

Civil Society

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Conflict and violence typically limit or even destroy the capacity of people to provide for themselves and of the state to provide the basic services that enable society to function. Agricultural production and commerce are disrupted. Everyday social functions such as caring for children and the sick are reduced. Formal structures that govern communities are destroyed or become dysfunctional. Health care and social welfare may disappear. Schools may shut down. Rubbish may not be collected. Water and electricity services may be disrupted, causing a rise in illness and epidemics. Police services may become debilitated, leading to a rise in insecurity and increased reliance on fighting factions. In many countries suffering from civil war, “civil society” increasingly has taken on the burden of providing services, caring for communities, speaking out on behalf of the population and attempting to influence the policies and actions of national and international actors vis-à-vis the conflict. This chapter provides an overview of civil society, with an emphasis on the NGO sector. It draws attention to women-led organisations and the opportunities and challenges they face.

1. WHAT IS CIVIL SOCIETY?

The term civil society was originally coined to describe popular movements in Latin America that sought to counterbalance the power of oppressive governments on the one hand and exploitative international financial interests on the other.¹ But it has expanded to include a variety of non-state actors, including formal organisations, informal networks and social movements. Since the end of the cold war particularly, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have flourished and are increasingly recognised as critical actors in the peace and security arena.

According to the Centre for Civil Society at the London School of Economics, “civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups,

women’s organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.”²

The inclusion of the business sector under the umbrella of civil society is a matter of some debate internationally. Some people are willing to accept the business sector as part of civil society, whereas others perceive the business community to be linked too closely to the government, particularly in some countries. NGOs such as International Alert have developed programmes to promote a peacebuilding role for companies including better ties between businesses and the communities in which they operate in areas affected by conflict.

Civil society is contrasted with the state (government and parliament) and formal political sector (e.g. political parties) as an alternative means of directly representing the will of ordinary citizens that organise in private entities but are active in the public arena.

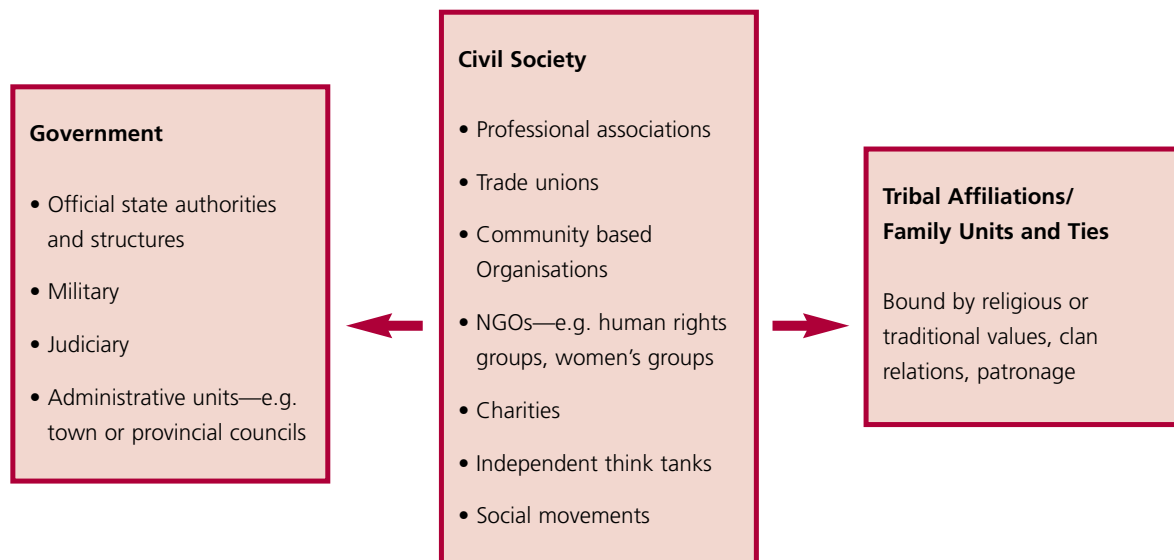
WHY IS A VIBRANT CIVIL SOCIETY IMPORTANT TO CONFLICT-AFFECTED SOCIETIES?

Civil society organisations enable individuals to unite

around different aspects of their identity, rather than just being identified by their social class, religion, political affiliation or ethnicity. For example, a female Muslim medical doctor with an interest in environmental issues in Bosnia can assert her identity as a doctor through the medical association, her interest in the environment through an NGO, her religious beliefs through the mosque. She is not limited to being identified only as a “Muslim” or a “woman.” Through her professional and other interests she is able to interact and establish relations with others in society who may have different religious identities, but similar professional ones. Civil society entities are an important moderating force in society, providing a middle ground between identification through either the state or tribal, familial or ethnic ties (see diagram below). A vibrant civil society can help prevent extremism and a breakdown in relations in societies that have diverse populations, and in which political leaders seek to manipulate support based on identity issues.

internationally recognised. In the “frozen conflict” of Georgia and Abkhazia in the Caucasus (where there is neither all-out war, nor an agreed framework for peace), Abkhaz civil society—particularly the NGO sector promoting conflict resolution—has greater access to the international community than the *de facto* (but not *de jure*) government of the region, and is thus the communication bridge. While the Abkhaz authorities view the potential influence of the NGO sector with concern at times, they also recognise its importance in maintaining ties with Georgia and conveying the Abkhaz perspective internationally.

The term civil society is often used as though it is, by definition, a positive and forward-looking force, with the capacity to represent the popular viewpoint, and whose strengthening will contribute to the establishment of durable peace. But this is not always the case. First, it is only able to represent those groups that are strong and self-aware enough



Where a strong civil society exists, there is greater accountability and civilian interest and participation in governance and political issues. “Impartial information on controversial issues, from human rights violations to corruption, is more likely to be expected from an independent NGO than from a government agency or a business corporation.”³

This is particularly pertinent where the political leadership of one side of the conflict is not

to become organised, leaving the weaker groups unrepresented.

Second, if it truly represents the full range of public opinion and interests in society, civil society will present viewpoints that may be conflicting and, in some cases, reactionary. To the extent that civil society organisations (CSOs) include nationalist groups or groups that have previously been engaged in violent conflict, it may even emerge as a force for

repression, exclusion or the defence of vested interests. In **Colombia**, for example, peace activists believe that some major corporations establish charitable foundations as façades to detract attention from their links to paramilitary activities.⁴

Third, as long as civil society attracts international funding support, it will not be immune from the political or financial influence that international interests may represent. Moreover, while many civil society organisations are explicitly non-political or apolitical, there are also many that have strong political leanings, or focus on issues that are supported by different actors in the formal political arena.

Fourth, as governments and multilateral organisations draw on civil society to provide services, in many cases

people are drawn to the sector because of the potential income they can make, rather than because of their ideology. This is particularly the case with NGOs (see box below). Finally, in many conflict-affected and non-democratic countries, control over civil society is very much in the hands of the state. The state determines which organisations can exist, what issues are addressed, what types of activities and programmes they can develop and how funds (from national and international sources) are disbursed. By definition it means that those groups that are not supported by the government are not permitted to form, become publicly active or gain access to the international community.

Is it possible to establish a strong and dynamic civil society, capable of making government and private

Women's Involvement in Civil Society

Women's civil society activism in the world has increased steadily since the 1970s (although women's organisations have existed historically). Women's exclusion from formal governing structures—elected or appointed positions—has been a driving force behind their involvement as leaders in civil society. Therefore, efforts that promote the inclusion of civil society in peace processes or democratic systems can translate into larger roles for women. Civil society can be a “back door” into the process when women are blocked access to the formal political process.

“The subordination of women has a long history and is deeply ingrained in economic, political and cultural processes. What we have managed to do in the last few years is to forge worldwide networks and movements, as never existed before, to transform that subordination and in the process to break down other oppressive structures as well... we have acquired skills, self-confidence and the capacity to organise for change.”⁵

Through civil society, women have created an autonomous political space where they are free to organise according to their own principles and interests. “Women's interests” can be interpreted in various ways. For some, they are determined by women's supposed essential natures as care givers, so that high on the list of women's interests is the provision of health, education and social services. For others, women's interests are defined by their social positions and the need to defend their rights and would include lobbying for legislation that, for example, enables women to vote or own property on an equal basis with men. For some groups, it is important to focus on ‘specific’ gender issues such as domestic violence or reproductive choice, while others aim to incorporate their activism within broader political platforms, promoting “a general project of social justice.”⁶

These different goals are of course linked; women are not likely to obtain appropriate services unless they have the power to influence decision-making. In many developing countries, women's organisations have stressed the goal of obtaining women's rights as citizens, meaning that their rights to services and their civil and political rights are indissoluble. For example, the Institute of Human Rights Communication in **Nepal** and the Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency in **Bougainville** work with their governments to raise awareness of women's rights in areas such as domestic violence and women's rights to education.

interests accountable? Civil society normally operates under government legislation and supervision, often using private sector financing. Thus its degree of independence may be limited. Civil society leaders must walk a thin line between constructive challenge and unacceptable opposition, with the risk of being excluded if they are seen as destructive or disloyal. While ideally the government, the private sector and civil society should regulate and monitor one another, in reality civil society is often not sufficiently united and is the least powerful of these groups. As a result, it is often the sector that is targeted first. This is the case both in conflict-affected societies and in countries where democracy is weak.

NGOS AS A GROWING SECTOR IN CIVIL SOCIETY

NGOs are a subset of civil society and represent a growing sector. Between 1990 and 1999, the number of international NGOs rose from 6,000 to 29,000.⁷ They have become increasingly significant actors in international development. NGOs engage in a wide array of activities, including undertaking research, implementing projects, advocating and raising public and political awareness about numerous issues. Many NGOs perform all of these activities, using research to develop programs and support advocacy. According to the Commonwealth Foundation, NGOs are characterised by four key features. They are:⁸

1. *Formed voluntarily by citizens*—There is an element of voluntary participation in the organisation, including voluntary staff or board members.

2. *Independent*—NGOs operate within the laws of the state, but they are controlled by their founders and elected or appointed board. The legal status of NGOs is based on the freedom of association—a basic human right. The 1966 International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, ratified by 152 countries (June 2004), grants the right to assemble (see section below on NGO laws).⁹

3. *Not-for-profit*—NGOs are not for private gain or profit. They can generate revenues, but only to further their mission. NGO employees can be paid for their work. Board members are typically not paid, but do get reimbursed for their expenses.

4. *Not self-serving in aims or values*—The aims of an NGO must be to improve the prospects and circumstances of people and to address issues detrimental to society at large or to particular sectors.

Ideally, NGOs contribute to civil society by promoting pluralism and diversity, advancing arts and science, promoting culture, motivating citizens to engage in civic life, providing services and creating an alternative space from the state for reflection on key social, political and economic issues.¹⁰

The World Bank classifies NGOs as:

1. **Community-based organisations (CBOs)**, which serve a narrow and often localised population;

NGOS, GONGOS, BONGOS and MANGOS

In many countries in transition as a result of conflict, non-democratic states and post-communist states, opportunities in the NGO sector have led to increased interference and influence on the part of governments and the private sector. As a result, there are BONGOS (business-organised and -oriented NGOs), GONGOS (governmental NGOs) and even MANGOS (mafia-based NGOs). The links with business are perhaps the most long-standing, particularly in the **United States (US)** where the private sector has a history of philanthropic involvement. The Ford Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, for example, are major actors in the NGO sector, but they have derived their funds from business. However, there is a distinction between the business component and the NGO work. Foundations such as these operate entirely independently of the business, setting their own agendas, operating under separate management systems and having unique areas of interest. They are not BONGOS.

2. **National** NGOs, which operate in individual countries; and
3. **International** NGOs (INGOs), which are often headquartered in the developed world but have operations in developing nations.

The Bank has increased its collaboration with NGOs over the past few decades, working directly with national organisations or CBOs, rather than with international entities.

Despite the increased acceptance of NGOs by international institutions, in many societies—those affected by violent conflict and states with limited or no democratic rule—people have difficulty creating formal organisations and asserting their legitimacy. Often by virtue of their activities, NGOs are under constant threat of closure and having their staff arrested. These difficulties stem from the fact that legislation governing NGOs and their relationship with the state, in some cases, is non-existent or weak. To flourish and gain strength, regulations governing civil society organisations and practices relating to trade unions, public gatherings, NGO formation and operation and a host of other related activities, need to be addressed. Typically, in the face of opposition from the government, there is limited opportunity for civil society activists to pursue legislation that protects their activities and independence. When states are in transition, however—either post war or in the process of democratisation—the opportunity to formulate new legislation and acceptance of NGOs does arise and should be taken, otherwise there is a danger that legislation that does eventually pass would make NGO formation even more cumbersome (see box for key issues relating to NGO laws).

Another common dilemma is that tensions exist between national and international NGOs in many countries. In **Pakistan** many INGOs are perceived to be pillars of western values and ideals, with little interest in the needs of people at the grassroots level. In **Nepal** and elsewhere, salaries and resources available to the staff of INGOs are the cause of resentment, particularly when contrasted with the living conditions of ordinary people. In many instances, locals perceive that the programmes of INGOs counteract those of local NGOs, causing tension and mistrust. This competition between

INGOs and local organisations is also evident in the search for international funding and visibility. Many groups are working collaboratively, drawing on the unique strengths and capacities of each entity. Others—particularly those active internationally or regionally—focus their partnership with local groups on building their capacities to operate independently. But the challenge remains and local perceptions and distrust are often exacerbated in crisis situations, when international actors flood a region with money and equipment, overwhelming communities and even draining skilled personnel away from local organisations.

2. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE PEACE?

Civil society has been active in a variety of fields for decades. The advent of the United Nations (UN) in particular helped forge relations between civil society groups across national boundaries on issues as diverse as education, health, socioeconomic development and human rights. In situations of war, humanitarian agencies have a long history of providing relief, led by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) movement. On issues relating to peace and security and decision-making around war, broad-based social movements have formed and dissolved for many decades, but focused activism on the part of organisations dedicated to peace and security issues on a global level is a relatively new phenomenon.

During World War I, for example, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), founded in 1915, was one of the few groups pressing for an end to war, bringing together over 1,000 women from warring and neutral countries. As the oldest women's peace organisation, WILPF remains active today. In the 1930s in **Russia**, women formed a feminist peace movement. The onslaught of the Cold War in the immediate aftermath of World War II left little space for civil society activism on peace issues. This changed gradually in the 1960s when public demonstrations against the Vietnam War in the **US** and **Europe** mobilised a new generation of peace activists. Social movements emerged throughout the 1970s across the world. In **Pakistan**, women mobilised

NGO Laws: Issues to Note

There are numerous issues to consider when developing or advocating for legislation governing NGOs. The following are included among the most important:

1. **Formation**—is based on the right to freedom of association (as noted in Article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international conventions).

- Any laws pertaining to NGOs must state that they do not need prior permit or licence from the state and must be free of any interference by the public administration or judiciary. The state should have no right to interfere with the creation of an NGO or to impose restrictions on its formation.
- Laws must state that procedures in place to enable NGOs to register must be swift, clear, simple and cheap and should not be at the discretion of the state. In other words, registration forms and processes should not be cumbersome.
- Associations should have their own legal identity, separate from their individual founders.

2. **The Statutes and Bylaws of an NGO**—regarding the purpose and scope of activities should be determined by the founders.

- Laws should explicitly declare that the state should not interfere in this process.
- NGOs should have the right to change their statutes and bylaws without interference from the state.

3. **Management of NGOs**—

- Laws must note that NGOs should be managed according to their own statutes and bylaws without state interference.
- In order to guarantee transparency and credibility, laws should note that organisations must keep accounting books and be independently audited annually.
- Laws should state that there must be no conflict of interest between organisations and their members.

4. **Source of Financing**—

- Laws should state that NGOs have the right to generate resources for their activities using various means, including membership fees, donations, grants and aid from local or foreign entities. NGOs should not be dependent upon their national government for access to foreign aid.
- Laws must allow for tax and duty exemption for NGOs and encourage donations and gifts that are tax-deductible at a reasonable rate. NGOs must be protected by law from state interference as a result of their tax-exempt status.

5. **Controls and Violations**—

- Laws must be explicit in demanding controls and accountability from NGOs.
- No state or public administration can dissolve an NGO.
- NGOs can be dissolved through resolutions passed by their own governing bodies or by a court decision that is based on a fair and public hearing.

against the imposition of Islamic laws. In **Africa**, numerous groups supported liberation movements.

In the 1980s, the Western world witnessed organisations dedicated to peace emerging on a notable scale. Although their focus was primarily nuclear proliferation, they nevertheless opened the way for more public activism on issues of war and peace.¹² The end of the Cold War and the parallel rise in internal conflicts and civil war also led to a mushrooming of organisations—best categorised as NGOs—at the international, national and local levels. Many of them either tackle the effects of war, focusing on the resolution of conflict, or work to rebuild post conflict societies.

Since the mid 1990s, NGOs have become key actors in humanitarian aid, post conflict reconstruction and international development. In fact, by the late 1990s, an estimated \$11–12 billion was spent by NGOs on these efforts.¹³ Whereas in the 1970s and 80s relations between civil society actors (e.g. human rights and development NGOs) and governments were often contentious and confrontational, in the post–Cold War period there has been a significant shift towards partnership and cooperation. In part this is due to the outsourcing of services, where governments draw on NGOs to provide basic services in an effort to lower costs. It is also due to the increasing expertise of NGOs in a variety of different sectors, as well as their access to the grassroots. The capacity of NGOs and other civil society organisations to influence global policies is evident in the successes of efforts such as the landmine ban campaign, debt cancellation and environmental protection advocacy (see below for more examples). However, there are many unresolved issues including:

- the tension that emerges for CSOs when working with governments and donors as partners and are reliant on them for funding, yet seek to guard their organisation’s independence; and
- CSO reliance on funding by major institutions or governments that can make their activities donor driven as opposed to beneficiaries/claimant and needs driven.

OBSTACLES TO CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISING IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED REGIONS

All civil society organisations—including women’s groups—face an uphill struggle in war-torn countries. The destruction of resources, physical and psychological impacts of extreme violence, exploitation of existing divisions in civil society by politicians and the prevalence of undemocratic and patriarchal institutions and attitudes create major hurdles. In many instances civil society leaders—particularly those promoting peace, human rights and justice—are directly threatened and often attacked or killed. Ensuring protection for staff and managing fear are critical problems facing many civil society activists and organisations worldwide. In attempting to overcome the fear, women’s organisations in **Colombia** have developed a number of approaches, including:

- workshops to help staff manage fear;
- the use of trusted messengers to warn their members and activists about threats;
- gathering to protect those who have been threatened (e.g. standing in front of a person’s house, moving together in groups); and
- using symbolic language such as music and flowers when faced with armed actors (the fact that the women lack weapons, “disarms” the armed actors).

The challenge of maintaining relations across conflict lines is another key complication facing civil society entities, particularly when violence increases. Throughout the Oslo peace process, many **Israeli** and **Palestinian** organisations worked together on issues as diverse as health, youth peace education and film-making in an attempt to promote trust and relations among citizens. There were also numerous initiatives bringing Israeli and Palestinian civilians together to talk and build relations. Yet many initiatives faltered following the virtual collapse of the Oslo process in 2000. A lesson for some groups was that it is essential to plan for the bad times and to draw on the range of relations that exist to maintain contact. For some Israeli and Palestinian NGOs, their relations existed on three levels: organisational, professional and personal.

When violence erupts or formal peace talks falter, at the level of civil society there is often pressure on

organisations to sever relations with their counterparts. If professional relations exist, communication can often be maintained and trust promoted (e.g. medical doctors can continue to work together). In other instances, it is the strength of personal relations and ties that sustains and enables the re-establishment of links. While such interactions may not be able to de-escalate the conflict, they are the root and foundation upon which relations can be rebuilt.

Another common challenge facing civil society organisations is that they may not be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to represent their members and constituency politically, especially in times of conflict. In addition, civil society entities may be isolated from each other and, in fact, in competition for partnerships with and resources from the international community, particularly donors. In most instances, the bulk of the resources dedicated to post conflict reconstruction are channelled through a handful of multilateral and bilateral organisations.

If civil society groups are not involved in the planning and programmatic development stages, they are likely to be marginalised at the time of implementation. Following the 1992 peace agreement in El Salvador, despite plans for a broad-based and inclusive consultation regarding the national reconstruction programme, the NGO community was largely excluded and donors such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the World Bank developed partnerships with government bodies rather than NGOs or social organisations. NGO networks that did participate in the design and implementation of the plan noted that by ignoring local organisations and expertise, potential partners were reduced to being only beneficiaries.¹⁴

3. HOW ARE WOMEN IN CIVIL SOCIETY INVOLVED IN PROMOTING PEACE AND SECURITY?

Women have often been at the forefront of the NGO sector in promoting and building peace. The oldest women's peace organisation, WILPF, now has branches in 37 countries.¹⁵ In recent times, a strong impetus towards women organising for peace was the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women. "At

the gathering in Beijing, the war in Bosnia and the genocide in Rwanda were fresh in the minds...of many participants.... Although information about...women was still limited...the trends were alarming.... It was of sufficient concern for all those involved to accept that a new chapter should be added to the document [Platform for Action] that focused specifically on women's experience in armed conflict."¹⁶

The **Beijing Platform for Action** calls on governments to take action on these issues. But in the decade that has followed, civil society has taken the lead. Women's organisations worldwide have emerged, many with a strong focus on peace issues. "From grassroots activism to international networks and campaigns, women...have brought new energy and focus to peacebuilding and have engaged other international and regional policy-making institutions."¹⁷

Women are motivated to start CSOs for a number of reasons. In many cases where conflict exists, women feel that the political arena is dominated by men and is morally bankrupt, as evidenced by the war itself. Experiencing war firsthand galvanises women to take action, but they may prefer to do so outside the formal political sphere. For many, involvement in women's organisations is driven by their desire to see a just society in which women's voices can be heard. They may prefer to start their own organisations, focusing on particular issues before influencing a wider community. Some women become involved in civil society believing that by mobilising and working collectively, they can create the power to transform the way politics is conducted. Particularly in the context of peace negotiations, women often make strategic use of their identities as mothers and caregivers and the space within civil society to influence male leaders in favour of peace and reconciliation, on the grounds that they are neither political competition nor have a political agenda and seek only to relieve suffering.¹⁸

Despite their motivations, women in many societies—particularly those dominated by men and determined by familial ties—are reluctant to speak out publicly and lack the self confidence and belief that they "can make a difference."¹⁹ Moreover, even those that do take the step forward can be apprehensive about taking a political stance and

speaking out against factional fighting or violence. However, in many cases where women do take the step forward—with support and training from national or international organisations—with time many become empowered and do enter the formal political arena.

WOMEN'S SOLUTIONS AND ACTIVITIES IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED SOCIETIES

Women's NGOs and others working on peacebuilding face many difficulties as they often address and confront highly sensitive issues.²⁰ While the challenges are significant, the desire and motivation to bring peace is often stronger. Around the world, women's organisations participate in a wide variety of activities in pursuit of peace, ranging from contributing to development and reconstruction to promoting the rights and participation of women. They have also developed strategies to overcome the many obstacles they face and are active at international, national and local levels.

Survival and Basic Needs: Women's groups may provide food, shelter, medical care, psychosocial counselling, orphan care and programs for the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS (see chapter on HIV/AIDS). The Women's Rehabilitation Centre in **Nepal** runs a program to provide psychosocial support and counselling to traumatised women. The Help the Widows Association in **Cambodia** provides microcredit for women to expand their economic activities in agriculture and trade. In **Sulaimania, Iraq**, the NGO, Asuda, works on combating violence against women and children.

Building Trust and Cross-Community Dialogue: In an environment of fear, distrust and no communication, peace activists aim to cross the conflict divide and work together for peace. Building trust and confidence in the opposition can be time-consuming and painful. It involves "truth telling" and acknowledgement of the violence and harm done by both sides. These efforts, however, can draw harsh criticism, opposition and threats from activists' own and/or other communities. Often, if violence escalates, peace activists find themselves torn between the need for immediate loyalty to their community or loyalty to the vision of peace.

Women's organisations build consensus and engagement with the peace process and may also monitor peace

accords (see chapter on negotiations). For example, the Réseau des Femmes pour un Développement Associatif (the Women's Network for Group Development) in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** monitors and denounces violations of women's rights during war and brings women of different factions together in simple shared acts like cooking and dining. In the northern province of Mannar in **Sri Lanka**, informal peace talks were brought about while women were weaving and singing, refusing to heed the communications barrier imposed on them by the conflict.

On a very different level, the international movement, Women in Black, was originally created by Palestinian and Israeli women united for peace. Its branches in the Middle East, the former Yugoslavia, Canada, the US and several European countries undertake non-violent demonstrations such as vigils, campaigns and solidarity visits against war, militarism and other forms of violence in war-torn countries across the world.

In **Northern Ireland**, Catholic and Protestant women began to work with each other on issues of common concern—child care, equal pay, social welfare—that were not directly related to the political and religious conflict that divided them. As they engaged more closely on these "bread and butter" issues, they realised that despite their different religious beliefs, they had a great deal in common, they shared the same fears and had the same hopes for peace in the future. The relations they established and the trust they built through working together on "non-sensitive" issues laid the foundation for their involvement in political and conflict-related issues. In 1996, a network of some 400 women's organisations and community groups came together to support the creation of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition political party.

Women's groups are also often the key leaders in promoting reconciliation and undertaking community outreach in the immediate aftermath of war. They run peace education programmes, help with the reintegration of soldiers, counsel victims of violence, or train the population in conflict resolution. The Wajir Women for Peace organisation in Northeast **Kenya** mobilised women for peace and, in alliance with other local peace groups, carried out training and mediation in local disputes, quelling many before they broke out into violence.²¹ In 2004

in Colombia, various women's groups came together for working groups on women, peace and reconciliation that invited several officials to participate, including a regional mayor, the national peace commissioner and the president's office for women's equality.²²

Building Capacity and Knowledge: In many instances, the initial motivation to get involved in peacemaking is hampered by a lack of skills or capacity of organisation and individuals to run programmes and interact with policy-makers, funders and other constituents. In many instances, women have little knowledge about their rights under international law. They may lack skills such as strategy development, programme planning, negotiation and mediation, conflict resolution, advocacy, fund raising and communications. In conflict situations, it is often impossible for women to gain access to skills-building programmes or workshops. Travel is difficult and resources are scarce. This can limit the range of activities that women engage in and the sectors they are able to reach.

Recognising the need for extensive capacity building, a number of NGOs have emerged with programmes dedicated to skills building, training and networking. Isis-WICCE (Women's International Cross-Cultural Exchange) in **Uganda** has been a leading force for women in this area. Founded in the 1970s, Isis-WICCE is a major resource centre that collects and disseminates information pertaining to women's rights and development. It has played a critical role in creating regional networks in Africa and bringing the voices of African women to the global arena. In **Afghanistan**, the Afghan Women's Network—with 72 NGO and 3,000 individual members—has led efforts to give women a voice in decision-making, assist their members' efforts to support Afghan women, promote women's and children's rights, build capacities among local organisations through training and to mobilise women to vote.

The Geneva-based Femmes Afrique Solidarité (FAS) has also dedicated its work to networking women's NGOs, providing training in peace and conflict resolution and promoting women's voices internationally. FAS was instrumental in the formation of the **West African Mano River Union Women's Peace Network**, an alliance of women's organisations in

Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone that has been a critical force for peace in the sub-region.

In **Iran**, the Hamyaran NGO Resource Center provides a mix of technical, managerial and financial support to NGOs across the country. Working to strengthen NGO capacities and networking, the resource centre runs thematic and issue-based workshops for NGOs involved in a wide range of issues including women's rights, the environment and education. It particularly emphasises the need to connect provincial and community-based groups with their urban and national counterparts.

Building Legitimacy Through Networking and Advocacy: In some cases, existing civil society groups and leaders dismiss women's efforts and refuse to engage with them. In addition, women's own lack of confidence, as well as limited knowledge of how to access decision-makers, can hamper their ability to engage directly with political leaders. Coalition building, networking and community outreach efforts are critical to secure women's inclusion in peacebuilding processes and ensure the legitimacy of their voices. The task for women is to identify strategic partners that can give leverage to their work and their voices.

In **Colombia**, following the collapse of the 2002 peace talks, women trade unionists initiated a coalition-building process for peace. The effort was funded by the women's wing of the Swedish Trade Union Movement. Their goal was to produce a collective agenda for peace from a woman's perspective and demand women's inclusion in peacemaking. Over eight months in 2002, 719 women delegates from 266 organisations across the country gathered periodically for 14 local, regional and national events. Starting with a 600-point agenda, the women ultimately prioritised 12 points.²³ The coalition, later named the Women's Emancipatory Constitution, has emerged as a model for promoting ownership, participatory decision-making and consensus building across divergent groups. Their process for reaching consensus is now being replicated by local and regional authorities in their efforts to develop common goals and priorities.

In **Rwanda**, the NGO umbrella group ProFemmes/Twese Hamwe, using the considerable power of its more than 40 member agencies, together with the Ministry of Gender and Women in Development and

the Forum of Parliamentary Women, have formed a strong alliance enabling them to draw on each sector's comparative advantages. Their partnership ensures that the voices of women reach the national level; that new policies are developed to address women's concerns; and that such policies are then utilised by women's NGOs in their work. They have addressed issues ranging from social security and justice to health, decision-making and women's education.

Challenging the Status Quo: Although women are active in peacebuilding at the community level, they tend to be less visible in the national political arena where security issues are addressed. Some fear violence and the stigma of mixing with men and entering "masculine" preserves. For others, the drive to address immediate and concrete issues through civil society channels is stronger than engaging in political processes.

Drawing on their identities as mothers has been a powerful and effective means of addressing issues that are typically dominated by men, particularly security and military affairs. In the 1970s in **Argentina**, Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo led weekly silent protests, demanding simply to know what had happened to their sons and daughters. Its simplicity gave the movement enormous power and moral authority and their questions directly attacked the secretive and violent nature of the state.

In the 1980s in **South Africa**, women joined with conscientious objectors to protest conscription into the apartheid army. The End Conscription Campaign, led primarily by women, posed a significant threat to the military, yet the state was unable to challenge the moral authority of the soldiers' mothers.

Similarly, during the 1990s when the **Israeli** army occupied southern **Lebanon**, a group of women, including the mothers of soldiers who had died there, began to protest on street corners in Israeli cities. Registering themselves as an NGO called the Four Mothers, their primary goal was the unilateral withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon. The image of the women and their message resonated across Israeli society and generated significant support among men and women. Men were prominent in the leadership of the group, but in the public's perception it was a

movement driven by mothers. Its members became informed of all issues relating to the military presence in Lebanon and attended briefings and meetings with Israeli officials, questioning them and demanding a withdrawal. The strategy to use their identities as mothers was critical to their success, as they faced military officials who were aware of and sensitive to the moral authority that the women brought. Israel withdrew from Lebanon in May 2000. A variety of factors contributed to the final decision, but many credit the Four Mothers for raising awareness and mobilising public opinion in favour of withdrawal.

Fighting Impunity, Advocating for Human Rights: Women's groups may work on specific reconstruction issues such as disarmament, the needs of the displaced, justice and human rights, or more generally collaborate with the media and other allies to promote sound information and awareness. In the **Arab** region, an Iraqi woman has been a key figure in founding the Arab Non-governmental Network for Development, which supports, enables and empowers Arab civil societies in their quest for democracy, human rights and sustainable development. In **Colombia**, the Iniciativa de Mujeres por la Paz (IMP) advocates for the incorporation of women's needs and interests into agendas for peace and negotiations, including reparations for victims of violence and the reintegration of women former combatants. In **Guatemala** and **El Salvador** a number of women's organisations emerged during the war years that fought against impunity for crimes committed against civilians. Their struggle to implement and strengthen international and national laws was fundamental in the search for sustainable peace with justice (see chapters on transitional justice and human rights).

Promoting Women in Decision-Making and Leadership: Women's organisations may work to promote women through their participation in political parties and in elections or in professional life. In **Cambodia**, a former woman refugee founded Women for Prosperity (WfP) with the goal of promoting women's political participation (see chapter on democracy and governance). These efforts also bolster women's confidence and help instill a belief that they, as individuals and collectively, can make a difference to their communities and societies at large.

Mobilising Resources to Support Peace Work: The lack of financial security—for short-term work or long-term strategies—is a fundamental obstacle facing women’s organisations. Many are heavily affected by poverty, the excessive demands on their time and resources, domestic violence and the loss of social services. Despite these factors, many members work as volunteers. Such challenges affect the creation and sustainability of organisations and make them dependent upon the funding they are able to secure. A USAID study of women’s organisations in **Cambodia** found that they faced a general problem of continued dependence on international donors, making them vulnerable to short-term planning and to changing international policy priorities.²⁴

Some women’s groups have developed innovative strategies to tackle this ongoing challenge. While some have built their capacity for finance and budgeting to ensure effective management of funds, others have joined with partner organisations to request grants that best utilise each group’s abilities and resources. Many women’s organisations hone in on particular issues to capitalise on their expertise and to avoid over-extending themselves. Others build their knowledge about international donors and their in-country programmes to match their expertise with national and international needs and priorities. In **El Salvador**, for example, USAID reported that NGOs, including women’s groups, were among the best at implementing programs because of their access to remote populations.²⁵

National and local-level women’s organisations often benefit from forging links with international civil society groups. As mentioned above, the women’s arm of the trade union in Sweden funded a coalition-building programme for women in **Colombia**’s trade unions and beyond. Working globally, Women for Women International, based in the US, provides tools and resources for women in post conflict countries, including **Bosnia**, **Iraq** and **Rwanda**, with the goal of strengthening civil society at the local level. A Rockefeller Foundation–funded program, Afghan Women Leaders Connect, links individual women in **Afghanistan** with women leaders in the US and Canada, providing grants and training to Afghan women leaders. With international donors increasingly directing funds to national NGOs, women’s organisations working at national and local levels are well placed to benefit from the shift,

particularly in times of conflict (see chapter on post conflict reconstruction).

4. WHAT POLICIES EXIST TO PROMOTE CIVIL SOCIETY INVOLVEMENT IN PEACEBUILDING?

NGOs are recognised as an important entity in the UN’s original charter. Article 71 says that the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) “may make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organisations which are concerned with matters within its competence.”²⁶ In addition, Article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) states the right to peaceful assembly and Article 22 grants the right to freedom of association.

The UN established the Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS) in 1975 with offices in Geneva and New York to provide information, advice, expertise and support services to civil society regarding UN activities.²⁷ NGOs have four types of status with the UN:

1. NGO consultative status with ECOSOC through the Department of Economic and Social Affairs; it allows direct participation in intergovernmental processes covering a broad range of socioeconomic issues, subdivided into three groups:
 - General: NGOs concerned with a broad range of ECOSOC issues;
 - Special: NGOs with special competence in a few fields of activity; and
 - Roster: NGOs with narrow or technical expertise in a field.
2. Department of Public Information status, which permits access, but not participation;
3. Media status for members of the press; and
4. Other status, which allows for participation in single events or conferences.

In addition to focusing on social and economic issues, NGOs are eligible for consultative status with ECOSOC if they:

- have democratic decision-making mechanisms;
- have been in existence for at least two years with appropriate governmental registration;
- obtain their basic resources from contributions by national affiliates, individual members, or other non-governmental entities; and
- commit to producing a report of their activities every four years.

The UN and other agencies have provided significant support for women's organisations over the last 30 years. The 1979 **UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)** and the 1995 **Beijing Platform for Action** have been critical tools for promoting women's activism in civil society and peace issues. To monitor implementation of the Beijing Platform, the **Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)** was established by ECOSOC. The CSW meets annually for ten days, usually in New York at UN headquarters and produces an official report with recommendations.²⁸ In recent years, peace and security has become a priority on the agenda of the CSW. NGOs with ECOSOC status and with passes for the conference are permitted to attend the meeting and use the time to network and lobby governments on critical issues. These forums enable global policy-makers and the people who are most affected by their policies to communicate and cooperate better. They also demonstrate the depth of knowledge, experience and skills in civil society that, when tapped and supported, are major agents of change. Agencies within the UN dedicated to women's issues—including the **UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)**, the **Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)** in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the **Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary General on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI)**—are also integral to the engagement of women's organisations with the UN.

Regarding peace and security specifically, two international laws exist promoting civil society participation and support:

- **UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2001)** explicitly calls for “support [to] local women's peace initiatives and indigenous processes for conflict resolution;” and
- **UN Security Council Resolution 1366 (2001)** articulates “the important supporting role of civil society” in promoting national-level conflict prevention.

In addition, as part of a major reform process within the UN system, the role of civil society is being addressed at the highest levels. The Secretary General convened a high-level panel to issue a report on how to improve civil society relations with the UN, launched in June 2004. One of their recommendations is: “...the establishment of a dedicated fund for civil society engagement...to strengthen the capacity of underrepresented groups to engage with the United Nations, especially women, indigenous peoples, disabled people and the poor.”²⁹ In conjunction with the report's release, the Security Council discussed the role of civil society in post conflict peacebuilding for the first time and many governmental and non-governmental representatives spoke on record, acknowledging the critical role of NGOs in post conflict reconstruction and the need for increased civil society partnership with the Security Council.³⁰

The trend to include civil society in discussions and activities related to peace and security has extended to the regional level. The **African Union**, in Article 20 of the protocol to establish its Peace and Security Council, notes that it will “encourage non-governmental organisations, community-based and other civil society organisations, particularly women's organisations, to participate actively in the efforts aimed at promoting peace, security and stability in Africa.”³¹ Furthermore, civil society is invited to participate in all open sessions of the Council. The **Organization of American States (OAS)**, through a Permanent Council resolution, recently established a fund to support the participation of civil society organisations in OAS activities and conferences. All groups registered with the OAS must submit a letter of application to the Secretariat to be considered for such grants. Every regional organisation has its criteria for enabling NGOs to gain accreditation and access to their processes.

Nationally, for NGOs everywhere, a key challenge is pressing governments and formal political parties to implement international laws, conventions they have adopted and commitments they have made. Another challenge is changing national policies to enable NGOs to work in equal partnership with state authorities in providing basic services, such as health or education programmes.

5. TAKING STRATEGIC ACTION: WHAT CAN WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS DO?

1. Before creating an NGO, do a mapping of civil society activities to avoid duplication. Aim to complement existing efforts. Be clear about the goals of the new organisation and its position vis-à-vis other civil society entities and the government.
2. Develop an agenda and mandate that represent the needs of a broad-based constituency with roots in the community, overcoming the factors that divide them.
 - Place international human rights and women's rights at the core of your activities and seek to realise them in ways that are culturally relevant.
3. Seek out other groups and create a coalition or alliance based on a common set of principles and values. In this way, unity can be strengthened without impinging on the individual areas of work or interest of each group.
4. Establish a national civil society forum that advocates for legislation in support of NGO formation and that can be a focal point for resources, including technical and management expertise.
5. Develop a common agenda and priorities for action. Where possible, use this as a base for advocacy and fund-raising with donors.
6. Develop an alliance with government and parliamentary entities to gain access to decision-making levels.
7. Aim to develop a common NGO endowment fund accessible to affiliated NGOs.
8. Identify the informal and traditional structures through which women can assert their influence and seek to strengthen them.
9. Document your activities and results in order to share the lessons with other women peacebuilders.
10. Draw on international policies and laws such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325 to raise awareness about women's roles in peace and security.

WHERE CAN YOU FIND MORE INFORMATION?

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ACRONYMS

BONGO	Business-Organised and Oriented Non-Governmental Organisation
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CBO	Community-Based Organisation
CSO	Civil Society Organisations
CSW	Commission on the Status of Women
DAW	Division for the Advancement of Women of the United Nations
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council of the United Nations
FAS	Femmes Afrique Solidarité
GONGO	Governmental-Focused Non-Governmental Organisation
HIV/AIDS	Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
Isis-WICCE	Women's International Cross Cultural Exchange
MANGO	Mafia-Based Non-Governmental Organisation
NGLS	Non-Governmental Liaison Service
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OAS	Organization of American States
OSAGI	Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women of the United Nations
SAFHR	South Asia Forum for Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WfP	Women for Prosperity

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