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Peace with guns? Women's human rights and the masculinisation of peace and security

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On November 24, Oxfam published a report, issued in advance of the London Conference on Afghanistan, that stressed the importance of the participation of Afghan women in future peace talks with the Taliban, following the withdrawal of the majority of foreign troops by the end of the year. Oxfam's report serves as a warning to the international community, arguing that the perpetuation of women's exclusion from the peace process will potentially have disastrous consequences.

No women, no peace

This is not the first time an appeal of this kind has been made. The call for participation of women in peace talks, invoked in countless other current and past conflict situations, challenges the common state of war as being in the realm of men. This status quo enables crucial decisions regarding a conflict's initiation, progression, and most importantly when and how it will end, to be made by men, with very little transparency.

As a result, certain questions are raised. How do wars especially affect women? Why is it important for them to be an active part of peace negotiations and what can they bring to the negotiating table? How does this relate to other forms of gender inequality? The answers to these questions are often disregarded. On the occasion of UN Human Rights Day 2014, it is a good opportunity to examine the masculinisation of peace and security as a major cause for the ongoing undermining of women's rights.

Wars, according to Cynthia Cockburn, are positioned on a continuum of violence, affecting all women in some way. In many cases violence escalates and personal security plummets following the official end of conflict. Some examples of common post-conflict gender-based violence include trafficking, forced prostitution, domestic violence, and rape. These relate, among other things, to the proliferation of small arms, an increased tolerance for violence within society, and the struggle for returning male heads of households to adjust to the new order of post-conflict civilian life following traumatic military engagement. The violence that women experience on a daily basis does not stop when a peace agreement is signed.

This constant state of gendered violence has been considered a form of discrimination, since it prevents women from obtaining and fulfilling human rights such as the rights to health, education, work and political participation. Subsequently, wars and their aftermaths are one of the main causes for gender inequality, since they perpetuate violent masculine dominance and further oppress the already excluded feminine population. On the other hand, different from 'peacetime' forms of violence against women, such as domestic violence or street harassment, the efforts to end the violence of military conflicts actually receive major international attention and hold the power to create social and political change on a grand scale. Consequently, can the negotiation table serve as bedrock for gender equality if women *are* more represented in international discourses on military conflict?

14 years ago, UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women Peace and Security (WPS) was unanimously adopted, acknowledging the disproportionate and unique effect armed conflict has on women. Understanding the necessity of including women for the success of global peace efforts, the WPS agenda – which comprises several additional resolutions – supports increased participation and representation of women at all levels of decision-making, attention to specific protection needs of women and girls in conflict, and the adoption of a gender perspective in post-conflict processes and various other UN endeavours. Comparing the work that has been done so far with the strong language in these documents, the promise remains unfulfilled.

So far, international efforts have been only partially successful. These have largely focused on sexual violence in conflict, but have neglected to promote the full participation of women in conflict resolution processes. Clearly, international efforts regarding the prevention of conflict-related sexual violence (such as the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative and the recent Global Summit, which was held in the UK just last June) are commendable actions and are, in fact, a crucial step towards the
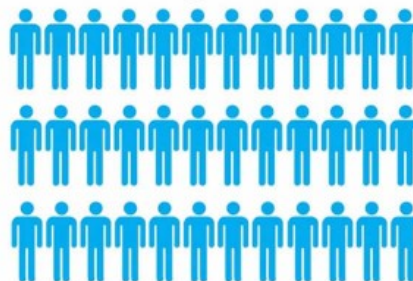
full participation of women in other civil and political arenas. Nonetheless, the ongoing struggle of experienced and courageous women to even be allowed to make a statement, let alone serve an active role in peace negotiations, is a crucial and urgent issue to be regarded both from a quantitative and qualitative aspect. Statistically, during 31 major peace processes from 1992 to 2011, only 4 per cent of signatories, 2.4 per cent of chief mediators, 3.7 per cent of witnesses and 9 per cent of negotiators were women. The striking inequality in these numbers clearly demonstrates the masculinisation of peace and security.

The inclusion of women in conflict resolution processes is an opportunity for a paradigm shift in our understanding of peace and security, moving away from a masculine-negative approach, which sees men as the primary agents of war and peacemaking, and is based on territorial security, military deterrence strategies and the accumulation of arms. Alternatively, the positive approach to peace and security acknowledges war's effect on everyone, focuses on personal security, and consequently on human rights, economic wellbeing and environmental sustainability.

Since women experience war in a very different way to men, their standpoint on post-war reconstruction and conflict prevention is relevant. In many cases women's standpoints will better represent the real needs of the civil population in general, and of women and girls in particular, putting emphasis on social and economic rights. Including women means addressing the root causes of war, and gender inequality as one of them.

Nonetheless, we should be careful of assuming that women are inherently peaceful. Women may bring different practices to the peace process, but not every woman will necessarily have a "pro-women" agenda. History holds several examples of women who led their countries to war, or who did little to empower other women while in office. A positive approach to peace and security means an in-depth readjustment of our prioritization of rights, and of those who can exercise them. Without a thorough international understanding and commitment that women should not only have a presence, but a clear voice to express their interests, we will reproduce the same approach to peace that has been failing us for centuries.

Certainly, there are other causes for the failure of many of the peace processes we see today, mainly since much of the local and international obligations we find written, remain just that: words on paper, without proper implementation and monitoring mechanisms or accountability. Yet more significantly, many of these causes are embedded in our approach to militarised security – developing more elaborate and sophisticated weapons as means of deterrence, instead of searching for and ameliorating the causes of conflicts.

This global pattern undermines human security and perpetuates violence, which plants the seeds of future conflict. If we are indeed all born equal, as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states, human rights must be distributed equally. Women should have the platform to shape their own future following the horrors of war. So ask the women of Afghanistan, what does security mean for them, and we might have a very different world than the one we see today.

This post is published to coincide with UN Human Rights Day 2014. The Centre for the Study of Human Rights has also organised a public event to mark the occasion, chaired by Professor Christine Chinkin, on the global struggle for women's human rights (more information here).

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