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Backgrounder  
**WOMEN AT THE  
HEART OF PEACE  
AND RECONCILIATION**

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Development  
and Peace

CARITAS CANADA

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# WOMEN AT THE HEART OF PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

## Women and peace: a historical relationship

Women have long been associated with peace and reconciliation around the world. Women have made vital contributions to peacebuilding and peace processes in diverse places such as Colombia, Guatemala, Liberia, Northern Ireland and the Philippines, just to name a few<sup>1</sup>. There are countless examples and studies of women's organizations engaging in the process of peace and reconciliation, whether at the national or international level, going as far back as World War I.

In April of 1915, a group of over 1000 women activists from 12 warring and neutral countries decided that they could no longer sit and wait for the end of war so they gathered in The Hague and convened the first International Congress of Women (ICW)<sup>2</sup>. On its first mission, the Congress sent 30 delegates to present its action plan to European heads of state. The ICW president, Jane Addams, met with US President Woodrow Wilson, providing him with many of the '14 points' that he took to the Versailles talks that ended the war<sup>3</sup>. ICW participants went on to form the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), which is still active today. In 2015, the WILPF celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of working to put a stop to war, making it the oldest peace organisation in the world<sup>4</sup>.

The impact of women peacebuilders was publicly recognized and rewarded in 2011, when the

Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to three inspiring women for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia), Leymah Gbowee (Liberia) and Tawakkul Karman (Yemen). This decision by the Nobel Committee reaffirmed the importance of women's contribution to peace<sup>5</sup>.

Throughout the years, women have challenged militarism, they have opposed nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, and they have prevented violent extremism, sometimes at the cost of their lives. By adopting effective, community-based, non-violent approaches rooted in cooperation and trust, and by organizing across political, religious and ethnic lines, women have transformed peace and reconciliation processes on every continent<sup>6</sup>. Whether as negotiators, activists or community leaders, women have contributed to peacebuilding and peace processes through a wide variety of roles<sup>7</sup>.

## Women's contribution to peace and reconciliation processes

The necessity of women's equal participation in peace and reconciliation processes has been recognized on many occasions, directly and indirectly, in the UN Charter, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Hague Agenda for Peace and Justice for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and in the Namibia Plan of Action, as well as by the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the UN

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The first International Congress of Women in The Hague in 1915.

Photo: Wikipedia

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On the cover:

Ixiles women in Guatemala listen to testimonies during the legal proceedings on genocide.

Photo: Trocaire

Security Council and the UN General Assembly, among others<sup>8</sup>. On October 31, 2000, the Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (UNSCR 1325), thereby urging “all actors to increase the participation of women and incorporate gender perspectives in all United Nations peace and security efforts”<sup>9</sup>. More specifically, “the resolution reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peacebuilding, 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”<sup>10</sup>.

The evidence shows that the inclusion of women helps prevent conflict, creates peace, enhances reconciliation processes, and sustains security after war ends<sup>11</sup>. Recent quantitative and qualitative research and empirical analysis have demonstrated that when including women is made a priority, peace is more likely—particularly when women are in a position to influence decision making<sup>12</sup>. For example, 40 in-depth case studies on the role of women and gender during political negotiations and their implementation conducted by the Graduate Institute’s Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) revealed that the meaningful participation of women is correlated with positive negotiation and implementation outcomes<sup>13</sup>.

Since the impact of armed conflict on women differs greatly from the impact on men, their contribution to peace processes also differs. Women are more likely to be victims of sexual violence, and are often responsible for providing food, shelter, and education for their families while conflict rages or after their families have been displaced. Women peacebuilders bring different perspectives and priorities than men, so when women are included, the nature of the dialogue changes. Women tend to contribute to a more holistic understanding of peace that addresses short-term security issues as well as long-term needs such as education, health-care, jobs and land. Women also tend to share a vision for peace based on respect for the dignity of the individual, regardless of nationality, ethnicity or economic background (even while their governments maintained isolationist or pro-war positions). Most importantly, they share the understanding that peace is inextricably linked with equality between women and men.

Because of their rootedness in their communities, they play a crucial role in re-establishing the social fabric in the aftermath of conflict<sup>14</sup>.

Women can also be a valuable resource for reconciliation initiatives since their social roles in some contexts position them well to lead reconciliation efforts. This is because they are sometime perceived as being more trustworthy than discredited political or traditional leaders<sup>15</sup>. For example, South African women played significant roles in the planning, development and implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)<sup>16</sup>. Their participation as commissioners, staff and witnesses contributed to the success of the TRC and, ultimately, to South Africa’s successful transition from a State built upon the subjugation of its majority population to one based on democracy<sup>17</sup>.

### **Canada’s commitment to women, peace and security**

Canada is a strong supporter of international mandates and laws on women’s rights and empowerment, including UNSCR 1325<sup>18</sup>. In fact, Canada was on the Security Council when the Resolution was adopted<sup>19</sup>. Canada is also a founding member and chair of the “Friends of Women, Peace, and Security” coalition in New York and often convenes forums that promote dialogue on the progress and challenges of implementing UNSCR 1325<sup>20</sup>. To ensure the implementation of the principles of UNSCR 1325, Canada created the Canadian Committee on Women, Peace, and Security in 2001. This committee is comprised of parliamentarians, government officials, and civil society representatives<sup>21</sup>. In 2010, Canada launched its National Action Plan (NAP), which includes “Advocating for the active and meaningful participation and representation of women and local women’s groups in peace and security activities, including peace processes”<sup>22</sup>.

In February 2017, the Government of Canada tabled its response to the report of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, entitled “An Opportunity for Global Leadership: Canada and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda”. The Standing Committee made 17 recommendations, such as:

- increasing the number of women military officers, of police officers and civilians it puts forward to fill senior UN positions;

- taking a leading role on peace operations issues and women, peace and security through forums at the UN;
- increasing the number of women employed in peace operations; and
- including women in peace processes by supporting local civil society organizations and women human rights defenders<sup>23</sup>.

Following the release of this report, the government held consultations in order to renew its National Action Plan for the next five years. With the launch of Canada's new International Assistance Policy in June 2017, Marie-Claude Bibeau, Minister of International Development and La Francophonie, reiterated Canada's commitment to the issue of women, peace and security by putting gender equality and the empowerment of women at the centre of Canada's approach to conflict prevention, resolution and transition to peace<sup>24</sup>.

## Challenges

Women's participation in peace processes, and in peace operations in particular, remains unfair and unequal. Since the adoption of Resolution 1325, many other important resolutions regarding women, peace and security have been taken, but unfortunately, only marginal progress has been made with regard to the number of women in formal peace processes or the design and conduct of peace talks in ways that would give greater voice to women, particularly from civil society<sup>25</sup>. Endemic discrimination, marginalization by decision-makers and gender-based violence are still significant barriers to achieving the goals of Resolution 1325 and of subsequent resolutions. Tradition and cultural practices also present challenging obstacles to the inclusion of women in peace and reconciliation processes or post-war governance unless a formal mechanism, like the use of quotas, is in place to support this<sup>26</sup>. The lack of resources available is another major challenge faced by women peacebuilders.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

For peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives to remain sustainable in the long term, women must be included in all levels and phases of the peace and reconciliation process, whether it's directly at the negotiation table or through various other mechanisms. Organizations like Search for Common Ground (a partner of Development and Peace in the Middle East) and many other organizations have been providing training for women to develop negotiation skills and leadership<sup>27</sup>. International groups can also act as facilitators, bringing groups of women together so they can develop strategies and learn new leadership skills. It is not enough simply to increase the number of women involved. The ability of women to exercise influence also needs to be improved.

Conflicts and wars can exacerbate women's marginalization, but they can also be used

as an opportunity for women's empowerment because when women are included in their resolution, it increases the chances of a peaceful outcome for the entire community<sup>28</sup>. This is why Development and Peace calls for the full participation of women and for the full integration of women's concerns and needs in all peace processes, agreements and transitional governance structures. Within these processes, equality between women and men should also be specifically addressed. The Canadian government has stated its commitment to this work through its new International Assistance Policy; however, in order to realize its ambitions for a more inclusive, peaceful world, Canada must also increase its budget for international assistance. Without peace there can be no development. It is the foundation for building a better world.



## Case study –

# Colombia

In 2012, following 50 years of conflict between the Colombian government and various guerrilla groups, President Juan Manuel Santos officially started peace talks with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and more recently, in 2016, with the National Liberation Army (ELN). Despite the signing of a peace agreement with the FARC in late 2016, many Colombians, especially those living in rural communities, continue to face severe challenges. For half a century, these rural communities have borne the brunt of the conflict between the armed guerrillas, the far-right paramilitary militias and the national armed forces.

The struggle to control land, territory and resources are at the heart of this conflict, which has led to the forced displacement of an estimated seven million rural inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> For decades, those most affected have been the peasant farmers, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. They have endured violence, massacres, assassinations, disappearances and have been terrorized. In several regions, particularly areas where government control and services are scarce or absent (services such as healthcare, education, security, roads and electricity), rural dwellers' lands have been violently seized by agri-food and mining industries, and residents' rights have been systematically violated.

Armed conflict and socio-political violence have affected human rights in general, and women's rights in particular. Women have been subjected to acts of violence perpetrated by armed belligerents and by members of their own communities. Yet their plight has long been ignored and gone unreported. The longstanding violation of women's economic, political and social rights means that today very few Colombian women participate in politics, organizations or productive life.

Against this background, the Coordinador Nacional Agrario (CNA – National Agrarian Coordination), a national peasant movement and Via Campesina member, has developed training programs and places for women to participate in learning, discussions and plans to improve their lives and those of their communities. They learn to assert their rights and develop proposals for land development. They also engage in collective and community efforts to build a culture of peace.

Luz Estella Cifuentes, head of the women's secretariat and the CNA's inter-ethnic political training school for peasant



Luz Estella with other CNA women in Bogotá.

farmers, Afro-Colombian and Indigenous women, has been a key national leader of this program. "In 2012, more than 40 women leaders from across the country met to discuss the challenges that we were facing," she says. "It became clear to us that the major stumbling block to our active participation arose from gaps in our training and organization and because we needed to formulate an inclusive political proposal. This realization gave rise to the idea of creating an inter-ethnic political training school for rural Colombian women, and in 2014, Development and Peace helped us establish this itinerant school."

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## Between 2014 and 2017, 295 women from over 10 regions in Colombia participated in workshops.

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The goal of the political training school is to empower Colombian women living in rural areas. In this school, women analyze and discuss gender equality, the challenges to development, women's active participation in the community, and women's participation in building peace at the local, regional and national levels.

They also discuss their common concerns, issues and challenges and how to engage in a reliable and credible manner with local, regional and national authorities and other organizations. At workshop sessions, they develop leadership and public speaking skills, and they are encouraged to share their ideas and strategies for land development. They also develop an understanding of their rights, a readiness to demand policy changes in support of a governance model that addresses their needs, and an ability to promote peace in Colombia. This is crucial, as the active participation of rural women in decision-making forums is not only key to improving their living conditions, but central to building a lasting peace in their nation.

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<sup>1</sup> It is very difficult to determine the exact number of internally displaced people in Colombia. The most conservative figure put forward by the Colombian government is at least 3.2 million, whereas the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates this number to be closer to 7.4 million. Colombia is among the four countries with the world's highest number of internally displaced people. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Forced displacement growing in Colombia despite peace agreement*, March 10, 2017, online: [UNHCR \[unhcr.org/news/briefing/2017/3/58c26e114/forced-displacement-growing-colombia-despite-peace-agreement.html\]\(https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2017/3/58c26e114/forced-displacement-growing-colombia-despite-peace-agreement.html\)](https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2017/3/58c26e114/forced-displacement-growing-colombia-despite-peace-agreement.html) (consulted on July 11, 2017).

## Case study –

# Syria

The conflict that has raged for more than six years in Syria has had devastating consequences for the people there. Communities have been divided; the country's infrastructure, monuments and economy have been destroyed; 6.3 million people have been internally displaced and there are now more than 5 million refugees.<sup>1</sup> All of this turmoil has led to the collapse of peaceful social bonds within and among communities.

The conflict has also had important repercussions for neighbouring countries, including Lebanon. This small nation of 4.4 million people has received about 1.5 million refugees, including more than 1 million from Syria.<sup>2</sup> With one of every four residents a refugee, Lebanon is now the country with the most refugees per capita in the world. This situation puts significant pressure on the country's resources and generates ever-increasing tensions between the different communities living there.

HOPe staff members are women, and 70% of the participants are women.

HOPe provides social peacebuilding workshops in Syria and Lebanon for local community groups and humanitarian NGOs. The workshops are designed to ease social tensions and establish pathways towards peaceful co-existence and reconciliation. Participants gain new perspectives and develop community-based initiatives.

The workshops also give women a platform to express themselves, to use their analytical skills, and to overcome social barriers and stereotypes. Women leave the workshops with new knowledge and skills, which empowers them to initiate projects in their community to promote social peace with people they might otherwise avoid.

Rabia, a trainer working with HOPe, explains how the workshops change the perceptions that Syrian and Lebanese people have of each other.

"Before their participation in the workshop", says Rabia, "a number of Syrian women did not believe that it was possible to develop good relationships with Lebanese women. Similarly, a good many Lebanese participants realized that their prejudices against Syrian women were unfounded. This is how fear and hatred gradually disappear. When the workshops come to an end, participants often keep in touch, visit each other and do activities together."

By independently leading a project that requires skill, persistence and hard work, women become more aware of their own potential. Rabia emphasizes the transformative power of women in their communities: "Women are drivers of change," she says. "When they influence their families and children, they influence society as a whole. Each member of the family influences the people around him or her, and so on. This is why women have an essential role to play in peacebuilding."



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Rabia Kadiry, HOPe trainer, and colleagues in the office in Lebanon.

House of Peace (HOPe), a peace-building organization supported by Development and Peace, works to build a solid foundation of peace for the future of Syrian and Lebanese societies. At HOPe, women play a central role both as project leaders and as participants. Three of the seven

1 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Syria Emergency*, 2017, online: UNHCR <http://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html> (consulted on July 11, 2017).

2 Lebanon has received over one million Syrian refugees; 30,675 Palestinian refugees from Syria; 277,985 Palestinian refugees; and 6,000 Iraqi refugees. For more information, please consult: European Commission – Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection, *Lebanon: Syria Crisis*, March 2017, online: European Union [https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/lebanon\\_syrian\\_crisis\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/lebanon_syrian_crisis_en.pdf) (consulted on July 11, 2017).

## Case study –

# Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a country marked by several decades of armed conflicts. In forty years, it has been the theatre of two devastating wars: the Soviet-Afghan War (from 1979 to 1989) and the War in Afghanistan (since 2001).

In this difficult context, women face many obstacles, including traditional practices that violate their fundamental rights. Afghanistan is among the countries in the world where equality between women and men is at its lowest level.<sup>1</sup> Afghan women face extreme discrimination and exclusion that severely limit their access to financial resources, jobs, education and health services. In 2009, the Afghan government adopted the Law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (known as the EVAW law), which is considered to be a major advance in the legal protection of women's rights in Afghanistan. However, full implementation of this legislation has been delayed. Members of the Afghan Parliament continue to oppose it, and demand that the law be amended.

This is the context in which our partner, Noor Educational & Capacity Development Organization (NECDO), has been working. For 15 years, NECDO has focussed on the empowerment of women and the elimination of violence directed against women and girls. From this experience, NECDO has concluded that men and young people must be mobilized in order to reach these objectives. NECDO's activism is deeply rooted in the belief that the empowerment of women is needed in order to achieve social peace and development in Afghanistan.

In January 2016, NECDO set up a project called "Mobilizing Afghan Men to Protect Women's Rights, Democracy and Peace." The main objective of this project is to improve the resilience of local communities, strengthen their cohesion and build their capacity to facilitate a peaceful transition, primarily by organizing activities to promote women's rights. As part of this project, two-day training sessions are offered to imams, community leaders and women activists. The subjects they discuss include violence against



women, the EVAW law, women's rights in Islam, gender, and peace.

"During my training sessions," says Jamila Safi, the lead trainer for the project, "I have often seen men arrive and argue against women's rights. When they admit, at the end of the day, that violence against women must be eliminated, this is, in my opinion, a major change." Explaining the effectiveness of the training, a participant said that it has the potential to "pave the way towards peace and democracy, while changing people's perspectives."

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Jamila Safi, lead trainer with NECDO, gives a workshop to Afghan women and men.

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**In 2016, NECDO offered 52 training sessions which reached 1,223 people, including 594 women.**

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *Human Development Data: Gender Inequality Index (GII)*, 2016, online: UNDP <http://hdr.undp.org/en/indicators/68606> (consulted on July 11, 2017).



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