



**Gender Perspectives in Contemporary Peacebuilding: Collaborative
Approaches to Conflict Responses**

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Abstract: This article argues the need to prioritize local co-development of peacebuilding approaches to ensure context-specific and culturally relevant peace efforts. With the recognition that local populations remain primary actors within conflicts, it is argued that international peacebuilders must work with locals to ensure effective peacebuilding efforts. By applying a gender and humanitarian approach to peacebuilding analysis, in both theory and practice, this article offers an alternative, complementary approach to the ‘local-turn’ theory in contemporary peacebuilding. The application of international peace and security frameworks – such as Women, Peace and Security resolutions – informs this piece and offers proven successes for collaborative and local partnerships in building effective peace.

Human rights is a complex and often convoluted concept to put into practice. Peace activists have yearned to ensure active and effective livable rights; but why do they experience such difficulties? To be effective peace workers, one must first begin to understand the theories which influence these interventions. Scholars and activists have long worked within the field of human rights, international peacebuilding and peace work; and continue to discover new ways to mainstream gender, transform humanitarian action, and create grassroots and culturally collaborative strategies. This article argues that by recognizing local people as the primary actors in conflicts - having relevant context and knowledge of the crisis - it is the responsibility of international actors to work with these locals to sustainably develop peacebuilding programming and create new effective, and meaningful solutions for peace. Gender perspectives in contemporary peacebuilding offer an essential insight into the realities of crises; these must not be overlooked when conceptualizing, implementing, and monitoring peacebuilding responses.

It is important to recognize that gender dynamics and gender-sensitive responses to peacebuilding and humanitarian action do not solely lie in the solution of adding more women - it is more complex than that. Gender considerations, and thus more inclusive and holistic responses to conflict, require additional analysis of impacts, experiences, and outcomes on all genders. It goes beyond simply adding more women or young women into the solution. This will be explored further in this paper.

International frameworks

Changing the overall local discourse and opinion on women's rights is difficult. Women's rights as human rights were first called upon publicly when Hillary Rodham

Clinton, then-First Lady of the United States, pronounced her famous speech at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China on September 5, 1995.¹ Five years later, the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) was adopted—a milestone for women worldwide.²

In 2000, Resolution 1325³ was “seen as a great victory for the women activists who had fought long and hard, as their influence had penetrated through to the very heart of masculine power within the UN.”⁴ Not only did Resolution 1325 set a precedent for other women's human rights frameworks, but it has become a tool for women's civil society and non-governmental organizations across the globe. Many practitioners use Resolution 1325 as a foundation for awareness-raising, advocacy, and activism within their spheres. The resolutions on Women, Peace and Security and the constant recurrence on the Security Council agenda has been a great advancement for international human rights over the past two decades.⁵ The importance of women's rights is finally recognized and legally protected; the largest global governance structure is now responsible for reinforcing said rights and ensuring that Member States are complying with their legal obligations to protect, uplift and support women's rights within their borders. Resolution 1325 is responsible for emphasizing the role of women in the “prevention and resolution

¹ Hillary Clinton, *Remarks for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women*. (San Francisco: United Nations Development Program, 1995) <http://www.un.org/esa/gopher-data/conf/fwew/conf/gov/950905175653.txt>.

² Security Council, *Resolution 1325* (New York: United Nations, 2000), <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N00/720/18/PDF/N0072018.pdf?OpenElement>, 1.

³ United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (on women and peace and security) was adopted in October 2000 and set the ground-work in international law for the participation, prevention, protection, and relief and recovery for women affected by conflict.

⁴ Susan Willett, “Introduction: Security Council Resolution 1325: Assessing the Impact on Women, Peace and Security,” *International Peacekeeping* 17, no. 2 (2010): pp. 142-158, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533311003625043>, 149.

⁵ PeaceWomen, *Our Work*, (The Netherlands: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 2020) <https://www.peacewomen.org/peacewomen-work>.

of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.”⁶

Since before the creation of the United Nations, civil society organizations have been critical actors of change in the Peace and Security sector. Civil society has organized, mobilized, and implemented many resolutions and initiatives worldwide to address injustices faced by individuals and marginalized groups. They were responsible for bringing issues affecting women and girls to the forefront decades before the draft and adoption of Resolution 1325.⁷ Many civil society movements have led to social change. However, international human rights laws, and even federal or regional legislation, certainly do not ensure change or shifts in local discourse and social norms.

Gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming is “a method and practice – an applied theory – for changing the status quo of unequal gender relations in decision making and policymaking and service delivery.”⁸ Resolution 1325 mandates that women’s equal participation in peacebuilding at all levels – nationally, regionally, and locally – includes a specific call for monitoring instruments, it is imperative that gender mainstreaming be prioritized in peacebuilding.⁹

⁶ Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women. *Landmark Resolution on Women, Peace and Security*. (New York: United Nations, 2016).

⁷ See note 5.

⁸ Dennis J. Sandole and Ingrid Staroste, “Making the Case for Systematic, Gender-Based Analysis in Sustainable Peace Building,” *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2015): pp. 119-147, <https://doi.org/10.1002/crq.21147>, 131.

⁹ Sandole and Staroste, “Making the Case,” 130.

Scholars, such as Betty Reardon, who worked on advocacy for the adoption of Resolution 1325, have developed further theories which touch on its implementation within the context of gender mainstreaming. For example, Reardon's concept of peace education – that peace must be a transformational approach that includes reform and reconstruction of traditions – demonstrates the need to mainstream gender within peace work and its activities in local contexts, from a broader, not exclusively women-focused paradigm.¹⁰ This also challenges the notion that gender mainstreaming is only about women. Many argue that gender mainstreaming is about going beyond the gender binary and understanding that individuals live their lives and experiences differently based on their gender – regardless of the binary – therefore, the responses to their experiences must also consider various gender dynamics.¹¹

Dennis J. D. Sandole and Ingrid Staroste, professors at George Mason University, also highlight that despite UN efforts, gender mainstreaming has proven to be contentious in both concept and practice. It is seen as a top-down approach by many because “the concept of gender mainstreaming lies predominantly with the leadership of an organization or network.”¹² Instead, Barbara Stiegler argues that “decision makers must take into account the gender mainstreaming principle and consult women as experts on specific situations of their lives.”¹³ This is also relevant to the ‘local-turn’ in peacebuilding approaches, which many scholars argue is needed to ensure sustainable solutions and responses to conflicts.¹⁴

¹⁰ Betty Reardon, *Comprehensive Peace Education Educating for Global Responsibility* (New York: Teachers College, 1988).

¹¹ See note 9.

¹² Sandole and Staroste, “Making the Case for Systematic, Gender-Based Analysis,” 131.

¹³ Barbara Stiegler, *How Gender Enters the Mainstream Concepts, Arguments and Practical Examples of the EU Strategy on Gender Mainstreaming* (Bonn: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2001): 11.

¹⁴ Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver P. Richmond, “The Local Turn in Peace Building: A Critical Agenda for Peace,” *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 5 (2013): 763-783, [doi:10.1080/01436597.2013.800750](https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.800750);

The concept of praxis is also highlighted by Sandole and Staroste with regard to its importance in peace work.¹⁵ They claim that gender mainstreaming is both a method and practice – a method of applied theory – which works to actively challenge social norms and discourses of unequal gender dynamics within policy development and decision-making, including on-the-ground program delivery.¹⁶ Other scholars go further into the concept of praxis, such as Paulo Freire, and Mohamed Walid Lutfy and Cris Toffolo, who emphasize that praxis requires “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.”¹⁷ Far too often theory does not meet practice, thus limiting its ability to pursue sustainable and long-lasting peace.

“Employing gender mainstreaming heightens awareness and attention to issues that affect women disproportionately and differently in comparison to men,” claim Sandole and Staroste.¹⁸ This argument is relevant to peacebuilding as it has significant impacts on post-conflict recovery; violence experienced by women in conflicts are different to those of men, both statistically and in practice. For example, instances of rape as a weapon of war, human trafficking, and the relegation of women in political discourse to objectified entities are most often violations perpetrated on women. Janie Leatherman and Nadezhda Griffin, who have written at length on sexual violence, argue that – for example, rape as a weapon of war – is used as a strategy of war within violent conflicts.¹⁹

John Heathershaw, “Towards Better Theories of Peacebuilding: Beyond the Liberal Peace Debate,” *Peacebuilding 1*, no. 2 (2013): 275-282, [doi:10.1080/21647259.2013.783260](https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2013.783260).

¹⁵ See note 9.

¹⁶ See note 13.

¹⁷ Paulo Friere, *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 51; Mohamed Walid Lutfy and Cris E. Toffolo, *Handbook of Research on Promoting Peace through Practice, Academia, and the Arts* (Hershey: IGI Global, 2018).

¹⁸ Sandole and Staroste, “Making the Case,” 132.

¹⁹ Janie Leatherman and Nadezhda Griffin, “Ethical and Gendered Dilemmas of Moving from Emergency Response to Development in ‘Failed’ States,” *Handbook of Conflict Analysis and Resolution*, 2008, pp. 380-394, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203893166-39>, 362.

This is one of the many unjust violations against women, which are more widely recognized and continuing to be documented. Furthermore, women and girls are silenced and forced to bear the traumas that they have been subjected to, which is a problem related to justice and conflict resolution practices – another area that would benefit from gender mainstreaming considerations.²⁰ To ensure these realities are sufficiently considered, monitoring frameworks have been put in place.

There are a number of accountability mechanisms to evaluate the progress and drawbacks of gender mainstreaming within the UN and by Member States, including the UN Progress Study on 1325, the UN Secretary-General's Annual Report on WPS, Resolution 1325's Security Council Open Debate, and CEDAW shadow reports.²¹ Scholar-practitioners, such as Jacqui True and Sanam Anderlini, have written extensively on the importance of these monitoring and accountability mechanisms which offer tangible and real opportunities for non-State actors to bring forth human rights abuses which continue in their regions.²² These violations would likely go undocumented if it were not for the civil society monitoring mechanisms which provide a platform to civil society actors to shed light on local realities. Thania Paffenholz also provides an analysis of peacebuilding where she insists on the role of civil society in ensuring sustainable and

²⁰ Leatherman and Griffin, "Ethical and Gendered Dilemmas," 364.

²¹ The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979 and monitors Member States signatories' progress on upholding the Convention. When a Member State undergoes a review period, civil society and other entities may submit to the CEDAW Committee shadow reports to shed light on the realities of the situation in their country.

²² Jacqui True, "Women, Peace and Security in Post-Conflict and Peacebuilding Contexts," Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution NOREF, (March 14, 2013), <https://noref.no/Publications/Themes/Gender-and-inclusivity/Women-peace-and-security-in-post-conflict-and-peacebuilding-contexts>; Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, *Women Building Peace: What They Do, Why It Matters* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishing, 2007).

proper peacebuilding methodologies; she argues that peace can never be achieved without local ownership.²³

Humanitarian Interventions

The concept of “do no harm” is another crucial component of peacebuilding, as arguably peacebuilding and humanitarian action are intrinsically linked. In s *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace—or War*, Mary B. Anderson explores the concepts of peacebuilding from a “do no harm” framework, understanding that once peacebuilders engage within the conflict, they are undoubtedly part of the solution but often can also be part of the problem.²⁴ As peacebuilders seek to be part of the solution rather than the problem, the success of never doing harm lies in evaluating the validity and impact of peacebuilding work in each step of the process, and thus embracing a critical analysis approach to peacebuilding. Furthermore, the “do no harm” is a core concept to the fundamental principles of good humanitarian work.

According to the *Gender Handbook for Humanitarian Action*, gender mainstreaming in humanitarian interventions – and thus peacebuilding approaches – is important because it enables the following outcomes:

1. Allows for a more accurate understanding of the situation;
2. Enables us to meet the needs and priorities of the population in a more targeted manner, based on how women, girls, boys and men have been affected by the crisis;

²³ Thania Paffenholz, *Civil Society and Peacebuilding: A Critical Assessment* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010).

²⁴ Mary B. Anderson, *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace-or War* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999).

3. Ensures that all people affected by a crisis are acknowledged and that all their needs and vulnerabilities are taken into account; and
4. Facilitates the design of more appropriate and effective responses.²⁵

Organizations, such as the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP), are examples of humanitarian actors who prioritize gender mainstreaming within humanitarian action and have significantly contributed to peacebuilding approaches in various regions. They claim that “[e]nsuring synergies between the [Women, Peace and Security] resolutions and humanitarian action leads to more inclusive, gender-responsive, and transformative crisis response and recovery, which builds community resilience, and prevents further outbreaks of conflict.”²⁶ The GNWP’s work with young Rohingya refugee women, for example, has helped decrease tensions among the Rohingya and host community members in Balukhali Refugee Camp, in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh.²⁷ This demonstrates how peacebuilding approaches to humanitarian action with specific gender considerations can have significant impacts on peace outcomes.

Keeping in mind that humanitarian responses rarely go according to plan, the intentions and approaches for peacebuilding should prioritize the safety, security and process of healing of the local population – their well-being and buy-in is primordial for sustainable peacebuilding. There is no situation where intervention without consulting those on the ground can be successful - this includes humanitarian and

²⁵ IASC Reference Group on Gender and Humanitarian Action, *Guideline: The Gender Handbook for Humanitarian Action* (New York: Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2018) https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2018-iasc_gender_handbook_for_humanitarian_action_eng_0.pdf, 20.

²⁶ Global Network of Women Peacebuilders (GNWP), *Empowering Local Women and Youth to Participate in Decision-making in Humanitarian Action and Crisis Recovery to Build More Peaceful and Resilient Communities* (New York, 2020), https://gnwp.org/wp-content/uploads/Edited-GNWP-Humanitarian-Brochure_Nov-2020.pdf, 3.

²⁷ GNWP, *Empowering Local Women and Youth*, 6.

conflict-response-focused peacebuilding. This is relevant to gender mainstreaming as it offers both a critical analysis of the conflict and the response, and enables strong do no harm principles.

Cultural and Grassroots Collaboration

Along with the concepts of do no harm and gender mainstreaming, a third important component to international peacebuilding work is cultural and grassroots collaboration; some scholars argue that this is the ‘local-turn.’²⁸ These approaches’ crucial nature cannot be stressed enough – culturally appropriate and meaningful collaboration with grassroots organizations or people are imperative for sustainable peace.²⁹ No intervention or Western organization truly knows or understands what is needed on the ground without adequate and meaningful collaboration, and respectful dialogue, with local people.³⁰ The individuals on the ground, working tirelessly to keep their families and communities safe, are the sole owners of the knowledge of what is required to help relieve their situation. This is evidenced by numerous research, including in the case of young women organizing to promote local ownership of the new Bangsamoro Organic Law in the Bangsamoro autonomous region of the Philippines, which was cited by the UN Secretary General as a peacebuilding best practice.³¹

²⁸ Mac Guinty and Richmond, “The Local Turn in Peace Building.”; Susan P. Campbell, *Global Governance and Local Peace: Accountability and Performance in International Peacebuilding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

²⁹ Katrina Leclerc, “Culturally Relevant and Collaborative Peacebuilding: The Young Women for Peace and Leadership,” *Master's thesis* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 2019).

³⁰ Campbell, “Global Governance and Local Peace.”; David Cortright, Conor Seyle, and Kristen Wall, *Governance for Peace How Inclusive, Participatory and Accountable Institutions Promote Peace and Prosperity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

³¹ UN Secretary General. *Report to the Security Council on Youth, Peace and Security*. New York: United Nations, 2020, 4.

Culturally appropriate measures of interventions and programs are also crucial to the success of peacebuilding work.³² International actors cannot claim to have helped anyone if they are further victimizing or oppressing the recipients with their colonial ideals or approaches. The concepts of democracy, peace, and justice are all important to living rich and fulfilling lives; however, the way these concepts are lived and executed – in all facets of the world – is extremely different.³³ Democracy represents the ability to choose one’s leadership, and therefore must remain as such when implemented in other contexts. Peace in some instances is the mere absence of overt violence, but in others also extends to the concepts of positive peace where systemic and social structures are deconstructed to eliminate all forms of oppression and discrimination.³⁴ Justice is an avenue to which perpetrators are held accountable for the harms they have done, regardless of what form this takes. It is crucial for sustainable and durable peace that peacebuilding interveners embrace the concepts of cultural diversity and that they are aware of their own biases.³⁵ This often requires conceptualizing peacebuilding from a new perspective, such as described by John Paul Lederach’s *The Moral Imagination*. *The Moral Imagination* demands practitioners to think beyond traditional approaches and re-imagine peacebuilding methodologies both in theory and practice.³⁶ The requirements

³² Campbell, “Global Governance and Local Peace.”

³³ Oliver P. Richmond, “The Problem of Peace: Understanding the ‘liberal Peace’,” *Conflict, Security & Development* 6, no. 3 (2006): 291-314, [doi:10.1080/14678800600933480](https://doi.org/10.1080/14678800600933480); John Heathershaw, “Towards Better Theories of Peacebuilding.”

³⁴ Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research.” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167-191, [doi:10.1177/002234336900600301](https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301).

³⁵ Séverine Autesserre, “International Peacebuilding and Local Success: Assumptions and Effectiveness,” *International Studies Review* 19, no. 1 (2017): 114-132, doi.org/10.1093/isr/viw054.

³⁶ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

of Lederch's theory are also true in the context of gender perspectives and in considering these in peacebuilding program development and implementation.³⁷

Empowerment and Agency

Gender perspectives in contemporary peacebuilding are relevant and important both in theory and practice. Another component of these perspectives, related to gender mainstreaming, is the concept of empowerment. There are two primary ways to view women's empowerment: a top-down approach where women need to be saved and given a voice; and a bottom-up approach that recognizes women as critical actors that must be given a platform and supported. Unfortunately, much of the generously funded peacebuilding work which encompasses empowerment models continue to imply that women are victims – damsels in distress – that need saving. Anna Snyder and Naila Kabeer have written extensively on this problematic conceptualization of women's inclusion in peace.³⁸ Empowerment, as it is widely understood, takes away from the individual's agency, ownership, and identity.³⁹ Kabeer emphasizes the importance of empowerment as a bottom-up approach, where women and girls are agents of change.⁴⁰ Snyder adds that “women must be significant actors in the process, not simply recipients of improved outcomes.”⁴¹ Nripendra Kishore Mishra and Tulika Tripathi conceptualize

³⁷ See note 32.

³⁸ Anna Snyder, “Gender Relations and Conflict Transformation Among Refugee Women,” in *Handbook of Conflict Analysis and Resolution* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008); Naila Kabeer, “Conflicts Over Credit: Re-Evaluating the Empowerment Potential of Loans to Women in Rural Bangladesh,” *World Development* 29, no. 1 (2001): 63-84, [doi:10.1016/s0305-750x\(00\)00081-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0305-750x(00)00081-4).

³⁹ Leclerc, “Culturally Relevant and Collaborative Peacebuilding.”

⁴⁰ Kabeer, “Conflicts Over Credit.”

⁴¹ Snyder, “Gender Relations and Conflict Transformation Among Refugee Women,” 50.

women's agency and how it relates to empowerment.⁴² They argue that agency is an essential aspect of empowerment, especially within development work.⁴³

In order to have adequate gender mainstreaming in peacebuilding, the problematic duality in interpretations of empowerment models must be addressed. In November 2020, the Canadian Coalition for Youth, Peace and Security (CCYPS) submitted their recommendations for Canada's new Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) - which is heavily focused on the empowerment of women and girls - to Global Affairs Canada. The CCYPS's policy recommendations claimed

[e]mpowerment is problematic as it infers a lack of autonomy, ability, and independence. Instead, [CCYPS] asks that [Global Affairs Canada] prioritize language on uplifting and elevating young women, women and girls in the new FFP. This ensures the recognition of the agency and their already active contributions in various aspects of societies.⁴⁴

Furthermore, Rameesha Qazi, Rosalyn Martin, and Olivia Compton insist that current conceptualization of empowerment "heavily relies on autonomy being given through a hierarchy, and more often than not through patriarchy. The reliance on autonomy being given through a hierarchy, patriarchy and hegemony are inherently problematic and infers a lack of autonomy, ability, and independence for youth stakeholders and their allies."⁴⁵

⁴² Nripendra Kishore Mishra and Tulika Tripathi. "Conceptualising Women's Agency, Autonomy and Empowerment." *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 11 (2011), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41151972>.

⁴³ Mishra and Tripathi, "Conceptualising Women's Agency, Autonomy and Empowerment."

⁴⁴ Canadian Coalition for Youth, Peace & Security, *Feminist Foreign Policy Review*. (Amnesty International, 2020), https://www.amnesty.ca/sites/default/files/CCYPS%20Submission%20to%20GAC_Feminist%20Foreign%20Policy%20Review.%20Nov%202020-EN.pdf, 1.

⁴⁵ Rameesha Qazi, Rosalyn Martin, and Olivia Compton, *Why "Empowerment" is no longer enough*, (Ottawa: Women, Peace and Security Network-Canada, 2020), <https://wpsn-canada.org/2020/12/09/why-empowerment-is-no-longer-enough/>.

This is one of many examples of civil society organizations pushing decision-makers and policy development towards more inclusive and locally-centred responses, while challenging their preconceived notions of peacebuilding.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is doubtful that developing and implementing peacebuilding programming strictly from a global non-gendered perspective will ensure sustainable results, even with a human rights lens. It is essential to collaborate with individuals on the ground in order to adequately understand and address the root causes of a conflict, including by prioritizing considerations of gender dynamics and their impacts. The application of gender mainstreaming and international frameworks is only as successful as the efforts and support they receive; increased funding and development of gender-focused initiatives have demonstrated a shift in the likelihood of generating success stories. By understanding theoretical perspectives of gender considerations and peacebuilding; acknowledging the different systemic, social, and individual structures which need to change to create durable peace; and, analyzing and critiquing peacebuilding approaches from an objective perspective then can effective and meaningful peacebuilders be developed. Only if the work to uplift and amplify all members of impacted communities is prioritized then can those working to support it claim truly successful peacebuilding interventions, towards eventual peace in the affected regions.

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