sensitive to local contexts, such efforts remain decidedly top-down, seeking to transform government institutions and mostly involving international and national security actors. This stands in stark contrast to trends in the peacebuilding literature, including feminist peacebuilding literature, which increasingly has emphasised that making peace sustainable requires a bottom-up approach that includes a diverse range of people, experiences and knowledges (see Rigual 2018).

The Gender and Conflict project (see end of this brief) studies practices of peacebuilding from a bottom-up perspective that recognises community leaders and members as peacebuilders and takes seriously everyday practices and situated knowledges as resources for conflict management. Project findings lead to three core insights further elaborated in this brief. First, a gendered, bottom-up approach to peacebuilding requires collaborations that valorise local knowledge and actors. Second, such peacebuilding requires an appreciation of intersectionally gendered diversity as a resource for conflict management. Third, a gendered, bottom-up approach to peacebuilding requires recognising gender as a fluid social construction.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- A gendered bottom-up peacebuilding approach requires collaborations that valorise local knowledge and make visible existing situated peacebuilding practices.

- A gendered approach to peacebuilding recognises that gender and other axes of difference can be a resource for peace: when communities value and manage their internal diversity they more easily resist conflict escalation and are more inventive when it comes to de-escalation.

- A gendered approach to peacebuilding rejects a simplistic association of men with violence and women with peace and counteracts justifications of violence based on the idea that strong men need to protect weak women. It affirms that there are multiple forms of femininity and masculinity that can be performed in many ways.

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH MAKES VISIBLE LOCAL KNOWLEDGES, PRACTICES AND ACTORS

Contemporary violent conflict is often internal to states. Its causes are rarely one-dimensional, and violent escalations tend to combine economic and political inequalities with identity crystallisations based on ideological, religious, or ethnic fault lines. Nobody understands the complex dynamics that trigger violence better than the people who experience them, and nobody can provide creative solutions better than community members and leaders committed to finding such solutions in a participatory fashion. Through its collaborative, micro-level approach the Gender and Conflict project was able to identify an abundance of efforts at peacebuilding in various communities in Nigeria and Indonesia.

Such efforts include locally grown interfaith dialogues, institutionalisations of cross-community decision-making and rumour control, mediation efforts involving local leaders, neighbourhood watches, rituals, and traditional institutions of conflict management, including those of women, as is the case with the Umuada of the Igbo in south-eastern Nigeria (see Box 1). Some of these initiatives have received external support in the form of funding from international donors, and some engage with international norms on human rights or with the UN's women, peace and security agenda. But local efforts of this sort rarely receive the recognition of large-scale interventions, such as UN peacekeeping missions. Yet they do crucial work in preventing the escalation of violence by providing venues for managing conflict in non-violent ways.

Participatory processes also enabled us to learn about needs that local peacebuilders have identified for their communities.

Figure 1.
Internally displaced people camp in Jos, Nigeria

Source: © Jeanine Reutemann (2018)

Thus, for example, Indonesian activists from Ambon, Maluku (see Rigual and Rahmawati 2019), emphasise the importance of training journalists to make them aware of the crucial role their reporting can play in either fanning or counteracting rumours. In a different vein, activist social workers in the city of Jos in Nigeria have identified a dire need for programmes of trauma healing among populations that have lived through episodes of violence. The hurt and pain of losses and the experience of atrocities easily translate into new cycles of violence. Funders interested in supporting violence prevention would do well to establish collaborations that alert them to these kinds of needs and allow them to support bottom-up peacebuilding initiatives.

Box 1.
The Umuada

The Umuada is an association of daughters of a clan or lineage among the Igbo of Nigeria. Although women typically leave the village upon marriage, the eldest daughters are called back to adjudicate intractable or complex cases of often domestic conflict, matters involving their natal lineage, and intra-community quarrels concerning economic, political and ritual matters that could not be settled through male-dominated conflict resolution mechanisms and have become violent and protracted. Highly respected, the Umuada constitute an unusual instance of institutionalised female conflict resolution and leadership. Valued for their balance and judiciousness, Umuada judgements are final.

The authority of the Umuada has been waning with urbanisation and with the proliferation of Christian groups in south-eastern Nigeria that attack them as worshipping idols. But the institution is reinventing itself as a social force for peacebuilding in a country riven with violent conflict. Locally embedded and deeply legitimate, the Umuada is establishing itself as a resource that brings female authority to conflict management.

DIVERSITY IS A RESOURCE FOR PEACE

Difference – whether ethnic, religious, class-based, or indeed gender-based – is typically treated as a cause for division that facilitates violence. And this may well be the case. But the Gender and Conflict project also identified diversity as an important resource for peace: the ability to bridge differences, and initiatives connecting people across communal divides convert difference from a liability into an advantage and something to be valued.

One example is from the village of Poka in Maluku. Although the village did not escape the communal violence of 1999, it was able to hold it off initially. A sense of common identity (or "Pokaness") shared by all residents regardless of background was crucial to this. In the words of Lela Rengur, a woman leader in Poka: "Yes, the level of tolerance between Muslims and Christians is very high. Not because we made peace after riots, but because that's how it has been since long ago." In other words, it was not the violence that made possible reconciliation but the level of tolerance that existed in Poka even before violence broke out. Peacebuilders in the city of Jos,

Figure 2.
Multiconfessional communities: a car displaying a Christian symbol of protection drives by a mosque in Jos, Nigeria
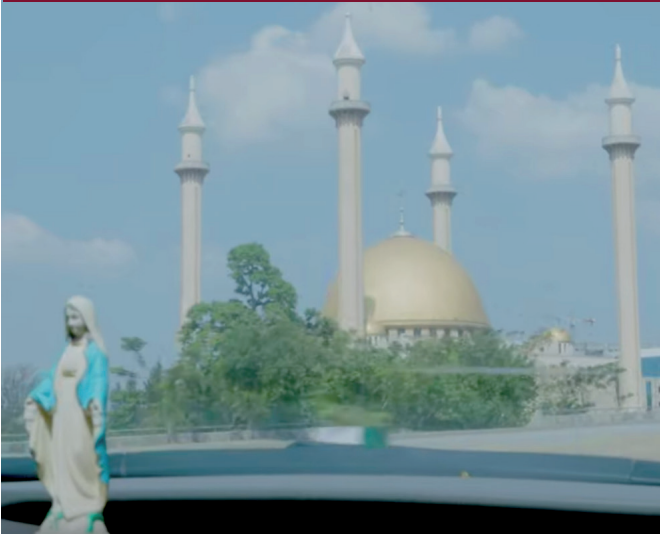
Source: © Jeanine Reutemann (2018)

Nigeria similarly recognise the importance of counteracting segregation in order to be able to better manage conflict. Accordingly, community members are working to (re)integrate markets and schools, establishing spaces where diversity becomes a valued part of the community's fabric of everyday life.

Valuing diversity does not mean ignoring difference. Yet, in situations of conflict that threaten to turn violent, identity-based organisations need to reach out across difference to signal mutual trust and common purposes. In Jos this is the case when Christians and Muslims invite each other to their respective ceremonies and festivals, and when young people from different religious groups collaborate on community projects and neighbourhood watches. Women's groups often play a prominent role in such efforts, but men also are involved, thus countering ideals of masculinity as violent. In Maluku, the Art for Peace project is a good example of male-led cross-community outreach (see also Kunz, Myrttinen and Udasmoro). The young men who initiated the project did so with the specific goal of maintaining friendships across ethnic and religious differences. Where communities come together in this way, they not only prevent violence but also learn how to live wisely in a world of difference, unleashing the creative potential that comes from diverse backgrounds.

PEACEBUILDING NEEDS TO RECOGNISE MULTIPLE FEMININITIES AND MASCULINITIES

Sustainable and effective peacebuilding requires a gender perspective. But taking such a perspective is not limited to demanding that women be included in existing institutions, or to combatting sexual violence (though both of these obviously are important to advance gender equality and counter oppression). It also needs to target gender orders that rigidly define men as strong and women as weak, justifying violence in the name of protecting women and children. Ironically, such patriarchal constructions of masculinity also tend to produce violence against women because they demand a militarisation of men. Yet ideals of strong men and weak women rarely reflect the complexity of gender roles in contexts of violent conflict.

The data collected in the Gender and Conflict project disrupt narratives of masculine protection in two ways. First, men do not always want to live up to the image of the masculine protector. Thus, in the Aceh conflict men often fled their communities in order to escape violence from the military (which tended to see them as potential insurgents) and from the GAM (Free Aceh Movement, the insurgents who engaged in forced recruitment). As the main targets of violence they were unable to fulfil the role of the protector or they refused it, thus disrupting existing stereotypes of war-like men. Second, women do not always live up to the image of the victim either. Again, in the Aceh conflict, women known as the Inong Balee participated as combatants in the GAM, showing themselves as political and violent actors. Like the women who joined the FARC insurgents in Colombia and are now professing an "insurgent feminism," the Inong Balee have become self-identified peacebuilders (see Box 2.)

Making visible men who refuse militarisation and female fighters who refuse to be victims begins to disrupt simplistic stories of women needing protection and therefore needing men to engage in violence. It unveils ideological patriarchal gender constructions that make war thinkable by providing it a justification. Disrupting gender stereotypes in this way is an important aspect of building the conditions for sustainable peace.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary peacebuilding literature recognizes the importance of anchoring peacebuilding initiatives in local communities and in local knowledge. A gender perspective in addition highlights the pernicious force of stereotypical gender constructions as drivers of violent conflict and shows that knowing how to live with differences is a resource for peace. A gendered bottom-up approach to peacebuilding can make a significant contribution to promoting peaceful societies and to reaching Goal 16 of the UN's sustainable development agenda.

Box 2.
The Inong Balee

The Free Aceh Movement (GAM) included 2,000 to 2,500 women combatants, known as the Inong Balee. Most were young village women, aged 13 to 15, who came from farming families and had received little education beyond elementary and junior high school. After the end of the conflict, the Inong Balee transformed themselves into peacemakers. They established the Inong Balee Committee (KIBA), an organisation for former combatants, and sought to strengthen bonds of friendship and networking among themselves and with others through economic and social activities. These have encompassed helping young former combatants (female and male) set up businesses, cultural and religious events, and the promotion of communal trauma healing.

The Inong Balee were left out of the Helsinki peace negotiations. Not fitting the stereotype of the peaceful woman, they also largely have been ignored in official peacebuilding activities.

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HOW TO CITE

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The 'Gender Dimensions of Social Conflict, Armed Violence, and Peacebuilding' ('Gender and Conflict') project

The 6-year 'Gender and Conflict' project investigates gendered conflict dynamics and peacebuilding initiatives at the community, state, and international levels in three types of conflicts in Indonesia and Nigeria: ethno-religious conflicts opposing Muslim and Christian communities in Jos (Nigeria) and Ambon (Indonesia); anti-governmental movements in Aceh (Indonesia) and Delta (Nigeria); and resource-driven vigilantism in East Java (Indonesia) and Enugu (Nigeria).

With the adoption of Security Council Resolution 1325, the international community has embraced the idea that international peace and security require a gender-sensitive approach to conflict management and peacebuilding. This project contributes to this effort by addressing the gender gap in the peacebuilding literature, exploring how gender operates in processes of conflict escalation, de-escalation and peacebuilding and probing the connections between local, national, and international peacebuilding practices.

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