THE AFTERMATH: LOOKING AT WOMEN'S ROLES IN POST-CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION AND FORMAL PEACE PROCESSSES

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Abstract

The first part of this paper will argue that women of post-conflict Aceh are not benefiting from the peace agreement due to their systematic exclusion, as women, from all aspects of the peace process on behalf of Acehnese society as well as most international agencies involved. There are several factors which contribute to this systematic exclusion of women which will be discussed in this paper. These factors include: cultural traditions and customs, the role of religion (Islam), the way in which women's contributions to and progress made during the conflict are acknowledged/perceived by society and Indonesian national institutions, and most importantly the absence of Acehnese women at the negotiation table during the peace talks. The second part of the paper will explore what is or rather what should be the role of women in formal peace processes in all situations of conflict. Observing that women are generally absent from negotiation tables, the paper will highlight the importance and benefits of having all stakeholders participate in formal peace processes. Then it will look at the obstacles impeding women from playing a larger role in peace processes. Finally, it will discuss possibilities for overcoming these obstacles by giving greater consideration to issues of gender balance and gender mainstreaming.

Introduction

When a country is hit by years of conflict, there is no doubt that every person's life in that country is, in one way or another, changed forever. Whether it is the man who lost a limb fighting at the front lines, the woman who was raped by enemy soldiers or the child who lost his parents in a surprise attack on his village, no peace agreement can take away the pain and suffering they have experienced. Eventually, the international community may get involved and after some time of negotiations, a ceasefire may be ordered, and a peace agreement signed. That being said, by no means does a peace agreement mean That social order is restored immediately or that, for some societies, it will ever be restored. The aftermath of a conflict is often just as traumatic, if not more so, than the conflict itself. If proper recovery and reintegration programs are not implemented for ex-combatants, their families and everyone else affected by the conflict, the after-effects can be extremely severe, leaving thousands of people homeless, in extreme poverty, terribly ill, and with acute post-traumatic psychological disorders (Mazurana and Parpart 2005, 33).

A great deal of feminist literature on peace research argues that, among the many actors involved in a conflict, women are often the group whose role in society is greatly enhanced during a conflict, yet almost always this advantage is almost completely lost during the reconstruction period (Baksh 2005, 61). "Conflict opens up intended and unintended spaces for empowering women, effecting structural social transformations and producing new social, economic and political realities that redefine gender and class hierarchies" (Turshen 2002, 7). In other words, when men leave the community to fight

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at the frontlines, women learn to take on not only their own role in society, but also to fulfill the tasks of the absent men. Many will even take an active part in the conflict either as combatants, or by carrying out supportive roles such as espionage or logistical aid. The majority of women come to realize the potential of their own strength and this awareness leads them to transform the way they perceive themselves from the traditional identity as wives and mothers, to that of fighters and liberators of their country. Unfortunately, the acceptance of this new identity and its place during the process of reconstruction is what proves to be particularly challenging for women in the post-conflict period. It proves often very difficult for women to consolidate the gains made during war-time, as argued also by feminist Meredeth Turshen. Furthermore, as Bouta and Bannon put it, "the return to peace is invariably conceptualized as a return to the gender status quo, irrespective of the nontraditional roles assumed by women during conflict." (Bouta and Bannon 2005, 9).

The Case of Aceh

The first portion/half of this paper will look specifically at the case of women in Aceh, a province found on the northern tip of the Indonesian island of Sumatra, and their role in the thirty year conflict that took place in this region. The Acehnese conflict stemmed from several major issue areas. The first being the national Indonesian government's complete disregard for Aceh as a province and for its repeated requests for autonomy throughout history. The second being the people's will to convert Aceh into an Islamic state in which Sunni Sharia law would be a part of their legal system, particularly since 98.6% of the Acehnese population is Muslim, and finally the last major reason being the unfair distribution of Aceh's natural resource (The Aceh Reintegration Board). These issues together gave rise to the Free Aceh Movement (in Bahasa Indonesia: Gerakan Aceh Merdeka-GAM) in 1976, a separatist group seeking independence for the Aceh region from the rest of Indonesia. GAM fought against Indonesian government forces for almost thirty years between 1976 and 2005, at a cost of over 15, 000 civilian lives (The Aceh Reintegration Board). After several unsuccessful rounds of peace talks between the two parties, it wasn't until after the devastation of the Tsunami, with the help of former Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari as mediator, that the two sides were able to reach a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on August 15, 2005. Aside from the promise to cease all hostilities immediately, the peace agreement was a pledge on behalf of the government of Indonesia to withdraw all non-local military and police from Aceh by the end of 2005, grant amnesty to approximately 500 former GAM members who were in exile, and release over 1400 members who were imprisoned by the government. In addition, the national government agreed to facilitate the establishment of Aceh-based political parties for the first time in history, came to an agreement on the distribution of income from Aceh's natural resources in which 70% of the income would remain in Aceh's possession, and granted the province of Aceh a special independent status allowing the implementation of Islamic Sunni Sharia law and Islamic Adaat customary law. Finally, the Indonesian government gave a guarantee that, in order to ease their reintegration into society, all former combatants and their families would receive an allocation of suitable farming land, employment or, in the case of incapacity to work, adequate social security (Memorandum of Understanding 2005, 1).

The Issue

Although today peace in Aceh continues to hold, there is no doubt that when it comes to the reintegration of former combatants, the peace agreement has certainly not proven to be successful. Particularly, with regards to the women of Aceh. The Acehnese conflict left thousands of women in the region facing the loss of a husband, brother or son. In other words for Acehnese society, facing life without a provider. The majority of these women never received an education and so are illiterate with little chance of finding a job or having the economic means to provide for themselves. In addition, they are dealing with severe health and psychological problems having witnessed the torture and/or deaths of their loved ones or from having been tortured themselves. Often, these women have no access to health services, are unaware of the social programs that are available to them, or simply fear that they will be shamed by their communities (Anderlini 2007, 56). For several of the women who were fortunate enough to have their husbands, sons, brothers, fathers come back alive, the clash between many women's new-found identity during conflict, and the threat this posed for men's status in the family, led to a significant increase in physical and sexual abuse in the home (Anderlini 2007, 58). While the majority of these women are unaware of their legal rights with regards to domestic violence or where to go for help, the issue only continues to worsen. This reality left these women living in complete and utter poverty and with fear for their lives, and reveals the profound level of disregard for the importance of women's reintegration into this patriarchal society.

Theoretical Perspective

This paper will adopt a liberal-feminist perspective in approaching the issue of patriarchal power structures and female socialization as the source of gender inequality in Aceh's post-conflict reconstruction. According to Sandra Whitworth, liberal feminists argue that women have been excluded from many of the most important public spheres of modern social, political and economic life as is the case for the women of Aceh, particularly the ex-combatant women who have been segregated by their communities, have no economic means to support themselves and are politically unaware of their legal rights as women, to social services (Whitworth 2004, 79). This paper will use the liberal-feminist argument that women are systematically discriminated against by men in authority through patriarchal culture and the state as complimentary systems of oppression (i.e. men in government, in the legal system, in religious institutions etc.), a system that renders women's activities invisible and demonstrates an absolute disregard for Acehnese women's contribution and progress made during the conflict. The paper will also look at Ann Cudd's concept of the assurance of social, political and economic equality between women and men as a responsibility of the state not because women have a right to be treated the same as men but rather, because all people are entitled to the same rights, women being just as much a part of this people as men (Donovan 1985, 191). A point which correlates directly with the absence of women in the formal peace process. Finally, in line with the liberal-feminist perspective, this paper calls not only for the inclusion of women in areas previously denied to them, but for a complete change in societal attitudes, leading to the socialization of women, a fair division of labour inside and outside the home, as well as educational and economic opportunities for women. In brief, whether in Aceh or other post-conflict countries, it highlights the need for a change in their patriarchal regime (Whitworth 1994, 49).

The reversion to old cultural traditions and customs:

There is no doubt that cultural traditions and customs play a key role in the lives of the Acehnese. With the significant influence coming from the conservative/conventional ideas of Sunni Islam, which the majority of Acehnese adhere to, comes a certain mentality with respect to gender roles, societal structure, as well as political priorities. It is during times of conflict and complete societal disorder, that these ideas are challenged and have the opportunity to undergo important changes. Whether or why these changes stick or not, is what matters most for the reconstruction of the country.

During the absence of men in a conflict, is more often than not, when women tend to take some significant/considerable steps forward. The fact that the men, who in Acehnese society act as the decision-makers of each household, were gone for long periods of time, provided women with the opportunity to transform traditional gender roles by assuming men's former tasks (Turshen 2002, 80). As a result, most women gained access to public spaces previously denied to them, many achieved a certain level of economic independence, and some even emerged as leaders in their societies. Why is it then that once the war ends and the peace process begins, women's expectations for acceptance of their new identity/roles in society are refused, and women are once again forced to revert to the old status quo? Meredeth Turshen, as a liberal feminist, argues that "not only expectations determine participation in the aftermath of a conflict, but also rules about who can speak with authority" (Turshen 2002, 81). According to Acehnese customs and traditions, these individuals with the authority are always men. When the conflict ended in 2005, ex-combatant men came home expecting everything to go back to what they knew, to what they were comfortable with, to what they identified with, which was the traditional society in which women were not looked at as equals. Back to "normal". The problem is, this normality would not favour women, since it had always been the male leaders who defined what "normal" was (Turshen 2002, 72). According to the liberal-feminist perspective, this systematic discrimination against women in society occurs because institutions holding authority and power are overwhelmingly controlled by men. On the other hand, there is also an alarming percentage of women who prefer to go right back to the way things were before the conflict began (Turshen 2005, 63). Although they may have indeed made significant steps forward in terms of their position in society, these are women who feel as if their new roles were never to be something permanent, they are unnatural and by demanding the acknowledgement and continuity of these new roles, they would disrespect not only their husbands, but also the religion they live by. Others prefer to return immediately to their old life-style, even if they may feel trapped between, on the one hand, the pressure and approval of their families, and, on the other, the solidarity formed between women during the conflict, hence a sense of betrayal in case they revert to the old traditional way of life. The fact that the conflict questioned some of the more conservative ideas regarding women does not mean that the fundamentally male-dominated structure/mentality of the society was entirely eliminated. As mentioned earlier, when the husbands, sons and fathers of these women return from the front lines, they are expecting to find a very similar society to the one they left behind. One in which they hold a great deal of decision-making power. If instead, they come home to a wife who is now demanding to work outside of the home and no longer has time to always cook and clean for him; this will undoubtedly trigger a sense of rebelliousness and disrespect. Hence, the significant increase in domestic violence during the post-conflict period. It is the prevalence of these restrictive-type customs and the

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continued view of women as commodities, which make the post-conflict transition so challenging for women. Yet, however difficult it may prove to be, the aftermath of a conflict is the ideal time for a transition not only socially, but legally and politically as well. The new social environment after a war makes this period a key time to review and incorporate into constitutions and laws international instruments, such as CEDAW and Resolution 1325, which prohibit discrimination and abuse against women. Only the respect and implementation of those guidelines in all aspects of day to day life can ensure equal participation/representation and equal benefit of men and women in all national services/programs and institutions (Turshen 2002, 84). Most importantly, once all laws and policies have been reviewed, the need for strengthened national institutions to ensure the enforcement of these laws is also pivotal to women's success in the post-conflict transformation period.

The role of religion (Islam) in the Aceh peace process

Aceh has been influenced by Islam for centuries. It comes therefore as no surprise that this religion, particularly Sunni Islam, plays such an overwhelming role in the day to day lives of the Acehnese. Although the majority of the Acehnese population has always followed and lived according to Islam's Sharia law, at the family level, it wasn't until the signing of the MoU in 2005 that it was no longer only followed within the household, but by the entire region as part of its legal system. The question here is, what is the role of this religion and society's religious institutions in the peace process for this society? Does the way religious leaders treated women before and during the conflict have an impact on women's ability to transform their status in the aftermath? Religion, in this society, is one of the most important institutions that decide whether the old patriarchal ways will be reintegrated or whether new ideas will prevail. This decision is ultimately in the hands of those who control at the local level, in Aceh's case; these are the male religious leaders (mollahs) in the Sharia courts (Awde 2005, 12).

Since the peace agreement was signed in 2005 and Sunni Sharia law was implemented in almost every aspect of Acehnese life, the lives of women of the region, as those who are most vulnerable in their society, were affected in every possible way. The religion of Islam is one that is most often interpreted by Muslim societies as supporting very distinct, and strict gender roles in which the woman's place is usually thought to be in the home as a care-giver for her husband and children, while the man is the decision-maker, provider and therefore the one with a superior status in society (Awde 2005, 31). Aceh is no exception to this tendency. Following the transformation of most women's 'identities' during the conflict period in Aceh, there were several obstacles to women's involvement in the peace process which were rooted in Sunni Sharia law. The first one being, the acknowledgement and treatment of women who were raped or sexually abused during the conflict. "The majority of the time, when women admit to being raped by the 'enemy', they lose the respect and protection of their family and community" (Turshen 2002, 12). The rape is often looked at as the woman's fault and she is from then on considered to be impure under Islamic law. Not to mention the fact that this law does not take into account the severity of the crime but instead, usually lets the rapist off with very little punishment (Awde 2005, 34). This, in turn, plays a significant role in a woman's decision of whether or not to bring up the fact that she's been raped or whether they will fight for justice in the peace process. The way by which Sharia law is interpreted in Aceh also left the majority of women without rights regarding domestic violence in the courts. Under Sunni Sharia law, men have every right to physically discipline

their wives, if they believe that there is a legitimate reason (Awde 2005, 36). According to Meredeth Turshen's writing, "a wife's subordination is a sign of respect for her husband's manhood. (Turshen 2002, 14). If this manhood is challenged, she will pay the consequences. Finally, the increased level of importance given to Sharia law in Acehnese society since the peace agreement, has also restricted women in the peace process in terms of land rights, legal rights, economic rights as well as the right to education, all of which most often go to the males in the family (Aceh Reintegration Board). Since the majority of men who were in the conflict did not come home, this leaves most women alone and in a situation where they are often uneducated, unable to support themselves financially and unaware of the legal rights they are entitled to. Again, the new implementation of conservative and often discriminatory practices based on Sharia law has only re-created patriarchal dominance throughout society, in new forms which affect every aspect of each Acehnese person's life, from their relations with family in the home, to their role in society, to the way they are judged in the court room. This makes it very difficult for a woman who has never gone to school and is therefore illiterate, to find a job that will allow her to support herself, to read and educate herself on the social services available to her, what she is and isn't entitled to, and the ability to charge her husband, or any other male, with sexual or physical abuse in a court where those, who make the ultimate decision, are those who live by the religion that labels them as inferior to men. This is a main reason why women are not taken seriously by men in the peace process. This seems to confirm the views of those liberal-feminist theorists, who see religion as hopelessly patriarchal and gender oppressive (Whitworth 1994, 73). As long as women continue to be forced into the society's poorest and least-educated bracket by those implementing the religion and its law, they will only continue to be overlooked in the peace reconstruction period, and their opinions dismissed.

Women's contributions to the conflict in the eyes of Acehnese society

As mentioned earlier in the paper, Meredeth Turshen argues in her book that it is during conflict that women have the opportunity to make the most amount of progress in terms of their involvement and status in society. However, she also makes a point to argue that it is the progress and contributions of women that almost always fail to be acknowledged in the aftermath, making it very difficult for them to be looked at as equals in the peace process. "In the aftermath of a war and armed conflict, many women are inspired to reopen the question of their place in society and may have high expectations of improving their condition" (Turshen 2002, 78). However, at least two legal regimes control women's lives simultaneously, acting as obstacles to these expectations: the statutory regime of the nation-state, and the customary regime of their households. Unfortunately, more often than not, it is men's interests who dominate both statutory and customary systems, which are both patriarchal (Bouta and Bannon 2005, 17). It is because of these two legal regimes, which most often fall back into play in the aftermath of a conflict, that there exists a complete disregard for women's role and transformation during a conflict. Although it is often overlooked in Aceh's case, women have participated in all aspects of the conflict as actors. Whether it was as female combatants, by providing logistical support, or by using survival strategies to keep their families alive, every woman in Aceh was involved in the war (Turshen 2002, 41). However, "men disparage women's peace activities as only a natural extension of their nurturing and caring domestic roles as wives and mothers" (Olsson 2001, 87). In the majority of cases, men coming home from the conflict with hatred for the enemy and a certain expectation that nothing

has changed, tend to clash with women who have gained a new understanding of their community and a wish for reconciliation. Because public recognition almost always goes to those who died in the conflict (mostly men), women's progress is often erased from the historical record (Turshen 2002, 17). Again, making it very challenging for women to be heard and accepted by others with their new transformed identity as 'agents of change'. Instead the tendency, not only for Aceh's case, but for the majority of women in post-conflict situations, is to be continuously and solely portrayed as the hopeless victims and losers in war. The media repeatedly provide information that describes the tough conditions women endure to survive the conflict yet, they constantly ignore the actions women take as principal actors (Turshen 2002, 19). This conveys a certain image to the rest of the population as well as to the global public, of women as weak, hopeless subjects who are unable to protect themselves from the by-products of war. "Such an image has serious consequences for a true awareness of the differential impact of conflicts on women and men and impedes the recognition of viable solutions that women propose" (Turshen 2002, 19). It is no wonder that these women's own family members, friends, colleagues, fellow citizens, can't look at them as having something valuable to contribute to the peace process. These stereotypes about women in wars are responsible for the widely-accepted notion that "women lose in wars" which results in further marginalization of women whose contributions researchers still largely ignore, and whose influence official policies do not recognize (Turshen 2002, 19), as was so clearly demonstrated by the under-representation of women in the Helsinki peace talks of 2005. It is thus important for women to move from being perceived solely as victims of conflict to instead be seen as agents for transformation and empowerment (Baksh 2005, 42).

Women's absence at the negotiation table

The final and certainly the most influential factor involved in the reason why women are not reaping the benefits of Aceh's 2005 Helsinki peace agreement, was the lack of women's participation in the negotiations themselves. The simple fact that practically no women were invited to participate in the peace talks, or asked to contribute to the rewriting/adjustment of policies and laws, acts as a clear demonstration of the disregard for how the peace process would affect women of the region (Aceh Reintegration Board). As Meredeth Turshen puts it, "Aceh's formal peace negotiations in Helsinki served to define basic power relations and to identify priorities for immediate post-war political activity" (Turshen 2002, 89). In most negotiations, women were excluded as it was thought to be a male's domain in which women had neither expertise nor interest, a common belief which liberal feminists strongly critique by arguing that women are oppressed by the injustices fostered through gender roles which favour men over women. Consequently, women had no direct influence in identifying the priorities for reconstruction which are typically a significant part of a peace agreement. Essentially this meant that gender relations were entirely overlooked for those who were considered to be most vulnerable, and furthermore that there was no one at the negotiation tables looking out for the needs and interests of the thousands of Acehnese women affected by the conflict.

The necessity of identifying all stakeholders and naming what each stands to gain from peace is essential if women are to participate effectively in the peace process. If women are to be heard, and their specific interests and views to be integrated into the peace plan, each negotiation table in Helsinki should have been gendered and should have involved women, an idea consistent with liberal feminists'

argument for assurance of social, political and economic equality between men and women as a responsibility of the state not because women have a right to be treated the same as men but rather, because all people are entitled to the same rights, women being just as much a part of this people as men (Donovan 1985, 191). It was not only the Acehnese officials who were at fault. Several third-party international organizations and governments were involved in the Aceh peace process, Finland being the most significant one, acting as moderator to the negotiations. As actors who supposedly stand for "western" values of impartiality and equal representation, why is it that women in post-conflict countries in general continue to be excluded from decisions on the shape of the peace and from the planning of activities to reconstruct society after the signing of a peace agreement? (Turshen 2002, 89). How effective and gender-balanced are most of these countries when it comes to their administration of peace talks? Do they usually have something in place for the women complainants or victims? The following portion of this paper will aim to answer some of the above-mentioned questions. It is also important to mention here that this is not an issue which has been labeled a problem by outside foreign/western international institutions or governmental bodies, but rather by the Acehnese civilians themselves (primarily women), a serious problem that has been ignored by the provincial and federal governments long enough, and requires immediate attention. Dozens of women's NGOs have been formed in the region since the 2005 peace agreement, all with the same general mission statement which is to improve all aspects of Acehnese women's day to day lives. Two in particular, the PPKPI and MISPI, have became fairly well-known at a national level for their work towards the assistance of women in dealing with domestic violence and other family issues, providing basic education for illiterate women and professional education for women going into the workforce, as well as legal aid (Aceh Reintegration Board). As undoubtedly helpful as these organizations have been, they continue to be limited by the lack of acknowledgement from society and the government, and by the very little say they have in official decision and policy-making. Unfortunately, the majority of the time their activities are "still looked at as 'volunteer', 'charitable' or 'social' even when they have a political impact" (Turshen 2002, 89). It is for this reason that most NGOs have only been able to open offices near the urban centres such as the region's capital Banda Aceh, and the city of Medan, since they receive the majority of their funding from local businesses and the municipal government who believe they "need to keep a close eye on their activities." Unfortunately, it is not the women living in urban centers that require their help the most, but those who live in rural villages, where religious traditions are strongest, and where they have little or no access to education, jobs, and social/health services. Thus, it is the municipal, provincial, and federal governments, along with a lack of help from international institutions, which are impeding these organizations from being able to do what they do best, and from helping those who need them most.

A closer look at the importance of gender in formal peace processes

While women in all post-conflict countries are often said to be active in informal peace processes, they are largely absent from the formal peace processes. As defined by the UN, "formal peace processes include early warning, preventive diplomacy, conflict prevention, peacemaking, peace-building, and global disarmament; they involve activities such as conflict resolution, peace negotiations, reconciliation, infrastructure reconstruction, and provision of humanitarian aid" (Bouta and Bannon 2005, 50). The UN also argues that women need to be included in all of these aspects of the formal

peace process in order to build greater post-conflict gender balance and a more inclusive peace. An argument that is consistent with the liberal feminist perspective on ensuring equal representation of women in politics through the eradication of institutional bias and the implementation of fairer laws towards women (Eblen 2002, 59). Meanwhile, some may argue that it was the men who held the guns and fought in the conflict, therefore it should be them who have a say in the peace talks. Others may argue that according to local customs and traditions, women have no place in the public sphere. Why is it then that it is still argued by so many peace researchers that it is better for everyone if women are included in the formal peace process? Peace literature argues that the inclusion of all social groups fosters the pluralism that is necessary to develop a more inclusive, stable, and participatory post-conflict polity. It is said that women are likely to make a different contribution to the peace process. When compared to men, women are more likely to put gender issues on the agenda, introduce other conflict experiences, and set different priorities for peace-building and rehabilitation (Bouta and Bannon 2005, 49). As mentioned earlier in the paper, the period during the conflict may increase opportunities for more gender-balanced political participation, but support is needed to sustain these changes. This is why it is believed that political processes during conflict and post-conflict may offer possibilities for greater gender balance and that through women's involvement in peace talks, democratization processes, and elections they can help sustain these positive changes (Baksh 2005, 44). Most importantly, because it is at the peace talks where the foundations for a future society are often set, this is where important gender issues should be addressed and where a gender perspective on peace should be incorporated, if there is to ever be any hope for equality in terms of benefiting from the peace process. Unfortunately, as compelling as these reasons may be, the reality still holds that women, for the most part, are excluded from all formal steps of a peace process as was earlier discussed in this paper, for the case of Aceh, Indonesia. The important question to ask is: why?

Why women are excluded from the formal peace process

There are many obstacles standing in the way of women's access and participation in high-level peace talks and the formation of an official peace agreement. The most prominent being; political institutions' tendency to perpetuate an exclusionary attitude and culture toward women. As a result, many women choose to work outside formal politics, with several civil society organizations whose work is seen as charitable or social, rather than political. This helps to demonstrate why liberal feminists believe that women's secondary status in society is based on unequal opportunities and segregation from men, a situation according to them caused by the patriarchal culture and the state as complementary systems of oppression (Whitworth 2004, 33). Furthermore, it is not surprising that, compared to men, relatively few women become involved in formal peace processes, from negotiations that begin in the midst of the conflict through all the phases of the transition to peace. Politics, the state, nationalism, and the army are fundamentally masculine notions that are characterized by patriarchal practices and values that are not easily changed (Bouta and Bannon 2005, 51). This acts as an excuse why women should not even bother to try and transcend these "difficult-to- change" barriers. Other obstacles include: women being excluded from public life by local custom and tradition, the assumption that what men want is also what women want from the peace process, the fact that women's contributions to the conflict are not seen as political and relevant to organization and leadership in the post-conflict society, the fact that negotiating teams are usually drawn from

government, diplomatic or military ranks of which women are largely absent and therefore are not considered, and finally logistical and security issues in terms of where peace negotiations are usually held (Baksh 2005, 38). On the other hand, even when women are allowed to participate in the peace process, their role often remains marginal or is co-opted by political players in the name of supporting the war effort. Women's activities are usually pushed aside to special women's wings of political parties, or side-lined in independent women's and feminist groups that fail to have a significant impact on mainstream politics and decision-making (Anderlini 2007, 67). Due to the above-mentioned obstacles and the complete disregard for women as equal actors with their own separate concerns and contributions, the peace process remains male-dominated and women continue to be underrepresented at all levels, including in international organizations supporting peace negotiations, like the UN.

Hope for future potential solutions

Although this issue is one that is deeply rooted in the patriarchal structures of these cultures, and cannot be fixed overnight, there still remain a variety of solutions which can take us one step closer to a more equally representative peace process. The majority of states have adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as well as the UNSCR 1325 which clearly calls for women's involvement at the peace table in decision-making bodies involved in the formulation of peace agreements, post-conflict reconstruction and in the drafting of new laws (Baksh 2005, 38). However, several instances of nation-building during post-conflict periods in different countries have failed to adhere to these commitments. This is why it is essential to establish gender equality in the peace process through the achievement of gender balance and gender mainstreaming, as the liberal feminists propose. Before looking at the ways in which a country can go about accomplishing this, it is important to define both terms first. Gender balance requires the inclusion of both women and men at all stages, and in all roles within peace processes and social reconstruction (Olsson 2001, 99). Again, this is one of the principal liberal feminist arguments for achieving gender equality. This does not mean the inclusion of a few highly placed international women, but listening and responding to the diverse experiences of women who have lived through the conflict. The participation of more women in a peace process, however, does not alone ensure the inclusion of women's concerns in the outcome of any agreement reached. Gender balance, in practice, must be accompanied by gender mainstreaming. Gender mainstreaming is defined by the UN as the process of assessing the implications for women and men in any planned action including legislation, policies or programs, in all areas and at all levels (Olsson 2001, 98). In other words, ensuring that women and men benefit equally from all aspects of the agreement. Once the objective of gender equality has been agreed, it is then important to incorporate this gender equality into the peace agreement and into future policy and legal constitutions in the following ways. Firstly, by organizing training and information-sharing events for politicians already in office or those involved in the peace talks. Also, through the development of wider processes of political consultation or representation, particularly with women's organizations. Another possibility is by increasing the number of female politicians by training women to run for political office, from the village to the parliamentary level. Furthermore, encouraging discussion within public and political bodies about women's involvement. An additional option would be to set legislative or party quotas to ensure a minimum number of female candidates, and finally by establishing indicators to test the difference

between the influence of female and male politicians on the political process and its outcomes. It is important to also acknowledge the pivotal role of global institutions and foreign governments, in formal peace processes. As demonstrated by the earlier case study on Aceh, Indonesia, the value of their involvement either as mediators, facilitators, financial aids, etc. cannot be overstated. On the other hand, it is also vital to be aware of the 'western bias' that they hold and the dominant/outsider lens through which they analyze the situation of these countries' situations. Although many times the intensity and nature of these conflicts call for a more neutral, third party perspective, there remains a fine line between providing effective assistance or counsel that benefits all parties involved, and the implementation of a transformation process that imposes irrelevant and futile western values the population cannot relate to. A line which can cause the difference between a strong reconstruction process that will prove successful for years to come, versus a temporary band-aid effect that will never be fully integrated and will only brew resentment amongst locals. All in all, the assurance of gender balance and gender mainstreaming, as well as the implementation of the above-mentioned practices, will not only lead to higher representation of women in peace talks at a global level, but will also "widen the popular mandate for peace and lead to concrete measures such as: ministries for gender equality and women's affairs, separate units within ministries to address gender issues, and changed attitudes towards women's leadership and decision-making capacities" (Anderlini 2007, 51).

Conclusion

In conclusion, although considerable progress has been made regarding women's role in post-conflict reconstruction and peace during the last 25 years, we still have a long way to go. The majority of countries facing conflict situations today are made up of the developing part of the world in which the mass of women still form the world's lowest poverty bracket, as is the case for Aceh discussed earlier in this paper. This phenomenon can be explained by a number of factors, such as: cultural traditions and customs, the role of religion, the way in which women's contributions to and progress made during the conflict are acknowledged by society and international institutions, and most importantly the absence of women at the negotiation table during the peace talks (Anderlini 2007, 66). Although these are all factors which are common to the majority of post-conflict situations, regardless of their source, they all remain too often overlooked by all. As noted earlier, almost all states have adopted the CEDAW convention, as well as the UN Security Council's Resolution 1325. Perhaps it's about time these states began to adhere to their articles.

When it comes to the most significant aspect of this issue, women's participation in formal peace processes, the current reality of peace processes is that the most attention is paid to the demands of those responsible for violence and bloodshed (the men), and far less is given to alternative perspectives for peaceful reconstruction that might be offered by citizens who were caught up in the conflict (the women) (Baksh 2005, 34). This is why it is key that "those responsible for the organization of peace talks should ensure that women leaders and peace-builders are identified, that visible and effective security arrangements for women are put in place, and that provision is made for their needs" (Bouta and Bannon 2005, 71). Having said this, it should not be assumed that women's presence in the peace process will guarantee that gender equality issues will be on the agenda. However, as demonstrated by Eblen in the cases of Burundi and Liberia, women's participation does make a

difference and although women may not always support opportunities for other women, research does show that they are still the main advocates of political agendas that include gender issues (Eblen 2002, 31). Therefore through the implementation of gender balance and gender-mainstreaming, the participation of women at all levels and in all functions is ensured. This is particularly vital amongst the international agencies present in the post-conflict zone, since it is extremely difficult to urge gender equality in national institution-building, if the international bodies executing the peace agreement do not provide themselves the good example of respect for gender equality (Baksh 2005, 48).

Finally, another significant point to remember in all this is that men and boys too can and should play an important role in promoting women's empowerment in the home, the community, the government, the labour market and the workplace. But only if they have a proper understanding of gender roles and relations, in all these aspects of society, will men be able to challenge unequal power relationships and support programs to achieve greater gender equality (Baksh 2005, 77). Above all, it is with careful consideration of the above-mentioned aspects of the post-conflict period and the formal peace process, that women will gradually be perceived not solely as victims of war, but as agents of transformation and empowerment.

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