



## Women's Perspectives of Peace and Security



*Empowered lives.  
Resilient nations.*



## **ABOUT N-PEACE NETWORK**

The N-Peace network (Engage for Peace, Equality, Access, Community and Empowerment) is a multi-country initiative that operates in Nepal, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, Afghanistan and the Philippines. N-Peace promotes the leadership of women as key actors in building peace and preventing conflicts, and provides a platform for engagement between different stakeholders on women, peace and security. This initiative is facilitated by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and supported by Australian Government Overseas Aid Program (AusAID).

## **ABOUT THIS SERIES**

A first batch of trainers were trained through a training of trainers carried out by UNDP and The Institute for Inclusive Security, as collaborators of the N-PEACE initiative. These perspective pieces shared by the N-Peace trainers forms the first of a series of such reflections. The overall conceptualization of this series is managed by the Regional Crisis Prevention and Recovery team at the UNDP Asia Pacific Regional Centre.

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To know more about the network and N-Peace Trainers visit: [www.n-peace.net](http://www.n-peace.net)

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# FOREWORD

The women, peace and security agenda has gained increasing prominence over the last few years. With the milestone United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 adopted in October 2000, women's concerns for the first time gained prominence as a core peace and security issue. A little over a year ago, several advocates working for peace, security and development came together from Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, Nepal and Indonesia to mark the ten-year anniversary of this resolution, and to reflect on the challenges that remain. It was then that the N-Peace network (Engage for Peace, Equality, Access, Community and Empowerment) was established. It operates as a multi-country initiative that links these countries, which may differ in terms of causes and the nature of conflicts and the socio-cultural contexts, but find common ground on challenges that women continue to face. These challenges range from being under-represented in decision making about peace and security issues to being under-resourced and suffering disproportionately during and after a conflict.

I was present when the N-Peace network was established in October 2010, and have since closely followed the momentum that has been created through this platform to support the leadership of women in preventing, resolving and recovering from conflict. The uniqueness of this initiative lies in its ability to identify and leverage collective capacity that exists in the region towards common action on the women, peace and security agenda. This first pool of trainers from the network is symbolic of that; it aims to strengthen a cadre of women trainers that can foster strong coalitions and result in a concrete agenda for advancing women's leadership in peace and security.

Each of the women from the first batch of N-Peace trainers have impressive profiles and personal experiences of heroism, coupled with professional expertise of being champions for peace and equality in their countries. They have shared their experiences and perspectives through this publication, which offers a glimpse into the collective experience of women peace builders involved in this emerging field of work. I would like to acknowledge the contribution of each of them and appreciation for sharing their stories and experiences. This series of short vignettes marks a tribute to the tireless efforts of many other women in our region working for peace.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N. Rosellini'.

Nicholas ROSELLINI

Deputy Regional Director  
United Nations Development Programme  
Regional Bureau for Asia & the Pacific

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The N-Peace Facilitators from Regional Crisis Prevention and Recovery team at UNDP Asia Pacific Regional Centre would like to acknowledge the women from the first pool of N-Peace Trainers for sharing their perspectives on peace and security. Each story represents a contribution to the Women, Peace & Security (WPS) agenda and personal journey towards building sustainable peace.

A special thank you to the N-Peace Network Partner, the Institute for Inclusive Security, for carrying out the N-Peace Regional Training of the Trainers (ToT) based on its manual, [A Curriculum for Women Waging Peace](#). Following this workshop, the N-Peace Trainers have adapted the curriculum to their own contexts, and with support from the network rolled out country-level trainings to further promote skills and knowledge to progress the WPS agenda with women at national and community levels.

The N-Peace Facilitators would also like to acknowledge the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) for its ongoing support to all N-Peace network activities, including its capacity building initiatives.

[Women's Perspectives of Peace and Security](#) is the first edition within a series of reflections showcasing the voices of peace builders from the N-Peace network.



# Peace building in Nepal & Women's Participation

Pinky Singh RANA, Nepal

**Pinky Singh Rana** is the Founder of SAMANATA-Institute for Social and Gender Equality, Nepal, and is an active board member of other national NGOs, namely SAATHI, the Rural Women's Development and Unity Centre (RUWDUC) and Safe Motherhood Network Federation. A fervent women's activist, Ms. Rana's forte lies in social research and training, and she is widely published on women's issues in Nepal. During the conflict and the current post-conflict transitional period in Nepal, Ms. Rana has been advocating for women's participation in peace building through the integration of UNSCRs 1325 and 1820 into government programmes, security forces' training manuals, training to security personnel and NGO programming at national and sub-national levels.

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experience taught  
me that success  
can not be  
ensured without  
engaging the  
male members  
of families and  
communities

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I vividly remember the heartbreaking tears of Sita Magar, a conflict affected victim unable to speak of her husband who was abducted while she was still pregnant. At present her son is seven years old, she has no news of her husband's whereabouts and, still traumatized, she can only cry when asked about his disappearance.

Six years on after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2006, which formally ended the insurgency, Nepali women continue to suffer from the impacts of conflict. Worse still, many have no answers to the whereabouts of their husbands, sons and daughters. Many who were internally displaced, forced to leave schools, or compelled to look for non-agriculture based employment were exploited due to their economic conditions. Those involved as former combatants face rejection from their communities and societies.

## NEPAL'S MARCH TOWARDS PEACE

Nepal's march towards peace has been fraught with power struggles between and within political parties, reigning impunity, security sector re-structuring, rehabilitation of the People's Liberation Army personnel and struggles to address transitional security and justice concerns. Nepal's constitution building process is held hostage to party interests, and the fulfillment of the peace agreements remain unrealized. Despite the CPA, splinter groups continue to create havoc across the country, resulting in continued violence.

The Nepali people are disillusioned with the concept of a 'New Nepal', as envisioned by the CPA. Access to justice remains impossible for many, while the voices of many conflict affected, in particular women and children, remain obscured due to their lack of political affiliations. Opportunities for economic recovery, social cohesion and political legitimacy are few. The Bill on Truth and Reconciliation remains pending, and troubling talks of blanket amnesty have arisen.

However, there have been positive changes in the gender roles and identities in the country since the peace process began and many of these changes have been possible due to the international conventions and treaties signed by the Government of Nepal, and the national laws and policies addressing women's needs. The latter have been realized due to a vibrant women's movement constantly advocating for equality and equity at national, district and community levels.

Still, women's engagement in the peace process leaves much to be desired. Women are often limited to lobbying and advocacy through NGOs and civil society. Women are viewed as beneficiaries, rather than decision-makers capable of creating changes. Similarly, culturally discriminatory biases prevent



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women from participating in peace building processes. Most activities to date focus on awareness raising and only few women are empowered as peace building and conflict transformation leaders.

### **EMPOWERING WOMEN TO REALIZE THEIR POTENTIAL**

I have been involved in Nepal's women's movement for almost two decades. I have worked for various NGOs lobbying for women's issues and concerns, particularly those pertaining to sexual and gender based violence, and those necessary for their empowerment. Part of my work, both as a trainer and a researcher, aims to address issues such as violence against women and girls. During the conflict and post conflict transitional period, the impact on women and girls increased significantly, in both the nature and the degree of violence. Although women's powers of resilience were tested and proven, the social, economic, physical and psychological burdens they suffered increased manifold.

My decades of experience working to eliminate violence against women taught me that success can not be ensured without engaging the male members of families and communities. Recognizing this, I accepted an invitation to contribute to creating the training manuals on gender equality for the Nepal Army and Nepal Police, along with their training. I saw this as a unique opportunity to engage men and boys, many unknowledgeable of our fight, to eliminate violence against women and girls.

My journey has led me down paths where I work with government, NGOs, and other like-minded organizations in key national strategies and local tactics essential for 'being heard'. To advance women's issues via the provisions of

UNSCR 1325. I have worked closely with the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction (MoPR) in the development of a proposal to implement a National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCRs 1325 and 1820. I also serve as a member of the recently formed 1325 Action Group.

From these undertakings, I have learnt that women – irrespective of age, class, caste, creed, and urban or rural – need to realize they can and should participate in decisions affecting themselves and their communities, societies and nation at large. There is a general unwillingness and lack of motivation among women to participate in peace building and conflict transformation activities, primarily due to lack of confidence, which is based on the society's discriminatory perspective of women.

Training to empower women to realize their potential, and role models to prove they have the capacity to create change and ensure sustainable peace have proved to be effective. Continued awareness raising on women's rights and responsibilities are essential, but there is need to enhance their capacity for increased involvement in peace negotiations, political decision-making and increased participation across all levels of government, non-government and civil society organizations at the community, district and central levels.





# Advancing Women's Leadership as Peace Builders in Nepal

Sagun BASNET, *Nepal*

**Sagun Basnet** is a Senior Programme Manager at NGO Equal Access Nepal, which works to educate and catalyze behavioral change for the promotion of development via innovation outreach and media strategies. She has over 12 years of experience working in social issues, especially gender and peace building. Ms. Basnet has worked in Nepal's national media and formerly worked as a news editor and anchor for Nepal Television. She has also created documentaries focusing on victims of the conflict in Nepal. Previously Ms. Basnet held positions in development and conflict transformation organizations including Friends for Peace, and she previously worked as an external program evaluator for Search for Common Ground Nepal. She is also a trainer on Gender and Peacebuilding. Ms. Basnet's qualifications include an MA in Social and Cultural Analysis from New York University, an MPhil from Pokhara University, Nepal, and an MA in English, Tribhuvan University, Nepal.

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While the pace of progress may be crawling, we, the peace builders, continue striving

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The peace process in Nepal has been facing a number of hiccups. There has not been a time, in my observation, when the process has run smoothly and not hit an impasse. While there are many reasons for the situation and the constant hindrances to the peace agenda's progress, as someone involved in the peace building process in Nepal I have to constantly remind myself to practice perseverance. While the pace of progress may be crawling, we, the peace builders, continue striving.

## WOMEN AS AGENTS FOR PEACE

Nepal, now a burgeoning Republic has an interesting history of democracy repeatedly being taken and given back to people by the rulers and leaders. The movements that brought back democracy three times in Nepal were initiated out of the dissenting voices and concerns of all the people which were not listened to and respected. Building peace requires an intervention, which listens to the voices and grievances of all sectors of society and addresses them accordingly.

Women and women's issues have been integral during Nepal's peace building process. Women were at the forefront of Nepal's civil war (1996-2006) as freedom fighters, as homemakers, and as activists. Unfortunately, however, they were not represented in the same manner in the formal agreements of the peace process.

Despite playing numerous roles in the peace process, women and women's issues have generally taken a backseat. Both in times of conflict and peace, cases of direct abuse in terms sexual, physical and verbal exploitation have severely hindered women's capacities to realize their own potential. This in turn impedes on their ability to effectively engage in building and sustaining peace.

Nonetheless, over the years the women's movement in Nepal has strengthened. With more women from the central to the grassroots becoming organized, aware of their rights, and actively seeking the fulfillment of their rights, the movement has gained momentum. Various networks of women's organizations have also played a pivotal role in bringing together the collective voices of women, and consolidating their aspirations to jointly advocate for a policy-making environment that is non-discriminatory and receptive to women's issues. The women's movement has had many successes forming, empowering and engaging women in groups.

Peace building programs need to further capitalize on women's groups in order to harness their role in reconciliation and the building of Nepal as a republic that is respectful of all people's rights. Efforts towards fostering



public attitudes that are supportive of women's roles in peace building are also needed for greater engagement to be realized.

We also need more women peace builders brought to the forefront as positive role models so that more women are encouraged to get engaged, and so that men too recognize the high value in engaging women.

## STRATEGIES FOR ADVANCING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

My initial involvement in advancing women's rights began when I worked as a television journalist and sought to bring to light the concerns of marginalized groups, including women, via the media. More recently I have been working to advance women's leadership roles in peace and security issues in Nepal.

Having conducted research on these topics and shared knowledge generated by publishing articles, producing media programs (both radio and television) and developing and delivering trainings, I became increasingly convinced of the importance of educating the masses about the potential the women of my country hold. One of my published articles that analyzed the intersections of gender and the peace process, titled "Women and Politics: Is voting enough?" stirred many reactions and debate over women's political participation in the peace process.

Similarly, my trainings and radio programs have generated a lot of feedback from women aspiring to voice their issues and have themselves heard. In carrying out activities through my organization, we have used some interesting strategies to increase women's leadership potential and empower them to leverage their own capacities. One such approach is called the "cascading training" through which I have imparted trainings to many women in the communities, who in turn train many more women, resulting in community leaders who help in building peace in their own communities. This process has been successful in generating large numbers of women, who understand their own settings and communities and can serve as agents for peace.

I have also trained a number of women to serve as community reporters working closely with FM radio stations, community leaders and conflict affected women. Such trainings have deepened their capacity to report effectively on the critical issues of women, peace and security.

## THE RESTRICTIONS OF ENTRENCHED STEREOTYPES

One of the greatest challenges I face is managing my work along with the prescribed roles that I am expected to perform as a woman. Building peace is a demanding job, which often requires the unlearning of things that have been rooted in customs, practices, beliefs and history. Managing this demanding work – while facing restrictions from stereotyped beliefs and attitudes towards women – is a significant challenge that pervades both home and work.

At the household level, being a women engaged in building peace has affected my relations in a mixed manner. Some of the people in my household are proud, while some still do not appreciate why I need to be involved in such work. This view is couched in a broader societal construct in Nepal, where women's roles and voices in politics is still marginal and insignificant. And with peace building largely seen as a political undertaking, most people still don't consider that women have a significant role to play in this field.

Despite the fact that Nepal is passing through a transitional phase, politically and socially, entrenched gender perspectives continue to pose challenges for women, where the male is regarded as 'the doer' and the female as 'the receiver'.

Even with these challenges, I still find myriad sources of inspiration that drive me to carry out my work. I take inspiration from the people I work with and the potential for change that I strive to achieve.

Though the stalemate in terms of development and peace building is far from inspiring, it serves as a reminder that more effort is always needed. "I can be changed by what happens to me, but I refuse to be reduced by it," is a quote by American author Maya Angelou that captures my outlook. The sense of gratification I feel when I realize that I have been able to make change and impact someone's life positively inspires me to continue working for peace.





# A Journey Towards Equality

Husna Banu SHEIKH, *Nepal*

**Husna Banu Sheikh** is the Gender Justice Specialist of the 'Enhancing Access to Justice for Consolidation of Peace Project' supported by UNDP Nepal. This initiative works to: provide services to Legal personnel on Gender Based Violence (GBV); develop gender friendly transitional justice mechanisms; promote the development of a National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325, and other gender focused programmatic activities. Prior to her current position, Ms. Sheikh worked for a Danish INGO to promote peace through community mediation and thereby reduce the impact of armed conflict on women. Ms. Sheikh's professional experience also crosses into the environmental sector and she has spent over 10 years working in the area of natural resource management. Ms. Sheikh holds an MA in Sociology/Anthropology from Tribhuvan University, Nepal.

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passionate  
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To begin, I would like to share my own life experience. As a Muslim woman who was not allowed to step out of the house, not allowed to be engaged in a job and was practically given no choices to make decisions affecting my own life, I took a very hard decision as a young woman. I realized quite early on that I had to choose between 'do, and die.' I chose to do – to leave my house, thereby challenging my family, society, religion and culture. I was left completely alone to face difficulties that would come with the many unknowns in the future.

I learned that sometimes negative consequences prove to be inspiring in terms of making big decisions. In my case too, it was my mother's life that drew me to making the decision that I would not lead a life that was like hers. Given that I took these decisions to change my personal life, I would also want to see the same change for other women.

## WOMEN IN POST-CONFLICT NEPAL

When I started working on peace building issues, I used to find a lot of resistance from the men, especially those who held high-positions. It was not easy for me to influence their decisions nor convince them of the need to address women's priorities and needs. Being a woman and not from a high-caste did not help me in generating much support from them.

Through the years I learnt that being radical was not enough, I had to also be convincing and technically well-versed with issues about which I was passionate. Hence, learning and strengthening my own capacities to be clear and articulate was an important part of my strategy to be able to leverage greater influence and establish longer term relationships.

Nepal is currently in the initial stages of a transition. After a decade of armed conflict, the footprints of conflict are still visible in the country's infrastructure, in the ongoing but still incomplete reparation and reintegration processes and in the political instability.

However, over the recent years there have been many significant developments for women's rights in Nepal. The voices of women became stronger, as they united under a common agenda for their rights, to influence the formulation of laws, increase the participation of women in state institutions and involve more women in the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and decision-making processes.

Through these efforts, many women became Constitution Assembly members with a quota to include 33% of women to be represented from different ethnic groups and minorities, like Dalits, Muslims, indigenous groups and lesser

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evolved societies. Qualified women are also now placed in the higher posts of the state, like ministers and leaders of constitution drafting sub-groups. Many I/NGOs, and bi-lateral and multi-lateral organizations in Nepal have also developed policies to hire women and fulfill gender balance in their own organizations.

The general awareness about human rights and women rights issues has also seen positive results. Issues of violence against women have gained immense prominence with a Domestic Violence Act being formulated in 2010, and the year 2010 being declared Violence Free Year by the government. Toll free phones were installed to receive and register cases and complaints, and Women Development Officers have been provided with more authority to address these cases.

Even in the area of education, girls enrollment in schools has been prioritized, with quotas being allocated in schools and universities to address the gender gaps. These are very positive developments, recognizing the fact that women's participation and empowerment cannot be enhanced unless an environment conducive for change is fostered.

## PEACE BUILDING GAINS FOR WOMEN

I firmly believe that changes in the legal system during the peace building processes have benefited women greatly. Women's right to own property; women's participation and involvement in decision making, through a 33% quota in political parties and the Constituent Assembly; and, new laws introduced to provide citizenship rights to children, through the mother.

When I was working on land rights via an NGO and working with ex-Kamaiya (freed bonded laborers), I witnessed a real change for women. These communities are part of ethnic groups whose ancestors were indentured to the landlords for

whom they worked. Hence, their only skill was cultivating land, fishing and simple carpentering jobs. When they were freed by their landlords, they had nothing on which to survive.

The government promised to provide them a piece of land, 10,000 rupees and some wood to construct a house. In fact, when they were provided this land, a milestone was realized when the land registration was made in the name of both the husband and the wife, giving more security to women in the community. But even during this process, I can remember several challenges, owing to lack of coordination and understanding among the Land Reform Office, Forestry and Land Measurement Office and other actors providing land registration certificates to ex-Kamaiyas.

While this benefit could not be made available to all the ex-Kamaiyas, it was gratifying to see at least a few thousand families receive land certificates in the names of both the man and woman of the family.

Currently, I work as a Gender Specialist in a UNDP project focusing on access to justice issues. As part of my work, I engage with lawyers and police, especially related to protection against gender-based violence. Through this project, more than 2,000 women have received free legal service in 7 districts. This has also contributed to strengthening the role of the Police in preventing and responding to cases of domestic and gender based violence.

In 2011, I worked on strengthening the interface between women police cells and lawyers to work together to solve GBV cases in the district. With better coordination among actors, the number of incidents is on the decline, and women have begun to have greater trust in the police and other state institutions.

Maintaining law and order is one of the most important aspects of peace building. While making new laws and bringing about positive changes to old laws requires a lengthy process of advocating and lobbying, the critical challenge still lies in the implementation of these legislations.

It has taken over three years in my current work for me to witness a change in the attitude and interest towards implementing laws by different actors. For all laws that hold potential to positively affect women, I plan to see through the implementation of these benefits in the years to come.





**Babita Basnet** is the President of Media Advocacy Group (MAG) a national NGO in Nepal. Ms. Basnet started her career in journalism in 1990 and is widely published on a range of political, social, and gender issues. She is also the author of non-fiction books. In 2006, Ms. Basnet participated as a member of the High Level Media Advisory Commission and Special Task Force Drafting Committee led by the Nepal Government. She is also currently the Secretary of the South Asian Editors Forum and Vice President of the International Press Institute (Nepal Chapter). Previously she was a scholar within the Peace Fellowship Programme, 'Women in Security and Conflict Management' (WISCOMP), New Delhi, and she is the former President of Sancharika Samuha (Forum of Women Journalists and Communicators). Ms. Basnet has received numerous awards for her contributions to Nepal's media industry and women's movement and she is also a trainer on Gender and Women, Peace and Security (WPS) issues. She is the editor of Ghatana Ra Bichar, a national weekly publication.

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# Nepalese Women as Nation Builders

Babita BASNET, *Nepal*

I would like to share with you a short history of Nepalese women's active participation in civic and social causes. This is a history that is traced back to the days of a centralized feudal state expansion campaign in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Serving as warriors in the Battle of Nalapani in Deharadun (at present, in Northern India) in 1815, Nepalese women fought alongside their men folk in a heroic resistance against the British Army who were far better equipped, trained, and outnumbered the Nepalese. Despite their advantages, the British were able to seize Kalanga Fort only after three attempts, while incurring heavy losses.

Similarly, women were mobilized to political effect during the anti-Rana movement by various anti-Rana political parties during 1947-50, culminating in the overthrow of the Rana regime in 1950. Again, in 1990 women actively participated in the democracy movement, which ended 30 years of one-party rule of the autocratic 'Panchayat' monarchy, replacing it with a monarchical parliamentary system.

In all such movements, women were drawn from both the well-known political families, and were mobilized from the rural population.

While historically, women have been considered weak and as caretakers only of the home and family, during periods of social unrest and conflict, women demonstrated they can serve effectively in front-line combatant capacities. When the Maoists included women in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), only then did the Nepal Army institutionalize the recruitment of women into their policies. Presently, 1.75 % of the Nepal Army are women (1,624 out of 92,753).

Traditionally, Nepalese society confined women between the domestic walls but conflict helped to bring women into the mainstream, and made society aware of their valuable contributions. Women were also empowered by conflict, when they were required to attend meetings in the absence of the male members of their families. Society's perspective on women began gradually changing.

## REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP ROLES

Nepalese politics appears promising for women on paper, with the Interim Constitution providing protective policies and a reservation policy for the representation of women in various sectors. The reality is that neither the government nor any political parties have taken significant action to implement this promise.

The Government and the current Constitution do recognize the socioeconomic disadvantages faced by women in Nepal and incorporate specific provisions to provide support to women. In 2006, the Interim Parliament announced 33% of roles in the state's institutions would be allocated to women. But, no such policy has yet been implemented.

Women have participated widely in political movements during times of crisis, but when the crisis is over, they are relegated again to the domestic arena. Today, very few women serve in political parties' central committees. Furthermore, during the peace-making process in Nepal, no women (from the government, or Maoist sides) were included in leadership roles in any of the major agreements toward peace:

- 8 Point Peace Agreement, signed on 16th June 2006;
- 12 Point Peace Agreement, signed on 23 Nov 2005;
- 25 Point Agreement on Cease Fire Code of Conduct, signed on 26 May 2006; and,
- Comprehensive Peace Accord, signed on 26 Nov 2006.

## **WOMEN AS PEACE-MAKERS & NATION BUILDERS**

Even as we work to build a new Nepal, many Nepalese people still share the traditional belief that women should be confined to household chores. They still don't want to recognize the potential of women in peace-making and nation building processes, believing that these issues cannot be addressed by women.

From my experience, I found that women are better peace-makers than men. Rather than looking for everything in absolute black and white terms, women perceive shades of grey where negotiation is possible. Consequently, women perform better not only in preventing and rebuilding after conflict within their home boundaries, but also as partners in national building. But, the reality is that this critical role of women in relation to conflict transformation is hardly recognized.

To support women in advancing their leadership skill in peace and security, I do my best as a trainer and a woman in civil society to provide spaces for women to share their grievances, as well as their achievements. I advise them professionally on alternative approaches to effective peace-making. I also counsel them at a very personal level on leading their day to day lives.

I have always advocated for placing women in policy-making positions so that they can utilize their knowledge and skills to make change for other women. Having women in leadership

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Increasing women's capacity for leadership and creating an environment in which women can thrive as national builders requires national efforts from all stakeholders

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positions also encourages other women to enhance their abilities and rise to higher altitudes in their own lives.

Increasing women's capacity for leadership and creating an environment in which women can thrive as national builders requires national efforts from all stakeholders. Women must be oriented and trained to sustain their involvement in this process and they must be well represented in national peace-making mechanisms. Importantly, I would like to see that all current national policies are made gender sensitive.

To end where I began, Nepalese women have a long history of commitment to civic and social causes. They have fought to protect their country, they have fought for peace, and they have fought for their rights within their country. It is time for all to shoulder the responsibilities of making sure women's capacity for leadership and potential to engage in nation building is fulfilled.







# A Search for Social Justice

Radha PAUDEL, *Nepal*

**Radha Paudel** is the Founder and President of Action Works Nepal (AWON), an NGO that works in the most conflict affected regions of Nepal, with the most vulnerable and often marginalized communities. With 17 years of experience in various organizations – including CARE Nepal, the Centre for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA) Nepal, and the Nepal Safer Motherhood Programme – she is knowledgeable and well-versed on development and peace issues including: gender and women’s human rights; social inclusion; and conflict resolution and peace building. In 2011 Ms. Paudel was awarded the South Asian Network to Address Masculinities (SANAM) Fellowship. Ms. Paudel has an MA Development Management from the Institute of Management, the Philippines.

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Before the civil war in Nepal, I struggled growing up with gender and class discrimination since childhood. And so began my search for social justice.

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I am a survivor of conflict. Before the civil war in Nepal, I struggled growing up with gender and class discrimination since childhood. And so began my search for social justice.

When the Maoist insurgency erupted in Nepal in 1996, I was working as a manager of a health institute. During the conflict (1996-2006), there were parallel governments and everyone had to request a visa to enter and exit in the periphery of the district I was working in. Health institutions were unable to staff their organizations and medicines and stretchers were unavailable.

Despite these problems and threats from both parties in the conflict, I managed to stay in the rural villages, negotiate access to the people and I took lead role in setting up a blood bank and a hospital for surgery in Karnali. Here, I was exposed to many tragedies that marked me deeply.

On one occasion I was caught in a 13 hour cross-fire and was witness to the futile death of many people around me – from combatants to poor women and men, and elderly people. I still remember the 48 bodies of those who were less fortunate than I.

This horrific incident highlighted to me how the conflict affected so many of the most vulnerable people in Nepal. I therefore chose to continue my fight for both social justice and peace.

An active campaigner, I chose to work with civil society organizations and networks that believe in democracy and women’s human rights at local, regional and national levels, seeking to influence national policies and major political parties, and to create a critical mass of activism at the local levels.

For a long time, I had keenly analyzed Nepal’s politics and society, and the changing status of both. Viewing these over time, I finally committed to work for our shared cause, due to a lack of progress in the peace-making and constitution-making processes.

My underlying philosophy is that a gender responsive constitution and gender responsive peace process and its implementation, right down to grassroots level, is the foundation to sustainable peace and development.

## **BARRIERS TO PEACE**

Being a women human rights defender and president of NGO Action Works Nepal (AWON), I play an active role in civil society towards building peace. I have therefore seen that there remain high barriers to implementing an enduring peace for my nation on cultural, political and economic levels. In rural Nepal, peace is largely hindered by cultural beliefs and practices.



At national levels, progress is complicated by misunderstandings, mistrust, disputes, and institutionalized patriarchal practices among major actors and political parties. Discrimination with regards to gender, caste, religion, and class is still prominent even within formal institutions, which are largely captured by the elite.

Accordingly, women who represent the poor, Dalit, disabled, victims of gender based violence, conflict affected and other marginalized groups are hesitant to trust activities led by the state and political parties. Therefore, we organize and mobilize women at the grassroots level across Nepal through more than a dozen organizations with a mission to support democracy, women's human rights, justice, equality, sustainable peace and a new constitution.

Nepal is in a fragile state of political transition and emerging from economic troubles, which distract political leaders from woman-centered policy issues. Policy tools including UNSCR 1325, 1820, and CEDAW used to drive this movement are not widely respected by the political leadership.

Meanwhile, the traditional culture of impunity makes impossible the enforcement, prosecution and punishment of perpetrators who continue to commit discriminatory acts against women. Women and girls remain unsafe at home, in public vehicles, their workplaces, in educational institutions – everywhere.

I point to an example as recent as August 2011, when women Master's degree candidates were openly sexually harassed during examination by the invigilator. Opposing this injustice, I took a leadership role in a public campaign on behalf of these women.

As an activist for women's rights in this environment, even I continue to suffer physical and verbal abuse in Nepal's most modern urban environments. Moreover, I have received death threats for my campaigning work.

So, imagine the environment of rural Nepal where women and girls suffer lives of tragedy in environments characterized by 9.3% literacy rates, 37-42 year life expectancies, near zero participation in civil society by women, and pervasive, repressive cultural taboos.

Women face multiple problems in society and are additionally burdened by their family roles and responsibilities. Initially, women are very committed to join the campaigns I have coordinated, yet later they are unable to sustain their participation because of objections from family members, household obligations and lack of personal funds. Gradually, campaigns taper off and end without any meaningful progress because very few women are at work actively campaigning.

On top of this, Nepal's patriarchal and hierarchical society, political instability, culture of impunity, caste and class inequalities and continuously changing coalition dynamics

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and divisions within parties themselves are additional challenging factors hindering and preventing progress in peace building for women.

Nonetheless, I am not deterred. I am determined. The peace is achievable and possible but requires a holistic approach at multiple levels with rural responsive implementation. In the meantime, I will continue this search for social justice and sustainable peace that is truly experienced by the women of Nepal.





# Widows' Rights in the New Nepal

Lily THAPA , *Nepal*

**Lily Thapa** is the Founder and President of Women for Human Rights (WHR), a Nepal based NGO that works for the rights of widows and single women affected by conflict in 73 districts across the country. Ms. Thapa is also a Lecturer at Tribhuvan University, she is the General Secretary of South Asian Network of Widows' Empowerment in Development (SANWED) and Vice President of Sankalp, a network of women's alliances for peace. She has received many national and international awards for her contribution towards women's empowerment. Ms. Thapa's qualifications include a Master of Sociology and Anthropology from Tribhuvan University, Nepal, a Post-Graduate Diploma in Women and Management from Luleo University, Sweden, and she is presently studying a PhD at Tribhuvan University focusing on conflict widows of Nepal.

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After my husband's death, I found myself a victim of the 'social death' to which many bereaved women are subjected in regions of South and Southeast Asia. I faced numerous challenges and threats, being a widow in my community.

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I was a young mother when my husband was killed while serving as a UN peacekeeper in the 1991 Gulf War. After my husband's death, I found myself a victim of the 'social death' to which many bereaved women are subjected in regions of South and Southeast Asia. I faced numerous challenges and threats, being a widow in my community. I committed myself to change the status of women, and especially widows, whose fates I share and understand quite well.

At present, I lead an organization named Women for Human Rights (WHR), comprising 80,000 young widows, conflict victims and victims of sexual and gender-based violence. These are the people who motivate me to work for peace and women's rights and the representation of women at all decision-making levels. I do this by influencing policy makers and the Constituent Assembly (CA) members.

At the core of my work, I am focused on a critical problem: women's inability to influence their situations, which results in part from the fact that many have no sense of identity or relevance outside of being someone's wife, mother, or daughter. I am a catalyst seeking to break the bonds that limit women to the 'home-ridden state'. I recognize this as a human rights issue: women's rights are human rights.

My organization works with women's groups in many communities, who then work with local level political leaders, as well as the national level policy makers. These women's organizations have played a central role in promoting awareness of gender equality, and transforming what was earlier regarded as women's private concerns into a wider public discourse in Nepal. Since the Peace Accord in 2006, this broad women's network has been successfully giving support to larger communities, advocating against injustice and impunity and for peace and security.

The key goal of women's organizations was to represent women in the political decision-making body throughout the post-conflict period in Nepal. Through this wide network, we organized many demonstrations all over the country, demanding women's representation in the peace process, handing over petitions to the government, and organizing signature campaigns for peace.

Many civil society organizations were made aware of the constitution building processes through the network's training programs. We are currently also lobbying political leaders to provide greater space for meaningful participation in the peace process by women, from the local grass roots level up to the policy decision-making level. In the women's alliances for peace we formed, I similarly play a role in influencing policy to incorporate women's issues.

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Personally, I take particular interest in mobilizing widows groups to act as agents for peace in their respective villages. We are now giving training to hundreds of women, especially conflict victims, on UNSCR 1325 and 1820. I am also engaged with women's alliances to advocate for the implementation of provisions within Nepal's National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCR 1325 & 1820 at national and local levels.

### **A POWERFUL NETWORK OF COLLECTIVE VOICES**

From my experience, I have learned that to be empowered, women firstly need to be made aware of their roles and capabilities for peace building, and then to be capacitated to mobilize women in their own communities.

Until and unless women in the many women's groups are organized into a larger network with a voice that is far greater than any one group alone, change will be difficult. This is why we focus on organizing women's groups into a broader network, in which their combined influence cannot be easily ignored. Together, they can demand attention and inspire others to advance the rights of widows and women.

Being widowed myself, I am personally committed to changing the lives of widows as we work to build a new Nepal.





# Promoting Non-violence in Post-conflict Nepal

Ambika POKHREL, *Nepal*

**Ambika Pokhrel** is a Programme Officer for the National Peace Campaign (NPC), a Nepal based NGO that works to promote conflict transformation and peace building. Ms. Pokhrel also works as a local correspondent for Peace Direct, a London-based organization with a focus on supporting grassroots people in building peace. Previously she worked as a trainer on conflict resolution and peace building, providing trainings to members of civil society and district level political leaders. She is the co-author of training manuals on conflict resolution, peace building, and reconciliation, and has over ten years of experience working in the field of conflict transformation. Ms. Pokhrel's qualifications include an MA in Peace and Development Studies from the University of Jaume Premier, Spain, and an MBA from Tribhuvan University, Nepal.

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My experience working within civil society and with conflict victims, particularly women, has highlighted the inordinate impacts of war experienced by women throughout the conflict, and in its aftermath.

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Women need to be present and their voices heard during peace negotiation. While it is widely recognized that women experience conflict differently to men, women's needs are often not addressed in peace negotiations. To address the different impacts of conflict, women's involvement in negotiations and conflict resolution is essential, not only because women feel the gravity of impacts, but in order to influence ongoing decision-making processes.

Throughout peace building processes, which are regularly punctuated with spikes in political tensions, conflict resolution and mediation strategies should continue to harness the voices of women at national and grassroots levels. This applies to Nepal and all other conflict affected societies moving down the path towards peace.

## PROMOTING NON-VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS

My experience working within civil society and with conflict victims, particularly women, has highlighted the inordinate impacts of war experienced by women throughout the conflict, and in its aftermath.

My involvement in Nepal's peace process started when I was campaigning for a peaceful resolution of the conflict through dialogue and negotiation. The campaign was launched by establishing the National Peace Campaign (NPC), and via this organization I have advocated for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Some of the activities I have carried out include developing the capacities of civil society stakeholders and political leaders on: conflict analysis; dialogue; facilitation; mediation and negotiations.

I have also been working to create awareness and develop skills around movements that promote non-violence. Though Nepal's peace process has been stalled and faced many setbacks, I have been working continuously to promote methods and skills for peaceful conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction since 2003.

This has involved organizing small group dialogues and problem solving workshops on the contentious issues of the peace process with concerned stakeholders from civil society, young politicians, and regional and district level political leaders. The strategies aim to influence key persons who have been directly involved in negotiations and generate voices for a logical ending of impasses so to achieve milestones within the Peace Accord. Such efforts regularly target women to create broader awareness and strengthened capacities on conflict-resolution and post-conflict reconstruction.

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## TAKING INSPIRATION FROM SOUTH AFRICA

A source of encouragement for me to carry out this type of work is the South African process towards ending the discriminatory apartheid system. I was inspired knowing that the large number of South Africans trained in the concepts, methods and skills of peaceful conflict resolution and negotiations was a crucial advantage to the country's successful peace process.

I realized the promotion of this school of thought and these skills were also needed in Nepal during the peace period. For me personally, I have also always taken inspiration from Nelson Mandela, a champion of peaceful negotiations and a beacon of hope for many of us striving for peace.





# The Sole Woman at the Negotiation Table

Shadia MARHABAN, *Indonesia*

**Shadia Marhaban** is a co-founder and President of the Aceh Women's League (LINA), the only female member of the peace talks between the Free Aceh Movement and the Government of Indonesia in Helsinki (2005) that has ended their 30 years of war, and a co-founder and member of the Board of Directors of the Aceh-School for Peace and Democracy. As president of LINA since its inception, Ms Marhaban has been active in promoting women's involvement in peace negotiations and post-conflict peace building and reconstruction. Through her organization she carries out trainings for 1400 former female combatants as well as other vulnerable members of the community. Currently she is a fellow at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University.

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we need to reposition our own argument from being about women's rights to it being about participation, and that only an inclusive process can be the bedrock to lasting peace.

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In 2004, the Leadership of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) asked me to join its peace negotiations with the Indonesian Government in Helsinki, mediated by former President of Finland Martti Ahtisaari. I was invited to take this role because of my loyalty to the struggle, and my existing leadership roles as a member of the Presidium of the Aceh Central Referendum Information Centre, SIRA, a broad-based movement consisting of 160 NGOs promoting a peaceful solution to the Aceh conflict through referendum.

In sharp contrast with previous peace talks by the Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) Centre, which involved meetings by proxy at the ambassadorial level, the Crisis Management Initiative headed by President Ahtisaari of Finland facilitated a mix of negotiation models including top level, small teams, and direct face-to-face negotiations.

The negotiating teams were limited to five persons on each side, assisted by support groups. The support teams were vastly imbalanced; six Ministries and two Embassies in Europe supported the Indonesian side, while we had only four inexperienced persons, including myself. As large as it was, the Indonesian Government side included no women, except for the Indonesian Ambassador to Finland, who left for Jakarta at the very start of the talks.

The negotiation process was scheduled on a strict timetable to be conducted between January and August 2005. Being on a very small team, I was required to participate in every internal discussion concerning strategy and all decision-making processes.

The pressures on our team were compounded by the massive earthquakes and tsunami that wrecked our communities back home. International tsunami assistance needed to proceed without hindrance by the conflict and fear of safety for relief workers.

With the Indonesian Government already categorically rejecting our offer of a ceasefire, the process ended up focusing on very general points of an agreement, without delving into significant details that factored in issues of women, religion, or voices of civil society.

Throughout the process, at times I felt very alone working within the male dominated leadership of GAM. Yet, to their credit, everyone treated me with equal rights and respect.

## WOMEN'S ACHIEVEMENTS THROUGH THE AGREEMENT

Looking back now, with a clear vision of the opportunity that was entrusted to me as a woman, I cannot help but feel some guilt for not being assertive enough to insist that women's issues be dealt with separately in the final agreement. I am disappointed that the players of the international community, who were well aware of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325), chose to neglect the issues of women, peace and security altogether instead of insisting that the Resolution be adhered to by all parties engagement in negotiations.



In order to secure signatures to an agreement, reputable international organizations, the European Union (EU) – as the guarantor of the Helsinki MoU – and even the UN itself opted to side-line women's issues within the process. Only later and outside of the negotiations process did I learn about the existence of UN SCR 1325 when I started dealing with female ex-combatants.

Today, six years after the end of the conflict, the Helsinki MoU is considered one of the most successful peace processes in the world. While it helped President Ahtisaari obtain the most prestigious recognition for his peace efforts, by winning the Nobel Peace Prize (2008), many women in Aceh still remain very much overlooked. For several women, their ability to access and exercise their basic rights has worsened since the conflict, when even the male fighters depended on them for survival.

To gain and strengthen their own power, Acehnese politicians now use the Sharia Law that was introduced by the Central Government during the conflict to weaken the independence movement. During the negotiations, GAM negotiators rejected this law as it considered it unnecessary for achieving a sustainable peace; instead, we agreed that freedom of religion to be one of the 6 authorities remaining in the purview of the Central Government.

## **UN SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION 1325 – THE INDONESIAN CONTEXT**

Whilst Indonesian women have played an extensive role in managing conflict at the community level in a variety of ways, their presence in conflict resolution decision-making at higher political levels is virtually absent.

Nonetheless, there have been some gains in this area, within the national policy landscape. Since 2007, the Indonesian State Ministry for Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (KNPP&PA) has undertaken a process of drafting a National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCR 1325.

UNSCR 1325 explicitly calls for the involvement of women in all stages of peace processes. In Indonesia, there is no significant application of the resolution to policymaking on women, peace and security issues by the government. So far, the UNSCR 1325 agenda in Indonesia is largely centred on workshops and seminars organised by non-government entities resulting in little, or no impact on women's meaningful participation in actual peace, or conflict processes.

At this point in time, the NAP has been delayed due to a lack of cross-government support. The Ministry of Politics, Justice and Security and the Defence and Foreign Affairs agencies have yet to endorse the NAP, and acknowledge the need for such a plan to be situated in the context of violent conflict.

Considerable work is required to sensitise officials in these various agencies about international norms and standards on gender equality in general, and women, peace and security specifically. This is a timely issue, as the mandate to implement this agenda is still debated between the Interior Ministry and the Ministry of Law and Politics.

To advance the NAP, the scope for engagement of civil society, from grassroots to the national level, needs to be broadened. Only then can the process progress and the women, girls and the wider community eventually enjoy the dividends of UNSCR 1325.

## **WOMEN AND PEACE, NOT WOMEN OR PEACE**

The current and unfortunate reality in the world of peace mediation is that there is still an arrogant reluctance to engage women because of the stereotyped belief, even amongst well-established international organizations and high-profile individuals that engaging women will slow down, or even potentially derail the peace process. The false rationale used to defend such an opinion is to question which is more important- achieving peace or women's inclusion in the peace process; as if there is only a choice of one, or the other.

In all areas of the peace process – cessation of hostilities, sustainability and credibility of peace on the ground, security and violence reduction, power-sharing, justice and truth-seeking processes, redressing impacts of violence – the participation of women is vital for ensuring that any agreement includes the views and priorities of what makes up more than half of the population.

Therein lays another challenge for women; to prove that excluding women excludes the possibility of creating sustainable peace. To this end, with regards to the contentious dogma, "to engage, or not to engage", we need to reposition our own argument from being about women's rights to it being about participation, and that only an inclusive process can be the bedrock to lasting peace.

To date, there has been no peace process where gender parity or anything approximating it has occurred. And until women remain peripheral, all integral decision-making will not reflect the true needs of all people required to foster and maintain an environment for peace.

It is time for the international community and governments that espouse the tenets of UN SCR 1325 to show leadership and walk the talk. Over a decade has passed since this watershed resolution; time can no longer be wasted.





# Women's Protection and Participation in Indonesia

Adriana Venny ARYANI, *Indonesia*

**Adriana Venny Aryani** is a Coordinator for the Anti-Gender-Based Violence Coalition (Koalisi GBV), a network of 40 NGOs committed to advocating for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Indonesia. She is also an Advisory Board member for the Women's Participation Institute, an NGO which works to increase women's participation in public spheres and gender equality in public policy. As an independent researcher, Ms. Aryani has focused on cases of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in conflict affected areas and the absence of women in peace negotiations. In 2011 she was awarded a Doctorate of Cultural Science from the University of Indonesia.

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I bring light to what has happened to women in conflict areas and how these issues should be dealt with to the parliament, government, military headquarters, and police headquarters.

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From carrying out research on gender-based violence (GBV) in conflict affected areas of Indonesia, I have found many instances in which women victims are blamed for distressing ill-treatment that they have endured. Most noticeably this occurs in dealing with cases of sexual exploitation committed by security forces.

I borrow the words of the Mayor of Ambon in responding to the incident of 150 cases of unwanted pregnancy during military operations: "If it is consensual, why ask the government to solve the problem?"

Many victims of GBV are re-victimized by injustice. The majority of cases are not processed within the courts and impunity is often the way of dealing with the perpetrators of GBV in Indonesia. Such injustices are a reason why I am committed to do the best I can for women in my country.

Friends in the areas impacted by conflict require a coordinator who can bridge what they have done in local areas and the issues faced by women to the national level. My work therefore involves connecting their experiences and raising their voices to decision makers.

As an activist, I make sure authorities have not just heard our calls, but that they have been listened too. I bring light to what has happened to women in conflict areas and how these issues should be dealt with to the parliament, government, military headquarters, and police headquarters.

Much of my work has focused on advocating for policies that protect women from GBV and encourage their participation in building sustainable peace.

## UNSCR 1325 & PROTECTION

In the era giving rise to the reformation, conflicts in Indonesia erupted in the period 1998 - 2000, occurring in Poso (1998-2001), Ambon (1999 and 2011), Papua (1998, 2011 and recently), and ex-East Timor (1999). Aceh suffered conflict since 1976, escalating and eventually being declared a military operational zone in 1990, which did not officially end until the signing the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2005.

Not only did the issue of women's vulnerability in Indonesian conflict zones rise to international attention, but the issue was identified as a key concern in a number of other countries suffering conflicts. Consequently, in late 2000 the UN Security Council approved Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) emphasizing women's protection in conflict areas and their roles in peace processes.

As a UN Member State, Indonesia agreed to UNSCR 1325, but has not yet implemented it. Since 2006, there has been only small progress towards implementing legislation offering the provisions agreed to in UNSCR 1325.

The UN and its agencies, including UNFPA, have since begun encouraging progress towards legislation in Indonesia based on the resolution.

Without the protections outlined in UNSCR 1325, widespread Gender-based Violence (GBV) violations continue to be perpetrated.

Creation of the anti-Gender-based Violence Coalition (GBV Coalition), representing approximately 40 organizations, was as a direct response to the failure by the government to implement this legislation. Several other groups formed alliances, such as the Alliance for UNSCR 1325 in Aceh.

These groups are working strenuously to implement national legislation that fulfills the promise of UNSCR 1325 via National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security, which in Indonesia is named; NAP on Women's Protection, Prevention and Empowerment in Conflict Areas (RAN P4DK).

## WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

In Indonesia, most peace processes do not include women. In the creation of the Malino II Agreement in 2001, women were excluded because the situation was still considered precarious. The 2005 agreement negotiated in Helsinki excluded the issue of GBV because it was viewed as a possible 'stumbling block' to peace. The first and second Malino agreements also failed to produce these types of provisions in large because women's roles and gender issues were not significant in these negotiations processes.

We have a long way to go and in the future I hope to carry out activity to encourage an inclusive and meaningful peace negotiations in Papua and in other parts of the country. As activists, it is important that we target the decision-making processes if we want to influence the decisions being made on behalf of the women in this country. It is important for us to consider not just how many women are included, but how meaningful their engagement really is.

Recently, we have had a victory in term of women's participation with the Law on Social Conflict Management that was passed last April [2012]. Women's groups celebrated our victory of a 30 percent target for women's participation in the task force, which is made up of government and members of society and mobilized when conflict occurs in a particular region. This objective will support our future engagement in conflict prevention and peace processes.

At the end of last year, Indonesia was expected to launch the NAP, but the process is stalled due to lack of cross-institutional coordination and commitment. The draft NAP includes important elements recognizing women as agents of peace and seeks to:

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It is important for us to consider not just how many women are included, but how meaningful their engagement really is.

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- Increase the participation of women in conflict handling;
- Formulate policy, planning and gender-responsive budgeting to effectively support women's rights advocacy in conflict areas;
- Integrate gender issues into the development policies, programs and activities in all sectors of development;
- Issue government regulations on protecting victims of GBV; and,
- Issue regulations facilitating women's participation as agents of peace.

The implementation of the NAP is expected to become an umbrella for additional bills and regulation relating to the protection, empowerment and participation of women, such as:

Government regulation as mandate from the law on social conflict management;

- Bill of gender equality;
- Bill on livelihood for widows and their children;
- Bill on sexual violence; and,
- Bill on security sector reforms.

## GIVING HOPE TO VICTIMS OF GBV

At the heart of the RAN P4DK is a commitment to justice and hope to the victims of GBV. Women across the country would also have a framework under which they contribute effectively to conflict prevention, resolution and recovery, unleashing the potential of women as agents of peace and to eliminate Indonesia's culture of violence. This mechanism holds potential to make peace a reality for all, not just a distant dream.





# Improving Women's Economic Recovery

Khairul HASNI, *Indonesia*

**Khairul Hasni** is the Executive Director of JARI Aceh, an NGO that works to empower widows and women affected by conflict and the tsunami in Northern Aceh. She has more than 13 years of experience working in women's empowerment and peace building, and previously participated in the implementation of the peace agreement in Aceh by joining the Henry Dunant Center (HDC) from civil society, involved in the security monitoring team in North Aceh. She also worked for the National Human Rights Commission (KOMNAS Ham) and since the Memorandum of Understanding came into fruition in Aceh, Ms. Hasni has worked with women's groups to develop national UNSCR 1325 initiatives. She holds a MA in International Relations from Ritsumeikan University, Japan.

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I have seen that when women have greater economic independence and lives outside of the home, they can create changes that strengthen women's positions in their own communities.

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After finishing university, I worked as an NGO volunteer in Aceh. In this role, I witnessed immense suffering and many human rights violations of women as my work commenced whilst the conflict in Aceh was still active.

Strange as it seems, before the age of 17, I never knew of the dreadful human rights crimes perpetrated in Aceh. But after witnessing the real situation, I was determined to fight for women's rights and for peace. To this end, I wanted to create social programs and help poor women's economic plight.

In the year 2000, I started encouraging several friends and colleagues in the NGO community to focus their work more on women's issues and priorities, and to advocate for women's equality and the enforcement of their rights in their communities.

I also co-founded Jari Aceh, a Women's Support NGO, that works to advance women's human rights, education, economic development and promote gender equality to groups that we have now been coaching for almost 11 years.

Nonetheless, after over a decade of working in this context, it is still apparent to me that the quality of women's lives in Aceh remains poor. Unfortunately, for the women of Aceh, the post-conflict period has not been a significant window of opportunity for us to 'build back better'.

The most urgent remedy should be improving women's education and economic stability. At Jari Aceh we feel that women's economic empowerment is critical for us in order to achieve increased participation in recovery and equality. I have seen that when women have greater economic independence and lives outside of the home, they can create changes that strengthen women's positions in their own communities.

To develop stable economic foundations at the grassroots level, we provide funds in rural villages and support for women's economic development. My organization also reaches out to women's groups to encourage engagement with their local governments in cooperative programs so the lives of the Acehnese people can be improved.

## ADVANCING EQUALITY

Alternative methods of education for women have shown very good results for allowing them to benefit from economic development initiatives at the grassroots level. The relationship between improved economic status and higher education is also apparent within these interventions.

In terms of women's empowerment, some of our work has involved collaborations with high schools on issues such as psychological violence, physical violence and sexual violence. Soon we will hopefully start engaging students around UNSCR 1325 in the near future. Support is also provided to conflict affected children in the form of scholarships.

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With a growing recognition that women have more difficulty in accessing justice, organizations have also become active in advocating for and providing direct support to women in need of justice.

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We have also worked with universities to campaign for justice for victims of serious human rights violations that occurred in Aceh during the conflict. Women's organizations in Indonesia and Aceh are very active in the promotion and protection of human rights, particularly in monitoring, advocacy, public awareness and education.

With a growing recognition that women have more difficulty in accessing justice, organizations have also become active in advocating for and providing direct support to women in need of justice. Women are increasingly mobilized to raise awareness about the bias against women by traditional institutions, since many are based on patriarchal powers which can issue justice in an arbitrary and unfair fashion.

During our recovery, provisions to encourage women's political participation and give them a greater voice in creating policies at the local, regional and national levels have not happened.

Women therefore need to play a larger role in demanding accountability and transparency in various areas of governance. While it is very important in local government, efforts are also needed at the national level, in creating greater partnerships with women's organizations.

Sacrifices made by women are immense, but policies and regulations continue to discriminate against them. Women in Aceh are still left behind and do not fully participate in society at all levels. Seeing the suffering and unfairness of this situation inspires me to fight for women, especially for the progress of women at the grassroots, within small villages and communities, and to champion women's economic, social, political and legal equality in Aceh.







# A Peaceful Fight for Women's Rights

Maria Damairia PAKPAHAN, *Indonesia*

**Maria Damairia Pakpahan** is a Gender and Planning Monitoring and Evaluation Consultant working for Circle Indonesia (Cooperative for Civil Society Resources Development) since 2007. Previously she worked for Oxfam GB as a Gender Officer and has also worked as an adviser on USAID projects. In 1998, Ms. Pakpahan co-founded the Indonesia Women Coalition for Justice and Democracy, which today boasts a membership base of 29,000 people from all over Indonesia. Since 2009 she has held the position of National Presidium (legislator) in this organization, a role she will remain in until 2014. Ms. Pakpahan trained as an anthropologist at Gadjah Mada University, Indonesia, and previously studied Political Science at Monash University, Australia. She has been published on a wide range of gender topics and has similarly facilitated various trainings programmes on gender and women's issues.

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A lot has changed over the years, but a lot more needs to be done, both to promote leadership capacities and to create a culture open to women's representation in decision-making roles at national and local levels.

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As a young student activist during Suharto's regime, I became involved in advocating for addressing human rights abuses, from Aceh, East Timor and West Papua, and even Myanmar and Palestine.

In 1992, my sister, who was then living abroad in exile, asked me to interview the leaders of Gerwani (Gerakan Wanita Indonesia Women's Movement), a major women's rights organization, for her thesis. Through these interviews I gradually developed a relationship with key Gerwani members and joined their numbers.

With these women and the movement they collectively catalyzed, I shared the same sense of motivation and vision for women in our country. Indeed, one of my role models, Ibu ("mother") Surastrī Karma Trimurti, was a founder of Gerwani.

Ibu Surastrī was a remarkable woman who endured imprisonment during the Japanese occupation of WWII, attended the Proclamation of Indonesian Independence in August 17, 1945 as one of our nation's founders, and later served as Indonesia's first woman minister, appointed as the Labor Minister in 1945.

She was a strong and principled woman, unafraid to confront even the Indonesian President Sukarno. I still remember her bravery when she publicly criticized his polygamous marriages. In another highly bold action for a woman in the 1960's, Trimurti divorced her husband who wanted to take a second wife.

She valued education and always placed a great deal of importance on learning throughout her life. Trimurti had a spiritual depth she displayed through her simple and humble lifestyle, living in the same small rented home for most of her adult life. She fought for our nation until her last days, until she died at the age of 96.

It is important that we remember these national treasures and the legacy of great women who have fought for us before our time. Trimurti inspired so many and achieved so much for women in her life's work.

Even today, amid the many frustrations and struggles of working on this agenda for peace and equality, I find solace and inspiration in my role models. It provides me the much needed strength to remain positive.

## WOMEN FRIENDLY LEGISLATION

When Suharto resigned as the President, I became actively involved with student activists in creating a new Parliament, and subsequently campaigned to bring public attention to many fundamental rights abuses that plagued his administration.



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The fight for women's rights and empowerment is not just a struggle in the public domain. Women's empowerment within the space of the home is central to achieving peace that is equitably experienced by all.

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I also became involved in campaigning for legislation to support women, which I continue to do, today. For several years I have been a member of the Indonesia Women Coalition for Justice and Democracy (KPI KD), where I work to advocate for and support the creation of national laws which are pro-gender equality and women-friendly. We also work with the National Anti-Violence Against Women Commission to solve equality issues created by Sharia laws that continues to be used in local regulations.

I am always humbled when I reflect on the diverse membership that I have the responsibility to speak on behalf of which includes; women from rural or urban areas, professional women, domestic workers, migrant workers, sex-workers, or housewives. I feel very proud to have this responsibility bestowed upon me.

Through my work over the years, I have begun to realize that the change we are seeking will come when women are empowered and when they take up new leadership roles in my country. A lot has changed over the years, but a lot more needs to be done, both to promote leadership capacities and to create a culture open to women's representation in decision-making roles at national and local levels.

## EMPOWERMENT FOR PEACE IN HOMES

The fight for women's rights and empowerment is not just a struggle in the public domain. Women's empowerment within the space of the home is central to achieving peace that is equitably experienced by all.

In 1988, we were a small number of student activists who organized a direct action in the court in Salatiga, Central Java on behalf of a woman who murdered her husband following over 10 years of abuse. This very unfortunate incident exposed the suffering of a woman in a trauma-filled marriage and how these violent years of abuse affected her later actions. As activists, we felt it was important to underscore the role domestic violence had played in this case.

We distributed pink heart-shaped brooches and raised awareness in the community about domestic violence. At that time, I travelled for 3 hours by bus to Salatiga from Yogyakarta to prepare public demonstrations. I remember knowing very little about organizing demonstrations. We talked with the media and stirred up a public discourse about women's issues and domestic violence in our campaigning.

Through this experience, I learned about the ugliness of domestic violence. Our effort here became the first direct action against domestic violence, and I realized that more people, both men and women, need to be mobilized to pay serious attention to these issues.

It really made me wonder, how we can talk about peace and empowerment, while violence continues to be rampant within the home? We must address women's issues both in the public and private domains if we truly want to create peace in our communities.





# Reporting for the War Affected

Sulochana PERIS, *Sri Lanka*

**Sulochana Peiris** has over 17 years of experience in media and peace building communications in Sri Lanka. Ms. Peiris started her career in journalism (both print and TV) and later moved to work with peace building and humanitarian NGOs. Her thematic areas of expertise include conflict transformation, peace building, and humanitarian and human rights issues. From writing publications to producing video documentaries, and capacity building or training media personnel, Ms. Peiris works to both unpack these issues and promote capacities around these thematic areas through a variety of mediums. Ms. Peiris is currently completing the final year of her MA in Conflict and Peace studies at the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka. Within the Master's programme she is carrying out research for a dissertation on social media and contemporary social movements.

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My regular travel to war-affected areas were reliable channels through which to learn how different communities are affected by war and violence, their coping strategies, levels of resistance and personal experiences.

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As someone who has grown up under violent conflicts in both the North and the South of Sri Lanka, and seen continuous deterioration of the relations between the Sinhalese and the Tamil communities, degradation of democratic governance, human rights and moral conduct and responsibilities, today I want nothing more than sustained peace and ethnic and national reconciliation in my country.

Even as many peers, colleagues, friends and relatives left our country in despair, I never gave up my hope for a reconciled nation. I remain hopeful and continue working towards a creating a greater understanding of the impacts of war and violence on the different communities.

## EXPOSURE TO THE IMPACTS OF CONFLICT

In my early career, I worked with a television production house called Young Asia Television (YATV), which at the time was fully funded by donors in support of its dedication for the promotion of environmental and social justice, human rights and peace building in society. To this end, the production house made high quality and informative television programs for diverse audiences.

In this role I developed my journalistic skills as the supervising producer for two programmes (Sinhala and Tamil versions) dealing with conflict related issues, whilst trying to promote ethnic reconciliation and conflict resolution in its subtext. Through innumerable reporting assignments in war-affected areas I was exposed to the effects and horrors of war and violence on the civilian populations.

This was indeed a life-transforming experience which stimulated and inspired me to utilize my journalistic skills to raise awareness about conflict-affected communities and work towards peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka. Instead of reporting on the events, I began a journey to affect events.

What I have collected through my range of professional experiences – in journalism and peace building - is a deep contextual understanding about how Sri Lanka's violent conflict has left its indelible and enduring imprints on the many different local communities and the nation as a whole. Using this knowledge to prevent conflicts, my reporting experience has been particularly helpful in preparing objective early warning reports in volatile areas, where early response actions have evidently prevented everyday disputes between individuals developing along ethnic lines.

In all of the assignments I have worked on I report in great detail on the need for improvements in living conditions, as well as security and protection for affected women, highlighting the plight of women and reporting on rights abuses of displaced women in camp environments.

## WOMEN'S ISSUES IN THE PEACE PROCESS

As in other war situations, in Sri Lanka too, women bore the brunt of effects that stemmed from the country's bloody 30-year civil war. Even after the end of the war, women from the North and East of the country continue to face critical challenges and dangers, including rights violations, which not only negatively impact on their own healing process but also make inter-ethnic reconciliation even more difficult.

Notwithstanding their roles in the war, neither the government nor the LTTE made genuine efforts to push ideas, perspectives and aspirations of women to the top of the peace agenda. They were kept detached from nearly all past efforts of peace negotiation and conflict resolution.

Politically, women's issues were not placed at the centre of the official political decision making process. Most decisions that concerned women and children were made by male political representatives. Women were mere bystanders. There was no system in place to include women's ideas and perspectives at the grassroots level into the strategic decision making process.

At the civil society level, numerous initiatives attempted to raise awareness of the critical role that women could play in the ongoing peace process. As a result, during the final peace talks held between the government and the LTTE after the signing of a ceasefire agreement in February 2002, a sub-committee was appointed to look into women's concerns and issues on an ongoing basis.

As negotiations came to a halt in April 2003, with the withdrawal of LTTE from the negotiation table, nothing of significance could be derived from the addition of a special sub-committee for women. At this point in time, there seemed to be a lack of understanding and appreciation among the general public about the specific ways in which women were affected by war and violence.

## MY COUNTRY TODAY

Sri Lanka is yet to experience a post-conflict situation. If I were to elaborate the mood of the country today, there is an emphatic push for a 'peace through economic development' strategy. People often question peace NGO employees, asking why they continue their work now that the war is over. Instead of becoming easier, the overall mood of the country has become even less conducive for peace building work and allows little space for a discussion to take place about inter-ethnic reconciliation involving different ethno-political groups.

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My regular travel to war-affected areas were reliable channels through which to learn how different communities are affected by war and violence, their coping strategies, levels of resistance and personal experiences. The resilience of such people in war-torn areas is my main source of motivation. After experiencing untold horrors and being exposed to such atrocities, those who have been able to recover – albeit some better than others – and move on is deeply inspiring.

In my work I have met people who have been displaced, up to two dozen times, and faced challenges that others would have thought impossible to overcome. But, they are still able to dream about a better future, for their children if not for themselves.





# The Key to Empowerment

Inoka PRIYADARSHANI, *Sri Lanka*

**Inoka Priyadarshani** is a Team Member of ASKE (Attitude Skills Knowledge to Empower), a Sri Lanka based training organization working towards empowering communities. Previously she worked as the Project Coordinator of the Development & Peace Sri Lanka Project (DPSL) implemented by Swisscontact, Sri Lanka. She has experience designing and implementing training and activities aimed at youth, women, and community empowerment. She co-authored the publication *Engendering Abilities: Context and Needs Assessment of Women in Leadership and Decision-making in the Ampara District*, and she is also the author of two books. Ms. Priyadarshani holds a Post-graduate Diploma in Conflict Resolution & Peace Preparedness from the University of Bradford, UK, and an MA in Social Research Skills from the University of Ulster, UK.

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Within all communities the engagement of men is equally important so gender constructs can be re-evaluated together.

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Ampara District, situated in the East of Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious district deliberately crafted by the government's ethnic engineering projects. It was affected by the conflict which polarized communities on ethnic lines, creating segregated supporting infrastructure, such as schools, hospitals and administrative and governance bodies.

I have worked in this district for over 6 years now and know the context well. I am confident that I understand the experience of being a woman in Ampara, having seen the impacts of both the conflict and entrenched patriarchal norms in my work towards building peace in this district.

## CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN AMPARA

Traditional patriarchal system still influence the roles women play at home and in the community. Hence, there are challenges in the four spaces women occupy: within the home; productive space; community space; and, the community political space. The inability of women to negotiate childcare and domestic responsibilities, lack of alternative childcare support, and development interventions that do not focus on creating an enabling environment where empowered women can thrive, are some of the challenges women face in Ampara.

Significant reproductive pressures on women also limit the roles they can play to the space of the home. Though lack of education is often cited as the barrier preventing women's progression, positions within various organizations are not always occupied by men with higher qualifications.

While the end of protracted civil war and recovery from the tsunami created job opportunities for women, the public presence of women was not well-accepted. This resulted in name calling and threats. Sexual abuse at work, transportation difficulties, under-estimation of women's capabilities and resistance against women leaders are allied sources of de-motivation.

Women's participation as leaders and decision makers in the community is also curtailed by the cultural and religious norms that shape the role and place of women in society. In constituency based politics, which is seen as the pinnacle of power, the socio-cultural challenges are heightened and women are obstructed from entering the political arena by the violent political culture, the lack of support from the parties, and their perceived lack of capacity.

Not surprisingly, Ampara District has been identified by as having relatively low women's participation at local governance level decision making. Women representation in local government with the percentage of women members in Municipal Councils, Urban Councils and Pradeshiya Sabhas (the lowest local government body) were 3 percent, 3.4 percent and 1.6 percent respectively in 2006<sup>1</sup>.

1) Dept of Census and Statistics (2008) MDG Indicators of Sri Lanka, Available at: <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/MDG/Mid-term.pdf>

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To undergo transformation and achieve empowerment, women firstly need awareness of oppressive systems and then the knowledge and skills to change such systems while creating support mechanisms around them to face these challenges.

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## UNDERGOING TRANSFORMATION

I was initially involved in peace building work as a researcher and a trainer. From working on women's capacity-building for decision-making roles or conducting training on non-violent conflict-resolution, much of this work is focused on empowering individuals to contribute towards sustainable peace in their communities.

I believe empowerment at an individual level requires the internal transformation of the individual, which then leads to personal empowerment. Yet, changing a person alone will not achieve empowerment. Creating an enabling environment where the changed individual can undergo transformation and grow is also necessary. This applies equally to men and women.

To undergo transformation and achieve empowerment, women firstly need awareness of oppressive systems and then the knowledge and skills to change such systems while creating support mechanisms around them to face these challenges. Women's networks, from local to national levels and beyond, are effective bases to support empowerment. Within all communities the engagement of men is equally important so gender constructs can be re-evaluated together.

Working with different ethnic groups, a challenge for me has been to create a trust where distrust is deeply engrained. For instance, to involve the participation of the rural community leaders in a project, who have previously been confined to one homogeneous locality due to their fear and distrust of other ethnic groups was a big challenge which took time and patience to work through.

Being from the Sinhala community, I was only successful when working within different ethnic communities because of my total neutrality. I maintained a transparent methodology, listened attentively and helped everyone equally, which helped to build healthy and trusting relationships.

Of course there are many layers to the challenges we have to face in this type of work to achieve transformation. Yet, there are equally many sources of inspiration.

My mother has been a source of inspiration for me to work towards correcting social inequality and marginalization. Her fight against marginalization and social stigma that she personally faced in her life is the driving force for me to work against social exclusion in my lifetime.







**Ayodhya Amarajeewa** works for Search for Common Ground in Sri Lanka. As a Nippon Foundation scholar under the Asia Leaders' Programme, she graduated from the University for Peace in Costa Rica with an MA in Media, Peace and Conflict Studies in 2011. She started her career as a development communications professional in 2008 at UNDP, Sri Lanka. She also has media related peace building experience in Mindanao, the Philippines. Her current research is focused on community level peace building, investigating how inner-peace dynamics affect outer-peace. Ms. Amarajeewa actively works to promote alternative ways of making peace and preventing crisis while transforming conflict-prone issues as opportunities for human development.

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Laws alone cannot foster women's empowerment and peace; the cultural context has to be shaped to absorb that change. For this to happen, we must inspire personal transformations.

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# Finding Personal Peace

Ayodhya AMARAJEEWA, *Sri Lanka*

'Peace process' is a broad concept that takes on many different meanings. My participation in peace processes is very personal. Since I believe that personal transformation can bring about how we relate to one's own self and one another, I see personal transformation as a solution for many conflicts.

There are many aspects that hinder our relationships with one another, and especially with other ethnic groups. In Sri Lanka, the war created a greater breach in the trust between differing ethnic communities. No matter how much we try, rebuilding that trust is difficult – yet, we can still be hopeful.

## **BENEFITING FROM OTHER'S EXPERIENCES – THE PHILIPPINES**

In the Philippines I studied different aspects of peace and conflict transformation while trying to understand how to bring about social transformation through personal transformation.

As a graduate student at the Ateneo de Manila University, I was invited to participate in seminars and lectures on the conflict and peace processes in Mindanao. Military personnel, religious leaders from different denominations, and security sector reform advisors who were involved in the peace process were present in these seminars.

During this time in Mindanao, I worked in a religious peace building organization called 'Silsilah Dialogue Movement' founded by an Italian priest. There I was able to learn how a Christian organization won the hearts of the Muslims in their common interest for peace and harmonious coexistence by denouncing violence from all sides and promoting dialogue to solve conflicts. This is where I saw how different aspects of day-to-day life had been used by this organization to transform conflict in their communities.

There is a lot to be learnt from the Philippines steps towards resolving a protracted conflict. Women participate at all levels of the peace process. They have created a very strong network of conflict transformation clusters. Different civil society groups have great support from these peace groups. Muslim women are at the forefront of the peace negotiations, and the President's peace advisor is a woman. The security sector reforms are being evaluated and discussed with men and women alike, and there are women experts employed by the government to work on the security sector reforms.

Though there is an involvement of women as combatants in the leftist groups (even Christian religious groups), there is also media coverage and encouragement from the government, NGOs and civil society organizations for women to serve actively in the peace process. This led to lessening the violence in the respective communities with more progressive peacemaking resolutions.



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We don't need money to reach a sustainable peace, but rather the local peoples' collective faith to make the change happen.

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From my time in Mindanao, I learned how the structural violence created by the government is mitigated by progressive and inclusive civil society groups and by their unity. While religion has been used as a reason for conflict, many Mindanao people turned religion into a reason for peace. Women have initiated dialogue with other religious groups to minimize violent reactions by opportunistic groups, including both government and extremist.

In turn, lessons learnt from the Philippines and the women working for peace have enriched my understanding of Sri Lanka's post-war experience.

## REFLECTIONS ON OUR POST-WAR CONTEXT

Reflecting on the Sri Lankan context, it is difficult to work in an immediate post-war situation when there is a victor and a defeated party, especially when that defeated party has factions who were formerly a threat to national security, and later accepted political figures. This kind of atmosphere affects apolitical peace activism.

For me, the biggest challenge is working with politicized institutions and organizations with their own agendas. Because, most of the agencies and governments – including both those in Sri Lanka and the Philippines – have their agenda set, they come to the local community with their own approach, not necessarily to first localize their approach to consider local needs. This also shows a shortcoming by not looking at both immediate and long term issues.

There needs to be a simultaneous top-down and bottom-up approach, reaching local, national, and international levels. Both national policy advocacy and activism needs to align with the needs at the ground level.

Then, very importantly, networking within the individual groups and across all the groups is essential to create a peace that is collectively pursued. As a friend of mine once said to me; "We don't need money to reach a sustainable peace, but rather the local peoples' collective faith to make the change happen."

Laws alone cannot foster women's empowerment and peace; the cultural context has to be shaped to absorb that change. For this to happen, we must inspire personal transformations.





# Women's Roles in Post-war Sri Lanka

Jayavani KANAPATHIPPILLAI, *Sri Lanka*

**Jayavani Kanapathippillai** works as the Deputy District Project Officer for a UNDP Sri Lanka initiative known as the Equal Access to Justice Project. The project seeks to address causes of injustice and connects countries to knowledge, experience, and resources to help people build a better life. Ms. Kanapathippillai holds a MS in Applied Statistics from the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, and has a wide range of experience in conflict resolution and women's rights issues through non-government and government organizations. Prior to her current position, Ms. Jayavani worked for FORUT Sri Lanka and the Department of Local Government to assist and promote Internally Displaced Persons' (IPD) participation in livelihood transition processes.

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.. a real change in gender roles will require educating the masses to the potential that women hold for Sri Lanka's peaceful progress and recovery.

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With the war coming to an end, Sri Lanka is now in the early recovery and transitional phases. Resettlement processes are ongoing, despite lack of facilities. Following the end of the ethnic war, gender roles have seen a considerable shift, with a sharp increase in the number of women-headed households. As part of the cultural and social fabric in Sri Lanka, married women are expected to first consider their family duties, and are hence mostly prevented from involvement in other work outside of the house.

Today, women continue to be considered as 'soft' entities who cannot handle technical, heavy and complex issues. It is interesting that women are given a high status in our religions, but rarely is this reflected in other aspects for most of them. Hence, a real change in gender roles will require educating the masses on the potential that women hold for Sri Lanka's peaceful progress and recovery.

While Sri Lanka is in a recovery and reconstruction period, if the government was serious about engaging women in these processes, then the basic issues related to their safety and security would be given more prominence in creating policies, as well as their implementation. In the aftermath of the Sri Lankan conflict, especially in the northern and eastern provinces, many women lost their husbands during the war and are now trying to fend for themselves and their children, with the assurance of basic needs, shelter and safety still being elusive.

Living in such constant fear, it is unsurprising that few women are able to engage effectively in the post-conflict reconstruction processes. With the limitations on mobility, fear of harassment and the burden of supporting their families, the likelihood of their effective participation in society becomes limited for most women. This will change only when society begins to understand and respect the rights of women.

## WORKING WITH THE CONFLICT-AFFECTED

When I first started working in communities affected by conflict, listening to horrific experiences and writing reports to seek assistance for such cases was very difficult. Gradually, I developed a deeper understanding of the issues in a post-conflict situation, and the roles that women were playing – sometimes finding clever and clandestine ways to diffuse conflicts and build peace.

I worked with civil society groups such as women's rural development societies, community centers, government organizations and local non-governmental organizations. While implementing a community women's empowerment programme to improve access to legal services called the Sarvodaya Legal Service Movement, I interacted with many women who came forward to express their problems and tell their personal stories of suffering. Later I also had the opportunity to work for the Equal Access to Justice Project, through which I organized mobile legal documentation clinics and gender awareness programmes.

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Her pursuit to work and build a life was continuously set back by the position society placed her in as a single-woman from a poor background.

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## A SINGLE WOMEN'S STORY

During a mobile documentation clinic visit carried out in a recently resettled village in Jaffna, a woman came to me and told me her life story. She was born in Elephant Pass, but her birth had not been registered due to her parent's ignorance about registration processes. When she was two years old, her father left, leaving her mother to raise her till the age of 8 when people in the village started raising objections on her mother's morality and asked her to leave and live with her father, who was in Jaffna. She took a bus in search of her father and arrived to find he had started a new family with another woman.

Her father accepted her into his home and sent her to school for a few years, but then due to the conflict she was displaced to Vanni. There she met a relative of her father's second wife, and became pregnant before marriage. Six months into the pregnancy the boy rejected her and said that he had to marry someone else due to parental pressures, and tried to say that the child was not his. Until the child was delivered she was in constant fear or threat of harm to herself and her child.

Due to the conflict there, she was again displaced, and the birth of her own child remained unregistered, too. After release from an IDP camp, she came to Jaffna to her father, who worked as a fisherman and helped support her, but he was getting old.

She told me how important it was for her to learn some skills to get a job so she could survive and sustain her child, but she suffered many times from not having any papers and wanted to make it a priority to register her child's birth. Her pursuit to work and build a life was continuously set back by the position society placed her in as a single-woman from a poor background.

Given that these issues and challenges must be faced by many women across Sri Lanka, I feel a great sense of duty and responsibility to help other women in my country who are less fortunate. While there are useful interventions taking place, real change for women can only be brought about when these initiatives are up-scaled and made sustainable. Building skills for livelihoods and support services for single women and female-headed households is critical to achieving a peace that is felt by all.

I believe that giving the opportunity to women from different villages, towns or districts to connect, share and exchange their views could be very empowering, so that women can form bonds to collectively work towards the recovery of our country together.





# The Fight to Empower Ourselves

Ana Paula MAIA SANTOS, *Timor-Leste*

**Ana Paula Maia Santos** is a member of FOKUPERS, a national women's organization working for women's rights based in Dili, Timor-Leste. FOKUPERS provides counseling and shelter for women victims of violence and day care for children. Prior to her current position, Ms. Paula worked as a Consultant for a UNDP Timor-Leste Gender Project. In this role she provided UNDP with a Socio-economic and Gender Baseline Study of two districts that are considered the poorest districts in Timor-Leste. Ms. Paula has over 9 years of experience working in the field of women's rights. She has been working with women victims of violence and has two years of experience working with the Timor-Leste Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Ms. Paula holds a BA in Women's Studies from the University of Hawaii, United States of America, and a Diploma in Economic Management from the University of Jember, Indonesia.

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Education, both formal and informal, is the foundation to empowering women.

Women must be well-educated and well-equipped with knowledge and skill in order to have a voice at the peace table.

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Being born in wartime was not easy. The war forced me and other young Timorese to leave school and work at early ages. I did not enjoy a normal childhood because I was a refugee and spent my early adulthood working with other women comrades helping women victims of violence. I also supported the underground movement during the resistance and the political conflict periods towards the difficult birth of my nation, Timor-Leste.

Experiencing the bitter killings and tortures in Timor-Leste, having friends and relatives who were raped and beaten to death in dark alleys, I disliked this thing called war.

## MY PATH – FROM CONFLICT TO POST-CONFLICT

Witnessing all the pain and suffering of my people, my family and my women comrades during the occupation, I decided to join FOKUPERS in 1997. It was a time when young women gathered together to secretly help other women who had been tortured or had relatives that were killed and disappeared during the Indonesian occupation.

During this crucial time, we advocated and mediated difficult issues, in an unpredictable environment, between Indonesian military members and the East Timor forces. After the 1999 massacres, as an Advocacy Officer of FOKUPERS, I convened and facilitated dialogues in the communities among families of victims and perpetrators. I was a member of a FOKUPERS team working within local communities preventing further conflicts from erupting.

In the more settled post-1999 period, I continued working to provide support to Timorese people returning from West Timor who were placed in quarantine because they could not return to their villages. Some of these returnees were women who were raped and/or abducted to be sex slaves. FOKUPERS at that time searched for their families and helped facilitate their return, or settlement into shelters when that was not possible.

In 2000, I led a team to join an East Timor UN Mission composed of Peace Keeping Forces, the Serious Crimes Investigator, forensic experts and Human Rights Affairs members to one of the 1999 killing sites in West Timor. With hundreds of killings and disappearances reported by widows and mothers in the western region, FOKUPERS and other civil organizations asked the Human Rights Affairs Section of the UN Mission in East Timor to pave the way to an international tribunal for crimes committed against humanity.

In the post-2006 period, I settled into the more day to day work of finding peaceful alternatives to better protect women, young girls and children in the IDP camps and to facilitate their return to their home villages.

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values.

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In preparation of the 2007 election, my work turned more to creating solutions through political action. I prepared women to participate in the election by providing capacity building and leadership skills. Getting women in the sub-district to successfully participate was not an easy task, requiring coordination with the Women Caucus, media and Church to influence the government, the politicians and the local district authorities.

Currently, we are entering a new stage of national development, where our work is taking part in peace mediation and negotiation led by civil society and community-based organizations, as well as the traditional leaders of Tara Bandu (peace negotiation and mediation through traditional mechanisms). As well, we are supporting groups, working for peace with the government and other institutions.

We continue working with groups of women in several districts who continue suffering internal political conflicts and domestic fights in their villages, encouraging communities to solve violence with non-violent methods and economic activities.

## OBSTACLES TO EMPOWERMENT

The greatest challenge I face in my work is the simple fact that I am a woman. As a woman, a mother and a wife, I am looked down upon by the community for opposing the traditional values and norms of our culture. A woman working in the public's eye is viewed with skepticism and doubted not only by her male counterparts, but by females who conform to traditional cultural values.

The traditional view is that mothers are required to conform to the norms, take care of their children and be the culture

protector. Wives are not generally free to express their thoughts and ideas. These obstacles are rooted in our culture. On the other hand, as a woman I think I am blessed with courage, skills and good heart to help other people and to empower other women.

In this work, I learned a few things that were effective in moving women to the front of civil society, where we could influence the lives of our people.

Education, both formal and informal, is the foundation to empowering women. Women must be well-educated and well-equipped with knowledge and skill in order to have a voice at the peace table. Increasing the number of women attending school and creating more informal education programs for those who were forced to leave school during the occupation and the internal political conflict periods is vital.

Personal courage and motivation are above everything necessary to keep moving forward. I would like to add that woman must fight against their laziness, and personal worries and anxieties without fear of becoming an enemy of others.

## GREAT LEADERS BEFORE US

I believe Mahatma Gandhi serves as the ideal role model. His non-violence teachings and movements must become the example not only for people and the Government of Timor-Leste, but people around the world. I take inspiration from his quotes including this one: "When I despair, I remember that all through history the ways of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants, and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it – always."

Another quote by Dr. Adela A. Allen speaks to me about how we should embrace our differences, in gender, in culture, and in peace: "We should acknowledge differences, we should greet differences, until difference makes no difference anymore".

My family, my women comrades and all the people of Timor-Leste are the main source of inspiration encouraging me to carry out my work. We, who are victims of war and who have suffered through these crucial times fighting for our country's independence and freedom from lives of violence, are the reasons to live.





**Maria Agnes Bere** is a lawyer currently working for the Administration of Justice Support Unit at United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT) as a National Judicial Affairs Officer. Her responsibilities in this capacity include carrying out activities surrounding women and justice issues. She also supports and advises the East Timorese Lawyer Association through a Women's Committee, aiming to increase the number of female lawyers to become legal practitioners. Ms. Bere also provides technical support for the implementation of the Law Against Domestic Violence. She has 8 years of experience working in the field of women's rights and justice issues within non-government organizations and the United Nations (UN). Ms. Bere graduated from the Nusa Cendana University of Kupang - Indonesia in 2003 with a Bachelor of Law.

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A challenge as a Timorese woman working in the post-conflict situation has been the cultural restrictions placed upon us.

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# Promoting Laws for Women in Timor-Leste

Maria Agnes BERE, *Timor-Leste*

Since March 2004, I have dedicated myself to women's issues in Timor-Leste, focussed on gender justice, through court monitoring and legislative analysis. My objective is to make sure that all laws and court practices in Timor-Leste conform to international standards for non-discrimination between men and women, and that they provide protection to vulnerable people, such as children and women, who are especially at risk of violence during armed conflict and post-conflict periods.

Over the years, I have grown a great deal professionally. But, my experiences working in this line of work, at this time and in this environment has also created opportunities for great personal growth, as an individual.

## CULTURAL CHALLENGES AS A WOMAN

A challenge as a Timorese woman working in the post-conflict situation has been the cultural restrictions placed upon us. Local cultural practices prevented women from speaking in the gatherings of elders (made-up of men only), as women were traditionally perceived as having nothing valuable to offer for the good of the community.

Initially, because I looked so young, no one took me seriously. For example, when I spoke before community leaders about gender bias and the Law Against Domestic Violence, they said: "Why must we listen to this young woman, who doesn't know our culture? And, she is a woman – we don't need to listen to her."

To earn their confidence, I approached them in a non-confrontational and respectful way using my persuasive experience as a lawyer. I offered them real examples of women victims, and explained about our role as citizens to end discrimination between men and women, as stated in our nation's Constitution, and explained about the state's and local community's obligations to all of its citizens and members.

After establishing a mutually respectful dialogue, the community leaders became more receptive to listening to these new ideas. Only then could I start speaking about the objectives and content of the programs we promote.

A major benefit to my work is that I now enjoy good relations within the local community and amongst other involved actors. Because of my active work with community leaders, people often invite me to join the elders when they discuss important family issues, like when a family member has died, or gets married. I hope this might serve as an example to younger women and girls, that women have a valuable place at the table with community and family elders.



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## MY FAMILY – MY INSPIRATION

My parents were a huge source of support while I was in the field. I was fortunate to be raised in a family believing in the equality of women and men. I am now devoted to these causes because of the inspiring example set for me by my mother. She served as my role model, teaching me to respect others, and to live with peace and grace even when people treat you very badly.

Changing people's minds and behaviours takes time. But, I believe that one day all Timorese will enjoy lives full of grace and peace.





**Isabel M. Marçal Sequeira** is the Executive Director and co-founder of the Asia Pacific Support Collective Timor-Leste (APSCTL) based in Dili. APSCTL is a national NGO working across the sub-districts of Timor-Leste on peace building with women by providing training, undertaking research, and managing a set of programs, including scholarships for women and working with widows on enterprise development initiatives. Ms. Sequeira is also a board member of Rede Feto, a women's network in Timor-Leste. She is the author of multiple research publications on women and violence and is the author of several books on women in the resistance period. Ms. Sequeira holds a Bachelor Degree in Marketing from the University UNPAZ, Timor-Leste.

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# Timor-Leste's Secret Strugglers

Isabel M. Marçal SEQUEIRA (Beba), *Timor-Leste*

I view my role in the peace building process as a facilitator. I organize community-based groups for discussions and identify their needs from those discussions. After necessary planning, my colleagues and I will then undertake advocacy responding to the community's priority issues.

The outcomes I aim to achieve depend on the interests of the local people themselves. These community-based groups identify their own needs. They are the ones who work to develop and contribute to their families, to their communities and to their nation. My role is to assist and mentor them in a process that they own.

Participatory, focus group discussions and learning by doing are the best methods to empower women to become more engaged in peace building. Civil society organizations should engage women in all programs and activities; government should support and give attention for women's programs, especially in rural areas.

## CREATING A LEGACY TO SUSTAIN FUTURE PEACE WORKERS

Recognizing the role women have played in our struggle for independence and building peace creates positive role models and is important to women's empowerment. Believing a very personal history of Timor's struggle should be chronicled, I co-authored a book on women involved in the clandestine movement towards independence titled, *Secrecy: The Key to Independence*. The women in this book had not had the opportunity to tell their stories and talking about their histories raised in them painful emotions and feelings.

Many of the women were angry about the way our government failed to recognize their contributions and felt betrayed by their former colleagues. Many women were still facing much hardship in their lives. I felt that I could not just talk to these women and hear and record their stories, but needed to follow-up on their issues through my advocacy on their behalves, and by supporting them in their own endeavors to create change.

This book is a major contribution to sustaining peace building momentum in our country beyond ourselves. When the book was published, these women and many others were able to see the positive outcome of their contributions; that their lives were now on the public record and chronicled in a history that will inspire others, and particularly women.

I was able to get close to these women and others like them as I am trusted because of my engagement in this process of peace building. The good practice that I believe that I have followed in my work has affected other people who

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I now have more influence in the community than even many local and national political actors because of my hard work – they see that I am passionate about the cause of peace building and women’s rights, and that I am consistent and reliable in my efforts

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can recognize and follow my actions and behaviour. There is a saying “a prática é o critério da verdade” – the meaning for which is “the practice, or action is the true criteria.”

I now have more influence in the community than even many local and national political actors because of my hard work – they see that I am passionate about the cause of peace building and women’s rights, and that I am consistent and reliable in my efforts, which I believe has a positive impact on them.

On the whole, I am a realist. The facts are that I have to contribute and build the nation and serve my people to become independent and self-reliant in all aspects of life. I am inspired to this cause by all women who suffer and struggle. They are my role models, encouraging me to fight for the voice of the voiceless.



**To join N-Peace:**

Send an email to: [n-peace@groups.undp.org](mailto:n-peace@groups.undp.org)  
For more information visit: [www.n-peace.net](http://www.n-peace.net)

To know more about N-Peace Network

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