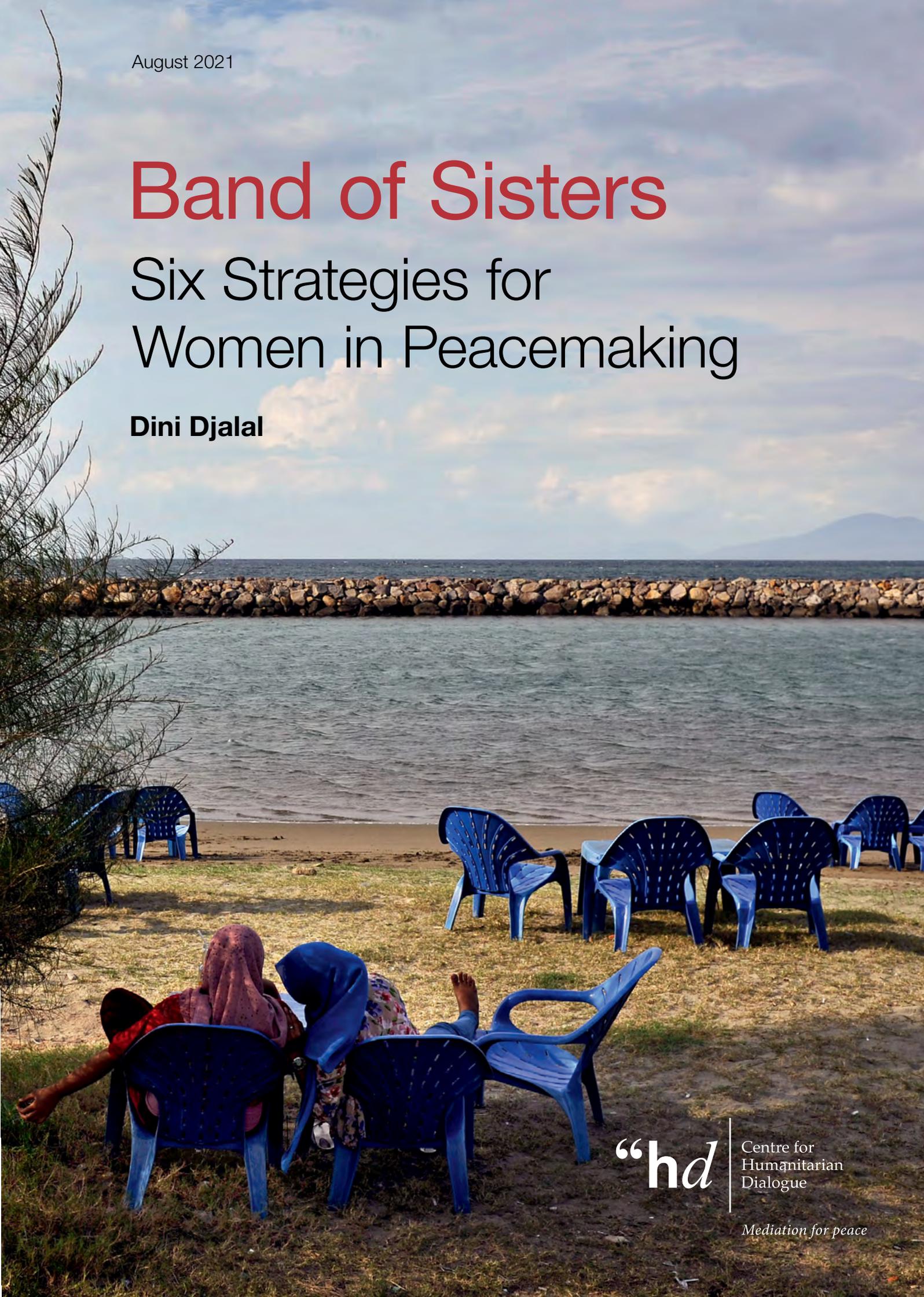


August 2021

Band of Sisters

Six Strategies for Women in Peacemaking

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Centre for
Humanitarian
Dialogue

Mediation for peace

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Two women in Banda Aceh, Sumatra, Indonesia (Chris Stowers/Panos)

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Introduction

To many women who bear the brunt of war and its aftermath, United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, adopted in October 2000, was a long-awaited breakthrough. It called for greater participation of women in peace and security efforts and more protection from gender-based violence in situations of armed conflict. At last, the wait was over for institutional affirmation that women are central to preventing conflict and building peace.

Twenty years later, the wait continues for meaningful change. Women made up an average of 13% of all peace negotiators from 1992 to 2019.¹ When they take part in negotiations, they struggle to be heard and to gain results that benefit women. Even in conflicts where women's participation was critical, female former combatants await similar levels of compensation to their male counterparts.

It is a tribute to their resilience that, across Asia, women peacemakers persist. From Papua's grassroots organiser Fientje Jarangga, to Cambodia's creative facilitator Suyheang Kry, South Korea's partnership-building academic Youngmi Cho and Nepal's coalition-builder Bandana Rana, women continue to add their voices to the national discourse on peace. And, as a consequence, they are changing the narrative.

This article builds on a mapping exercise of women peacemakers and women-led organisations working for peace across Asia, commissioned by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD). It highlights the women's individual approaches and the specific contexts of their vital work while drawing out six strategies that connect them.

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In interview after interview with these often apparently tireless women, common threads emerge. Each woman has unique qualities which have contributed to their success. But, together, they are akin to a sisterhood of shared optimism and tenacity. They provoke vigorous dialogue but joke and cajole too. They favour collaboration over confrontation.

Many of the women spearheading efforts to foster peace have the potential to assume a larger or more formal leadership role at a national level. It is telling that many refrain from taking a more prominent position. Some seem to be sceptical of governments while others seem intent on influencing behind the scenes through the vast networks they navigate, focusing on the communities they serve and in which they have an outsized influence. The global community benefits from learning more about their work.

A note on methodology

This research was carried out against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. More than 60 interviews were conducted over five months through telephone calls and video conferences. In all the interviews, the strain of living through the world's worst public health crisis in a century was inescapable. Frustrated by travel restrictions that curtailed engagement with far-flung stakeholders, some women turned to distributing aid to the hard-hit communities they could reach.

COVID-19 has made very challenging work even more difficult. Many of the women interviewed live in states that deny conflict even exists. If peace has been achieved, officials argue, why do we need more peacebuilding? The messenger becomes the issue. Enduring scrutiny and surveillance, some activists become creative in navigating political environments that can unexpectedly turn hostile. For that reason, names and attributions are included only sparingly in this article, and only with consent.

“COVID-19 has made very challenging work even more difficult”

Instead, this analysis summarises the strategies that women employ to negotiate solutions that can benefit everyone in their communities. The six strategies do not reflect the totality of the peacemakers' creativity and are not exclusive to women. But the particular challenges that women confront make these strategies pertinent for sharing with those who face similar obstacles.

Six strategies

Strategy #1: Be persistent

When Fientje Jarangga first established TIKI – which means ‘Enough Already’ in her native Papuan language – her goal was to document human rights abuses against women in Papua. That’s a difficult topic to broach, but Jarangga forged ahead. Today, the National Commission for Women’s Rights and the region’s council of traditional leaders endorse her report as an important reference source, and Jarangga occasionally advises the government on development plans.

Jarangga exemplifies women peacemakers in Asia, many of whom overcome obstacles and resistance with sheer grit.

Consider, for example, the challenge of exclusion. Women in Asia navigate a world where they are vastly underrepresented at multiple levels of government and other institutions. Women, on average, make up a quarter of the members of parliaments around the world, but some countries in Asia do not meet this global average. In Cambodia, women made up 20% of the National Assembly until the 2017 election, when representation fell to 15%.² In South Korea, parliamentary representation by women is only 17%.³

Women are also underrepresented in peace talks. Hundreds of inter-Korean talks have taken place over several decades, but only a handful of women in total have participated. If the women were fazed by the imbalance, they forged ahead regardless. The civil society organisation Women Making Peace designed exchange programmes between women from the North and South. They also held conflict resolution workshops for schools and local communities. They persisted.

Women have persevered through many difficult situations. Even before martial law, peacebuilding workshops in Myanmar tended to be visited by uninvited guests from the police forces, particularly if the gatherings included high-profile speakers. At the time, the trainers typically responded with a smile and continued the training. They accepted the scrutiny as part of the long process of democratisation. They persevered.

Strategy #2: Be creative

Perseverance often inspires creativity. Ask Ruby Kholifah of the Asian Muslim Action Network and initiator of the ‘peace schools’ for women in Poso, Indonesia, which was then a tinderbox of religious strife. Kholifah wanted to rebuild trust between the warring communities, but through more organic means than a typical roundtable discussion. An unconventional idea came to her: let’s convene local leaders in a garden to plant vegetables together. Initially, the participants were sceptical. But, by the time of the harvest, a semblance of community harmony had emerged.

Creativity can also be borne out of necessity. Authorities in neighbouring Papua can be rigid. To circumvent a lot of questions, rights advocates call their capacity-building workshops ‘animations’. There is similar restraint among activists who focus on learning rather than advocacy when required. Instead of referring to the tensions they address, they equip the communities they serve with the skills to listen, reflect, and conduct dialogue.

Creativity can simply come from inspiration. To prompt more conversations between the North and the South, the Women Making Peace organisation, which is based in Seoul, planned a ‘Peace Talk Show’. The ‘My Friend’ campaign run by Myanmar’s Women’s Peace Network used social media to spur dialogue about religious and ethnic diversity. Sri Lanka’s Center for Equality and Justice uses puppet shows, yoga and exchanges of the traditional sari to break the ice during community dialogues.

Creativity often involves some risk-taking. Carmen Lauzon-Gatmaytan trains combatants and government forces in the Philippines in conflict mediation. She knew that inviting women to take part would invite some scepticism from conservative male counterparts. The gamble was worth it. The attitudes and behaviour of all participants improved considerably.

However, being creative can also mean being unseen. Some of Myanmar’s most effective peace advocates

influence from the outside, advising politicians and government officials on gender-informed policymaking but not taking part in the formal meetings. While others insist that affecting lasting change requires a seat for women at the table, backroom influence is often deployed when cultural norms remain restrictive.

Strategy #3: Be collaborative

Empatiku, an Indonesian non-governmental organisation (NGO), has a challenging task. They have to reintegrate the families of former ISIS combatants into society while easing the anxieties of wary communities and returnees alike. It's a situation that calls for as many partners as possible to keep cool heads and reassure their stakeholders. That's why Empatiku sought the support and participation of officials from the Ministry of Social Affairs as well as religious organisations, including women preachers. Over time, the repeated assurances of Empatiku's partners dissipated the stigma against the returning families – and the threat of violent extremism and conflict in the community.

It may seem elementary to encourage collaboration to achieve peace. But, in reality, further confrontations – for example, between communities and government authorities – often occur in post-conflict situations. In contrast, collaboration can not only foster peace, it can also encourage policy change. In Cambodia, for example, an effective collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the Alliance for Conflict Transformation resulted in the adoption of a 'peace education' curriculum in three districts. Another Cambodian civil society organisation, Silaka, consults with political parties on their capacity-building efforts. Over time, the parties have promoted more women as candidates for electoral seats. Indonesia's Mosintuwu, an NGO that teaches peacebuilding strategies as well as civil rights and public speaking, also builds institutional buy-in by allocating 10% of enrolment in its 'peace schools' for local government officials.

Collaboration can also build momentum. Just ask Youngmi Cho, the Executive Director of the Korean Women's Movement for Peace. Cho wants to generate the widest possible support for peacebuilding efforts and is engaging with government agencies, legislators, and civil society organisations alike to build partnerships. As a result, scores of organisations and politicians are signing up to campaign for demilitarisation.

This collaborative approach may mean the revision of short-term objectives while long-term goals are kept intact. The long term goal of the Asian Muslim Action Network, for example, is peaceful coexistence for

minority groups. But they modified their campaign to focus on addressing basic needs rather than on human rights – a more subtle approach that can ensure positive results since, as Ruby Kholifah explains, "the government also wants to claim success".

Strategy #4: Be inclusive

Rebuilding trust and communities can take years of dialogue. And effective dialogue doesn't reinforce categories and divisions.

Take the example of Family Conversations, a dialogue programme initiated by the women-led Al-Mujadilah Development Foundation (AMDF) in Marawi on Mindanao island in the Philippines. In 2017, fierce fighting broke out in Marawi. 'The Siege', as it has come to be known, created a cleavage in the community as families were displaced from their homes. With Family Conversations, the displaced families are provided with a safe space to discuss health issues (from mental health to reproductive health) and all family members are invited: husbands, wives and children alike. The AMDF's former chief, the late Zahria Muti-Mapandi, explained that effective dialogue is inclusive dialogue because all perspectives are aired and everyone feels heard. "The impact we want to see is better than if we only talk to the women or the men", she said. The presence of male champions can also help to diffuse tensions in more patriarchal societies and, in these circumstances, it can be effective to include these possible champions in dialogue.

The Asian Muslim Action Network innovates in this space too. One of its programmes brings together participants who rarely convene for dialogue: a roster of women preachers from Sunni, Shia, Wahabi, and Ahmadi communities. Religious leaders are also key participants in many other peacebuilding dialogues. An inter-community exchange and dialogue programme convened by the Center for Women and Development (CWD) in northern Sri Lanka brings leaders from many groups together in one conversation. The aim of such diversity? "Friendly coexistence," said CWD Director, Saroja Sivachandran.

Strategy #5: Catalyse for change

Sometimes, the role of the peacebuilder is to set an example for others to follow.

Cambodia's Alliance for Conflict Transformation (ACT), for example, typically holds workshops once a year in targeted areas with the hope that local leaders will copy the template. The goal, as explained by ACT Director Sotheavy Srey, is to fortify communities with



A community facilitator from Al-Mujadilah Development Foundation (AMDF) conducts a debriefing session with women as part of the family conversation sessions in Marawi (Photo: Genevive Estacaan/Oxfam)

the tools for easing conflict so that they may “replicate the efforts in their own community”.

This strategy of initiating a chain reaction is working. In Indonesia, a number of women on low incomes – who comprise the majority of those enrolled in Mosintuwu’s ‘peace schools’ – went on to start their own initiatives: a shelter for abused women and children, tutorials to improve literacy, even a community radio station. Similarly, peace groups in Papua involve traditional leaders in dialogues so they recreate the conversations with their communities.

In Myanmar, the Naushawng Development Institute (NDI) based in Kachin State has both a one-year and a 45-day programme that trains people from across the country to live in diversity and practise critical thinking. The NDI hopes that graduates of these programmes will share their positive experiences when returning to their communities, becoming de facto ambassadors for peace.

At Nagarik Aawaz, a Nepalese NGO which means ‘Citizens’ Voices’, women share their war stories from behind curtains, so they can express their trauma without inhibition. The goal, as explained by Executive Director Susan Risal, is to heal wounds and rebuild confidence – both women’s confidence and the community’s confidence – by listening. Risal describes this approach for building community peace as “latitudinal transformation”, as every layer of society is given a voice.

Strategy #6: Build leaders

Peacemaking and peacebuilding are also opportunities to develop leaders.

Consider, for example, the women’s leadership programme in Bangladesh’s Chittagong Hill Tracts, which has produced more than 300 village chiefs. The programme owes part of its success to the socialisation of its goals, as organisers familiarise communities with



Women taking part in the 'Building Leadership for Women, Peace, Security, and Equity' programme run by Nagarik Aawaz, Nepal (Photo: Nisha Thapa/Nagarik Aawaz)

the prospect of women leading villages. As one trainer explained: "You can't have women leading villages if the residents don't accept them."

Leadership programmes are now often integral to peacebuilding organisations, which chart their own achievements in leadership development. For example, alumni of the leadership training provided by Cambodian civil society organisation Silaka have become heads of their communes. TIKI in Papua has transformed scores of their participants from victims of domestic violence into community leaders and agents of change.

Leadership does not have to be formal. The AMDF in Marawi provides leadership training for women across 40 municipalities, yet they don't count success in terms of elections. As one trainer explained: "We focus on women becoming the go-to for problem-solving in the community".

Persistent challenges

While these may be effective strategies, it's important to say that women still face significant challenges in making and building peace.

Across Asia, it is clear there is disappointment that years of campaigning for inclusion have not significantly improved outcomes for women. On the contrary, economic insecurity is acute for many bereaved women in post-conflict situations. Women's concerns have been sidelined. Nepal was once envied for its prioritisation of UNSCR 1325; today, the second National Action Plan languishes in the Ministry of Home Affairs where it awaits approval and adoption.

Security is not assured. Political violence in the Chitragong Hill Tracts persists. Fighting has resumed in Kashmir as well as in Kachin State in Myanmar. Skirmishes have returned to Nepal, and inter-religious tensions are intensifying in Sri Lanka. Animosity lingers between Rohingya refugees from Myanmar and host communities around Cox's Bazar.

In post-conflict situations, political repression in some countries has kept inter-ethnic and political tensions under the radar, where they quietly simmer. As one rights advocate said with words that could describe many countries in the region: "Conflict (can be) invisible and latent, and deep-rooted in structural issues and structural violence that has not been addressed."

In such countries, the persistent peacebuilder may grow frustrated by governments insisting that since the war is over, peace is at hand.

This promotion of 'peace' prompts another critical challenge: a scaling back of donor support. Donors determine funding allocation according to perceived need, often set by governments. Short of funds, many initiatives are a shadow of their former selves.

Some women are wary of token representation. "I don't advocate for women's participation for quantity. I advocate for quality", said a rights advocate from Myanmar. Others agree that women with political connections

are more likely to be included in formal peace processes than more representative women from their communities.

The international community can help. The following actions can help women peace practitioners to gain more ground and consequently foster lasting peace in their communities:

- Increase institutional support and funding, and develop partnerships, particularly with organisations that offer community dialogue and training programmes.
- Publicly endorse the initiatives of partner organisations, particularly those that do not have the resources to fund promotional activities.
- Help to elevate women to more strategic positions, especially those that can encourage security hardliners to soften their stance.
- Help actors to transcend the civil society space and academia which, rightly or wrongly, may not be accorded equal status in national politics. This can be done by inviting them to participate in semi-official or formal meetings, or events with government officials.
- Organise and/or support activities that bring together peace practitioners from different countries and/or backgrounds, and document the activities to facilitate learning from other's experiences.
- Advocate for women's participation and leadership in peacemaking and peacebuilding with key decision-makers in government. Peace practitioners may not have extensive access to these decision-makers. Be the bridge for dialogue.

It is worth remembering that, while the women referenced in this article do not seek attention, they and their respective organisations are undertaking the real work of rebuilding communities. And the rest of us in the global community gain from supporting this resilient sisterhood in their search for lasting peace.

Endnotes

- 1 UN Women. *Facts and figures: Women, peace, and security*. Available at www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/peace-and-security/facts-and-figures.
- 2 Kijewski, L. (2017, November 30). *Only two women join the National Assembly*. The Phnom Penh Post. Available at www.phnompenhpost.com/national-politics/only-two-women-join-national-assembly.
- 3 Statista. (2021, March 5). *Share of women in South Korean National Assembly 2010-2018*. Statista.com. Available at www.statista.com/statistics/641688/south-korea-female-national-assembly-member.

Annex: Further information

You can find more information on the work of the women and organisations that informed this article on the following websites.

Ain o Salish Kendra

www.askbd.org

Alliance for Conflict Transformation (ACT)

<https://act-kh.org>

Asian Muslim Action Network

www.amanindonesia.org

Association of War Affected Women

www.awawsl.org

Balay Mindanaw

www.balaymindanaw.org

Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST)

www.blast.org.bd

Cambodian Center for Human Rights

www.cchrcambodia.org

Cambodian Development Resource Institute

www.cdri.org.kh

Center for Equality and Justice

www.cejsrilanka.org

Center for Korean Women and Politics

<http://feminet.or.kr>

Center for Women and Development

www.cwdjaffna.org

Empatiku

www.empatiku.or.id

Gender Equality Network

www.genmyanmar.org

Kashmir Youth Arts Initiative

<https://kyai.org>

Korean Women's Association United (KWAU)

www.women21.or.kr

Korean Women's Movement for Peace

www.koreapeacenow.org

Korea Women's Political Solidarity

<https://tinyurl.com/3k2rk8mn>

Mon Women's Organization

www.monwomen.org

Mosintuwu

www.mosintuwu.com

Muslim Women's Research and Action Forum

www.mwraf.lk

Nagarik Aawaz

www.nagarikaawaz.org.np

Naripokkho

www.naripokkho.org.bd

Naushawng Development Institute

www.naushawng.org

Nyein Foundation

www.nyeinfoundation.org

PEKKA

www.pekka.or.id

The Prajnaya Trust

www.prajnya.in

Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB)

www.rib-bangladesh.org

Silaka

www.silaka.org

SKPKC Franciskan Papua

www.fransiskanpapua.org

Suriya Women's Development Centre

www.suriyawomen.org

Women Cross DMZ

www.womencrossdmz.org

Women Making Peace

www.peoplepower21.org/English/38073

Women Peacemakers Cambodia

www.wpmcambodia.org

Women's Human Rights

www.whr.org.np

Women's Peace Network

www.womenspeacenetwork.org

Women's Regional Network

www.womensregionalnetwork.org

www.hdcentre.org