

Women negotiating peace

The Commonwealth People's Forum (CPF) is a biennial event held prior to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. CPF 2018 took place on 16-18 April in London and was jointly organised by the Government of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth Foundation. CPF 2018 critically explored policy based actions under the theme of 'Inclusive Governance: The Challenge for a Contemporary Commonwealth'. It provided an innovative opportunity for civil society organisations to share knowledge and learn from each other as well as to interact with governance institutions on key policy issues. The CPF 2018 series elaborates on the issues covered in the London Declaration on Inclusive Governance for a Renewed Commonwealth.

Introduction

Institutions involved in matters of war, peace and security have traditionally excluded women. When women are not involved in negotiating and drafting peace agreements their priorities and rights are less likely to be taken into account during the 'post-conflict' implementation period.

Women's inclusion is a right that should be instituted at the earliest stage of negotiations'

The CPF 2018 session Women negotiating peace discussed the importance of taking gender into account in high-level peace negotiations. The session shared stories of women who have managed to overcome the barriers to working in male dominated environments and take the lead in negotiations. The session also sought to demonstrate the transformational value of inclusion, and to identify clear recommendations for institutions at all levels to achieve it.

Issues and strategies

Panel members comprised women who have served as lead peace negotiators and successfully negotiated enduring peace in their countries; the women hailed from Colombia, Northern Ireland, the Philippines, and Uganda.

Their presentations focused on women's participation in peace processes in each country, and the negative consequences for women and society at large when they are excluded. Across the world, women's participation is a question of justice, democracy and achieving equilibrium between local and national priorities. When women are present in negotiations, inclusion is brought to the table and discussed and this has a measurable impact on the outcome of the peace process, the content of the agreements reached, as well as their implementation.

Overcoming structural discrimination

In all country case studies, including those in which women served in leading roles during the negotiation process, women faced many hurdles in having their voices heard and acted upon, from overt discrimination and exclusion to simply being ignored. In almost all cases, political advisors and senior civil servants frequently blocked women's access to politicians and others with influence over negotiations. Similarly, women faced campaigns of acute sexism and false news on social media that misrepresented proceedings and sought to damage their reputations.

Lessons from country case studies illustrated that women have been able to achieve meaningful influence in peace negotiations in the face of persistent discrimination. Several approaches have been used to break patriarchal structures and overcome systemic barriers to hearing and acting on women's voices.

Ensuring women's rights remain at the centre of peace discussions

Ensuring women's rights were included at the centre of peace discussions required highlighting the differential impacts of conflict on women and their lives, emphasising that women had the right to justice and reparations, and recognising sexual violence as a crime against humanity. Women had to coordinate among themselves in order to overcome negotiating obstacles: 'we pointed our finger up and that meant we met at the ladies' loo'.

In the Philippines, women's groups conducted listening workshops for Bangsamoro¹ communities and provided recommendations to negotiators. The subsequent peace agreement includes a number of gender-specific considerations for transitional governance and women's empowerment.

In Uganda, no women held positions at the negotiating table despite twenty years of

conflict. However, they pushed their agenda through a campaign of corridor diplomacy, handing video clips of women's voices to negotiators who subsequently raised their concerns at the negotiating table.

Building female allies

During the Bangsamoro¹ peace process between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, women played leading roles, including: Chief Negotiator for the government; and Presidential Advisor on the Peace Process, a government agency involved in arbitrating the dispute.

In the Philippines the female peace advisor appointed women to senior negotiating positions who advanced women's participation by appointing yet more women to influential roles. The Filipino experience and other country case studies show that women tend to appoint women. Mobilising the support of female allies in positions of power served as an important mechanism for enhancing women's ability to participate in and influence peace negotiations. One participant described this effect: 'the more women you get up there, the more [...] they break the barriers and [...] open up the space for more women.'

Developing a common negotiating agenda for peace

Developing a common negotiating agenda for peace among women, that is representative of diverse interests, is important for mobilising their support and participation in peace negotiations during periods of conflict. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) mobilised women's support around three core principles: equality, human rights and inclusion; and ensured the Coalition

1. The term Bangsamoro is derived from the old Malay word 'bangsa', meaning 'race' or 'nation'; 'Moro' means 'people'. This term is now used to describe both the Filipino Muslims and their homeland and describes the aspiration of Filipino Muslims to have an Islamic (Moro) country or state (bangsa). The Moro population in the Philippines is the largest non-Catholic group in the country and comprises about 11% (as of the year 2012) of the total Philippine population. Most Moros are followers of Sunni Islam of the Shafi'i madh'hab.

publicly recognised the division in society and advocated solutions based on listening and consensus. The approach attracted broad support from women from all social backgrounds and built confidence in the value of the coalition.

In Northern Ireland, the NIWC developed from a group advocating women's political participation into a fully-fledged political party. This coalition played a key role in the talks leading up to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, by bringing solutions to the table that recognised and worked to accommodate differences.

Building collective power of local communities

In Colombia, many women worked at local and community level over many years to ensure that women's rights were included in the peace agreement. Collective power, rather than the influence of individuals, enabled women to wield power in peace negotiations. This was partly due to the frustration of Colombian women at their decades-long exclusion from peace processes, and the continual infringements on their rights during that period. When the opportunity to negotiate peace arose, a generation of women that had not known peace were prepared to make difficult ethical and political compromises to ensure that negotiations were successful and took women's voices into account.

From negotiation to implementation

While women have been successful in wielding power in peace negotiations, women's capacity to sustain power and influence beyond the negotiations has varied. In Colombia, the collective power shared by women nationally and locally in mobilising for peace enabled them to ensure the proper implementation of the peace accords, and public consciousness was raised of women's authority and legitimacy as a political group that deserved to be included.

Similarly, in the Philippines, women have

maintained leadership positions and influence into the implementation stages of peace accords, enabling them to address policy challenges faced by women in former conflict areas and secure a national action plan focussed on women's priorities.

In Northern Ireland, despite the enormous efforts made to protect women's interests in the peace agreement, this did not translate into tangible influence in the implementation stages. Nevertheless, female influence led to the establishment of a civic forum as a second, advisory chamber of government, comprising representatives of civil society, including women, youth, faith groups, and trade unions. Although this represented a symbolic step forward for participatory democracy, the Civic Forum was later sidelined by elected political parties.

Lessons for inclusion

Several steps can be taken to help achieve more inclusive peace processes. To begin with, women's inclusion at the negotiation table is a right that should be instituted at the earliest stage of negotiations. This requires designing the specific selection, nomination or electoral system in such a way that guarantees gender balance in negotiating teams. A sense of public ownership over the negotiations can be achieved by local and national women's groups working together to establish a common negotiating agenda. The media plays a key role in reinforcing patriarchal attitudes, and so smears and sexist messages must be routinely challenged. In addition, it should be remembered that diversity begets diversity: women in positions of authority in peace processes and in governance institutions appoint other women, and so attaining senior posts early on is important.

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