



# Women Building Peace and Preventing Sexual Violence

in Conflict-Affected Contexts

A Review of Community-Based Approaches  
October 2007



# Contents

Acknowledgements

Acronyms

Executive Summary

1. Introduction

2. Peace-building and conflict resolution initiatives

- Building united networks
- Participating in local decision-making processes
- Funding mechanisms
- Innovative women's organizations working to build peace
- Incorporating traditional mediation practices
- Using digital technologies

3. Reconciliation mechanisms

- Social contracts for conflicting parties
- Community exchanges
- Public advocacy for peace

4. Increasing access to justice

- Traditional justice systems
- Community-based legal support
- Working with the police

5. Access to support services

- Multi-sectoral support to women in post-conflict contexts
- Multi-sectoral support to survivors of SGBV

6. Awareness raising and attitudinal change

- Increasing access to information and changing attitudes
- Challenging local power structures and men's behaviors

7. Conflict monitoring systems

8. Making communities safer

- Reducing SALW
- Community safety initiatives

9. Conclusion

References

Endnotes

Tables and Boxes

Tables

- Table 1. Obstacles and Solutions to Women's Engagement in Community-Led Peace-Building and Prevention of SGBV
- Table 2. Initiatives supported by the DFID-funded UNIFEM, by location

Boxes

- Box 1. Definitions
- Box 2. Women's Peace Huts in Liberia
- Box 3. UNIFEM supports Women's Peace Caravan in Uganda
- Box 4. Community involvement can improve support service programs
- Box 5. Challenges with radio as a communication tool for women
- Box 6. Women's Safety Audits

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*Cover photo:* Women's peace-building group in Liberia sharing symbolic foods in a traditional conflict resolution practice.

*All photo credits:* Annalise Moser.

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## Acronyms

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ACORD	Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development
ARC	American Refugee Committee
CSO	Civil society organization
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
FSU	Family Support Unit
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
IHRICON	Institute of Human Rights Communications
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PDF	Peace and Democracy Foundation
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
Sida	Swedish International Development Agency
SLP	Sierra Leone Police
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
VAW	Violence Against Women
WAC	Women's Action for Change
WIPNET	Women in Peace-Building Network

# Executive Summary

## Context

Women's engagement in peace-building is recognized by many international institutions as a crucial element of recovery and conflict prevention – a fact reflected in Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), which commits the United Nations (UN) and its member states to engaging women in conflict prevention and peace-building. The serious threat of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) during and after armed conflict is also recognized by the UN, as well as at the national level through national plans of action on SGBV.

However, despite elaborate international and national policy frameworks, women around the world face enormous challenges to their participation in peace-building processes and in translating legal instruments into real rights and concrete change. Furthermore, women's ability to effectively influence peace-building processes is often compromised by the threat or the actual experience of SGBV, which commonly escalates during and after armed conflicts. These experiences suggest that, while normative frameworks are crucial, SCR 1325 cannot be fully and effectively implemented without attention to action at the community level. Therefore, it is important to recognize that women are in fact already engaging in community-based initiatives relevant to SCR 1325, and that these need to be better understood so that they can be supported more effectively.

UNIFEM is directly tackling the challenge of implementing SCR 1325 at the community level in order to build women's engagement in peace-building and public decision-making, and to protect women and children in communities around the world. The present paper is a background review of community-based peace-building initiatives. It is intended to inform UNIFEM's program "Supporting Women's Engagement in Peace-Building and Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict: Community-Led Approaches." This program is supported by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) with the aim of supporting initiatives like the ones described below in six very different contexts: Afghanistan, Haiti, Liberia, Rwanda, Timor-Leste and Uganda. UNIFEM and its partners hope that this program will help identify effective means of addressing the array of challenges faced by women at the community level, and of discovering some of the successful strategies that can embrace women's engagement in peace-building and protect women's rights in different post-conflict contexts.

Each of the following thematic sections examines the barriers women face, and highlights examples of women's successful engagement in peace-building that were selected on the basis of being simple yet innovative and explicitly community-based:

**Peace-building and conflict resolution initiatives:** At the community level, women face significant obstacles to engagement in peace building processes, including exclusion from male-dominated decision-making forums, lack of funding, exclusion from formal peace-building processes, resistance to initiatives that challenge cultural traditions, and security risks. Successful approaches implemented by women include coalition-building, promoting the use of digital technologies and new funding mechanisms, as well as efforts that combine traditional and modern conflict resolution approaches and strive to facilitate women's participation in local decision-making processes.

## Reconciliation mechanisms

Reconciliation mechanisms often function in parallel to other peace-building processes, combining an emphasis on justice with a process of healing, respect and creating a longer-term culture of peace among parties in conflict. Barriers to reconciliation include the erosion of social capital and

a lack of trust within and among communities. Women have used community-based initiatives to create new “social contracts,” facilitate community exchanges and engage in public advocacy for peace.

**Increasing access to justice:** Women commonly face barriers in their access to justice in the aftermath of armed conflict. This may be because legal services have simply not yet been restored; because patriarchal attitudes and structures actively exclude women from traditional justice systems; or because of a lack of basic services accessible to women. Successful community-based initiatives include gender-sensitizing traditional justice mechanisms, providing community-based legal support, and working with the police.

**Access to support services:** In post-conflict settings, women’s access to support services can be severely constrained. The infrastructure of health clinics may have been destroyed; personnel may have been displaced; and materials may have been lost. Women are affected by multiple issues: both armed conflict and sexual and gender-based violence affect women’s physical and psychological health, their legal rights, and their capacity to earn an income. As such, many initiatives which aim to increase women’s access to support services need to use a multi-sectoral approach.

**Awareness raising and attitudinal change:** Two key challenges to gender-sensitive conflict resolution are the lack of access to information, and entrenched social attitudes and gender biases. Community members may be unaware of the gender dimensions of conflict, of women’s human rights and SGBV violations, or of the presence of conflict prevention activities. This lack of awareness is linked to attitudes which enable conflict as well as SGBV.

**Conflict monitoring systems:** Signs of serious inequalities in gender relations—including SGBV—are not considered to be important warning signs of conflict. Nor are women’s perceptions of subtle changes in community relations, or in the flow of arms and disaffected youth in communities recorded in conflict analysis processes. However, conflict analysis, monitoring, and early warning are all significantly enhanced with a gender-sensitive approach, because aspects of conflict that might not otherwise be detected are exposed when women’s experience of conflict is addressed.

**Making communities safer:** Some features of the physical environment of communities can make women more vulnerable to violence. For example, the design of the physical space can make activities such as using latrines or walking after dark unsafe for women. Changes in the security environment of communities, caused for instance by the proliferation of small arms, also compromise women’s safety. Effective means of making communities safer include enabling women to better protect themselves from violence, and reducing the opportunities for perpetrators to commit acts of violence against women.

## Conclusions

A number of common threads emerge throughout the cases discussed in this paper. In some cases, women’s initiatives are challenging and transforming the nature of dominant institutions and identities. Many of the case studies demonstrate a strategic use of gender roles, with women often choosing to use approaches which are readily accessible to them in their daily lives, and capitalizing on the commonly-held images of women as peace-makers. The approaches accessible to women are in most cases small-scale and informal, and, as the examples below illustrate, women must act carefully to avoid community backlash. Yet notwithstanding these significant obstacles, the successful strategies highlighted in this paper underscore the importance of community-based initiatives in implementing SCR 1325 and creating a lasting peace.

Perhaps most of all, however, the examples documented here suggest that the long-term effectiveness of community-based approaches to bringing peace and security for women and men, girls and boys, cannot be isolated from national-level and international efforts to implement SCR 1325. National and international mechanisms to ensure accountability for implementing this binding resolution are needed in order to reinforce the impact of community-level work. For instance, monitoring and reporting systems are needed to ensure that all relevant actors are translating SCR 1325 into concrete efforts to prevent violence against women, ensure women's participation in peace-building and post-conflict governance, and ensure a gender-perspective in national, regional, and international development and security planning. The role of these mechanisms must be to ensure that existing international and national policy frameworks translate into real change in women's lives, and that women's efforts at the community level are recognized and supported at the national and international levels.

While community-based approaches play an essential part in peace-building efforts, they cannot on their own stem the overwhelming tide of sexual violence in conflict, nor stop the systematic use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. The effectiveness of community-based approaches ultimately depends on a broader recognition of the ways in which violence against women undermines both peace-building efforts at the national level and international security more generally. As the examples in the following report illustrate, peace-building begins at the community level but it cannot end there.

# 1. Introduction

Women's engagement in peace-building processes is recognized by many international security and governance institutions as a crucial element of long-term recovery and conflict prevention – a fact reflected in Security Council resolution 1325, passed in October 2000,<sup>1</sup> which commits the United Nations (UN) and its member states to engaging women in conflict prevention and peace-building. The serious threat of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) during and after armed conflict is also recognized by the UN – for example through the Stop Rape Now campaign<sup>2</sup> – as well as at the national level through national plans of action on SGBV.

However, despite the wide-spread recognition of their contributions, women around the world face enormous challenges to their participation in peace-building processes, whether at the local, national, or international levels. One of the most important challenges is the social resistance women face when attempting to take on new public roles. Furthermore, their ability effectively to influence peace-building processes can be compromised by the threat or the actual experience of SGBV, which commonly escalates during and after armed conflicts.

While there are many cases where women's rights and priorities have been incorporated both into peace agreements and into post-conflict legal and political reforms, changes in policy and legislation at the national level have not necessarily translated into better access to decision-making processes for women, nor have they ensured that women enjoy increased protection from violence. International and national-level legal and policy change is often not reflected in women's daily lives.

There are even more significant challenges associated with women's empowerment and their ability to engage in peace-building processes at the community level. Women may face resistance to their engagement in decision-making from formal and informal sources, including community members and their own families; in many cases it is extremely difficult to go against traditional practices without creating backlash and outright obstruction. Furthermore, challenges are often compounded by women's lack of access to justice mechanisms and support services for survivors of SGBV.

## Box 1. Definitions

Peacebuilding involves a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development. Peacebuilding strategies must be coherent and tailored to the specific needs of the country concerned; must be based on national ownership; and should comprise a carefully prioritized, sequenced, and therefore relatively narrow set of activities aimed at achieving the above objectives. (Policy Committee, PBC, Conceptual Basis adopted on May 22, 2007).

Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) is violence directed against a woman because she is a woman or violence that affects women disproportionately in comparison to men.<sup>3</sup> There are many types of SGBV, such as rape, torture, murder, beating, sexual exploitation, abuse by an intimate partner, forced marriage, forced prostitution and trafficking. SGBV may be physical, psychological, and sexual.

Several related terms include violence against women (VAW), domestic violence, and gender based violence (GBV). SGBV is commonly used as a weapon of war.

Community-based initiatives are often overlooked or ignored in favor of international and national-level work on Resolution 1325. While this high profile work is crucial, SCR 1325 cannot be fully and effectively implemented without attention to action at the community level. Therefore, it is important to recognize that women are in fact already engaging in community-based initiatives relevant to 1325, and that these need to be better understood so that they can be supported more effectively.

**Table 1. Obstacles and Solutions to Women’s Engagement in Community-Led Peace-Building and Prevention of SGBV**

Obstacles faced by women	Innovative solutions
Divergence of opinion among diverse groups of women	• Building united networks and coalitions
Exclusion from formal peace-building processes	• Innovation in informal peace-building
Exclusion from male-dominated decision-making forums	• Innovative efforts to facilitate women’s participation in local decision-making
Lack of sustained funding	• Funding mechanisms for small grants • Using new low-cost digital technologies
Resistance to challenging women’s exclusion from traditional dispute	• Combining traditional and modern mediation techniques
Risks to physical safety	• Reducing the proliferation of small arms • Changing the physical environment
Eroded trust and social capital	• New “social contracts”
Fear and/or hatred of ‘the other’	• Community exchanges
Community voices excluded from the public sphere	• Public advocacy for peace
Lack of general knowledge about legal rights	• Legal aid programs
Unwillingness to report SGBV to police	• Specialized SGBV police units
Patriarchal and non-gender-sensitive traditional justice mechanisms	• Transforming traditional justice mechanisms
Lack of access to support services for victims of conflict and of SGBV	• Multi-sectoral support services
Gender roles that encourage male violence and enforce patriarchal attitudes	• Challenging existing gender roles and patriarchal power structures
Lack of access to information	• Communication through radio and theatre
Women and gender issues excluded from conflict monitoring	• Gender-sensitive conflict monitoring systems



How can some of these obstacles be overcome? What are the practical ways of promoting women's peace-building and SGBV prevention at the community level, and how can these be better supported? The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) is addressing this issue through a new program entitled 'Supporting Women's Engagement in Peace-Building and Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict: Community-Led Approaches.' The two-year initiative, launched in April 2007, is funded through a US\$6.5 million grant from the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID). Six conflict-affected countries are involved: Afghanistan, Haiti, Liberia, Rwanda, Timor-Leste and Uganda.

This paper provides a review of successful approaches to women's engagement in peace-building and preventing SGBV in conflict-affected communities around the world. Each section and issue begins with an analysis of the relevant obstacles faced by women, and is followed by one or two case studies relating either to peace building or to the prevention of SGBV (see Table 1).

The examples of women's engagement in conflict resolution or the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence examined in this paper have been selected on the basis of being simple yet innovative, and because they are explicitly community-based. There are relatively few case studies available that fulfill these criteria – and even less data on the impact of such initiatives – which is another reason why UNIFEM has undertaken to address these issues in a systematic way. The case studies here are drawn from both a desk review and from field visits. They include peace-building and conflict resolution initiatives; reconciliation mechanisms; studies focusing on access to justice and support services; awareness-raising and attitudinal change campaigns; conflict monitoring systems; and initiatives aimed at making communities safer.

## 2. Peace-Building and Conflict Resolution Initiatives

At the community level, women are often very active in peace-building processes such as mediation and conflict transformation – mostly on a voluntary basis. They usually face enormous challenges to their engagement, including a lack of consensus among diverse groups of women; exclusion from male-dominated decision-making forums; lack of funding; exclusion from formal peace-building processes; resistance to changing cultural traditions; and ongoing security risks. Important approaches implemented by women in this area include coalition-building, promoting the use of new digital technologies, identifying new funding mechanisms, combining traditional and modern approaches, and innovative efforts to facilitate women's participation in local decision-making processes.



*Literacy class graduation for internally displaced women and girls in Afghanistan. The classes are provided by a local women's NGO, supported by UNIFEM.*

## Building Successful Coalitions

Women peace builders hold multiple perspectives and ideologies. Given the large number of civil society organizations working at the community and national levels, each with different constituents, objectives, and interests, and at times representing different sides of the conflict, uniting these organizations into coordinated networks can be challenging. At the same time, it can also be a very empowering process for women to present as a coordinated movement engaging in peace-building.

One such example of successful coalition-building has been the ‘Women’s Initiatives for Peace’ project in Colombia. The aim of the project was to create a women’s agenda for peace, which could contribute to the national peace agenda. To achieve this aim, the project developed a methodology for reaching consensus and creating a ‘women’s movement for peace’ that brought together 22 civil society and trade unions between 2002–2004, with financial support from the Swedish International Development Agency.<sup>4</sup> The diverse political, ideological, and experiential perspectives of the women made this a challenging task, but the consensus-building methodology relied on participatory tools across two distinct, interlinked stages: consensus was first reached within small groups, either by general verbal agreement or by brainstorming (listing) and ranking of key issues. Small group decisions were then taken to plenary where the entire group voted. Two analytical concepts were critical: first, there was collective agreement that the basic issue uniting all Colombian women was their ‘exclusion.’ Second, a distinction was made between a ‘Basic Agenda’ around which all Colombian women could rally, and a ‘Maximum Agenda’ that provides space for diversity on the basis of issues such as ethnicity, race, class, or age.

The success of this methodology in terms of building consensus for a women’s agenda for peace is illustrated by the fact that at a national meeting of 300 women, the participants were able to select twelve basic agenda points from an initial 600 proposals. These included the need to establish public policy on women’s human rights in order to promote a culture of non-violence and respect for diversity; democratic agrarian reform with an ethnic and gender perspective; and the direct and autonomous participation of women’s organizations in national and local political dialogue around conflict. The twelve proposals were signed in the National Senate by representatives of the 22 organizations.

## Participating in local decision-making processes

Women often face obstacles to gathering and collectively deliberating about their concerns and problems. These obstacles are further compounded when women attempt to present their views in local decision-making forums. This is especially the case at the community level, where local councils are dominated by local male elites. It is also particularly important during the post-conflict period, when processes of democratic governance are being rebuilt, or in many cases established for the first time.

Efforts to address this problem have focused on establishing forums for deliberation between women, as well as channels to relay women’s views and concerns to decision-making bodies. One such initiative, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, facilitates open meetings between a women’s centre and the municipality. Called ‘Coffee with the Mayor,’ the weekly meetings have been facilitated by the organization Lara since 2001, and involve inviting representatives from the municipality to come to the women’s centre to answer questions from women and listen to their concerns.<sup>5</sup> Initially, the meetings took place on Wednesdays—Wednesdays were ‘sports evenings’ for men, which gave women the time and space to gather. The meetings have not only given women a chance to speak directly to politicians and government representatives, but also to feel that, as a result of meeting regularly with elected officials face-to-face, they can hold their representatives to account.

Several campaigns and protests have taken place as a result of these meetings. In addition, the

evening dialogues with the women have become such an important platform for citizen mobilization in town that politicians themselves have come to seek out the opportunity to participate. This level of attention is a sign of how significant women have become to community decision-making and conflict-resolution. This would not have been possible without the structured – yet informal – access to local decision-makers that was facilitated by Lara, the women’s NGO. Unfortunately, however, the precise impact of this program remains difficult to assess in the absence of evaluation data.

## **Funding mechanisms**

One of the most fundamental obstacles to women’s involvement in peace-building is the lack of sustained funding sources for women’s community-based organizations. In the immediate aftermath of conflict, there may be an influx of donor funds (in such cases the competition among local organizations vying for support can be fierce). However, these funding sources typically dry up once the initial reconstruction phase has passed, leaving women’s peace-building efforts with no support, or forcing them constantly to focus on finding alternative and short-term funding options. A longer-term mechanism for funding women’s community-based initiatives is therefore crucial to women’s peace-building efforts.

To address this challenge, in Afghanistan and Haiti UNIFEM has established funding mechanisms to provide small grants to women’s community-based organizations. In Haiti, a Small Grants Mechanism will provide grants of US\$5,000 to \$20,000 to support both women’s organizations and human rights organizations working at the community-level (particularly in rural areas) to provide critical services to women and children who are victims of violence, as well as community-based efforts to increase security and conflict prevention, (particularly in the areas of justice and security sector reform).<sup>6</sup> In Afghanistan, the Fund for Community Based Responses to SGBV<sup>7</sup> will support grassroots civil society organizations (CSOs) in their efforts to promote community reconciliation, including participation in the peace jirgas, to build women’s capacities to take part in community decisions, to prevent sexual and gender based violence, and encourage respect for human rights (for instance, in customary dispute adjudication).

UNIFEM expects that the availability of financing for these community-level activities in Haiti and Afghanistan will reduce competition among women’s CSOs; allow local organizations to access resources through a participatory and flexible funding mechanism; build capacity; and establish networks that promote collaboration among organizations working towards similar goals. In Afghanistan, it is envisaged that this will also create a mechanism through which other donors can contribute funds, thereby establishing an ongoing and sustainable funding source beyond UNIFEM’s involvement.

There are several key challenges to the effective implementation of small grants mechanisms. For example, it is necessary to balance the need for very small grants, on the one hand, with the associated high transaction costs, on the other. The process of identifying and vetting the right organizations and activities is crucial, as is providing both adequate support and monitoring and evaluation. These problems are not unfamiliar to organizations working to provide small grants to women’s groups. Like the Global Fund for Women, which has awarded over US\$58 million to 3,450 women’s organizations around the world since 1987,<sup>8</sup> UNIFEM seeks to address these issues in its small grants funding mechanisms in Haiti and Afghanistan.

## **Innovative women’s organizations working to build peace**

While women commonly lack access to formal peace-building processes, there are many examples of women working informally within their communities to resolve conflict and build peace. Such initiatives owe much of their effectiveness to their ability to gain respect among male and female community members, and the innovations of local women’s organizations.

## Box 2. Women's Peace Huts in Liberia

The women's Peace Huts in Liberia are community-led peace building groups, established by WIPNET (Women in Peace Building Network) and supported by UNIFEM.<sup>10</sup> The Peace Huts' success lies in their role as community mediators. The women meet on Thursday mornings, during which time they share information about problems and issues they have heard about in the community, and plan actions to further investigate, publicize, or resolve the issues. Community members also come to the Peace Huts with problems to be solved, including difficult issues such as rape, as well as those related to land, religious differences, and tribalism. The Peace Huts also serve as a refuge, as women experiencing domestic violence can 'run to the Peace Huts' for safety. The women then bring together the husband and wife, and sometimes their families, to discuss the problem and find a solution.

Despite the innovations and successes of the Peace Huts, they do face a number of constraints. The extent to which the women engage in community decision making, and their relationships with local authorities, varies. In one case, the women wrote repeatedly to the local leaders, inviting them to join their weekly meetings. Not only did the women never receive a reply, but none of the leaders attended a meeting. In another case, however, leaders came to the Peace Hut regularly, and also called on the women to help mediate when there was a conflict in the community. The capacity of the women to respond appropriately to problems, their knowledge of women's human rights, and their conflict resolution skills vary considerably. Finally, the Peace Huts' minimal financial resources constrain their activities, and create resistance within the women's own families because they work without getting paid, and go home without food for their children.

In Nepal, for example, networks of district-level and village-level peace volunteers—largely women coordinated by the Institute of Human Rights Communications (IHRICON)<sup>9</sup>—work with village groups, monitoring incidents of human rights abuse, confronting the perpetrators, and publicizing these incidents through 'wall newspapers' (bulletins of hand-written local news appended in a public place). Village volunteers also raise funds and support people's income-generating projects. IHRICON's women's program is focused on UN SC resolution 1325 and the women organize discussions its implications in the Nepalese context. To achieve this effectively, IHRICON has adapted resolution 1325 for discussion within the village context, ensuring that the text incorporates simple and familiar language.

### Incorporating traditional mediation practices

During periods of upheaval and unrest, communities can be especially resistant to changing traditional practices and approaches. Introducing innovative approaches to peace-building can be particularly challenging for women, as cultural traditions are often strongly defended by traditional leaders, who are frequently male. Incorporating traditional elements into a balanced and inclusive approach to mediation can therefore offer a non-threatening way to introduce change and innovation into communities.

The Peace and Democracy Foundation (PDF) in Timor Leste, for example, implements an innovative mediation program which includes traditional Timorese mediation practices.<sup>11</sup> Traditionally, all community leaders come together for conflict resolution sessions; these are generally all men, but in the PDF model, women leaders are included among mediators. Traditional practices are incorporated in the opening session – such as drinking wine or chewing betel nut – and at the closing session, where for example both parties may drink together or eat together as a symbolic gesture.

The actual mediation proceedings in between follow a balanced and inclusive approach, where all parties are given equal time to present their perspectives. This model has been piloted in three districts, and women have been very active mediators, who are often approached by community members to mediate disputes. The most common conflicts which are brought to these sessions are land, neighborhood and family disputes. It is thought that having women among the mediators results in gender-sensitive rulings and appropriate outcomes for women. It is also possible that the use of traditional elements helps legitimize women's participation in the process.

## Using digital technologies

Digital technologies provide an unconventional but highly effective means of communication that can be employed by women working to end VAW, build peace, and prevent conflict. They are especially useful because they enable women to overcome obstacles such as lack of funds, security risks to activists, and limited physical mobility owing to their domestic obligations.

Useful technologies include the internet (websites, chat rooms, blogs, internet radio streaming, video streaming, and podcasting technology), email and mobile phones. These enable quick and relatively cost-effective ways of exchanging written, visual and audio information, organizing, networking and mobilizing, as well as facilitating dialogue, and are particularly useful for those women whose mobility is restricted or for communication with organizations outside of affected areas. Facilities such as mailing lists can create a 'safe' space for individuals to organize around an issue that might be 'risky' in physical spaces, as well as being a simple and usually cost-free initiative.

For example, in Kuwait and the Gulf States, women have mobilized their networks to demonstrate a moment's notice when the government denies access to a certain area. Kuwaiti women protesting for their voting were more effective during their 2005 campaign than during their last campaign five years ago because text messaging allowed them reach more women and call them into the streets.<sup>12</sup> Text messaging also allows women to 'build unofficial membership lists, spread news about detained activists, encourage voter turnout, schedule meetings and rallies, and develop new issue campaigns – all while avoiding government-censored newspapers, television stations and websites.'<sup>13</sup>

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## 3. Reconciliation Mechanisms

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Reconciliation mechanisms run parallel to other peace-building processes, combining an emphasis on the search for justice with the process of healing, respect and creating a longer-term culture of peace among conflicting parties. Barriers to reconciliation include the erosion of social capital and a lack of trust within and among communities. Types of women's community-led initiatives around these issues include creating "social contracts," community exchanges, and public advocacy for peace.

### **"Social contracts" among conflicting parties**

In countries affected by armed conflict, one of the longest lasting legacies is the undermining of social capital – that is, of the relationships and networks that enable trust and cooperation among people. Affected communities face the challenge of strengthening social cohesion, rebuilding relationships and re-establishing trust; this is especially important in reconciliation mechanisms dealing with the aftermath of conflict. An increasing amount of evidence shows that the process of re-building social capital within communities can also be an effective method of challenging the constraints women

face in participating in local decision-making structures: when women are involved in reconciliation mechanisms, they are playing an important role within the community, and can ensure that these processes reflect women's concerns.<sup>14</sup>

Women's involvement in the creation and signing of so-called 'social contracts' is one way of promoting social capital and reconciliation. Community-based social contracts are agreements among community members to abide by a set of mutually-identified rights and duties. An initiative by the Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD) in Burundi, for example, focuses on reconciliation and conflict prevention through community negotiations, which are followed by a signing of community social contracts in the presence of the community, local authorities, and external witnesses.<sup>15</sup> A gender-specific approach is fully integrated within the initiative to ensure that women participate in equal numbers and with equal decision-making opportunities in the process. At the onset of the community social contract process, an



*Rwandan women's group members weaving baskets for income generation, with support from UNIFEM. Recently returned from Tanzania, the former refugees are working to reintegrate into Rwandan society.*

in-depth analysis of the causes and impacts of the conflict is conducted, as well as an analysis of existing traditional responses to conflict. The community dialogue and negotiations bring community members of different ethnicities and groups together to talk through their situation and to listen to testimonies, allowing people to admit to their wrongdoings and ask for forgiveness. Upon mutual agreement within the community, 'social contracts' are developed and signed and a peace committee is elected to ensure that the social contract is respected.

The peace committees in Burundi are democratically elected and include both Hutus and Tutsis, women and men, young people and older community members. 'Peace projects' are identified with the objective of benefiting the whole community and contributing to mutual solidarity. The projects are either related to post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation, or to conflict prevention. The whole community is expected to take part in the project's implementation, and the project is expected to have a rapid and lasting impact, such as the reconstruction of a bridge, the opening of a school, local road, or a common mill, grinding, or storage facility. The pilot phase of the initiative, which began in 2002, involved almost 200,000 people.

## Community exchanges

Fear of the 'other' can be a key barrier to reconciliation among conflicting parties. Negative stereotypes and assumptions—and lack of knowledge or understanding about different groups of people—foster fear, especially in a context where the 'other' is also 'the enemy.' Therefore, another approach which women have used to promote reconciliation between belligerent parties is creating greater understanding and compassion, and reducing fear of 'the other' through community exchanges.

For example, in the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians there is fear of 'the other' on both

sides. The Israeli organization Coalition of Women for Peace arranged what they call ‘Reality Tours’ geared toward Israelis (women and men) who are willing to travel to the Occupied Territories and meet Palestinians.<sup>16</sup> Led by trained guides, the tours introduce participants to the social, economic, political, and environmental realities of the conflict – checkpoints, refugee camps, the recently-erected security barrier. The tour exposes participants to a reality that most have never witnessed before. Approximately 1,500 Israelis participated in these tours in 2004. In several cases, participants became directly involved in peace activism following the tour, and almost all send friends and family to participate.

In another case, while tensions were still running high in Georgia, the ‘Fund Sukhumi’ women’s organization and the Association of Women of Abkhazia brought women together to talk about security. The events were taped and the videos of the discussions were exchanged over the border. The aim was to get the women to meet, if only virtually, ‘the other’—the supposed enemy—in an attempt to reduce tension and fear. Through the exchange of tapes, women from both sides had a chance to ‘see’ each other and talk about their fears.

### **Box 3. UNIFEM supports Women’s Peace Caravan in Uganda**

In 2006 UNIFEM supported the Women’s Peace Coalition to implement a Women’s Peace Caravan, carrying the African Women’s Peace Torch as part of women’s advocacy for peace.<sup>17</sup> The Torch arrived in Kampala and was received by the Speaker and Deputy Speakers of the Ugandan Parliament, as a sign of solidarity and commitment to peace. The Women’s Peace Caravan then traveled from Kampala to Kitgum, joined in solidarity by women from the region. A documentary of the Peace Caravan will be produced, which will give women the opportunity to talk about their experiences in the conflict and the subsequent peace-building process.

## **Public advocacy for peace**

Even as women’s voices have frequently been excluded from the public sphere, women’s community-based organizations have been extremely successful in challenging this state of affairs and reclaiming public spaces to advocate for peace. Women’s networks utilize public expressions of support and solidarity for peace to draw attention to important and often neglected aspects of a conflict, and to advocate for conflict prevention or conflict resolution. These initiatives often take the form of regular public events, such as women’s peace vigils.

The Blue Ribbon Peace Vigil in Fiji, for example, began in response to the 2000 coup, when the National Council of Women Fiji mobilized a network of women’s groups in Suva to gather for a peace and prayer vigil.<sup>18</sup> The peace vigil became a daily, then weekly, event incorporating a multi-ethnic group of women from civil society organizations. It instigated women’s roles in mediating between conflicting parties, in communicating and advocating with security forces, and in bringing different communities and groups together to pray for peace and unity in the country. The vigil was re-initiated after the December 2006 coup.

## 4. Increasing Access to Justice



*Women's group in northern Uganda. Their village is the site of a massacre which killed many community and family members.*

Women often face enormous barriers to accessing justice in the aftermath of armed conflict. This may be because legal services have simply not yet been restored, or because patriarchal attitudes and structures actively exclude women from traditional justice systems, or because of a lack of women-friendly legal services. Successful community-based initiatives that have facilitated women's access to justice in post-conflict settings include gender-sensitizing traditional justice mechanisms, providing community-based legal support, and working with the police at the community level.

### Traditional justice systems

Women are often excluded from traditional justice systems. This is both because in many communities women have historically been excluded from traditional decision-making structures in general, and have faced discrimination in the context of traditional justice mechanisms in particular. As a result, traditional justice mechanisms may hinder women from testifying, or may not recognize crimes of gender-based violence as punishable offenses.

The Rwandan Gacaca courts represent an important traditional dispute resolution and reconciliation mechanism, and significant support has been devoted to empowering women to participate in this mechanism.<sup>19</sup> The Gacaca courts are community-level courts where victims, perpetrators and the public gather to hear testimony concerning crimes committed during the genocide of 1994, and have proved an effective way of achieving justice within the context of a justice system overwhelmed by the scale and enormity of the crimes committed during the Rwandan genocide. With the support of UNIFEM and the Rwandan women's organization Pro-Femmes Twese Hamwe, efforts have been made to maximize women's participation, through advocacy regarding the integration of a gender perspective in implementation of Gacaca law, and through awareness-raising sessions for 100,000 women leaders, local government representatives and persons in prisons, as well as through training sessions for female judges. These efforts have yielded notable results, with women participating meaningfully in the Gacaca process as judges (over 30% of elected judges in the Gacaca courts are women,) <sup>20</sup> as well as witnesses testifying during Gacaca hearings.

There are, however, a number of challenges associated with the Gacaca system. While rape and sexual torture are classified as 'Category 1' crimes, to be dealt with by the regular courts, in order for a case to be categorized, the accusation must be brought before a public hearing. However, women understandably find it difficult to give testimony in public, especially around GBV crimes. In response to this obstacle, the Gacaca law was revised in 2004, such that victims of sexual crimes can present their case in front of one judge, rather than the entire community; it remains to be seen to what extent this provision is implemented in practice.<sup>21</sup> In addition, while women comprise the majority of witnesses for other types of genocide-related crimes, the obligation to testify can be a source of tension. For example, if a woman's husband committed a crime during the genocide, the wife may be exposed to strong pressure from her in-laws not to testify. This pressure is often compounded by the fact that in many cases women are dependent on their husband's family for economic support. <sup>22</sup>



## Community-based legal support

In many cases, the reason for impunity for violent crimes against women is not a lack of laws which address SGBV, but, rather the failure to implement those laws. The failure of implementation is linked to barriers such as lack of knowledge about legal rights, and legal institutions' resistance to prosecuting SGBV cases.

A particularly innovative approach to address these issues is that of the American Refugee Committee (ARC) Legal Aid Program in Guinea, which operates a 'Legal Aid Clinic.'<sup>23</sup> The Clinic runs an education program targeting refugees, community leaders, government and non-governmental aid workers, as well as United Nations employees, physical and mental health care providers, bar owners, hotel owners, video club owners, law enforcement personnel, and Guinean officials charged with the responsibility to protect. It includes information about the legal clinic's services, the substance of the laws regarding SGBV, and the penalties associated with violation of these laws.

The education program strives to educate refugees on their rights while aiming to deter would-be offenders. The Clinic also provides legal advice and representation to the survivors of violence, which enables:

- Punishment of those who engage in criminal activities;
- Protection and restitution for the survivors;
- Deterrence of others who might engage in similar acts;
- The existence of a visible, reliable, and effective avenue of recourse for women.

By filing cases, the Clinic promotes the enforcement and the rule of law within the Guinean legal system.

## Working with the police

Frequently, women victims of GBV are unwilling and unable to report the crimes to the police. One initiative aiming to overcome this barrier has been the establishment of specialized police units dealing with GBV.

The Sierra Leone Police (SLP), for example, have established Family Support Units (FSU) with specially trained male and female officers dedicated to working with victims of rape, sexual abuse, domestic violence and trafficking.<sup>24</sup> Located in the main police stations across the country, the FSUs are supposed to provide compassionate, humane, and appropriate assistance. The FSUs also have established referral services for free medical care and legal assistance. The FSU also engages in extensive public awareness-raising efforts, especially on the topics of sexual violence, domestic violence, HIV/AIDS, trafficking and female genital mutilation.

In the past, women rarely reported such crimes to the SLP. The FSUs, however, have been effective in enabling women to report cases of GBV. In 2003, FSUs received and investigated 3121 reports of sexual and physical violence, a significant increase over reporting in previous years. This rise in the number of reported cases is seen as a result of increased public awareness and public confidence in the FSUs.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, a UNICEF assessment of the FSUs found that the stigma associated with sexual exploitation and abuse has diminished, and people are more aware of the support services available.

## 5. Access to Support Services

In post-conflict settings, women's access to support services can be severely constrained. The health infrastructure of a country, including health clinics, may have been destroyed; personnel may have been displaced; and materials may have been lost. The lack of access to services is often exacerbated by the fact that women have significant needs for support as a consequence of their experiences during armed conflict – especially with regard to gender-based violence. At the same time, women are affected by multiple issues: both armed conflict and sexual and gender-based violence affect women's physical and psychological health, their legal rights, and their capacity to earn an income. In response to these challenges, many initiatives which aim to increase women's access to support services use a multi-sectoral approach; the innovations are in the particular combinations of services and sectors.



*A Safe house, home to six women and girls in Timor Leste.*

### Multi-sectoral support to women in post-conflict contexts

Female-headed households face particular challenges. One support services program targets widows in conflict regions in Nigeria. The Women for Women International program enrolls widows in a one year holistic program, during which they receive psychological counseling, financial assistance (which gives them the freedom to purchase basic goods, start a small business or send their children to school), and job skills training (more than 150 cooperatives composed graduates have registered with local authorities). Rights awareness and leadership education classes are given once a week. The skills and awareness that women have learned in these sessions have led to strong women's networks and increased participation in political advocacy, such as the successfully contesting – via traditional rulers— of local inheritance customs that discriminate against widows. The program also engages men—notably traditional rulers, government officials, religious leaders and businessmen—in gender sensitivity workshops. There is evidence that many of these men now not only advocate to bring an end to gender discrimination in their own homes, but also share what they have learned with other community members. These combined approaches contribute to improved peace-building capacity for women.<sup>26</sup>

## Box 4. Community involvement can improve support service programs

The extent of community involvement in a project has a critical impact on its success. One multi-sectoral project on GBV within refugees camps in Tanzania found that success in fighting GBV depended on how well both men and women participated in the design and implementation of the program.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, extending the benefits of a project to the community, and involving them in planning and implementation, was found to build support and encourage sustainability of a United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) project to support girls and women in Sierra Leone.<sup>28</sup> Host communities were sensitized to issues including gender equality and they were involved in project planning and implementation. For example, community members contributed local building materials for project structures, distributed condoms, and served as peer mobilizers in discouraging violence against women, child abuse and commercial sex. In addition, free health and education services for the host community encouraged their support of the project.

## Multi-sectoral support to survivors of SGBV

Many programs that increase access to support for survivors of SGBV combine the elements of medical services, psychosocial counseling and legal support. The ARC Community Safety Initiative in Guinea builds a comprehensive multi-sectoral approach in its efforts to prevent and respond to gender-based violence among Albadaria refugees.<sup>29</sup> Components include the following:

- Skill-building and income-generation activities, which aim to minimize women's vulnerability to exploitation by promoting economic self-sufficiency;
- Training grants, which provide vocational training and life skills classes on leadership, decision-making, and basic health, while academic scholarships are provided to girls who are attending school but are especially at risk of dropping out;
- 'Entrepreneurial assistance', which is provided to all Training Grant and Scholarship beneficiaries, involving training in business management, and the provision of a package of materials at the close of training so that the beneficiaries can start up a business using their new skills;
- Alternatives for commercial sex workers, which include vocational skills training and a monthly stipend to allow participants to focus on their training and not have to seek alternative income sources, along with reproductive health education, and medical testing. Upon graduation, participants receive a package of materials with which to start up their own businesses;
- Medical case management, which aims to increase the access and quality of care available to GBV survivors and highly vulnerable women, providing advocacy and support for them within the health system;
- GBV awareness trainings tailored to specific groups – such as security forces, male non-governmental organization (NGO) workers, drivers, health workers, teenage boys, and vulnerable girls and women – which increase these groups' ability to respond appropriately to GBV cases and to prevent sexual exploitation;
- 'Prevention Grants,' which are in-kind grants awarded to grassroots community groups who are committed to addressing GBV issues through culturally appropriate means such as drama, dance, music, and debates;
- Finally, the distribution of kerosene lanterns to refugee households and booths which house new arrivals, which addresses security concerns.

A comprehensive manual is available.<sup>30</sup>

## 6. Awareness Raising and Attitudinal Change



*Communication materials addressing violence against women, such as this billboard, are common in Liberia.*

Two key challenges to gender-sensitive conflict resolution are the lack of access to information and entrenched gender biases in social attitudes. Many community members – both men and women – may be unaware of the gender dimensions of conflict, women’s human rights, and SGBV violations, or may be unaware that they have access to conflict-prevention activities. This lack of awareness is linked to attitudes which enable conflict as well as SGBV.

### Increasing access to information and changing attitudes

Communication initiatives are often the most effective ways to enhance access to information and to change attitudes and behaviors towards gender-sensitive conflict resolution and combating SGBV. While radio and theatre have been used to this end for several years, currently new and innovative uses for these media are under way. The incorporation of listening groups or feedback discussions, for example, is crucial for reinforcing messages and for actively involving the community, enabling participants to represent their views, identify common concerns, and seek solutions that emerge from within the community.

Women often have even more difficulty than men in gaining access to what little information there is about peace-building and security. Radio has proved to be an effective communication method for reaching women, especially among illiterate audiences. In Nepal, for example, Equal Access, in partnership with General Welfare Prathistan, trained rural women as community radio reporters. As reporters, these women collected stories from other rural women to create a radio program entitled ‘Changing our World.’ This program, which reached two million listeners, covered issues relating to women’s human rights, peace-building, and violence against women. Importantly, 60 community listener groups were set up to encourage grass-roots leadership and changes in attitudes and beha-

### Box 5. Challenges with radio as a communication tool for women

Challenges to radio-based initiatives include the fact that few women own radios, and even fewer can afford batteries to run them, so men often control whether and when women can listen. As such, efforts should be made to supply wind-up and solar powered radios to women, and women-specific programs should be broadcast at times when they are most likely to tune in.<sup>32</sup>

violence. The project succeeded not only in increasing the awareness of community members regarding violence against women, but also served as a catalyst for actual changes in attitudes and behaviors. For example, there was a reduction of incidents of domestic violence in the communities and an increased reporting of incidents of violence to authorities. The project also created a pool of qualified and motivated women reporters.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, supported by the International Women's Development Agency, Women's Action for Change (WAC) in Fiji uses theatre as a tool in challenging sexist attitudes and violence against women, against the backdrop of ethnic tensions of Fiji.<sup>33</sup> The play entitled 'Another Way,' for example, concerns a young couple – Priya, from a working class Indo-Fijian family and Jerry, an indigenous Fijian. Priya's family expects her to marry an Indian man they have chosen, and the pressure and violence that comes with the resulting family conflict eventually leads her to end her life. The play was performed in front of around 2000 people at secondary schools and community centers in marginalized regions from 2005 to 2006. Following each performance, the 'play back' method was used to explore issues raised in the play, inviting the audience to discuss alternate responses and to see that there is indeed 'another way.' Select male and female audience members then took part in further theatre workshops and training in non-violent conflict resolution skills. The aim was to develop networks of diverse young men and women who have the skills and confidence to become community leaders, and several of the young people involved have since become involved in conflict mediation in their families and communities.<sup>34</sup>

## Challenging local power structures and men's behaviors

Even when women face considerable social exclusion at the community level, they can be successful in challenging local power structures and men's behaviors to prevent SGBV.

The women's anti-alcohol movement in Andhra Pradesh, India, was started and sustained by poor, low-caste, often agricultural working women, in response to the violence experienced at the hands of alcoholic men. Men's drinking also exacerbated family poverty through the squandering of male earnings on alcohol.<sup>35</sup> The women invoked the support of priests, pressuring men into taking an oath of abstinence at the temples and involving the temples in monitoring alcohol abuse. Women also prevented the men in the community from consuming alcohol by using community-based sanctions on men who drank, including strategies such as parading the drunk men around the community, refusing to give them food, and shaving off their hair. They stopped liquor sales by destroying shops and dens; countered the joint attacks of drunken men, police and thugs; and demanded an end to the practice of paying male labor in the form of liquor. The movement was successful in forcing the Andhra Pradesh State government to ban the sale of arrack (liquor) in October 1993 (this prohibition was subsequently revoked).

In another example, the Noor Education Centre, an NGO in Afghanistan, has run an 'Imam Initiative' in Jalalabad, which regards religion, custom and culture as tools for attitudinal change.<sup>36</sup> Discussions are held with religious leaders on issues such as women and Islam, sharia law, and the Koran. Human rights issues are subsequently introduced. This initiative has seen some success in changing ideas through religion, especially when Imams use Friday prayers as a venue to discuss women's issues.

## 7. Conflict Monitoring Systems

Frequently, gender issues including SGBV are not considered to be important warning signs of conflict, and women are often excluded from participating in community-based decision-making around peace-building processes. However, initiatives that use a gender-sensitive approach in early warning and monitoring of conflict can also contribute to SGBV prevention and women's peace-building. Conflict analysis, monitoring, and early warning and response are all significantly enhanced when a gender-sensitive approach is applied, because aspects of conflict that might not otherwise be



*UNIFEM facilitating a discussion of conflict early warning signs with women in the Solomon Islands.*

detected are exposed when women's experience of conflict is addressed. In particular, it is crucial to consider the ways in which information about both men and women, as well as information from both men and women can be used to prevent conflict and build peace in a gender-sensitive way.

In 2004-2006, UNIFEM conducted three pilot projects on gender-sensitive conflict monitoring, in Colombia, the Ferghana Valley, and the Solomon Islands.<sup>37</sup>

In the Solomon Islands, UNIFEM's gender-sensitive conflict early warning project:<sup>38</sup>

- Trained 20 male and female volunteers from five conflict-prone communities;
- Developed a set of gender-sensitive indicators of conflict and peace;
- Collected data at the community and national levels;
- Disseminated the data among communities, civil society, government and donors.

As such, the system became a social resource for the prevention of conflict. The use of gender-sensitive indicators (such as levels of domestic violence and rape, and women's levels of fear in going to markets) served to legitimize attention to gender issues and GBV as a signal of impending conflict and social dislocation. This, combined with working with women and men from the communities themselves, empowered women to engage – and be seen as legitimate – in community decision-making, and discussion and planning around community conflict prevention and peace-building strategies. It also proved successful as a means of involving men and raising their awareness of the consequences of GBV, and as a result several male participants became strong community advocates for women in GVB cases.

## 8. Making Communities Safer

The physical environment of communities can, sometimes unintentionally, make women more vulnerable to violence. For example, the design of the physical space can make activities such as using latrines or walking after dark unsafe for women. Aspects of community life, such as the proliferation of small arms in communities in the aftermath of conflict again compromise women's safety. Effective means of making communities safer include enabling women to better protect themselves from violence, and reducing the opportunities for perpetrators to commit acts of violence against women.

### Reducing small arms and light weapons (SALW)

The proliferation of small arms in communities renders both public and private space unsafe for women. Small arms and light weapons facilitate sexual violence against women during times of armed conflict, and their widespread presence in the aftermath of ceasefires or peace agreements continues to make women more vulnerable to rape and domestic violence.<sup>39</sup> Effective disarmament strategies at the community level are therefore crucial for improving women's physical security.



*A woman activist wearing her anti-gun t-shirt in Liberia.*

One successful documented case of women's role in disarmament is the 'Weapons for Development' program initiated by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the UN Department for Disarmament Affairs in Albania.<sup>40</sup> Women went door-to-door in their communities, raising awareness about the danger of small arms, collecting survey information on disarmament, and collecting large amounts of weapons and ammunition.

### Box 6. Women's Safety Audits

UN-Habitat's Safer Cities program uses 'Women's Safety Audits' to identify spaces where women feel unsafe and produce recommendations to address the problems.<sup>41</sup> In Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, community members used the audit to develop and implement an environment cleaning scheme, where women participate in clearing open spaces, cemetery sites and footpaths and cutting hedges, where criminals might be able to hide. In addition, they implemented a campaign to promote better lighting of public spaces, encouraging each household to put up a bulb outside their verandas to light up the surroundings. Similar lighting campaigns have been directed towards industry owners.

The program included the following components:

- A workshop on women's role in weapons collection, providing training to NGOs and political representatives to develop strategies for weapons collection;
- Capacity-building workshops for civil society leaders;
- A conference for 200 women called 'Women of Diber Say 'No to the Guns, Yes to Life and Development';
- Posters and radio programs raising awareness of women's roles in disarmament.

## Community safety initiatives

Women's safety and, conversely, their vulnerability to violence are often determined by the physical environment where they live, which determines the extent to which women can move about and actively engage the daily life of their communities outside the home.

Similarly, in the South African township of Khayelitsha, the German Bank for Reconstruction and Development together with the City of Cape Town has designed an innovative project entitled 'Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading.' This project found that women were particularly vulnerable to high levels of violence in open fields, narrow lanes, empty market stalls and communal toilets.<sup>42</sup> In response, the following strategies for reducing gender-based violence were identified:

- Improved street lighting and visibility;
- A more wide-spread and functional telephone system;
- Market stalls locked at night;
- More visible police patrolling and neighborhood watches;
- Sewers installed and outdoor toilets phased out;
- Communal sanitary facilities supervised.

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## 9. Conclusion

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Throughout the diverse examples of women's action in communities discussed in this paper, a number of common threads emerge. In some cases, women's initiatives are challenging and transforming the nature of dominant institutions and identities. In India, women's resistance challenged men's authority, and caused a shift in the culture of violent masculinities. Traditional (and often patriarchal) justice mechanisms were transformed in the gender-sensitization of the Gacaca courts in Rwanda, as was the police with the strengthening of the Family Support Units in Sierra Leone. In Burundi, the very nature of the community itself was re-cast through the 'social contracts' initiative: it was no longer defined along ethnic divisions.

Many of the case studies demonstrate a strategic usage of stereotyped gender roles. Women in communities choose to use strategies which are readily accessible to them in their daily lives: being present, using silence, public shaming, holding coffee meetings. They also capitalize on the commonly held images of women as peace-makers, as mothers who are both nurturers and arbitrators. In this way, women themselves are appropriating stereotypical gender roles, and using them to empower themselves and to strengthen their organizations at the community level.

One salient characteristic of the approaches accessible to women is their informality: many initiatives are small scale and rely on being physically present or having face-to-face contact in order to build peace and prevent SGBV. Raising awareness and increasing access to information through



theatre or community exchanges, making spaces safer through door-to-door neighborhood maintenance programs or resolving conflict through women's peace huts—all illustrate the effectiveness of informal community-led approaches used by women. A related issue is that much of women's contribution to peace and the prevention of SGBV within communities stems from women's frequent roles as informal community mobilizers and managers. This role is re-cast to focus on peace-building and violence reduction within the community.

A final similarity among the examples in this paper is the effort to avoid backlash. Women activists are vulnerable to hostility, especially within the context of patriarchal societies or sensitive post-conflict settings. Various strategies are used to avoid or mitigate potential backlash from community members, from using a poverty reduction justification among the anti-alcohol advocates in India, to incorporating traditional mediation practices in Timor Leste, to benefiting the whole community in community safety initiatives, to standing behind traditional gender roles as mothers and peace makers in order to gain a legitimate role in local decision-making.

These issues and strategies employed by women point back to the significant obstacles women face when working at the community level. In many ways, these common threads are direct responses to the need to overcome multiple constraints in order to work effectively. It is crucial not to underestimate the intensity of patriarchy at local levels. Beyond this, other key obstacles involve exclusion from decision-making, lack of access to information, justice and basic services, lack of technical skills, constraints to mobility, risks to physical safety, social resistance and backlash.

Ultimately, women face enormous challenges in translating national and international legal instruments into real rights and concrete changes in their lives at home and in the community. Such national and international agreements filter down to communities only very slowly, but it is vital that they do filter down. While UN Security Council resolution 1325 has been subjected to critiques – especially in terms of implementation and the filtering down of information and impact to women at the community level – women and men in communities do use policy changes. In order for 1325 to work and to be an effective instrument, however, it is vital that women and men work at the community level to build peace and prevent SGBV.

With its mandate to implement Resolution 1325, UNIFEM is directly tackling this challenge as it works to apply the resolution to everyday lives in communities around the world. The DFID-funded “Supporting Women's Engagement in Peace-Building and Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict: Community-Led Approaches” program is supporting initiatives like the ones described in this paper, across the six very different contexts of Afghanistan, Haiti, Liberia, Rwanda, Timor-Leste and Uganda. The program has a number of key elements which are common to all six countries, as well as context-specific elements responding to particular circumstances, as outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2. Initiatives supported by the DFID-funded UNIFEM, by location**

Type of Initiative	Location
Consultations with women at community level on issues of peace consolidation, disarmament, peace-building, and preventing SGBV.	All project countries
Working to make community-based peace building institutions and local authorities more responsive to women's priorities, as well as strengthening women's peace building organizations.	All project countries
Supporting the police and members of the judicial system to better prevent and respond to SGBV, including improved access to justice, reporting, recording and prosecuting of cases.	All project countries
Improving support services for women survivors of SGBV, through access to referral systems, medical and psychosocial support, or access to protected spaces such as transitional houses and shelters.	All project countries
Awareness-raising on women's rights in relation to SGBV, national SGBV legislation, and access to support services for survivors.	All project countries
Support for efforts to ensure that sexual violence is recognized as a crime in post-conflict justice and reconciliation mechanisms.	Afghanistan, Liberia, Uganda
Training women in gender analysis of conflict and peace and in negotiation and communication skills so as to improve their impact on peace and conflict mitigation.	Afghanistan, Haiti, Timor Leste, Uganda
Training members of customary institutions to apply international human rights standards to SGBV cases.	Liberia, Rwanda, Uganda
Supporting land management and administrative institutions to ensure a gender perspective in restitution of property rights and compensation.	Timor Leste, Uganda
Supporting the emergence of peaceful expressions of masculinity.	Afghanistan, Haiti
Supporting livelihood programs for women survivors of SGBV to reduce their vulnerability and break the cycle of violence.	Timor Leste.
Supporting the engagement of women from communities in formal peace negotiations.	Afghanistan, Uganda
Establishing Trust Funds to provide small grants to innovative community-led peace building and SGBV prevention initiatives.	Afghanistan, Haiti
Promoting women's engagement in reconciliation mechanisms, as well as ensuring those mechanisms is responsive to women's concerns.	Liberia, Rwanda

This program is in part inspired by the types of initiatives presented in this paper, and by the conviction that change must happen at the community level. UNIFEM and its partners hope that this program will help identify effective means of addressing the array of challenges faced by women at the community level, and discover some of the successful strategies that can embrace women's engagement and protect women's rights in different post-conflict contexts.

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UNIFEM is the women's fund at the United Nations. It provides financial and technical assistance to innovative programmes and strategies that promote women's human rights, political participation and economic security. UNIFEM works in partnership with UN organisations, governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and networks to promote gender equality. It links women's issues and concerns to national, regional and global agendas by fostering collaboration and providing technical expertise on gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment strategies.

United Nations Development Fund for Women  
304 East 45th Street  
15th Floor  
New York, NY 10017  
Tel: +1.212.906.6400  
Fax: +1.212.906.6705  
[www.unifem.org](http://www.unifem.org)  
[www.womenwarpeace.org](http://www.womenwarpeace.org)

