Chapter 6: Organizing for Peace

History will acknowledge the crucial role of women human rights defenders in building up sane and safe societies . . . Which values are we betraying when exposing crimes committed in our name by our own governments? Certainly not the values that are enshrined in each and every one of our constitutions – values that our governments and armies so often trample. Rather than 'traitors', we are the very guardians of these values

Marieme Helie-Lucas,
Founder, Women Living Under Muslim Laws[1]

In April of 1915, World War I had been raging across Europe for nine months. According to some estimates, more than 5,500 soldiers died every day in a war that would ultimately leave 8.5 million dead.[2] Many people were numbed by the devastation, but a group of women activists decided they could no longer sit and wait for the end of war. For the first time in history, women crossed borders in wartime to talk about how to end the carnage. They gathered in The Hague – over 1,000 women from 12 warring and neutral countries – and convened the first International Congress of Women (ICW). Their plan of action did not simply call for universal disarmament and an end to the war. It demanded equality between women and men and among nations, and the creation of a non-partisan international organization to mediate disputes between countries.[3]

The ICW sent 30 delegates on the first women's peace mission to bring the plan of action to the heads of European states. Meanwhile, ICW president Jane Addams, who later won the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts,[4] met with US President Woodrow Wilson, providing him with many of the '14 points' that he took to the Versailles talks that ended the war.[5] ICW participants went on to form the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), which is still active today.[6]

Contemporary women's peace missions are rarely greeted with the deference that heads of state accorded the delegates from the International Congress of Women. But this indifference has not stopped women from organizing for peace. They are still active, and their work is still just as vital. Throughout our journey – in the Mano River countries of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia; in the Middle East and Latin America; in East Timor, Cambodia, the Balkans and the Great Lakes region of Africa (Burundi, Rwanda, the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo) – we met brave and tireless women who had much in common with the women of the ICW. They shared the ability to see beyond national boundaries, even while their governments maintained isolationist or pro-war positions. They shared a vision for peace based on respect for the dignity of the individual, regardless of nationality, ethnicity or economic background. And they shared the understanding that peace is linked inextricably with equality between women and men, a concept introduced by the ICW and recognized some 85 years later in a statement made by Security Council President Anwarul Karim Chowdhury of Bangladesh on International Women's Day, 8 March 2000: "Members of the Security Council … affirm that the equal access and full participation of women in power structures and their full involvement in all efforts for the prevention and resolution of conflicts are essential for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security."[7] We were inspired by the women peace activists we met, who were working steadfastly in the midst of deadly conflict,

undeterred by threats to their safety, limited resources or their marginalization by decision makers.

Women have sacrificed their lives for peace. They have challenged militarism and urged reconciliation over retribution. They have opposed the development, testing and proliferation of nuclear weapons, other weapons of mass destruction and the small arms trade. They have contributed to peacebuilding as activists, as community leaders, as survivors of the most cataclysmic horrors of war. They have transformed peace processes on every continent by organizing across political, religious and ethnic affiliations. But their efforts are rarely supported or rewarded.

"Women are half of every community … Are they, therefore, not also half of every solution?" asked Dr. Theo-Ben Gurirab, Namibia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, who acted as President of the Security Council during October 2000 when Resolution 1325 was unanimously passed. It is a question that needs answering, for despite their peacebuilding efforts, women are rarely present at the peace table. It takes fierce determination and intense lobbying for them to be included as participants in transitional governments. Political parties that are building democracy rarely turn to them.

Women's Peace Work

Grass roots organizing

Women's leadership role is most visible in their communities; it is here that they organize to end conflict and build the skills necessary for peacebuilding and reconstruction. "The role of women in the overthrow of the regime was extremely important," said Stasa Zajovic from the Serbian peace group Women in Black, which is also part of an international network. For years, Women in Black members stood in silence outside government offices, holding placards calling for peace and denouncing the government of Slobodan Milosevic. Stones were thrown at them, they were spat upon, beaten, and arrested, yet every week they returned and stood in silent witness. "By turning our discontent into public demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience, we transformed ethical principles into concrete acts of disloyalty towards the regime," stated Zajovic. "Along with many other women's organizations operating in war zones, we built networks of solidarity combining feminism and anti-militarism. We created alternative women's policy on the local, regional and global level, entering women's resistance to war and militarism into alternative history."

The government did everything it could to isolate the group. "They demonized us so much that the people were afraid of us," said Zajovic. A turning point came when Women in Black was awarded the Millennium Peace Prize by International Alert and UNIFEM: "After the Prize, women from inside the country, in small towns and villages, were proud of us for the first time."

Efforts like those of Women in Black as well as many other civil society groups created and run by women provide a visible alternative to violence and hatred. Women create campaigns and demonstrations, institute human rights reporting, lobby for ceasefires and build networks to care for victims of war. For Ruth, building peace in her village outside of Freetown, Sierra Leone, meant taking in the children of neighbours, friends or family members who were killed in the war. For Tatiana in Kosovo peace work

meant rebuilding damaged houses as well as friendships with former neighbours who had turned against her during the conflict. In Bosnia women have established mobile health clinics to provide gynaecological and psychosocial care to women survivors of rape and assault, most of whom had never seen a doctor or a counselor. In Colombia, we joined some 20,000 women organized by the new National Movement of Women Against the War in a march to demand an end to a conflict that kills about 3,500 each year. Their protest, "We won't give birth to more sons to send to war," rang through the streets of Medellín. Mercedes Vargas, a teacher and union leader, travelled eight hours by bus from the provincial capital of Manizales to join the demonstration. "The women have something in common," she told us. “We want peace. We are here demanding a negotiated end to this conflict."

In some conflicts, women’s social status becomes a basis for organizing. In Kosovo we met Sonia, who was part of a group of widows that met regularly. "As widows, we share a lot in common," she told us. "We struggle to claim our inheritance from our late husbands’ families and, sometimes, even the custody of our children. We want to know where our husbands are buried so we pressure the authorities to investigate their disappearances. And we turn to each other to help raise our children and the orphans who lost both parents to the war."

AVEGA, the association of Rwandan widows, originally met under a tree in Kigali. Within a week of their first gathering, more than fifty women had joined. Like so many other self-help and humanitarian organizations created by women, the Association provides psychological and social support and health services to its members. As one member told us, "We’ve always faced uncertainty, but had to carry on with our lives and care for Rwanda’s children. Otherwise, what would happen to the next generation? But widows of the genocide in Rwanda are discriminated against and blamed for the HIV epidemic. With little help from the government or local authorities, we have little choice but to rebuild our nation and try to heal the wounds ourselves."[8]

Some organizations limit their support to special categories of women: to widows, to the mothers of disappeared, or to the wives of political leaders, but many women believe it is a mistake to use social categories when offering support. “It’s not only widows who are raising children by themselves, caring for the sick and elderly, or struggling to claim their lost property,” said Elsie, the leader of a non-governmental organizations (NGO) in Rwanda, who is raising a child born of rape. “Many women in this village have come together to support each other. Some are widows, some are not. They all have special needs and different fears. But they don’t want to be divided or privileged differently because of their social status – because one lost her husband to war, and another never married. What about Sophie, who is supporting her family and her husband who is sick with HIV/AIDS and Cenina, whose husband fled the village in fear of retaliation by other village members?"

Organizing across borders

Women’s organizing at the grass-roots level often lays the groundwork for organizing across borders – in sub-regions and internationally. The Mano River Union Women’s Network for Peace, which has members from Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone brings together high-level women from established political networks as well as grass-roots

women, all searching for a way to end the fighting that has debilitated their three countries. "Women's networks have been pivotal in the resolution of the conflict in Sierra Leone, and in getting negotiations started between the Mano River countries," said Isha Dyfan, an activist from Sierra Leone. Dyfan is a former member of the Women's Forum, which was created long before the war started in Sierra Leone in 1991. Because the Forum had already brought women together, they were able to "raise our voices and opinions to the highest level. Our national network helped us to reach out regionally and internationally," said Dyfan. Eventually the Sierra Leonean women became involved in the regional Mano River Union Women's Network for Peace, the continent-wide Federation of African Women's Peace Networks (FERFAP), which was created with support from UNIFEM and with WILPF on the international level.

Women in Black, founded in Israel in 1988, has become a model for a different kind of cross-border organizing. Women in Black groups, like the one Zajovic is part of in Serbia, have sprung up around the world, creating an international network of women with a shared vision of peace and demilitarization. Support from the network provides a measure of solidarity for members in many countries who confront regimes bent on aggression. International conferences can provide a similar sense of solidarity. Luz Mendez, one of the few women to participate in Guatemala's official peace negotiations, told us how important it was for her to meet other activists at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing: "I had felt so isolated during the negotiations in Guatemala. In Beijing, I found many other women sharing the same struggles. I returned invigorated, with new ideas and strategies. And I had an international platform to support my arguments."

Getting to the Peace Table

On 2 May 2000 92 Somali women stood outside a huge military tent in the town of Arta, Djibouti. The Somali National Peace Conference was about to begin, the fourteenth attempt since 1991 to find a peaceful solution to the civil war. The women had been chosen to be part of delegations representing traditional clans, but their ultimate goal was to break out of clan-based allegiances. "We knew that peace in our country would come from cross-clan reconciliation, not official negotiations among warlords and faction leaders," one delegate told us during our visit to the country a year later. "So we cared for the wounded and built schools in communities regardless of clan, ethnic and political affiliations."

At the Conference, the women presented themselves as a 'sixth clan' (delegations came from four major clans and a coalition of minor ones) that reached beyond ethnicity to a "vision of gender equality," said Asha Hagi Elmi, a leader of the Sixth Clan Coalition. "In Arta, we presented 'buranbur' – a special poetic verse sung by women – to show the suffering of women and children during 10 years of civil war. We lobbied for a quota for women in the future legislature, the Transitional National Assembly (TNA). But we faced opposition from the male delegates. 'No man,' they told us, 'would agree to be represented by women.'"

But the women did not give up easily and ultimately helped create a National Charter that guaranteed women 25 seats in the 245-member TNA, and protected the

human rights of women, children and minorities as well. The Charter "ranks among the top in the region and the best in the Muslim world," said Elmi.[9]

As the Somali women's experience shows, it is not easy to translate women's activism into a presence at the peace table. Certainly not all women's groups want to be at the table if it involves negotiating with the warlords or tyrants who helped create the conflict, but most peace activists feel that women's presence is essential. Yet women are rarely included in formal negotiations, whether as members of political parties, civil society or special interest groups. Their organizing efforts are ignored, as are their roles as combatants and political leaders in national liberation movements. In Colombia, despite the fact that as many as 30 per cent of the fighters of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) are women, FARC included only one woman, Mariana Paez, among its representatives to official negotiations with the government.[10] Women were absent from the Dayton peace talks that ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.[11] According to Inonge Mbikusita Lewanika, President of FERFAP, "Women establish their credibility as peacemakers at the grass-roots level but are marginalized from official negotiations. Making it from the grass mat to the peace table has nothing to do with their qualifications as peacemakers. Once the foreign mediators come and the official negotiations start, you have to be able to sit at the table, and speak their language. Often women are not trained or given the chance."

When women are there, the nature of the dialogue changes. Women's concerns come not merely out of their own experiences, but out of their rootedness in their communities. They represent different constituencies: those in need of education, of health care, of jobs and of land. They have a different experience of war from male fighters and politicians. Former U.S. Senator George Mitchell credits women with helping to achieve an agreement in the Northern Ireland peace negotiations: "The emergence of women as a political force was a significant factor in achieving the agreement. Women were among the first to express their weariness of the conflict . ... The two women that made it to the [negotiating] table had a tough time at first. They were treated quite rudely by some of the male politicians … Through their own perseverance and talent, by the end of the process they were valued contributors. When the agreement included the creation of a new Northern Ireland Assembly, women got elected there too. Overall, in achieving the level of stability now enjoyed, women's involvement at all levels was a very important factor."[12]

Training and facilitating

Throughout our visits, when we did meet women who had made it to the peace table and beyond, it was through a combination of women's organizing and support from the international community. International organizations that support women's activism have seen that, as Inonge Mbikusita Lewanika indicates, women need training and preparation to open the doors that are consistently shut in their faces. Organizations like Search for Common Ground, International Alert, the US Institute for Peace and many other groups have been providing training for women to develop negotiation skills and leadership.

International groups have also become facilitators, helping to bring together groups of women so they can plan strategy as well as learn new leadership skills. UNIFEM is one of the pioneers of this approach. In July 2000 UNIFEM and the

Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Foundation convened the All-Party Burundi Women's Peace Conference in Arusha, Tanzania. Despite restrictions on Burundians leaving the country, the delegates found ways to get there**,** because it would be one of the last chances for women to affect the peace accords, which all-male delegations had been hammering out for four years. Winnie Byanyima, a Ugandan Member of Parliament (MP), who served as a facilitator at the Women's Conference, described the importance of the meeting:

> "The men who had been negotiating didn't feel that women had any right to be there. These men felt they had a right to be there because they were fighters, or had been elected to some parliament before the war escalated. But Burundi women who had suffered so much didn't have any legitimacy in their eyes. But by bringing in women the documents have more legitimacy now. People from the grass-roots have made their input to the future. The conference created a space that was necessary but lacking, not only between women in political parties and women working for peace and reconciliation at the grass-roots level, but also between international facilitators and women."

Since that meeting, the process has been replicated in other parts of the Great Lakes region. In 2001 UNIFEM was asked by Sir Ketumile Masire, the former President of Botswana, and the facilitator of the Inter-Dialogue to help develop methods for promoting women's participation in the Dialogue. Two sessions were convened, providing training to women on the gender dimensions of constitutional, electoral and judicial reform. Ultimately, 40 women from government, opposition parties and civil society participated in the Sun City Talks in March 2002.

International organizations can also be facilitators, bringing different groups together for working sessions. A particularly successful partnership enabled Afghan women in the diaspora to meet with women from inside the country to develop an agenda on how to contribute to national reconstruction. With the fall of the Taliban, it was essential that women meet quickly. They had to get to know international donors who were supporting reconstruction and they had to get to know each other so they could present their demands for women's participation as a united front. In December 2001 Equality Now, the European Women's Lobby, V-Day, the Center for Strategic Initiatives of Women and The Feminist Majority Foundation hosted the Afghan Women's Summit for Democracy in Brussels, in collaboration with the Gender Adviser to the Secretary-General of the United Nations and UNIFEM. At its conclusion, 40 women participated in a two-day Women's Roundtable, hosted by UNIFEM and the Belgian Government, which brought the women together with donors and heads of UN agencies. The Brussels Action Plan – which included recommendations on education, media and culture, health, refugees and internally displaced persons and human rights and the constitution – was adopted and informed the UN Transitional Assistance Programme for Afghanistan in 2002.

Quotas

Tradition and cultural practices can present formidable obstacles to the inclusion of women in peace processes or post-war governance unless a formal mechanism is in place to support this. To date, the use of quotas has been one of the most successful

methods for guaranteeing a minimum percentage of women in official negotiations as well as in government positions. We visited many countries where the use of quotas had brought women into the political process. As noted above, quotas ensured Somali women's participation at the Arta peace conference.[13] In Mozambique the Organizacao da Mulher Mocambicana, created in 1973 by the now-ruling FRELIMO party, recruits women for decision-making positions, and women now make up 30 per cent of Mozambique's legislative bodies. Similarly, in South Africa, the African National Congress's commitment to a party quota resulted in 29 per cent representation of women in the nation's first parliamentary elections in 1994.

The Beijing Platform for Action (PFA) calls for a 30 per cent minimum representation of women in decision-making bodies and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 urges the appointment of women in decision-making bodies and peace processes. Some NGOs have expressed dissatisfaction at the 30 per cent minimum, especially when considering the lack of progress seven years after Beijing. Instead, they call for parity, with a range of 45 to 55 per cent as acceptable in a democracy.

But the international community has been equivocal at best about honouring the calls for either formal or informal quotas. The UN has not always supported quotas in countries with UN mandated transitional governments. Within the organization itself, only one woman currently serves as a Special Representative of the Secretary-General. In East Timor women's groups overwhelmingly supported quotas for the national election when they met at the National Congress of Women, held prior to the elections.[14] But the UN's Department of Political Affairs (DPA) told the transitional government that the UN did not support quotas.[15]

"At one stage we were told that they would pull out and would not run the elections in East Timor if we insisted on quotas," Milena Pires, Deputy Speaker of the East Timor National Council told us. "We had comments from two missions that I know of that considered that gender was a luxury in East Timor. In the end even though we didn't have quotas, we offered training, with UNIFEM's support, to 160 potential women candidates for the constituent assembly, and 24 women were elected out of 88 members. However, now there have been replacements. One political party decided that the woman they had placed first on their list wasn't able to represent their interests, so they replaced her with a man who came after her on the list."

Certainly quotas alone cannot guarantee the emergence of a 'gender perspective' in the political process – although one is more likely to develop when a critical mass of women are in decision-making positions. We recognize that especially when numbers are small and cultural barriers enormous, quotas can only put women in power; they cannot guarantee that grass-roots concerns will be addressed. In Bosnia women parliamentarians told us they did not support action to legislate parental leave because they believed in women's traditional role in the family. The Minister of Foreign Trade agreed with them: "Just because I am a woman," she told us, "I will not fight for women's rights."

These disconnects may occur for many reasons. They may be the result of a lack of communication, outreach and advocacy. Sometimes they are due to continued violence, or a lack of financial and operational support from donors and national governments that should be promoting gender issues at all levels. Quotas must be seen as a temporary solution to increase gender balance. They are a first step on the path to gender equality, both a practical and a symbolic measure to support women's leadership.

But they cannot replace long-term projects that address the socio-economic constraints that keep women from participating in the political process.

Restoring the Rule of Law and Women's Access to Justice

Peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction must do more than focus on ending warfare. The nation-building process that is mandated by the peace agreement should include the revision of key laws in order to recognize women's contributions, to build gender equality and to protect women. Failing to establish a firm foundation built on law increases the danger of chronic instability and collapse into violent confrontation all over again. Support for the rule of law, multi-party systems and elections have become the benchmarks of peace-building. Without these women cannot live in safety. In many places we visited, threats from armed groups, including the national military, have drastically reduced women's ability to work for peace. In Colombia, we met with the daughter of a murdered political activist; her mother had ignored warnings from paramilitaries to drop out of a local city council race. In August 2000 paramilitaries burst into their house and forcibly removed the woman and her husband. When their children went to the police to report the disappearance, they were beaten and told to go home. The bodies of the woman and her husband were later found in the town dump. The organization the woman worked with is trying to support the eight orphans left behind, who have also become targets. "I was kidnapped [by paramilitaries] and held for 16 days," one daughter told us. "After that I sought refuge in another country, where I stayed for a year. But I had to come back to continue the struggle for peace. Since returning, I have received three bomb threats."

Constitutional reform

No matter how many women are included in peace negotiations or the reforms that ensue, it is up to all participants, women and men, to ensure that gender issues are addressed at all levels. Gender equality should be enshrined in a nation's constitution and bill of rights and be specified in all relevant clauses, including those setting up the parliament, the executive and the judiciary branches. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is the core international document for women's rights, but a full range of guarantees are set out in other treaties and consensus documents. These include the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Beijing Platform for Action. Women have a right to expect that all of these will be reflected in post-conflict constitutions that embody the needs of the local population. In Guatemala, the peace accords spelled out the government's responsibility to revise national legislation to eliminate discrimination against women using CEDAW as a guide, although, as with other aspects of the peace accords, this has not been fully carried out.

The constitution should contain simple and clear language so it is accessible to all, not just legal scholars. It should also be written with gender-sensitive rather than neutral language to avoid ambiguity and to ensure fairness and equality. Translating the

document into local languages ensures that all the different ethnicities within a country are aware of their rights.

Typically, producing a gender-sensitive constitution is a hard-fought effort. Women's networks, supported by international organizations that can supply the knowledge and the funds, have been central in the fight. In Rwanda a Legal and Constitutional Commission is responsible for reforming the old constitution. Three of the twelve commissioners are women, and women make up more than 50 per cent of the Commission's employees. Both the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UNIFEM have provided support, including training on CEDAW which, the women told us, provided a focus for their efforts. In Cambodia, UNIFEM-supported consultations among women have led to constitutional protections for rural women, equal pay for domestic workers and paid maternity leave. Like Cambodia, East Timor was a nation with almost nothing left when the fighting ended. Women's groups got together to make their needs clear and a coalition of national and international organizations, such as Oxfam and the Asia Foundation, helped establish a Gender and Constitution Working Group that developed a ten-article Charter of Women's Rights. Nine of the ten articles were adopted into the Constitution, which guarantees, among other things, social, health and educational rights, equal access to traditional law and protection from domestic violence. It also provides citizenship protections for children born of rape.

Electoral issues

Constitutional and political reform must ensure women's citizenship, and their right to vote and stand for public office. Quotas and proportional representation on ballots can help elect women into office. Proportional representation encourages voters to focus on parties and their policies, rather than on particular individuals, so women candidates are less likely to be defeated by bias and negative stereotypes.

In East Timor when the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) informed women's groups that they would not be able to use quotas in the national election, activists looked for other ways to get women elected. UNIFEM and UNTAET's gender advisor put together a training workshop for women who would consider running for office. "We planned for about 50 women and one workshop, " Lorraine Corner, UNIFEM's regional advisor in Bangkok told us. "But we were afraid no one would come. Well, we had 180 applications and we had to expand the number of workshops to five."

Along with helping to support the workshops, the then UN Special Representative, Sergio Vieira de Mello, used incentives to get women on the ballot. He promised transportation and media access – space in newspapers, ads on radio and television – to those parties that not only ran women candidates but put them near the top of their lists. "Only a few of the women we trained got into office," said Sherrill Whittington, the UNTAET gender advisor, "but that turned out not to be the point. They went back to their towns and ran voter education workshops for women. They are preparing a new generation of women to vote and to run for office."

Judicial reforms

Women seeking a new national standard for their legal protection can draw upon the precedents set by international courts, as well as on international customary law and even on non-binding tribunals. War crimes trials in national courts can play an important role in judicial reform by helping to rebuild the judiciary and the criminal justice system: Lawyers and judges are put in place who know and respect international humanitarian law; and open court proceedings become a model for the future. It is also essential to monitor human rights in the immediate post-war phase so that the highest possible standard of law is enforced.

However, national judicial systems in post-conflict societies have rarely delivered for women. Most investigations at the national level do not focus on violations against women. When they do, they lack both the systems and the capacity to carry out forensic investigations. Too often, judicial systems discriminate against women. They minimize the violence women experience, indulge in sexual innuendo and humiliate them. In Cambodia, Croatia and Kosovo, UNIFEM-supported women's groups are working with the judiciary to sensitize judges and lawyers. But much more can be done. Legal literacy programmes can help raise women's awareness about the operation of courts and the judicial system. Police units trained to investigate crimes against women can enhance legal access. Counselling programmes can advance the process of healing and reconstruction.

Implementation

It has become clear to us during our visits to conflict areas that peace agreements, electoral and judicial reform and government restructuring are only as good as their implementation. Time and again women described the wonderful documents that had been created and signed – and the failure to implement most of what had been promised. Asha Hagi Elmi of Somalia correctly calls the National Charter of Somalia "one of the best in the Muslim world" in terms of women's rights. Yet Somalia today is one of the most dangerous places on earth, still ruled by warring factions that have no commitment to honouring the National Charter.

In spite of the ground-breaking contributions made by women's groups in Burundi, Liberia and many other areas, the gender equity mechanisms created during peace negotiations often remain weak. Renewed violence can stop implementation in its tracks. In Guatemala, according to Luz Mendez, the coordinator of the National Union of Guatemalan Women, "Almost five years after the signing of the peace accords, the majority of the commitments referring to women have not been implemented." Many women's groups believe the Government is unwilling to honour its promises to women, as well as other aspects of the peace agreement.

In the peace accords the Guatemalan Government committed to promoting legal reform that included the classification of sexual harassment as a criminal offense. "If the offense is committed against an indigenous woman, it is considered an aggravation in determining the penalty," Mendez told us. Indigenous women "confront higher levels of gender-based violence as a result of their double discrimination, both as women and as indigenous people," she said.

Indigenous women's groups have been lobbying unsuccessfully since the accords were first signed to have this reform approved. "This experience erodes people's trust in the peace process. It is extremely important to support the strengthening of women's organizations both during the armed conflict and the peace-building so that they will be better prepared to impact the implementation of the peace agreements," Mendez added.

While it is ultimately a State responsibility to honour the agreements that have been signed, and to create an environment in which they can be implemented, the international community also has a role to play. Whether international donors are in a country as advisers, as peacekeepers or as educators, they must keep gender issues at the forefront of their work. They must focus more effort on supporting the implementation process through training, support of women's organizations and capacity-building. Specific mechanisms must be put in place to guarantee women's continued presence through constitutional, judicial, legislative and electoral reforms. And, of course, they must work to guarantee the peace that will allow reforms to be implemented.

What do women need?

Women's participation in peace processes and new governments, and their efforts to rebuild judicial and civil infrastructure, cannot be achieved unless their organizing is supported. The women organizers we met needed four things to contribute to peace processes and decision making about security: safety, resources, political space and access to decision makers.

Safety: In conflict situations, political activists and their organizations frequently face security threats; many have been killed and many more abducted, beaten and tortured. Women are particularly vulnerable, first because they are subject to sexual attacks in addition to the other dangers, and second because they are often seen as stepping outside their traditional role – which can lend cultural justification to the idea that they need to be 'taught a lesson.' Without adequate protection, women are frequently compelled to abandon activism. We suspect this persecution has drastically reduced the number of women's organizations in many places we visited. An enabling environment, that allows organizations and individuals to express their opinions in safety and security, would sustain current activities and encourage more women to become active.

Resources: Almost all the groups we visited, whether they are coping with a country in conflict, in transition or in post-conflict reconstruction, have significant unmet needs. A much larger pool of funds is needed to maximize the potential of women's organizing efforts. In many places we visited, the financial outlay necessary to keep an organization going or enhance its effectiveness would be minimal and the benefits enormous. Women told us that just a computer or a cell phone, or even some paper and books, would make a major difference in their work. There is often fierce competition for humanitarian and development resources, which does not enhance collaboration between groups. Longer-term investments in human resources would be more expensive, but no less crucial. Often, foundations and donors will only fund projects and not the ongoing costs of maintaining staff and institutions, making it nearly impossible for long-term endeavours to properly develop. However, support should not be thought of as only material aid. Frequently, even activists with very limited resources emphasized that international political solidarity and messages of support are priceless.

While UNIFEM has been able to provide funds to 'innovative and catalytic' projects, it cannot begin to meet all the challenges it confronts on its current budget. It is operational in only a handful of countries. We returned from our journey more convinced than ever that women's peace work reinforces the broader effort to extend and protect human rights and expands the political space that allows women to address gender issues. We believe that ensuring the support this work needs and deserves will require a dedicated pool of funds, such as a United Nations Trust Fund. This fund would be able to leverage the political, financial and technical support women's civil society organizations and women leaders need so they can have a significant impact on peace efforts nationally, regionally and internationally.

Political Space: Sometimes ensuring that women play an important role in building peace requires carving out space and time for a women-only gathering. Recent initiatives show what can be accomplished with foresight and funding. To enhance the participation of women in the Inter-Congolese Dialogue (ICD), Femme Afrique Solidarite and WOPPA-DRC (Women As Partners for Peace in Africa – Democratic Republic of the Congo) created space for women to find common ground. These cross-party groups gave women an opportunity to develop a joint declaration and plan of action that offered a gender perspective to the Dialogue. Thanks to the political space provided by UNIFEM, a similar consensus was achieved by women observers of the Burundi peace process, many of whose recommendations were included in the final document.

Access to decision-makers: While activists and NGOs are often viewed as a source of innovative ideas and information, governments and international organizations sometimes regard them as a nuisance or even a threat to their interests. Activists who have won an opportunity to meet with decision-makers at the national or international level often told us how crucial it was to share information and to build relationships. NGOs have had a formal relationship with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) through Article 71 of the UN Charter. However, the doors to the General Assembly and the Security Council, where peace and security matters are discussed, remain officially closed.

Secretary-General Kofi Annan has called NGOs "the conscience of humanity." To truly become this conscience, the voices of women's organizations must be heard and heeded by governance structures in which they are fully and consistently represented. Kofi Annan understood this when he said at the 2000 meeting to evaluate progress made in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action, "Five years ago, you went to Beijing with a simple statement: 'We are not guests on this planet. We belong here.' Five years on, I would venture that we all know this is an understatement … not only do women belong on this planet … the future of this planet depends on women."

On Peace Building the Experts call for:

1. The Secretary-General, in keeping with his personal commitment, to increase the number of women in senior positions in peace-related functions. Priority should be given to achieving gender parity in his appointment of women as Special Representatives and Envoys, beginning with the minimum of 30 per cent in the next three years, with a view to gender parity by 2015.

2. Gender equality to be recognized in all peace processes, agreements and transitional governance structures. International, regional organizations and all participating parties involved in peace processes should advocate for gender parity, maintaining a minimum 30 per cent representation of women in peace negotiations, and ensure that women's needs are taken into consideration and specifically addressed in all such agreements.

3. A United Nations Trust Fund for Women's Peace-building. This Trust Fund would leverage the political, financial and technical support needed for women's civil society organizations and women leaders to have an impact on peace efforts nationally, regionally and internationally. The Fund should be managed by UNIFEM, in consultation with other UN bodies and women's civil society organizations.

4. UNIFEM to work closely with the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) to ensure that gender issues are incorporated in peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction in order to integrate gender perspectives in peace-building and to support women's full and equal participation in decision-making, and for the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) to strengthen its work in emergency situations in order to build women's capacity in conflict situations. UNIFEM and UNFPA should be represented in all relevant inter-agency bodies.

5. Peace negotiations and agreements to have a gender perspective through the full integration of women's concerns and participation in peace processes. Women's peace tables should be established and enabled through financial, political and technical assistance.

6. The UN and donors to invest in women's organizations as a strategy for conflict prevention, resolution and peace-building. Donors should exercise flexibility in responding to urgent needs and time-sensitive opportunities, and foster partnerships and networks between international, regional and local peace initiatives.