

Women in War, Women in Peace



CÉSAR CARRERÓN, SIG

Colombian government delegates and the FARC initiate talks for ending the conflict, in Oslo, Norway.

No True Peace Without the Voices of Women

In late 2012, when Colombia's government and its largest guerrilla group, known as the FARC, met in Norway to launch peace talks, the only woman sitting at the table was the Norwegian moderator. Sadly, this is not unique: according to a study by UN Women that reviewed 31 peace processes over two decades, nine out of ten negotiators and signatories were men.

In addition to being combatants, women are impacted by armed conflict in a variety of ways. It is often women who have to provide food, clothing, and shelter to sustain their families and children during and after conflicts. Sexual and gender-based violence is used as a weapon of war; women experience physical and psychological trauma, sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, and stigmatization.

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Over the years, Inter Pares has worked with many grassroots organizations led by women that have responded to situations of social, political, and armed conflict. Their voices are far too often absent in formal settings when armed actors come together to negotiate peace. During the past year, Project Counselling Service, Inter Pares' principal counterpart in Latin America, organized four gatherings that brought together a wide range of women and groups with first-hand experience of armed conflict in order to share lessons learned.

The first three gatherings were of women from Guatemala, El Salvador and Chiapas (Mexico), and fed into an international review of UN Security Council Resolution 1325. This resolution creates an international legal framework that focuses on the disproportionate impact of [PAGE 4 ▶](#)

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The Messy Process of Peace

Peace. The word creates serene images of healthy communities. When countries like Burma, which have been ravaged by decades of conflict, begin peace processes, there is an almost instant air of optimism. This hope permeates national and international media, and it impacts diplomacy, business investments, and development. For those directly impacted by the conflict in Burma, however, this optimism can be tainted by skepticism and a sense of *déjà vu*.

Since 2011, the Government of Burma has indicated a renewed interest in creating peace but, like past efforts, the process has been slow and divisive. As is typical with peace processes around the world, they have been managed by men, despite the fact that the inclusion of women leads to far more sustainable agreements. Almost immediately, the absence of women in the various ceasefire talks and peace-building initiatives was highlighted. Unfortunately, there are deeply different understandings as to what gender inclusion means, and for many, simply having some women at the table is enough.

The peace process in Burma has also been mired by secrecy, the exclusion of many ethnic armed groups, stalled political talks, and a tremendous pressure to move forward on large resource extraction projects.

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Resistance groups are expected to engage in a severely flawed constitution that maintains military control over the country, centralizes power in the national government, and undermines aspirations for ethnic autonomy under federalism.

There are costs as well as potential benefits to engaging within the peace processes. Can civil society transform the embedded power structures within a process



KAREN WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION



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The Karen Women's Organization promotes women's roles in the peace processes, and raises awareness about the peace processes in a variety of ways, including public events such as celebrations of International Women's Day (top, in Ei Tu Hta Camp) and International Day of Peace (bottom, in Htee Wat Blaw village).

that is framed and controlled by elite, predominantly military, men? This difficult decision can leave community organizations caught between engaging in an exclusive peace process that may only entrench military control and impunity, and being still further excluded and portrayed as pro-war. Some of the women's rights groups that Inter Pares works with choose to critique and propose alternatives to the processes, while advocating for gender inclusion. For Inter Pares, these past years have been a reminder of the complexities of building peace, and the importance of following the lead of each of our counterparts. ☺

A Model for Peace: Women building peace in Mali


The community leaders who gathered in Gao last July had seen their share of horror, of hope, and of hope betrayed. Gao, on the banks of the Niger River, is the provincial capital in one of the areas of Mali most hard-hit by the recent civil war. With the support of ACORD, Inter Pares' long-time counterpart, 24 women and 24 men from the women's rights organizations GREFFA and AMPRODE gathered to learn and share ideas of how to transform national conflict into an authentic and sustainable peace.

Their first task, they felt, was to address some of the consequences of the war: the scars, fear and anger that divided their communities and their country.

Just a month earlier, a peace accord had been signed between the government and rebel groups to end three years of armed conflict. During the war, human rights were systematically violated by all the warring factions. But women and girls, who were largely non-combatants, were disproportionately targeted for violence by each faction. There was widespread gang rape of women and girls from "enemy communities." They were forced into marriage, beaten and flogged for perceived sins, widowed, and forced off their lands. At the same time, and despite increased restrictions on their freedoms, women played a central role in keeping their families alive, maintaining gardens and local markets, and receiving and sheltering people fleeing the violence.

At the meeting in Gao, the women reflected on the causes of the violence, and the distrust, fear, and emotional scars it had left. Coming from different regions and ethnicities, they talked about social exclusion in their own communities. They shared experiences of the increased competition for land and water resources among people made more desperate by land grabs for mining and export agriculture and by the local impacts of climate change.

Through such sensitive and difficult discussions, they began to identify what they

could do in their communities to construct a peace that went beyond an end to the fighting, that recognized and met the needs of women, their families, and communities torn apart by war. On the banks of the Niger River, these women – and the men who support them – came together to recapture hope, and to become the model for the peace they intend to build. 

Inter Pares and ACORD support the empowerment of Malian women and girls to foster peaceful, just, and inclusive societies that are free from fear and violence, and to rebuild sustainable food systems and livelihoods.



Top: Women leaders sharing their experience from the conflict.

Bottom: Women from the North and the South of Mali come together to reflect on a model for peace.



JULIANA DUCIA, PCS

Project Counselling Service (PCS) staff celebrating this year's ceasefire agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC.

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war on women, as well as the key role women play in conflict management, conflict resolution, and sustainable peace. The fourth gathering brought together a group of Central American women and over 200 women from across Colombia, enabling participants to reflect on the meaning of peace for their communities while learning lessons from “post-conflict” countries.

The meetings also celebrated the many peacebuilding achievements of grassroots women’s organizations. In Guatemala, El Salvador, and Chiapas, they have been integral to successful struggles for truth and reconciliation, brought the issue of sexual violence out into the open, and promoted women’s political participation and their access to justice. For its part, the women’s movement in Colombia prepared the ground for the current peace talks. As well, its

relentless advocacy efforts eventually forced the Colombian government and the FARC to incorporate women in their respective negotiating teams, and to create a committee tasked with ensuring a gender perspective in all of the peace deliberations.

A key lesson learned was that signing peace accords does not mean the end of conflict. Once agreements are signed, the international community’s gaze often moves elsewhere. What support exists is also usually directed to government entities, marginalizing again the women’s and community-based organizations that have made these processes possible – even though these groups often represent people whose exclusion set the stage for conflict in the first place. As Colombians move towards a new beginning for peace and democracy, it is crucial to ensure the voice and active participation of women at every level. 

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With the support of thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares works in Canada and around the world with social change organizations who share the analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by inequalities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.

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