After the Peace: Women in Post-Conflict Reconstruction

In the past decade, many countries have embarked upon the difficult transition from armed conflict toward reconciliation and reconstruction. The international community’s role in this transition has shifted from narrow humanitarian and relief activities to more comprehensive efforts to foster sustainable peace. At the same time, the community has shifted from a stepped approach from relief to development to one that combines a broader package of concurrent steps: immediate humanitarian relief activities plus longer-term development strategies to build infrastructure, political institutions, and the social fabric of civil society (Bush 1998; Cohen and Deng 1998; Fagen 1995). Development organizations have become increasingly engaged in activities during and post-conflict, devoting time and resources to supporting this transition. A recent World Bank framework paper substantiates this trend pointing out that the proportion of worldwide development assistance devoted to relief activities, including short-term humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping activities, increased from two percent in 1989 to ten percent in 1994 (World Bank 1997).

Building a lasting peace that sustains post-war economic, political, and social development requires the full participation of all citizens. Yet, it is increasingly recognized that the role of women in post-conflict settings has received inadequate policy attention. Women often bear a disproportionate share of war’s consequences. As war changes the demographics of a country, women may become single heads of households, supporting children, parents, or extended families. They may become uprooted, deprived of all assets, and resettled in an unfamiliar community without their usual support networks. These women also may suffer wartime sexual abuse or the loss of a family member. Given this gender-differentiated impact of war, women must participate in and benefit from post-conflict development policies and programs if peace is to be sustained (Commission on the Status of Women 1998; Date-Bah 1996).
Challenges to Women in the Post-Conflict Period

The issues facing women during the post-conflict period are familiar to those working in the field of women in development. These include women’s access to employment opportunities and productive assets, like land, capital, health services, training and education. In addition, women play an integral role in restructuring economies and domestic food production. More recent cases of post-conflict reconstruction have underscored the need to give attention to the particular needs of women, including immediate and long-term programs to combat violence against women and secure their physical safety; ensure women’s full political participation; and emphasize the importance of investing in women’s health.

Although women’s reintegration roles and needs have often lacked recognition at the national and international levels, women’s, human rights, and other civil society groups have brought these concerns to the fore. In some cases, the post-conflict period has created an important opportunity for civil society to voice concerns and participate in the reconstruction of new economic, political, and social institutions (Bush 1994; Honwana-Welch 1994; Anderson and Woodrow 1989). Furthermore, when peace accords recognize the role of civil society in peacebuilding efforts, women’s groups can lobby national governments to include women’s reintegration in the planning process at an early stage.1

Many women’s lives are changed fundamentally by conflict, which also affects how they engage in post-conflict activities and institutions.2 While some women return to traditional roles, others may seek expanded roles, becoming organized and actively participating in national political debates and in post-conflict socio-economic reconstruction. They operate through women’s organizations that existed prior to conflict or were formed in exile, or through avenues opened since the cessation of hostilities, such as peace accord implementation and monitoring mechanisms or national legislative processes.

The Post-Conflict Transition in Central America

In Central America, this decade has seen tremendous social and political change catalyzed by war. Two notable cases are El Salvador and Guatemala, where peace accords were signed in 1992 and 1996, respectively. Despite a multitude of challenges, women’s groups in El Salvador have taken advantage of opportunities to participate in new ways at the national and local levels. For example, an El Salvadoran NGO, Las Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida, also known as Las Dignas, has provided critical input in the government’s national plan for women, and Cemujer, also a Salvadoran NGO, has been one of the

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1 In Guatemala, the 1996 Peace Accords provided for an Assembly of Civil Society (ASC) to facilitate peace negotiations. One of the eleven sections of the ASC is the women’s sector, which includes 30 women’s groups representing trade union, academic, feminist, human rights, and indigenous groups. Although the accords may create the opening officially, there is still the problem of ensuring that systems are set in place to include women at all stages of planning and implementation.

first groups to work on gender sensitization at the ministerial level. At the community level, Las Dignas carries out projects that address women’s education and literacy, violence against women, reproductive and sexual health, and mental health. Las Dignas also provides vocational training for women in non-traditional employment and programs enhancing paternal responsibility in childcare. In Guatemala, refugee women’s groups, like Mama Maquin, which played a critical role in organizing returns from the refugee camps in Mexico, have now become part of the movement to articulate and integrate women’s needs into reintegration and reconstruction.

PROWID Post-Conflict Studies

Recognizing the need to document women’s experiences during exile and upon return in order to ensure women’s successful reintegration, the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) is supporting, as part of the PROWID grants program, a set of three studies which explore women’s roles in post-conflict settings in greater detail. In the first study, Las Dignas is using in-depth life history interviews and focus groups with women and men in four regions of El Salvador where returnees have resettled (see box on page 4). From previous work with female ex-combatants, Las Dignas has observed women’s traditional roles shift during conflict, and reintegration may be impeded if such personal changes are ignored. These personal changes profoundly affect the ways in which women participate in post-conflict reconstruction, especially when compounded by resource- or policy-based obstacles. The second study is being conducted in Guatemala by the Project Counseling Service (PCS), a regional NGO that works with local counterparts to find durable solutions to the problems of refugees and internally displaced persons throughout Latin America. PCS is examining the dynamics of change in women’s lives using life history interviews (see box on page 5). As in El Salvador, the return process in Guatemala represents a critical moment in determining whether or not the gains made by women during exile can be sustained. The third study in the series is being conducted by ICRW and uses multipurpose household survey data to identify individuals and households that migrated or were displaced from former conflictive zones as a result of

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3 The Promoting Women in Development (PROWID) grants program is funded by the Office of Women in Development at the U.S. Agency for International Development and managed by ICRW, in partnership with The Centre for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA). The program currently supports over 40 projects that cut across five broad themes—economic growth and development, women’s rights and political participation, violence against women, women’s reproductive health and rights, and environment and natural resource management. A separate Information Bulletin describing PROWID projects around the world is available on request.

4 The establishment of refugee women’s organizations—for example, Mama Maquin, Ixmucane, and Madre Tierra—allowed women refugees to voice their opinions and be heard while in exile. These organizations, for reasons to be articulated in the study, have weakened considerably during the return phase.
Female-maintained households are those where women generate more than 50 percent of all household income.

The analysis attempts to compare the welfare of migrating and non-migrating households and to explore the effectiveness of post-conflict reconstruction expenditures. Particular attention is being given to the gender dimensions of poverty experienced by female-maintained and female-headed households.\(^5\)

By documenting women’s experiences of transformation and reintegration in post-conflict reconstruction, these studies are designed to generate policy that will consolidate the gains women made in exile and support the active inclusion of women in post-conflict planning. Project findings will be analyzed and disseminated through national and regional workshops and a variety of documents, including education materials, research papers, and policy briefs.

By 1987, the refugees began to return to El Salvador. The women had spent six years in the camps confronting traditional gender roles. The experience changed these women’s lives by giving them skills for new livelihoods. The study, initiated at the beginning of May 1998, attempts to analyze the changes women underwent and the contribution their work has made to their society in transition since the war. The first phase of the study is a series of interviews with institutional leaders who have participated in projects focused on refugees and returnees. These interviews explore the extent to which women have been included as beneficiaries in development plans and assesses the feasibility of these plans.

In the second phase, Las Dignas will conduct interviews with refugee and returnee women, focusing on their situation before crossing the Honduran border and the changes they experienced in the refugee camp to assess whether these changes applied also to repopulated communities. The study will examine whether the skills women acquired continue to develop and what occurred when men returned home at the end of the conflict. Municipal and national government reconstruction plans will also be analyzed, including how these plans account for the needs of women, whether they recognize the role women played and the potential for building a society based on democratic relations among both genders. The final objective of the research is to look at how repopulation areas develop adequate policies to meet women’s needs.

\(^5\) Female-maintained households are those where women generate more than 50 percent of all household income.
This study is investigating three generations of Guatemalan women before the conflict, during conflict, in the refugee camps and in the new phase of return and/or integration.

The internal conflict in Guatemala climaxed in the rural areas between 1981 and 1983 when thousands of families were displaced and resettled in other communities in the country and in southern Mexico. While in exile, women recognized themselves as individuals with specifically expressed rights. At the same time they began to voice their opinions, as they learned about health, literacy, human rights, and income-generation projects. They communicated with each other in Spanish, whereas they had previously spoken only indigenous languages. Women’s traditional roles were transformed. They began participating in community decision-making and identified other social and political actors.

The study identifies and documents changes in women’s relationships and their participation, both privately and publicly, in the areas of health, education, and organization. Assessing these areas will facilitate a clearer recognition and realization of the interests of women, and an evaluation of the factors that support or hinder the return and resettlement phases. The impacts of external actors (agencies of cooperation) in these women’s processes is also being explored.

Using oral histories as a methodology, Project Counseling Services will provide individual returned women an opportunity to reflect on their own experiences to maintain advances and develop new options for social and gender relations. The study also aims to support governmental and non-governmental agencies that design and implement policies.

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