

## Women and security: ‘You cannot dance if you cannot stand’

**Elisabeth Porter**

19 October 2005

*To translate Resolution 1325 into reality, we must understand that there are gendered and cultural views on security, and include women in formal political processes, says Elisabeth Porter.*

### Can women make a difference to peace and security?

Yes, if the rhetoric about including women is translated into reality. Before suggesting how, I must make three qualifications. First, I am Australian and have worked in Northern Ireland during 1990, from 1994-1999 and since 2004. Personally, it is not possible to live in a divided society that is inherently violent and where patriarchal attitudes and values pervade everyday living (despite progressive equality legislation) without feeling committed to working toward change. Yet in a place where identity markers define both exclusion and inclusion, it is not easy to work as an ‘inside-outsider’, living in the culture, aware of its limitations and possibilities, yet always being conscious of being different in a culture where diversity is not yet celebrated.

The second qualifier regards the involvement of women in Northern Ireland in peace processes. Northern Ireland has a history of strong women making a difference. However, I write this in mid-September 2005, after the worst riots in Belfast for a decade. Last Saturday, the road I live in was blocked by loyalists (many other roads were also blocked) in support of the Orangemen’s protests about having

their march redirected 100 metres (in order to lessen offence to a nationalist community). I gained permission from the police to walk my dog through the line of protesters and was appalled to find the bulk were young women and children and kept thinking, why did I find this so appalling? We have seen more than a week of violence, disruptions to normal activities, hijacking of cars and buses, burning of vehicles and shops, shootings and violence aimed at the police, accusations of police brutality and the invoking of much tension and fear. Many loyalist women and children visibly support this violence. There are few women elected political representatives and few women publicly voicing alternatives. The message is clear, women potentially can make a difference but we must never assume they always will.

In many places, women socialise children into a cultural identity that includes the learning of ethnic hatred. Some Catholic and Protestant women in Northern Ireland perpetuate sectarianism that promotes violence. In Rwanda, many women encouraged revenge for the dead. Women have been liberation fighters in Eritrea, Nicaragua and Indonesia. In Eritrea, Sri Lanka, South Africa and across Latin America, women are one-third of the guerrilla armies.

My third qualification refers to the significance of Resolution 1325 and practices within the United Nations. In April 2005, I attended the United Nations University Directors meeting in Bonn, Germany. United Nations University acts as a UN think-tank and has both 'Peace and Governance' and 'Environment and Sustainable Development' strands. I was astonished to find that at this meeting, there were 23 men and two women. Aren't universities supposed to be enlightened institutions where matters of equality and inclusion of difference are taken seriously? Several directors agreed with me that there should be more women present. Why? For reasons of gender equity, plural inclusivity and because of women's potential unique contribution.

Thus, I turn to the main points of this article and affirm that women can make a difference, that 1325 is unprecedented in calling on persons to take action in: increasing women's participation in decision-making and peace processes; including gender perspectives and training in peacekeeping; encouraging the protection of women; and integrating gender mainstreaming in UN programs by assessing the in/equality implications for women and men of all policies and programs.

Yet in each of these four key areas, there are stark failures in translating the rhetoric into reality. Three changes are necessary: expand the concept of peace-building in order to transfer skills acquired in informal work to participation in decision-making; understand that security means different things to different groups and; keep insisting on the need for quotas and benchmarks.

### Women as victims of armed conflict and as peace-builders

While I have already mentioned that women are actors in armed conflict, more women are victims of conflict. Women are vulnerable, because whether it is Burundi, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Algeria or Jerusalem, internal conflicts are not fought primarily in battlefields but in villages and towns where women and children remain. Further, violence often flows back home. In Northern Ireland, men in security forces have approved arms because of being potential targets, while paramilitary groups retain illicit arms.

In war zones and in conflict societies, women are not just victims, many are active peace-builders. The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing, was

[www.openDemocracy.net](http://www.openDemocracy.net)

instrumental in defining those areas of concern considered to represent the major obstacles to women's advancement and making recommendations for change. Since then, the global network of NGOs working on women's rights has expanded. This includes lobbying the UN in the lead up to the 24 October 2000 Security Council session on Women, Peace and Security. The resultant resolution is a global advocacy tool.

It is a necessary resolution because women are active in informal peace protests, community dialogue, promoting intercultural tolerance and in practical peace initiatives. However, they are overwhelmingly absent in formal peace processes. They must be included in formal processes in order to establish meaningful gender equality.

### Why should women be present at negotiating tables?

Does it really matter if women are present at negotiating tables or in formal peace processes? Yes it does.

First, women and men are affected by conflict and therefore also are affected by the consequences of peace agreements. These agreements are not merely about ending war,

they are also about establishing the conditions for new just societies where plural perspectives are taken into account.

Second, women's inclusion in all stages of peace processes is essential for inclusive social justice.

Third, the presence of women in political, policy and legal decision-making contexts often makes a difference to the sorts of issues addressed like education, health, nutrition, childcare and human security needs in places as varied as South Africa, Israel, Palestine, Liberia or Guatemala.

Women universally are prime carers in families and communities and they have a huge interest in community stability, so they play important roles in peace-building in unofficial ways. Some women are peace activists advocating for non-violence, others are mediators, trauma healing councillors, practitioners addressing the root causes of violence, educators or facilitators of capacity-building. Many women assist dialogue between husbands or brothers in warring factions, tribes, clans or ethnic groups. Women often bridge divides across traditional ethnic, religious and cultural divisions, coming together on the shared concerns about practicalities of life. In Azerbaijan, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Great Lakes Region, the Middle East, Northern Ireland

and Somalia, women work collaboratively across ethnic and religious lines to make valuable contributions to peace processes despite little awareness of 1325 (see UNIFEM pdf). Stella Tamang of one of Nepal's largest indigenous groups argues that women at the negotiating table "will introduce practical workable solutions to the conflict". The Mano River Women's Peace Network of women from Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone opened pathways of communication between warring factions that led to reopening of borders and restoring of diplomatic relations.

### Why should the understanding of peace-building be expanded?

Narrow definitions of peace-building sit within the post-conflict reconstruction stage, after peace settlements. This definition has two significant consequences for women.

First, it overlooks all the hands-on, unofficial work women do to build peace in grassroots groups, communities and families.

Second, it provides inadequate validation for including women at negotiating tables. Failure to accord acknowledgment for women's active conciliation in all stages of peace processes, consistently results in their exclusion from political decision-making.

I am suggesting that peace-building is a *process* that needs to flow through the pre-conflict, conflict and post-conflict stages and elaborate this in my forthcoming book, *Peace-building: Women in International Perspectives* (Routledge, 2006). Peace processes consist of both formal and informal activities. Women are prominent in informal peace work. However, despite 1325, they are rare in formal peace processes as defined by the UN to include "early warning, preventive diplomacy, conflict prevention, peacemaking, peace-building and global disarmament".

The UN distinguishes between different aspects of these processes. *Peacemaking* includes mediation, conciliation, arbitration and negotiation to bring hostile parties to agreement. *Peacekeeping* involves keeping parties from fighting or harming each other through multinational forces of armed soldiers and police. *Peace-building* includes constructing the conditions of society to foster peace through development, aid, human rights education, reconciliation and the restoration of community life. In the UN, peace-building typically refers to formal approaches used in post-conflict reconstruction.

As Christine Chinkin argues, for many women this concept of 'post-conflict' is a problem. When active conflict or violence ceases, women still have to deal with traumatised children, family members who were combatants and the inevitable difficulties of meeting everyday needs while dealing with intense traumas. The notion of 'reconstruction' may also seem meaningless for women who never have known full citizenship, social justice or a respect for human dignity and rights.

So it is a positive thing that the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Anan is expanding his view and says, 'the participation of women and girls and inclusion of gender perspectives in both formal and informal peace processes are crucial in the establishment of sustainable peace'. Certainly, UNIFEM's emphasis on peaceful, just relationships of equality contrasts with orthodox emphases on structural reconstruction.

Most women's understandings of peace-building are far broader and more holistic than UN or conventional usages of the term. As Sanam Anderlini writes in *Women, Violent Conflict and Peace-building: Global Perspectives*, "the intricate tapestry of what constitutes real peace and security...[includes] social justice, domestic reform, women's rights, co-existence, tolerance, participatory democracy, transparency and non-violent dialogue as necessary ingredients for addressing social differences and building sustainable peace".

### Human security and well-being

Part of translating 1325's rhetoric into reality is understanding that there are gendered and cultural views on security. Whilst foreign policy assumes that a military presence tightens security, such militarism threatens security for women who are victims of war-rape or are used sexually by peacekeepers.

In their book, Susan McKay and Dyan Mazurana provide examples of how women understand peace-building and security. In South Sudan, for Nuer women, "making peace means figuring out how to meet the material, social and spiritual requirements of life". Similarly, with women in Somalia, "peace is not seen as a matter of discussion, but as a way of living, of security and food for your family, of the future for your children". In Sierra Leone, building peace means "taking in the children of neighbours, friends or family members who were killed in the war". In Kosovo, "peace work means rebuilding damaged houses as well as friendships with former neighbours who had turned against them during conflict". Lebanese women discover peace-building is building bridges between

factions involved in the civil war. All these activities revolve around connections, healing, spiritual wounds, rebuilding relationships and meeting everyday family needs.

Accordingly, when women are present around negotiating tables (Guatemala, South Africa, Northern Ireland, East Timor), they initiate different issues – questions related to human security and well-being – like feeling safe and being inclusive, as well as focusing on the practical needs of food, water, health, education, land rights and economic livelihood. As Johan Galtung puts it, 'human security' initiates a new paradigm where people's needs are central to international security and root causes of insecurity are tackled.

### What is the difference that makes the difference?

In Guatemala, women's participation in formal negotiations resulted in specific commitments to women on housing, credit and land, attempts to locate children and orphans, penalising sexual harassment and creating the National Women's Forum. In South Africa, women across all parties agreed that each party should have one-third female representation in each negotiating team for the Constitution process. The South African Constitution includes a comprehensive Bill of Rights with gains for women on reproduction, property rights, healthcare, education and culture. In Northern Ireland, the two representatives of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition lobbied for mixed housing and the early release and reintegration of political prisoners.

There are many positive instances of 1325 helping women to make a difference (see pdf). In Sri Lanka, in 2002, the Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, supported by Norway, established a subcommittee on gender issues to elaborate gender-sensitive guidelines for the peace process. In Somalia, in 2002, fifty women undertook training in negotiation skills and the provisions of 1325 in order to take part in the peace process.

It is overwhelmingly the case that it is women in NGOs and feminist academics who are really utilising the resolution – more than politicians and policy-makers. In Rwanda, even in a context where almost every woman survivor of the genocide has a dramatic story of rape, hunger, fear, flight and loss – women began

forming groups to confront common problems. By 1999, Rwandan women's organisations exceeded 15,000. After 1994, the UNHCR began the Rwanda Women's Initiative, taking a practical approach to assisting income, agriculture, land title, childcare and gender-related violence. When Erin Baines, researcher, asked a Rwandan woman if the Initiative had made a difference in her life, she replied, "you cannot dance if you cannot stand".

Many women's organisations involve both Hutu and Tutsi groups. These groups concentrate on what *unites* rather than divides, that is, the commonalities women face everywhere such as poverty, violence against women, feeding their children and shelter. *Pro-Femmes?* the umbrella organisation of women's groups mobilises women "to spearhead the promotion of a culture of peace, tolerance and non-violence in grassroots activities". There is the view among survivors that women are better than men at forgiving, reconciling and building peace.

Ironically, Rwanda has now surpassed Sweden as the country with the highest proportion of women legislators. From the 2003 elections, women hold 48.8% of the seats in the National Assembly and nine out of 28 ministerial posts. Funding from the Netherlands trained women in decision-making and political awareness. Such a commitment helps translate rhetoric into reality.

But let us return to Northern Ireland, where there are many dedicated women peace activists and hundreds of small women's groups, for a final example. Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan led large demonstrations of Catholics and Protestants to protest against terrorist violence in 1976 and were awarded the Nobel Prize. Despite being deeply divided politically, activists in Northern Ireland come together over basic issues of childcare, housing, education and job skills, avoiding political differences. Two historic examples of women making a difference include the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition and their place at the negotiating table, and the McCartney sisters' stance against the IRA and the demand that there can be no peace without justice.

'The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition was initiated by women with long histories of engagement in civil, human and workers' rights. The Women's Coalition adopted equality, human rights and inclusion as their

principles. They also agreed that participants should acknowledge their political identity differences rather than do what is more typical in Northern Ireland, keep silent or fight about controversial differences. An explicit discussion of differences, divisions, discord and political dissonance is necessary to move beyond intolerance of others' views and sectarian attitudes and practices (see Elisabeth Porter, 2003, pdf). In 'transversal politics', you keep your identity intact while openly trying to understand others' identities. In 1996, the Coalition gained enough votes to secure two seats in the multi-party peace negotiations on the future of Northern Ireland that led to the *Belfast Agreement* in April 1998. They put on the agenda issues like victims' rights, reconciliation and the need for a Civic Forum.

Monica McWilliams, the Coalition's leader talks of "women's central role in conflict prevention, peacekeeping and peace-building"; of the dangers of sectarianism, which see "the world exclusively in terms of the interest of your "own" side as against the other side"; and of the importance of "working with, not burying, our differences". The Coalition made a noteworthy difference to electoral politics in Northern Ireland, with forthright and positive women presenting a vision of how politics should be different. Whenever the parties were bogged down, the women brought the debates back to personal issues of bereavement, loss and hopes for children's future.

In a bar fight on 30 January 2005, Robert McCartney was murdered by a known leader of the IRA and several of his associates. McCartney's five sisters – Paula, Catherine, Gemma, Claire and Donna – and his fiancé Bridgeen Hagans are demanding justice. These women "are being seen as a metaphor for where the nation finds itself – still struggling for unity, torn by savage grief yet looking for justice, peace and reconciliation" (Jo-Ann Moriarty, *The Republican*, 14 March 2005). Five days after the murder, the women held a candlelight vigil attended by 600 people to protest at the IRA cover-up. Sometimes, women prompt the conscience of the nation. Since 1982, Sicilian women have challenged the iron grip of the mafia; since 1996 the committee of soldiers' mothers in Russia have campaigned against conscription in the war in Chechnya; and more recently in Northern Ireland, the McCartney sisters have taken an important stance. Paula McCartney says, "Yes, absolutely, this is about women standing up. The men tend to huff and puff and egos come in to play, and it goes round and round, and it always ends in more violence...But we want real justice, not more violence".

Peace and violence cannot coexist. Anger is 'a crippling emotion' when tied with revenge.

These women say, "we have no fear of the IRA...and we will not be bullied by them". This is worth mentioning because Northern Ireland sectarian conflict has claimed more than 200 lives since the paramilitary organisations called their 1994 ceasefires and only thirty people have been prosecuted for murder. Such women motivate other families who have lost family through paramilitary murders.

**So – is the rhetoric of Resolution 1325 being translated into reality?**

Yes and no. Women's global participation in peace and security concerns continues in mediation, conciliation, trauma counsel, healing and memory work, providing health care for survivors of rape and HIV/AIDs sufferers. Women and men continue to build bridges across ethnic, religious and cultural divisions, opposing war and militarism in innovative and creative ways.

Despite the significance of Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, women remain absent or are marginalised from negotiating tables, political decision-making opportunities and senior advisory positions. Inclusion matters. Without plural inclusivity, there is no peace with justice and equality and 1325's call to "all actors involved, when negotiating and implementing peace agreements, to adopt a gender perspective" goes unheeded. The substantive content and implementation of peace agreements require balance between women-specific provisions and gender mainstreaming.

What exactly do I mean by the latter? "Mainstreaming gender equality" means transforming the "mainstream" and focusing on the systems and structures that create disadvantages for women and men. Mainstreaming gender is all about working within institutions to integrate equality concerns into all policies, programs and projects so that issues of gender equality become part of organisations' actions, beliefs, values, priorities, needs and actual decisions. Sometimes, this can result in a token gesture, so an organisation makes sure there is a woman on a committee but some men still make sexist jokes or ridicule the woman's contribution. Thus, often it is important to have women-only events to enable women's voices to come through clearly, particularly if there are sensitive issues to discuss like women's discrimination, rape or dowry price. For example, Astrid Heiberg was a Norwegian representative to a

Gender Sub-Committee to the Sri Lankan peace talks of 2003. She tells how women's interaction in negotiations between the Government of Sri Lanka and the women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam became more open when the Government men left, and she created a "women-only space".

In 2000, Sanam Anderlini gave four warnings in a preliminary audit on the international community's response to women, peace and security. First, while the explicit endorsement of women's groups and civil society participation in peace processes is unprecedented, the absence of actual quotas, benchmarks and timelines is of concern. Second, while the endorsement of the need for peacekeepers and civilian personnel in peace processes is clear, "without the core commitment of governments to provide additional funds, these measures can be ignored or not implemented adequately". Third, with regard to protection of women, "without an effective monitoring and evaluation mechanism and incentives for compliance...it is likely that the necessary changes are not made". Fourth, much more gender mainstreaming needs to be done to translate rhetoric into concrete progress. Ways to reduce gender disparity need to be built into organisations' policies, programs and projects. The UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) define gender mainstreaming as "a strategy for making the concerns and experiences of women as well as men an integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs in all political, economic and societal spheres, so that women and men benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated". Five years on, these concerns remain.

During 2001 and 2002, Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf travelled to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, East Timor, the former Yugoslavia Republic of Macedonia, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Guinea, Israel, Liberia, the occupied Palestinian territories, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Somalia to present an independent assessment in their *Women, War and Peace*. They found terrible stories, but also women who were surviving trauma and rebuilding communities. Yet, "time and again women described the wonderful documents that had been created and signed – and the failure to implement most of what has been promised".

Lack of will among member states, consistently seeing women's participation as not a priority, institutionalised sexism and patriarchal cultural mores remain major obstacles in translating the grand rhetoric of Resolution 1325 into practical reality. To include women in political decision-making in transitional societies is to take seriously gender justice, gender equality, women's human rights and the rebuilding of relationships in formerly militarised societies.

Peace-building is a process that is important in pre-conflict, conflict and post-conflict stages in both formal and informal settings. Practical peace-building must be truly inclusive of women and men from all branches of life. The 2005 World Summit Document commits states "to fully and effectively implement Security Council Resolution 1325". This commitment must translate into reality.

---

*Elisabeth Porter is INCORE Research Director. INCORE (international conflict research) is a joint University of Ulster, United Nations University centre for peace and conflict studies. Her books include Peace-building: Women in International Perspectives (2006, forthcoming), Feminist Perspectives on Ethics (1999), Building Good Families in a Changing World (1995) and Women and Moral Identity (1991). She has published extensively on women, diversity and feminist theory.*

---

Copyright © Elisabeth Porter, 19 October 2005. Published by openDemocracy Ltd. Permission is granted to reproduce this article for personal, non-commercial use only. In order to circulate internally or use this material for teaching or other commercial purposes you will need to obtain an institutional subscription. Reproduction of this article is by arrangement only. openDemocracy articles are available for syndication. For institutional subscriptions, syndication and press inquiries, please call ++44 (0) 207 608 2000.