

# Women and conflict transformation: influences, roles, and experiences

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## Introduction

This chapter is based on my current research project, 'Hidden Voices: Working Towards a Culture of Peace'. Using an oral-testimony approach and a multicultural perspective, I am interviewing grassroots peace workers, giving priority to women's testimonies, and exploring a range of transformational processes. These processes include mediation, advocacy, education, self-help, music and the arts, reconciliation, spirituality, storytelling, and bridge building. By publishing this collection of inspiring and informative personal stories, my aim is to raise awareness, stimulate further debate, and enhance understanding of the complexity of peace processes, for both the worker in the field and the layperson.

Here, I focus on the women I have interviewed. My particular interest is to explore what influences and drives women to become actively involved in peace-building processes, including their roles, sustaining factors, and transformational experiences. I analyse all of these within the framework of their working contexts. I begin by providing an overview of these women, followed by a presentation of the findings of key aspects including areas of experience that are reflected within a number of broad themes. Drawing upon other relevant research and peace projects, I also focus particularly on the roles that such women play in transformational peace-making processes. Finally, I highlight what can be learnt from these women's peace experiences and the contribution they are making towards the concept of a culture of peace.

## Defining the research project

### *The participants*

So far, I have interviewed 22 people – including 14 women – who have narrated 20 different peace stories in total. The women all work in peace building in various capacities. Many are directly involved in post-war or conflict areas or are working with others who are. Fifty per cent of the interviewees are based in the UK but work internationally. The others were interviewed in Israel, Australia, South Africa, the USA, and Ireland. Their ethnic backgrounds include white British, Irish, Jewish-British, Jewish-American, Cherokee of mixed ancestry (Anglo/Celtic), black South African, Italo-American, and a person from New Zealand. Their institutional affiliation and/or work include:

- a grassroots women's aid peace group working on post-war reconstruction in the Balkan states, specifically Bosnia and Croatia. The work now focuses on support for human rights, regeneration, self-help schemes, and peace and reconciliation;
- a housing co-operative in the British Midlands which constitutes a community peace and environmental centre. The centre offers support to asylum seekers and refugees, and provides resources and information. Members run peace workshops in schools, and campaign on peace and environmental issues;
- research undertaken for a PhD, entitled 'Mending the web' (Walker 2001), which addresses peace building between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. The research uses a process of listening intently to the stories of indigenous people involved in processes of conflict transformation as well as those of non-indigenous people working in solidarity with them through a reconciliation programme;
- a training team based in the UK that promotes the exploration and use of active non-violence for positive social change and sustainable peace;
- a training programme with local organisations in Bosnia promoting peace through sustainable community development and supporting training and networking opportunities;
- a collaboration of Jewish, Moslem, Christian, and Hindu musicians living in Israel and working with music as a cultural bridge and powerful force for peace. The 'Voices of Eden' ensemble is described as a living example of peace in the Middle East;

- training workshops in Art and Conflict in the UK, Africa, Israel, and Central America. Using art therapy, mediation, and restorative justice, the workshops explore the ways in which art can contribute to conflict resolution and peace making (see Liebmann 1996);
- working for peace by providing training, especially for young people, in conflict-handling skills, mediation and negotiation, and relaxation and meditation in Britain, Eastern Europe and the Balkans, Russia, Africa, Ukraine, and the USA;
- education for and about peace, in which the aim is to support, encourage, and promote peace education and the promotion of a culture of peace in schools and the wider community in the UK;
- volunteering with Peace Brigades International (PBI) in Colombia, whereby internationals accompany and provide protection to human-rights defenders who are under threat as they go about their work;
- positive action and bridge building to break down cultural barriers and advance understanding on peace issues, especially disarmament. A group of UK mothers, using the collective identity of motherhood, has reached out and networked with groups of mothers from a number of countries including those in the former Soviet Union, the USA, Japan, and Cuba;
- a community development organisation in south Belfast which is involved in many different kinds of work, runs a variety of projects to match the relevant needs of the mixed urban community, and does things that probably could not be done anywhere else in Belfast. This is because the organisation is not 'owned' by any religious body or political party, but rather embodies a form of local democracy;
- an alliance of African peace builders that works to ensure that African women have the tools to participate in promoting peace, development, and human security in Africa as strongly and as frequently as men. Staff in the organisation provide human rights and legal education to women within government and civil society, conduct research, and support networking efforts on the continent; and
- the Friendship Association, a volunteer, non-profit organisation formed for the specific purpose of creating bridges that will enable citizens of St. Augustine in Florida to make connections with the citizens of Baracoa in Cuba. By constructive example, members are

proving that citizen diplomacy based on true friendship and mutual respect can transcend political differences. They hope to sensitise those who currently oppose entering into true diplomatic relations with Cuba in the USA.

### ***Parallel projects***

In presenting my findings, I draw upon four peace projects that parallel my own in a number of respects. These include:

- 1 Cynthia Cockburn's action-research work with women of polarised ethno-national groups who were able to transcend their differences to find commonalities in their peace work (Cockburn 1998).
- 2 The Panos Institute's international collection of oral testimonies of women's many roles during and after conflict, in which women 'speak of their experiences of armed conflict as fighters, participants, refugees, and organisers for peace and reconciliation in addition to their various roles as family carers'. These show that women 'are on the move, proactive, making decisions. They are not victims. They became activists for peace where they could see an alternative way of resolving issues' (Bennett *et al.* 1995).
- 3 The International Fellowship for Reconciliation's 'Women and Peacemaking Programme' (IFOR 1998), which is developing a gender perspective within peace work, based upon the recognition that women fulfil multiple roles in conflict but could be seen mainly as leaders with innovative ideas about peace building.
- 4 International Alert's Gender Campaign, *Women Building Peace: From the Village Council to the Negotiating Table* (IAGC 1999), which highlights the roles and capacities of women contributing to sustainable peace.

Both IFOR's programme and International Alert's Gender Campaign were established specifically to promote women's contribution to peace.

These projects, like my own, all aim to find out and highlight the ways in which ordinary civilians work towards making peace in their everyday life. There is a strong focus on hearing their 'voices' and on collecting and disseminating good practice so that people, both locally and internationally, can gain from these positive stories, campaigns, and achievements.

## *Roles and ways of working*

Cockburn (1998) points out that women may not necessarily be directly involved in formal peace-building processes but very much underpin them. The fact that they are not visible does not mean that they are absent. This is my main departure point. Although there is still a long way to go for women to have equal power and participate on equal footing to men in the highest levels of decision making, they are nevertheless deeply involved. A major point raised in International Alert's Gender Campaign is the scepticism and ignorance concerning women's contributions and potential role in preserving peace. This needs to be addressed in order to attain gender equality and achieve sustainable peace.

The women in my project do not necessarily work only with women, but through their work they bring women peace makers to the fore. While allowing for some degree of interchange, their roles can be grouped into four broad categories:

- *Supportive*: enabling, assisting, facilitating, supporting, accompanying, and building up.
- *Directive*: organising, training, managing, advising, and providing resources and information.
- *Networking*: promoting, liaising, disseminating, publishing, and influencing.
- *Representing*: acquiring the roles of ambassadors and advocates.

The woman affiliated with the UK-based training team on non-violence is team co-ordinator and trains resource people. She allocates work among them, provides advice, back-up, materials, etc. to enable them to provide training among social-change activists.

The co-ordinator of the training programme in Bosnia responds to a wide and diverse range of needs. Using trainers from Bosnia or Croatia, her key role is to help them organise seminars and workshops in the local communities.

The woman who belongs to the grassroots women's aid peace group has seen her role develop over the years from that of supplying aid and working in partnership with local women in social reconstruction work to that of supporting human rights, regeneration, self-help schemes, and peace and reconciliation initiatives. The local women with whom the peace group has worked have taken on organisational, managerial, and decision-making roles. They have relished the opportunity to empower themselves, which has let them use skills they didn't know they had.

Many of the women involved in peace-building work directly on influencing policy themselves or on empowering other women to use their initiative and adopt proactive approaches. Overall, the women consider that they have enhanced or acquired many skills through their work, including, for example, active listening and speaking, negotiation, mediation, and lobbying. The major point here is that the peace women are actively involved. They are in charge, both as leaders and as co-ordinators. They are dynamic – proactive rather than reactive – and often act as catalysts. In comparison with the men I interviewed the position/power/influence of women in these peace processes was equal, if not stronger.

### ***Motivation and influences***

Factors that drew these women towards their chosen peace-building area fall into four broad categories: prior experience, pragmatism, emotional/spiritual motivation, and compelling need. For many of the women there is some overlap between and within these categories. However, early or formative experiences, spirituality, and subsequent long-term involvement in and commitment to peace building are key factors.

The women's aid worker had been involved in peace work for years, including the women's peace movement. She, like her co-workers, responded emotionally to the crisis in the Balkans but also rationally by thinking about the issues and deciding that there was something practical that she could do.

The manager of the peace house has always been involved in the peace movement, even while raising a family and working full-time, and has always been deeply involved with marginalised people. She claims that her own sense of marginalisation is very much part of her identity. She has always seen the importance of connecting and communicating with everybody.

The researcher, a Cherokee woman of mixed ancestry, was raised in a very Western environment but was always involved in learning about and participating in Cherokee ways of knowing and in evolving Cherokee culture. These experiences have brought on a process of conflict transformation within her family and herself. Her personal experiences continue to deepen her commitment to understanding ways of overcoming conflict between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples.

The co-ordinator of the women's positive action programme was already involved in the peace movement before she was appointed to

that post. For example, alongside other women from the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and the Quakers, she was involved in raising awareness about and money for the women at Greenham Common (in the UK) who were protesting against the deployment of cruise missiles in the 1980s.

Doing something practical and looking for something meaningful were also quite prominent factors influencing women to become involved in peace building among the group I interviewed. The volunteer with PBI had been looking for work that had a purpose. One of the main things that attracted her was the idea that by being an international observer she could do something that Colombians could not do for themselves.

These motivating factors indicate a desire to act upon initial influences/experiences and to participate in a positive way as part of what they do. They also convey a belief that peace is worth working for – and also essential – as a way of effecting social change. Responding to a perceived need clearly responds to a commitment that goes much deeper than simply seeking something to do. These initial influences, especially ‘compelling need’ and ‘strong emotional/spiritual’ drive, sustain many of the women throughout the work that they take upon themselves.

## **Main themes of the research**

A number of strands have emerged in my research which fit within broader themes: relationships and communication; approaches and methods to achieve sustainable peace; race and gender; and transformation. The themes emerge in the four main parallel projects. They also match the criteria set out in a number of notable peace-research works on effective peace building. This particular set of women’s stories exemplifies what they consider makes for effective peace-building practice.

### ***Relationships and communication***

The main theme that emerged from my research concerns relationships and communication, with a particular focus on partnership, collaboration, interconnection, alliances, and networks. All the women I interviewed mentioned the importance of working collaboratively and in solidarity with others – in other words, developing good solid relationships and understanding. The main values underpinning all of these include trust, acceptance, good will, respect, forgiveness, compassion, and humour, with trust as the underlying key factor.

Much was made of reaching out to others and finding common ground by recognising our mutual humanity. One woman stated that whatever you do individually is part of the larger picture. The need for active listening was also widely expressed. The researcher in Australia believes that true peace building involves hearing, supporting, and acknowledging the views and opinions of others, especially among the most disadvantaged members of our societies.

Self-awareness features as a necessary prerequisite to positive relationship building and appropriate action. The women talked about being prepared, having prior information, having realistic expectations, and seeing their work as a long-term commitment. This means taking responsibility for and care of oneself. In their view, it is essential to address conflict both inside one's self and within teams. It is also equally important to realise that working in a post-war context is extremely demanding emotionally because one absorbs many strong feelings.

In her paper 'Insiders/Outsiders in Conflict Areas', Mary B. Anderson (2000) speaks about 'local capacities for peace', which she believes every society has, and she calls for a new collaborative effort and a need to learn from experience. Mari Fitzduff (2000) also discusses the 'what, who, and why' of conflict resolution. She emphasises that positive emotional strategies are required to resolve conflicts, and that partnerships can work well.

The women in my study who are involved in post-war community social reconstruction especially highlighted the need for effective partnership and participation. They talked about flexible, dynamic teams using initiative, sharing tasks, balancing work overload, and having non-hierarchical structures. They recommended employing local people, providing safe environments, being vigilant about power inequities (including gender and race), and addressing imbalances.

Cockburn (1998) found that themes of alliance, democracy, and identity wind through the accounts of the women involved in her study. Although each of the three projects she carried out is distinct, they share a number of commonalities, especially the fact that the projects are themselves alliances. She maintains that the most important resource for an alliance is a participatory democratic process characterised by the careful and caring management of interaction and decision making. This in turn involves fostering good communication, inclusive activity, and supportive relationships.

The Panos research (Bennett *et al.* 1995) highlights the importance of alliances among women in fostering empowerment through



solidarity and the pooling of resources. International Alert collaborated with over 100 NGOs to launch its international Gender Campaign (IAGC 1999). IFOR's women's programme is part of a large international alliance that includes All Africa Women for Peace (AAWP) (IFOR 1998), where one of the participants in my research plays a key role. She, along with other professional women from different African countries, is working to consolidate a base which will act as a contact, networking, and resource centre for women peace builders in Africa.

Alliances and networks are central features in virtually all the peace projects in my research.

The Friendship Association is a strong alliance between US citizens and Cubans. The co-ordinator believes that through bonds of friendship and joint programme activities a more humane and mutually beneficial bilateral relationship will result for both Cuba and the USA. The two women who are working in education and training in peace are members of wider peace networks which provide forums for the exchange of ideas and the promotion of good practice. The co-ordinator of the group of peace women/mothers states that, via positive action and bridge building, the group was able to reach across a wide cultural divide. Among other things, the group successfully linked women from the USA with women from the (former) Soviet Union either in the USA or in Britain.

Louise Diamond (1999) describes 'multi-track diplomacy' as a systems approach to peace building that embraces a large network of organisations, disciplines, and methodologies working flexibly towards non-violent approaches to sustainable peace. The women in my research have formed multiple networks/links with allied projects. For instance, the co-ordinator of the community development association in Belfast has taken part in IFOR's programme. She maintains political links with the Women's Coalition in Northern Ireland. The peace house manager has stated that, while maintaining links is time consuming, sustaining such networks is an essential element in being able to have a wider impact. She now has a website whose whole purpose is to disseminate information. The women's aid project has always forged links and built networks with other groups and projects, and also issues a regular newsletter.

The women in these examples believe that it is essential to integrate fieldwork and ideas using a multidisciplinary/agency approach;

to have a forum for the exchange of good practice that includes comprehensive access to and dissemination of information (including the Internet); and to maintain continuous support, especially financial.

### ***Towards sustainable peace: approaches and methods***

Discussing the path to sustainable peace via a peace-building framework, John-Paul Lederac (1999) stresses the need for interdependence and relationship building at all levels. His 'process-structure' approach to peace is dynamic and changing while at the same time it carves a structure with direction and purpose so that it is truly sustainable. He believes that, in order to achieve sustainable peace, it is vital for peace to be seen as a creative process and for structural change to take place.

The peace women in this study clearly show an understanding of peace as a creative process. There is an emphasis on flexibility, adaptability, and open-mindedness, for example responding to actual rather than perceived needs, having choices, and always being willing to learn. Improvisation emerges as a major element. Most women recognise that aspects of conflict transformation are holistic and overlapping.

The following examples illustrate Lederac's 'process-structure' approach at work.

#### *Creativity approaches*

The musician who is part of 'Voices of Eden' believes that her ensemble's performances make a very real and practical contribution to the solution of conflict in Israel by, among other things, refusing to be stopped by the violence and by providing musical harmony, which relieves stress and reduces anxiety. She asserts that clarity allows us to come up with more creative solutions to our very dramatic problems.

The researcher involved in storytelling as the key process in a reconciliation programme in Queensland maintains that stories shed light on the interconnectedness of all things. They are holistic and enable conflict transformation. Through her work, the researcher has come to know effective processes of transforming conflict between indigenous and non-indigenous people more deeply. Her completed research looks at what we can learn from the stories that live within cultures. She says that we must acknowledge the complexities of colonisation and be aware of the ways in which indigenous concepts and ways of knowing are silenced by Western methods of processing conflict.

From my experience working with art and conflict, I firmly believe that people gain insights through artistic approaches that they can then use to contribute to conflict resolution and peace building. Cultural appropriateness regarding certain approaches and the use of materials is always a consideration.

#### *Community reconstruction and development*

The co-ordinator of the training programme for local organisations in Bosnia has stressed that the workers involved in the project are recruited from the local communities, and that the programme is ongoing and responsive to the needs of the group. The training ranges from organisational management, development, and reporting to human-rights education, advocacy, and community building. Aware that supporting women's groups in Croatia and Bosnia is a long-term project, the programme's policy is to develop enduring links with each group individually and really get to know what each group needs and aspires to. The programme now supports a number of self-sufficiency projects, including a peace and reconciliation project in Pakrac that focuses on health education, as well as a non-violent conflict-resolution project in a local secondary school. The Croatian government has continued to fund this project.

The manager of the peace house and community centre has talked about the 'practical peace work' that her organisation carries out with young people and with refugees, stressing that its activities should be seen not only in terms of campaigning but also in terms of offering practical helpful work at the community level.

At the community association in Belfast, the co-ordinator has described the work of her organisation in helping local people to 'open their minds', look for creative options, and use their talents within their 'culture of peace' community. She uses social-conflict energy as a way of producing some positive social interaction at the local level and also within the wider community.

#### *Education and training*

The non-violence training programme is not about denying conflict. Rather, it is about working through conflict on non-violent and neutral terms, and about channelling conflict properly so as not to be thwarted by it. The co-ordinator believes that conflict needs to be resolved through a creative process that can take advantage of its positive energy.

The co-founder and partner of the peace project that is focused on education and training has emphasised practical approaches to the

project's work. One of these is not to lecture groups but to give them practical experience, e.g. listening skills. Another is to use practical skills to build relationships, e.g. contacting, getting to know people, and helping people in post-war areas.

Working on education for and about peace, the co-ordinator uses interactive discussion in her workshops, with all pupils having an input. In terms of sustainability, she insists that the peace programme must permeate the whole school and the wider community. It is an ongoing process that requires much reinforcement.

AAWP works to ensure that African women acquire the tools and capacity they need to work toward peace, development, and human security in Africa on an equal footing to men. The research co-ordinator works with other AAWP staff in providing human-rights and legal education to women within government and civil society, conducting research, and supporting networking efforts throughout the continent.

#### *Information exchange and solidarity*

In protecting human-rights work in Colombia, the PBI volunteer has stressed that the non-interference approach is about being as visible as possible. The whole purpose is just to be physically there, to enable the human-rights workers to go about their work safely. She has also claimed that, in many cases, the leading workers are women, a reflection of the fact that women in general are doing really important and effective grassroots human-rights work at the community level all over the country.

The Friendship Association divides its outreach efforts into three groups: local educational events, awareness-building delegations to Cuba, and support of programmes in both St. Augustine and Baracoa. Specific projects and programmes have been created or revitalised, covering a number of areas of mutual interest including communications, environment, and humanitarian aid.

One of the achievements of the Mothers for Peace has been helping women who were trying to set up voluntary organisations in the former Soviet Union after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Among other things, they helped to set up a scheme for women to engage in conflict-resolution training. Over the past two years, a number of the Russian women have come to the UK to do Alternative to Violence training, and Mothers for Peace, who are themselves trainers, have gone to Russia to train women there.

The diversity and variety of the peace-building activities described above demonstrate the commitment of all these women to social, economic, and political justice, as well as to non-violent processes of structural change. Their experiences have yielded various recommendations on how to work towards peace most effectively, including the use of various methods to influence policy outcomes, such as the involvement of high-profile people such as MPs and policy makers. For example, the women's aid worker invited her local MP to visit the partnership in Croatia. A second recommendation is to ensure that the reconciliation process is fully in the hands of those directly involved in the conflict. A third is to adopt a peace model that will enable all involved to achieve greater depth and focus. And a final insight is to ensure that effective monitoring, review, and assessment procedures are in place.

Evaluation was difficult to implement rigorously. Most of the women interviewed use more informal procedures, but they see evaluation as an ongoing, multi-dimensional, and intrinsic component of any change process. They have used various techniques to evaluate the effectiveness of their projects, including, for example, qualitative personal feedback using an evaluation form and/or brief meetings with a sample range of users to get a sense of how the work had influenced ideas and improved the effectiveness of peace practice. Other methods or indicators include the number of successful follow-up schemes, increased co-operation and networking, increased leadership, and positive change in people's lives. According to the Panos research (Warrington 1999), the key to measuring qualitative objectives is consultation with those involved, without which it is virtually impossible to measure them.

### ***Race and cultural issues***

The main factors in this theme are awareness, sensitivity, and appropriateness in working across cultural boundaries; all these being integral to peace building.

Virtually all participants in my research highlighted the need for self-awareness or self-knowledge. This includes having a profound understanding of issues related to ethno-centricity and racism, of cultural frames of reference or worldviews, of the ubiquitous and often inappropriate use of Western models of peace building, and of the need to ensure that different racial and cultural perspectives are fully incorporated in both documentation and practice.

It is interesting to note that most people interviewed talked as much about cultural similarities as they did about differences, mentioning things such as 'having similar needs but doing things differently' and 'connecting through our common humanity'. It was felt that cultural diversity should be embraced and celebrated. One woman talked about her strong realisation, through ordinary conversation, that what people fundamentally care about is actually the same, irrespective of cultural, religious, or political differences. In the end, we are all human beings.

General comments about dealing with differences and culture-bound misunderstandings included getting to know the people and the culture, recognising that culture-bound behavioural differences are with us all the time, and trying to stay with and in some way 'process' the culturally different behaviour. The human-rights worker in Colombia said that the key element for her was adaptability, being able to adjust to any situation, and she added that tiny things can cause huge friction when living and working in stressful situations. Those working in community social reconstruction as well as some working in education and training referred to the range of difficulties embedded in the 'insider-outsider' issue. Trust emerged as a key factor to overcome such differentiations, especially for those working in culturally diverse environments.

Specific ways of overcoming cultural barriers, particularly in settings where the women in my research were working in close proximity with ethnically mixed local communities in Bosnia, Croatia, Uganda, Ukraine, Colombia, and South Africa, were illustrated in three main aspects:

- *language*, i.e. learning local languages, or using official translators or local volunteers who speak English or other international languages;
- *behaviour*, i.e. conducting oneself in a way that displays sensitivity, respect, and appropriateness (including attention to dress, habits, and gestures);
- *cultural bridges*, i.e. doing practical things such as placing welcoming signs on doors, contacting local families, and showing respect by speaking to local people in their own language where possible. The coordinator of the training programme in Bosnia stated that there can be a dilemma regarding the need to respect people's identities without promoting nationalistic agendas. Collaborative participation in a common cause was seen in itself as a cultural bridge.

## *Gender issues*

In her discussion of the UNESCO Women and a Culture of Peace Programme, Ingeborg Breines (1998) strongly emphasises gender equality as a precondition for a culture of peace, and speaks of the need to fully use women's experiences, talents, and potential at all levels of society.

Through its Gender Campaign, International Alert was one of the five organisations pressing the UN Security Council to adopt the resolution regarding gender sensitivity in all UN missions (including peacekeeping) and for women's full participation in peace processes.

Cynthia Cockburn's women's bridge-building project (Cockburn 1998) is underpinned by gender perspectives including identity and difference, nationalism and ethnicity, and international relations.

In my research, a number of women highlighted the intersection between race and gender. Discrimination in their peace-building work was experienced not so much by them personally but by women in certain communities, especially in the Balkan states, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, and Colombia.

At the UN World Conference against Racism held in South Africa in 2001, the session chaired by Mary Robinson, 'Intersection of Gender and Race', explored discrimination against women, and its complexity and multi-dimensionality – especially when race was involved (Robinson 2001). A compilation of best practices for dealing with discrimination was called for. While emphasising the intersection of race and gender, Gay McDougall of UN/CERD asserted that racial discrimination does not necessarily affect men and women equally.

As stated above, the women interviewed in this study showed more evidence of their position, power, and influence in their peace-building work than of their low-profile status or subservience to men. Many work directly on influencing policy making and policy outcomes, or on empowering other women to be proactive and get involved in peace-building initiatives. For example, the community association in Belfast has recently run a productive development programme focused specifically on women. It was a major success because its individual training programmes were personally developed, and the women supported each other. Other examples abound as well: there are increasing successful self-help schemes supported by the women's project in Bosnia, women's empowerment is a cornerstone of the AAWP's programme, and Mothers for Peace has empowered numerous women over the years.

## Negative factors, sustaining factors, and personal transformation

### *Negative factors*

All of the women interviewed have experienced opposition, obstacles, and setbacks in their peace work. On the whole, they consider that significant progress has been made, but that there is still much more to be done. Some women, for example, have experienced great antagonism towards them, while two have received threats. All of those working in teams or organisations have experienced conflict within the teams. Owing to the stressful nature of much of their work, several women have also experienced 'burn-out' at some point. Under-funding and serious lack of resources remain the all-pervasive problems. But despite all the obstacles, these women carry on undeterred, even if in one or two cases their involvement has lessened. They find strategies to combat their difficulties, and draw strength from sustaining factors.

### *Sustaining factors*

Good relationships at all levels appear to be the *sine qua non* in sustaining these women throughout their peace-building work. These include support from family and friends as well as solidarity and camaraderie within teams. The need for support was strongly emphasised, including counselling and debriefing, especially for those directly involved in post-war contexts.

The second major factor is the belief in the effectiveness of the work these women are doing in conjunction with long-term commitment. This is particularly sustaining during times of high stress, doubt, frustration, etc.

Enjoyment and empowerment are illustrated through a whole set of 'Ss' – satisfaction, stimulation, solidarity, spirituality, seeing results, and a sense of achievement. Spirituality, in particular, is a strong feature in many of these peace stories. Some simply refer to their faith in God, while others talk about drawing upon 'an inner sense or inner peace', or about having a deep spiritual aspect in their psyche.

Most of the women share the conviction that feelings and healing are of central importance to peace building, and that proper structures and mechanisms need to be in place within the working environment for expressing such feelings. Samuels (1993) states that qualitative work requires addressing both internal and external factors but that



we need to concentrate on what he calls the 'inner world' of feelings and sensitivities. Mindell (1995), writing about conflict transformation through 'processing' or 'inner work', maintains that to achieve sustainable peace we need to break through to a new level of communication. He adds that structural work is only a bandage unless feelings are properly healed. Indeed, feelings were explored extensively throughout the interviewing process of my research work, and a whole range of experiences of both positive and negative emotions was discussed.

### ***Personal transformation***

Unequivocally, the foremost response to the question of how the work these women carry out has personally transformed them relates to the whole experience of peace building, referring to 'the journey itself', 'the process itself' – 'all the experiences were a natural development'. Some women talked about early experiences, the onset of and transition to using skills in peace making, learning about oneself, working with women on a different basis with a degree of success, having a new concept of war, and seeing other people gaining new insights from their work on conflict. This is a clear indication that working holistically towards conflict transformation and sustainable peace has been in itself transformational for these women.

## **Conclusion**

Albeit a small-scale study, 'Hidden Voices' provides a good diversity of ideas and practices. The women who participated in my research are clearly neither victims nor marginal spectators. On the contrary, they have a range of often overlapping, but essentially leading and strongly proactive, roles. Working at the grassroots level, they endeavour to influence policy and decision-making processes.

My research participants do not reflect a wide pool of women involved in sustainable peace building on a global scale, but alongside all those referred to in this paper and beyond, I believe such women are plentiful and growing in strength and number. While all participants are keenly aware that their personal experience is but a tiny contribution to peace in general, and that it is not always possible to generalise from the specific, they also know that collectively they may help to make a difference.

As the peace researcher involved in storytelling put it, 'Individual stories are synthesised with other stories to create themes. These

themes tell the larger story of peace building ways. Therefore story is a process of weaving individual experience into a larger web of meaning.' I would suggest that the themes discussed in this paper also form a larger picture about women and sustainable peace: what motivates and influences them, what drives and sustains them, their roles, their diverse and effective practices, and their experiences in conflict transformation.

Diamond (1999) believes that exercising our power to empower means generating more stories and building a base of success from which we can all learn. The second component of International Alert's Gender Campaign is about public awareness strategy, the 'know-how' of peace. This focuses on women's achievements and experiences in conflict situations, as well as on their contributions to peace building.

The peace education co-ordinator in my research made a most pertinent comment, 'Peace can be gained if we know how to do it.' I very much hope that the publication of this inspiring collection of peace stories will make a valuable contribution to the 'know-how'.

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