

**RISING UP**  
**in**  
**R E S P O N S E**

**Women's Rights Activism in Conflict**

**JANE BARRY**

**URGENT ACTION ♀ FUND**

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Women's Rights Activism in Conflict

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**Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights (UAF) is an independent nonprofit organization with a strategic mandate to protect and promote women's human rights through rapid response grantmaking, collaborative initiatives, research and publications. Grounded in a human rights framework and focused on women in civil society, Urgent Action Fund supports women human rights defenders responding to conflict and crisis around the world.**

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**...to all the activists  
- sung and unsung - defending  
women's rights around the world.**

## Preface

The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325), passed unanimously in October 2000, stated among its many provisions that there was a lack of data and information about women's experience of and responses to armed conflict. It also acknowledged that while women are disproportionately affected by armed conflict, they are also actors: supporting communities and families, engaging in resistance to oppression and war, taking a lead in reconstruction, and holding the information necessary for post-conflict peace and nation-building.

This study, emerging from the unusual perspective of the Urgent Action Fund, aims to contribute to that challenge – to find out more about women's activism in the face of armed conflict and its aftermath, and to recommend to the international community and its partners how future action can be undertaken that will ensure that the vital contribution of women does not continue to be lost or ignored. The study addresses the importance of respecting women's human rights – in particular the right to participation and non-discrimination.

Over the last decade, much has changed in terms of how armed conflict is addressed in the international arena – both positively and negatively. While conflicts are now usually intra-state, and civilians (mostly women and the children they care for) are increasingly targeted, there has also been an explosion of international instruments that should help women access mechanisms to effect change – change that, in turn, prevents conflict and eases the burden on women that results from conflict.

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UNSCR 1325, perhaps the most oft-quoted of these instruments, provides that not only parties to an armed conflict, but all actors involved in addressing the conflict, have responsibility for taking particular measures to ensure that women are protected as civilians and that their engagement at all levels – from the management of camps for internally displaced people and refugees to equal participation at peace negotiations – is guaranteed. There remains a gap, however, in the implementation of important instruments such as UNSCR 1325. For the most part, women's organisations and women living in conflict are not aware of the machinations on their behalf at international headquarters or the significance of UNSCR 1325 as a powerful tool for change.

Other positive developments over the last few years include the coming into force of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which creates a right of individual petition for women to complain about their own government to the Committee which hears the reports of those countries. In situations where states are themselves often responsible for atrocities against women in situations of war, it is imperative that women are equipped – and given the choice that comes with information – to take up this challenge.

The International Criminal Court, thanks to women's advocacy and organisation, has extensive provisions covering sexual and gender based violence in times of armed conflict. This Court is now in force and preparing to hear its first two cases of conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, both which have been characterised by massive violations of women's human rights. It is crucial that women's voices are heard at these trials, so that the gains made over the years at ad-hoc international criminal tribunals are not lost and so that avenues are created and smoothed for women's participation in this important institution.

As demonstrated over and over again in this study and in the grantmaking activities of the Urgent Action Fund, women's

rights activists are responding to conflicts throughout the world, contributing their considerable energies into the creation and preservation of peace in their countries.

The challenge to the international community is to support their response. International instruments and the machinery for reconstruction and conflict prevention must be made responsive and relevant to women across those continents where armed conflict tears their lives apart. As with all institutions, international law and standards are only as good as their implementation and application. The development of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement has demonstrated that a piece of paper - used by those whose experience it describes - can be enormously powerful against those seeking to abrogate the rights of civilians in armed conflict.

As this study shows, women have both the enthusiasm and the capability to make their own choices about which instruments and institutions they use. The challenge to the international community is to make sure that women in conflict-affected areas are fully informed and equipped. As the author states, it is only by listening to women, by including them and by asking the right questions that women will be sufficiently empowered to play their full part in the movement towards the realisation of human rights for all.

**Sarah Maguire**



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## Executive Summary

### *Background and Methodology*

The Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights (UAF) is an international human rights organisation with a unique mission: to promote the human rights of women and girls through rapid response grant-making. UAF also encourages collaborative projects to support women in situations of conflict or crisis, seeking to establish links between women's activism and wider policy and advocacy issues. This study is one such project, borne of the realisation that, while women's rights activists are always responding to conflicts or crises in their own countries, understanding of their strategies and capacities is extremely limited.<sup>2</sup> Hence, they receive very little external backing for their interventions.

To address this problem, UAF launched a year-long project in early 2003 to identify concrete ways to improve international support for the interventions of women's rights activists during all phases of a conflict. Over 82 women's rights activists were interviewed in three conflict-affected areas: the Balkans<sup>3</sup> (Kosovo and Serbia);<sup>4</sup> Sierra Leone; and Sri Lanka.<sup>5</sup> The choice of women was intended to draw attention to different styles of activism and to different means of gaining external access. Interviewees ranged from well-known, primarily urban activists to more isolated rural or marginalised activists.<sup>6</sup>

Countries were chosen principally on the basis of geographical diversity – representing Europe, Africa and Asia – and the prevalence of varying types of conflict and different forms of international intervention, particularly peace support operations. Sri Lanka's war,

for example, is now over 20 years old, making it one of the longest running conflicts in Asia. Sierra Leone's armed conflict lasted for about ten years – a peace accord has held since 2002. In contrast, the armed conflict phase of the Kosovo war was relatively brief, lasting for little over a year.

The massive international intervention in response to the instability in Kosovo was unprecedented, commencing in 1999 with the unilateral bombardment of Yugoslavia by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), followed by the deployment of a large multinational peace support mission and an extraordinary, chaotic influx of international entities. The intervention continues today: Kosovo is run as an international protectorate, its status unresolved. The Sierra Leonean conflict has witnessed varying degrees and types of international response, including an array of military interventions – by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the United Kingdom and the United Nations (UN) – and a moderate to large international agency presence. In comparison, Sri Lanka's conflict has received relatively limited and sporadic international attention, including the three-year deployment of a troubled Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) and the presence of a modest number of international agencies. Paradoxically, according to Sri Lankan women activists, a disproportionate number of international research projects have been launched in the country.

The report's findings and recommendations are derived primarily from semi-structured field interviews, focussing on women activists' experiences and their interventions at different points of a conflict, as well as specific barriers to their work and supporting factors, with a particular emphasis on security-related issues.<sup>7</sup> Other topics were discussed, including the relationship between women's rights activism and humanitarian action.<sup>8</sup>

The recorded interviews were initially assessed using an 'affinity analysis process', to identify core themes and to generate findings. These conclusions were strengthened through further research and a review of relevant documentation, including UAF grant reports and publications.

Various women activists provided key advisory support during the development period of the project, the fieldwork stage and the analysis and writing phases.

This study is written with deep respect for all of the activists who contributed their valuable time in order to share their experiences and to offer advice. These contributions are incorporated within the report in various forms: some in direct quotes, others are paraphrased, and still others are woven into the main body text.<sup>9</sup>

Hopefully, this study honours the work of women activists in areas of conflict and complements it by supplying international actors with some challenging findings, combined with practical, concrete recommendations for supporting this vital conflict response mechanism. Readers should view this as a *practical discussion document*, and they are welcome to use it as they see fit to begin a constructive dialogue that, ultimately, might increase recognition of and support for women's rights activism in conflict zones.

## *Key Findings*

Women's human rights activists work on the frontline of conflicts throughout the world. They mobilise, individually and collectively, to address the urgent needs of conflict-affected populations – before, during and after the fighting.

In the midst of acute crises, they can be found addressing immediate healthcare issues, establishing informal education systems, working with survivors of violence, offering advice and providing services and support. Some stay behind when many have fled, risking their lives to speak out about human rights abuses and to help people trapped by hostilities. Others cross borders with their communities, negotiate access with armed actors and work in refugee camps to trace the missing and to alleviate the physical and psychological effects of the violence.

### Activists Working at all Stages of Conflict

*‘Kosovar women started organizing in the early 1990s and worked very closely with the local parallel government that resisted the persecution of the Kosovar Albanian population by the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milosevic.*

*‘When war started in ex-Yugoslavia, we became part of the regional women’s networks that raised their voices against the war and provided help to women and refugees in those very hard times.*

*‘When the war came to Kosovo, women’s rights activists became refugees themselves, but never stopped working with women and for women, this time in refugee camps in Macedonia and Albania’.*

– Igo Rogova, *‘Keeping Spirits Alive’*,  
Pristina, June 2003

After the cessation of open armed conflict, they turn to re-establishing critical services, aiding return and reconstruction processes, ensuring access to justice through legal reform, and supporting political and economic development.

Activists living outside of the worst-affected areas, both in the region and across the world, will reach out in various ways to support those women who are on the frontline. For instance, they stage anti-war protests in their own countries, send messages of solidarity and provide practical resources, including financial donations. They also offer safe spaces for respite and for the sharing of information and strategies.

This activism is an integral part of the protection afforded to civilians in the midst of, and following, armed conflict.

Yet, for most international actors responding to a conflict, particularly international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), donors and international armed forces, the work of women's rights activists remains peripheral and invisible.<sup>10</sup>

Women's rights activism rarely factors into international actors' strategies to tackle deadly conflict. In a best-case scenario, it is considered as an afterthought, once hardcore peace negotiations are complete. When activists manage to establish key political institutions and mechanisms, such as the Stability Pact Gender Task Force (SP GTF) in the Balkans or the Sub-Committee on Gender Issues (SGI) in Sri Lanka, they are usually under-funded and sidelined. In a worst-case scenario, such as the international response to the Kosovo conflict, activists are marginalised, their work duplicated or dismissed. Post-conflict, within their own countries and regions, they face an uphill battle to negotiate constructive relationships with state institutions.<sup>11</sup>

This is not a new phenomenon, and is occurring despite the important work that has been done on the need to recognise, respect and support actors on the ground, including Mary Anderson's seminal piece entitled *Do No Harm*, which sparked significant reform in the humanitarian sector in the 1990s, Ian Smillie's critiques of the international top-down, 'service delivery' approach to capacity-building, and the outputs of the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP).<sup>12</sup>

To date, though, most international actors simply do not engage – or do not engage early enough – with women activists working in crisis zones, and often create new response mechanisms. Critical support, in the form of cooperation with principal actors and the supply of information and material and financial resources, is rarely extended to women activists. Often, they are unaware of – and/or do not have the time to become acquainted with – the means that will allow them to increase their visibility in this context and to acquire backing. This

lack of recognition, both internally within their own countries, and externally vis-à-vis international bodies, can impact significantly on women activists' capacity to intervene. Paradoxically, those women's groups with access to international agencies during and after a conflict often spend a disproportionate amount of their time educating and informing international staff, to prevent them from doing harm.

Several factors contribute to this invisibility, including those listed below.

*External perception of women as conflict victims.* International actors engaging with conflict-affected populations often perceive women and girls primarily as passive victims of war, particularly when conflicts are at their height. This is reflected in the oft-quoted statistic that some 80% of conflict victims are women and children. Such a reading is compounded by a lack of information about activists themselves, especially who they are and the nature of their capacities and strategies. Consequently, during the emergency assessment and programme design phases, international actors rarely, if ever, seek out and consult with women activists – sometimes because they do not realise they are there, other times because they do not value their work.

*Human rights activists or humanitarians.* For some, there may be confusion as to who is a human rights activist and who is a humanitarian, particularly because the terms can often be used interchangeably. During active conflict, and immediately following a cessation of hostilities, there is a very high level of crossover between humanitarian action and human rights activism. Frequently, women are engaged in both areas, and find it difficult to separate human rights activism from responding to immediate needs. Equally, women's rights activism is often incorporated into broader human rights agendas that often overlook women's rights, exacerbating its invisibility.

At the same time, though, the international humanitarian community is increasingly recognising that the delivery of ‘pure’ humanitarian services cannot be disconnected from the human rights violations that are at the heart of these conflicts. As a result of this conceptual shift, many humanitarian agencies have integrated the concept of ‘humanitarian protection’ and an overall ‘rights-based approach’ into their emergency and transitional conflict work. However, agencies are still working to apply this in the field, and have yet to link clearly the idea of rights-based programming with working in partnership with women’s rights activists in crisis zones.

*The human rights cloak for military intervention.* Within political-military and even humanitarian circles, human rights protection, and often women’s rights protection, is increasingly cited as the rationale for armed intervention in an area of conflict. The UK and the United States, for example, frequently pointed to human rights violations by the Taliban regime (with a particular emphasis on the abuse of women’s rights) to justify the 2001 military intervention in Afghanistan.

But this does not equate with making the work of women’s rights activists on the ground a core element of the strategy to address conflict. Instead, other approaches are prioritised, such as the use of armed force. Human rights activism, particularly women’s human rights activism, is seen as irrelevant to the ‘real job’ of separating armed forces. Conflict resolution specialists are typically brought in from outside and, in such work, women’s rights are once again marginalised.

*Activism or fundraising?* Finally, many activists face the difficult decision of where to concentrate their energies and resources. Ultimately, this is a choice between focusing on core response activities or promoting certain activities in order to ensure funding – there is not enough time to do both during and after a conflict.



### Marginalising Women's Activism

*'Recently I was commenting on a report done by the [United Nations] High Commissioner for Human Rights, together with local NGOs in Montenegro. Although none of the NGOs participating in writing this report were women's organizations, [the authors used information drawn directly from the reports of women's NGOs working with] victims of violence and domestic violence. So all the data they had was from women's organizations, because the State doesn't have any serious statistical data [on violence against women].*

*'And the seventh chapter of that report – I remember that very vividly – stated it is "satisfied with the role of the NGOs"... but this had only four lines.*

*'In the last several years, only the women's NGOs were taking care of these issues. So they cannot write it that way. It looks like it is a very small thing, but from history it is not a small thing, because the history of the women activists will be neglected. This history is written by the same international organisations – which are primarily staffed by men -- and it will be totally unimportant what women did in historical reports – because they did it at the moment when the State was not willing to help us push those changes through'.*

*–Tanja Ignjatovic, Serbia*

Why does it matter if women's activism in conflict situations goes unrecognised or is marginalised? Does it really make that much of a difference?

**Women's rights activists make up the bulk of the frontline human rights and humanitarian response to armed conflict.** They are there long before international actors arrive – and they will be there long after they leave. Their work is fundamental in every phase of a conflict.

Any externally-driven conflict intervention that does not acknowledge and support this response fails in its mission to serve conflict-affected populations.

This lack of recognition:

- ensures a disconnect between post-conflict reconstruction processes and reality, which means that the lion's share of resources is invested in processes that are not grounded in the needs of the local community and grassroots activism;
- fortifies systems that perpetuate further structural violence against women and girls; and
- intensifies the security threats facing women activists.

### **Disconnected Reconstruction Processes**

During and immediately after a conflict, women's rights activists focus their energies on critical service provision; monitoring, documenting and reporting human rights violations; and lobbying for a lasting peace settlement. They are committed to the priorities of the people they are striving to assist.

Meanwhile, external international actors and the warring parties negotiate political agreements and the country's future. Topics include ceasefires; peace accords; transitional justice mechanisms; disarmament; demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) processes; economic and infrastructural reconstruction; and security sector reform.

By the time women activists are able to shift their attention from survival and rebuilding to developments in the political, economic and legal spheres, the major ‘deals’ have already been done without them. As a result, these processes are detached from reality; the very people who will be affected – women activists and most members of the population – have not provided input. Usually, these deals involve trade-offs, like an amnesty for war crimes, and rank reconciliation over justice.

Critically, there is also a disproportionate focus on stabilisation at any price, which can entail glossing over the past and turning a blind eye to continuing violence.

### **Post-Conflict Violence**

Post-conflict, the level of violence against women and girls does not diminish, it increases. This is due to a combination of factors.

First, there is an **overall rise in the number of individuals and groups that pose a potential threat**, including national armed forces, non-state armed groups that retain territorial control and, in some cases, international military intervention forces, international police units and private military contractors. Furthermore, demobilised fighters are returning to communities and/or are being recruited into state security forces. Finally, there is a rise in the number of organised criminal gangs, with links to international organised criminal networks.

Higher profile conflicts, such as in Kosovo and Sierra Leone, can also lead to a disproportionate influx of foreign civilians into the country, including staff of international governmental and non-governmental agencies and the UN, as well as private suppliers and business people.

Second, there is an **expansion of certain forms of violence**. In addition to the violence committed during the armed conflict and the baseline level found in all societies, countries in conflict also experience a considerable increase in trafficking, sexual slavery, exploitation, harassment and prostitution. In post-conflict contexts, women and girls, particularly

women activists, also face the significant risk of ‘backlash’ from men threatened by changes to traditional roles and the power structure.<sup>13</sup> This is exacerbated by an array of factors, such as increased drug and alcohol use, mounting unemployment, the breakdown of the family, and access to small arms.

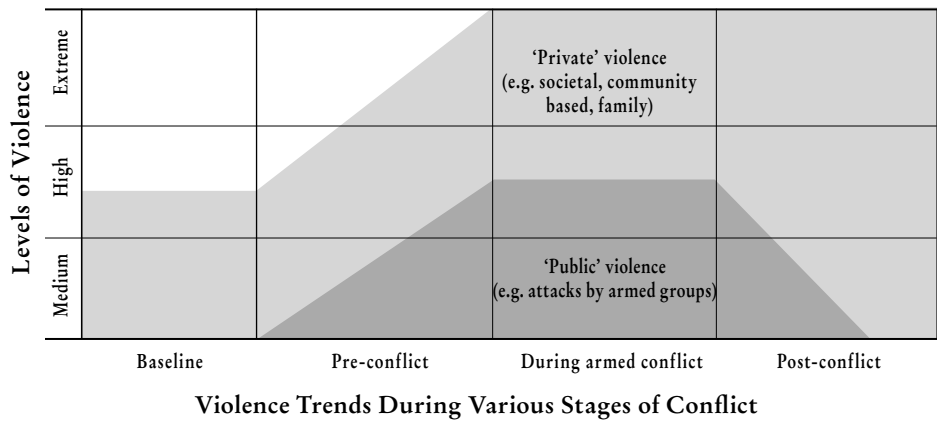
Third, there is a **prevailing sense of impunity** due to an interruption to the rule of law.<sup>14</sup> This is sometimes compounded by amnesty agreements that signal that violence will go unpunished. Hence, women and girls who suffer this violence remain silent out of fear of reprisal or ostracism, especially as perpetrators often hold powerful positions within their own government, community and/or family.

For women’s rights activists working with survivors of these forms of violence, it is now much more difficult, and dangerous, to address them. While it may have been possible to report violations perpetrated by armed actors and community members of opposing groups during the conflict, in the politically-charged post-conflict environment, it is extremely hard for women activists to speak out about violence committed by men and boys belonging to the same political, ethnic or religious group. It would be considered unpatriotic and traitorous. Worse still, the fact that the perpetrators are often acting as armed ‘protectors’, in a formal or self-appointed capacity, makes it that much more difficult to combat violence on all levels.

It is at this point, though, when women’s rights activists are struggling to deal with increasing levels of violence, in addition to supporting survivors of war-related violence, that international actors largely perceive the violent phase of the conflict to be over. This is when *public violence turns ‘private’*. It is now seen as unrelated to the conflict and, therefore, largely beyond the scope of post-conflict reconstruction priorities.

The model on the next page offers a graphical representation of this trend. The light area indicates the reality of ever-increasing levels of violence, while the darker area represents the external perception that violence diminishes, rather than increases, after a cessation of hostilities.

RISING UP IN RESPONSE



Security

Women’s rights activism in areas of conflict is inherently dangerous work, and it is likely to become more insecure in coming years.<sup>15</sup> Critically, women activists confront security threats that are very different from those faced by other international actors. However, there is limited understanding of the way in which women activists analyse security risks or respond to them.

Women’s rights activists are exposed to high levels of violence for significant amounts of time. Some have suffered harm themselves; many have lost family members and/or friends. Much of their work requires that they be exposed to such violence since, as well as providing vital support services, they are also acting as witnesses to human rights violations.

Their work is either unpaid or poorly paid, and they are often responsible for members of their own family, as well as colleagues and others in their community.

The basic features required to work in safety are usually absent, such as secure transport and working spaces, information and communication systems, and psychological care and support.

*‘In being a Human Rights Defender (HRD), multi-tasks are assumed by women. While they are advocating for human rights, they are simultaneously expected to ensure the well-being of the household/family and even of their own community. This multi-tasking places a greater burden psychologically and politically on Women HRDs (WHRDs) ... Male HRDs are commonly not burdened in the same way. In their work to promote and protect human rights, WHRDs experience distinct, additional and/or heightened risks, vulnerabilities and violations to their rights.*

*‘They are subjected to violations, risks and vulnerabilities which are:*

- (a) of a general character (i.e., those shared/experienced by all HRDs);*
- (b) gender-specific or gender-intensified (i.e. abuses due to their being a woman or impacts disproportionately on them because they are women); and*
- (c) due to their work on women-specific rights or issues.*

*‘All these highlight the need for special protection for WHRDs that addresses these risks, vulnerabilities and violations. Measures and enabling conditions for [WHRDs] must include practical support that recognizes their multiple roles and responsibilities in the exercise of their right to defend human rights ... The enduring source of support for and protection of WHRDs lies in the strength of their own movement/network’.*

**– Hina Jilani, ‘Report on the Consultation on Women Human Rights Defenders with the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Human Rights Defenders’, Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, August 2003**

## RISING UP IN RESPONSE

Women activists have limited time and resources and sometimes insufficient awareness of how to protect themselves. Many are new to working in conflict situations. Hence, many women activists can find it difficult to assess security risks and to develop appropriate responses.

Moreover, women's rights activists are more likely to rank the safety and well-being of others above their own. As one activist put it, 'while these women may understand the risks to their bodies, they don't realise the risk to their souls'. They are often too busy, or consider it shameful, to ask for help. Those who do ask for help are rarely heard.

All of these factors can lead to exhaustion and burn out. At a minimum, burn out can limit the capacity of activists to recognise danger signals; at a maximum, it can lead to risk-taking behaviour.

Isolation poses perhaps the single most significant security risk to women activists. Those who are in particular danger are often the most marginalised, that is, those with the least access to support networks due to a range of factors, such as their location, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation. These people include for example rural women in Sierra Leone or Sri Lanka, Roma women in Serbia or Kosovo, and Serb women in Kosovo.

Often the most important of women's rights issues are among the most dangerous and difficult to address. This is the case, for example, with regard to trafficking in all three countries,<sup>16</sup> as well as female genital mutilation in Sierra Leone, violence against female members of the Roma community in Serbia, and violence against female members of the Serb community in Kosovo.

Although some courageous women activists do speak out about trafficking and offer protection to those women and children who have been abused,<sup>17</sup> for most the threat is simply too great. Trafficking is connected to international organised criminal networks, and often occurs to satisfy the desires of powerful clients, including government officials, national and international police officers, peacekeepers, international

aid workers and private military contractors. When the individuals and organisations charged with curbing trafficking are involved in it, women activists have little room for manoeuvre.

Because women activists are not recognised as a core element of conflict response – and because violence against women is considered normal – they do not benefit from the protection afforded by the security support networks to which international actors have access. This includes, for example: secure accommodation, work space and transport; training in operational security management; access to satellite phones; critical incident and stress counselling; and, in extreme situations, evacuation to safe countries or assistance with hostage negotiations.

Even those security guidelines that exist have limited applicability to the work of women activists. This is because they are based on certain assumptions about the context, available support systems and risk awareness and threat perceptions, which are far less relevant to the crisis interventions of most women's rights activists.

To date, most of the standard security guidance on offer is primarily directed towards a particular audience: the international staff of the UN and other international agencies operating in areas of conflict.<sup>18</sup> The recommendations are not specific to women activists' experience of security dangers.<sup>19</sup> Those sections that are written for women are typically limited to perceptions of the risk of sexual violence or harassment, ignoring the fact that women activists have their own capacities and strategies to respond to security threats.

### **Relationships with International Actors**

Post-conflict funding shifts can significantly damage the response capacity of women's rights activists at a time when the risk to women and girls may be at its height, and often at a time when *conflict may resume* in the region.

The lack of stable, flexible funding is one of the most significant operational barriers to women's rights activists. This is a particularly



serious issue post-conflict, when donors tend to ‘mainstream’ funding, shifting from direct support for civil society to bilateral arrangements with the government. The expectation inherent in this strategy in Sri Lanka, for example, is that government departments will assume responsibility for ‘re-granting’ to NGOs.

The first activists to suffer as a result of this shift are the most marginalised – rural activists working outside of capital cities and activists belonging to under-represented minority groups.

This shift raises a couple of critical questions, particularly for independent human rights activists: when, if ever, is it possible for a human rights organisation to maintain independence without external support? Is it ever appropriate for a human rights group to receive the majority of its funding from its own government?

However, many women activists are learning ‘on the job’ and are not familiar with conflict cycles and the behaviour of international actors. Consequently, they focus on the task at hand during the acute emergency phase – and are left unprepared for resource shifts during the transition stage. Lepa Mladjenovic reported that several women’s groups in Serbia had approached her for fundraising support at the last minute, once their resources had run out. She attributes this to a lack of planning, in part because they had become accustomed to short-term crisis funding and in part ‘because this is the typical thinking from the totalitarian government and the war time – that you think only a little bit. Your experience of time is fragmented’.

Women’s rights activists in general, and marginalised ones in particular, lack consistent and good access to most international donors. They have limited access to information on funding sources, and often confront significant language and cultural barriers to interacting with foreigners who are either based in capital cities or internationally. Those who can gain access to donors must take time away from conflict response to

educate new donor staff members who are unfamiliar with the context and women's priorities, especially when international interventions are at their peak. They must also grapple with unfamiliar, bureaucratic application processes, as well as with funding delays and programming restrictions.

Family responsibilities are another significant barrier to interaction with international actors situated outside of the local community. When travel is necessary, activists have to consider the costs of caring for family members. In addition, they may have serious safety concerns for family members whom they leave behind in a conflict-affected area. This barrier is particularly serious for excluded or marginalised activists with limited resources, such as widows and single parents.

Finally, lack of support to help activists satisfy their basic operational requirements, such as safe transport and permanent work space, *significantly limits their response capacity* and increases their insecurity.

## *The Recommendations*

As international actors responding to conflict, it is our responsibility to reach out to women activists and to strengthen their capacity to conduct their critical work in safety. This means working in partnership with them, providing rapid assistance and accessible and practical resources and tools.

The recommendations of this report – summarised below and elaborated in detail in chapter seven and the Annex – draw attention to such resources, tools and approaches.

It is hoped that this study will stimulate a constructive dialogue between activists and international actors that, ultimately, will improve the way in which we respond to conflict ... together.

### **1. Increase women activists' access to critical decision-making processes throughout conflicts**

International agencies responding to conflicts should establish practical mechanisms to ensure that women activists are consistently and actively engaged in decision-making processes that shape the international conflict response *throughout all phases of a conflict*, and *at all levels of response*. This could be achieved by:

- reforming the current international response design and implementation processes to ensure that they are grounded in the realities of women and girls;
- ensuring that peace terms, including amnesty schemes and transitional justice mechanisms as well as, economic and political transition arrangements, are negotiated in a transparent, accountable and inclusive manner; and
- ensuring that women activists can engage safely and effectively in conflict negotiations and reform planning and implementation processes.

### **2. Provide women activists with consistent, accessible funding throughout conflicts**

International donors should ensure that there is consistent support for women activists throughout all phases of a conflict, particularly after a cessation of hostilities, by:

- maintaining a strong commitment to addressing increasing levels of violence, as well as to meeting transition challenges;
- ending practices like 'mainstreaming'; and
- improving funding processes in order to increase women activists' access to resources.

### **3. Strengthen relationships between women activists and international actors**

International agencies should strengthen their relationships with women activists by:

- offering practical support to women activists to allow them to participate in key meetings and conferences, such as by covering the costs of safe transport and accommodation, including escorts, and of care for children or older family members; and
- engaging in outreach to understand the strategies and priorities of marginalised women activists, in order to identify ways to work with them more directly.

### **4. Support women activists in order to address their operational constraints**

International agencies should help women activists to address their operational constraints by providing consistent access to:

- communication and information systems;
- freedom of movement; and
- safe work spaces.

### **5. Sustain women's activism**

International agencies should help women activists to sustain their activities by:

- recognising their tendency to minimise or ignore the cumulative effects of stress and exposure to violence; and
- providing them with opportunities to rest, to recover physically and mentally and to advance their professional skills.

### **6. Enhance the security of women activists**

International agencies should work with women activists to address barriers to security in conflict zones by:

- setting up an independent security audit system to assess the human rights protection response of international peace support operations;
- supporting regional safe houses;
- providing options for the protection of women activists, ranging from increasing public recognition of their work to, in worst case scenarios, assistance with evacuation;
- formulating security guidelines that reflect women activists' realities; and
- supplying women activists with emergency preparedness and evacuation packs.

### **7. Improve violence prevention and response mechanisms in conflicts**

International agencies should work with women activists to alter and improve significantly the current international response to violence in conflict areas by:

- altering international agency perceptions of, and responses to, violence at all phases of a conflict;
- improving relationships between state police forces and women's rights activists;
- ensuring that human rights monitoring and international justice mechanisms are appropriate and do no harm; and
- strengthening the mental health aspects of the response.

## Who are the Activists?

The women activists who participated in this study were involved in addressing a wide range of issues throughout the conflicts in their regions, including violence against women, legal reform, property rights, the provision of essential services, and political participation. The common element that ties this diverse work together and results in it being described as ‘women’s rights activism’ is to be found in the particular *approach* of women’s rights activists.

Being a women’s rights activist *‘means that I try to be proactive about things ... I need to take it further than just indignation, try to actually do something about it. I believe very strongly that people can make a difference and can make a change’.*

–Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff, *Sierra Leone*

Activism is *‘consistent, committed engagement on women’s rights issues – working with women and minorities’.*

–Vjollca Krasniqi, *Kosovo*

*‘You are a women’s human rights activist if you have some specific, concrete idea in working in human rights’.*

–Vera Kurtic and Ana Zorbic, *Serbia*

*‘In my experience women’s rights activists are feminists engaged in women-focused work. They have a philosophy and a rationale for why they do the work’.*

–Rachel Wareham, *Afghanistan*

These activists come from all walks of life and are engaged in activism on all levels, from the grassroots to the highest echelons of politics. They have an impressive array of skills – a significant number learnt ‘on the job’. Critically, many of these activists emerged from the fighting, and were transformed by it.

The work of UAF is grounded in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, which calls for the adoption of a broad approach to women’s human rights and the issues that define them. Within this context, UAF considers grant requests for actions that not only directly advance women’s rights, but also promote women’s views on human rights matters that are of importance to civil society.

The UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Human Rights Defenders, Hina Jilani, reflected this broad understanding of women’s rights activism in her description of human rights defenders. She emphasized that she has *‘not adopted a firm definition of HRDs as any definition will have the tendency to exclude’*. Instead, she said that *‘all activity for the protection and promotion of human rights is in defence of human rights. Any person, who does this activity, whether once or consistently, is a human rights defender’*.

*‘HRDs therefore include those who have put forward resistance where the State (or “non-State actors”) conduct is reprehensible. They are found among NGO workers, journalists, trade unionists, members of people’s organizations, health workers, religious workers, students etc. They can also be the families of victims because of their endeavour to achieve justice. Given the wide ranging nature and scope of the activities they are involved in, it is an impossible task to list them all’.*

– Hina Jilani, *‘Report on the Consultation on Women Human Rights Defenders with the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Human Rights Defenders’*, Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, August 2003

Perhaps more important than the way in which they have defined the concept of human rights activism is how they themselves became activists, and why they continue their work, despite numerous problems and dangers, ranging from lack of recognition and limited compensation to threats against their lives.

For Yasmin Jusu-Sheriff, activism was in the family, and hence she fell quite naturally into the role:

*'I don't know what I am really – I'm interested in women's rights issues and also human rights issues. I grew up in a very highly politicised environment. My mother is also an activist and my father was leader of the opposition here for many years, so I think I come from a family which has always been interested in public issues. When I came back to Sierra Leone from the UK, I think people just assumed that I'd be interested – they would ask me to do things and I just got involved'.*

Valnora Edwin initially approached human rights activism with a very healthy dose of scepticism, but over time she became committed:

*'Of course I consider myself a human rights activist. I became interested in human rights issues when I started working for the Campaign for Good Governance [CGG]. Prior to that, I heard about human rights and I thought these people look like a bunch of hypocrites. In 1997 when we had these problems here in Sierra Leone, nobody – (from the) international human rights organisations – was saying anything about what was happening for quite a while. When we heard about Amnesty International saying something about the detained rebels ... and about their human rights issues ... we were thinking, don't we have rights as well? So I didn't think much about the human rights issues, but when I started working for the CGG, I got to understand how it works'.*

Many women chose activism in response to their own personal experience of violence and loss. U.D.M. Seela Watthie, the founder and coordinator



## RIISING UP IN RESPONSE

of the Uwa Vilasu Farming Women's Organisation in Moneragala, Sri Lanka, became an activist after her father – a well-respected social worker, a village counsellor and the director of a psychosocial support organisation – was killed fighting for land rights.

In 1989, during the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) uprising, the husband and son of R.M. Bandara Menike were taken from their home one evening and shot. After Bandara found their bodies, she went to the police. Although she eventually received government compensation, the killers have not been punished and continue to live in her village. Following the murders, she turned to the Farming Women's Organisation for assistance; she has worked for it ever since.

After their loved ones disappeared, A. Vithanga and Visaka Dharmadasa became activists, working on missing persons issues with the Association of War Affected Women in Sri Lanka.<sup>20</sup>

*'When my second son went missing, I became very active because the war was at my doorstep. I was directly affected, and of course I didn't look back. For the last five years, I have been doing everything possible to see an end to this war. I did know the cruelty of the war, the reality of the war if I may call it, but experiencing it – I mean then you really understand what it is'.*

–Visaka Dharmadasa, Sri Lanka

*'I don't know whether my husband is alive or not because no one has told me. But I still believe that he will be somewhere and I am doing everything I can to find him. I'm mentally relieved by this work. When I go with Auntie Visaka to all these places to meet everybody and discuss these things, that gives me mental relief – I'm happy to help people from the religious side so I can make them feel better. I am doing all these things because of my husband – I want to know. I want to meet all the LTTE [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam] people and find out if my husband is alive, to know what happened to him'.*

– A. Vithanga, Sri Lanka

Some activists rise up in response to violence directly perpetrated against them. Four young women in Makeni, Sierra Leone, for example, joined a support programme for survivors of violence run by Grassroots Empowerment for Self-Reliance (GEMS). Each one had endured terrible loss and abuse during the conflict, including abduction and rape. After participating in the programme, they decided to form their own group, focussing on HIV/AIDS and child rights issues. Barbara Bangura, the head of GEMS, commented on their transformation:

*'I've always wondered how they've survived; for me I don't see them as victims, I see them as survivors. But some of them went through hell. I don't know whether it's because of the urgent need to survive that made them survive, I don't understand. Because they can all tell you how they managed it. And they have bonded so well. They've formed themselves into a group calling themselves GEMS Sisters. It's amazing. I went up last week for a day and they just did this beautiful song that they had composed on peace and reconciliation. These things touch you'.*

After she was arrested and persecuted by the Serb regime, Naime Sherifi-Macastena of the Center for the Protection of Women and Children in Kosovo chose to dedicate her career to protecting women and children:

*'I became an activist because I was a victim myself when I was a child. In 1984, I was arrested by the regime at that time – when I was not even 16 years old. I was under investigation for six months ... accused of political enemy propaganda. After the trial I was punished for five years with surveillance and restricted freedom. For some time, I lost the right to education. After a lot of difficulties I finally got involved in school again, after a year. So, I know what it means when someone doesn't respect your rights, especially if it is the law and the institutions that are doing that. It is something I felt myself'.*

### Emergency Activists

Ordinary women and girls will often join established women's rights movements in response to significant political crises and conflicts. Together, they have brought world leaders to power. For example, the women's movement in Sierra Leone is largely acknowledged as being behind Ahmed Tejan Kabbah's presidential success in 1996. In other instances, they have united to depose leaders. For example, the 'Recipe for Democracy' and the 'Get Out, Stand Up, Hold Out – Defend Your Vote!' campaigns succeeded in ousting Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic from office in 2000. Subsequently, some of these new activists return to their previous lives, while others are inspired to continue.

Lepa Mladjenovic recalled how young women participated in efforts to keep the Autonomous Women's Center Against Sexual Violence open in Belgrade and to maintain connections through a regional women's safe house, the 'Budapest Base', during the NATO bombardment.

*'We also paid for people's travel to the Budapest Base ... some girls, like Teodora, went back and forth. There was always something to do and take from there – or to go with someone who was afraid to go alone to this place. If you told her to go tomorrow, she goes tomorrow. Because they knew this was the only center that was non-stop open. These were not girls who were originally working in the center – they were friends of friends from the network. About half of them were not originally with us before – nor afterwards – they were just there as emergency activists'.*

See Chapter 6 for more details about the Budapest Base.

## How do Women Activists Respond to Conflict?

### *Introduction*

Women activists in the Balkans and Sri Lanka have long been engaged in programmes of resistance and reform. Movements developed in the late nineteenth century and were grounded in the principles of feminism. At various times they were influenced by foreign women's movements and feminist theories emanating from Europe, Russia and the US.<sup>21</sup> Activism was focused on the reform of discriminatory state systems and on raising public awareness of women's social, economic, reproductive and political rights. Activists worked in a variety of ways: running public workshops; organising rallies, meetings, conferences and discussion groups; and researching and publishing literature on feminism and women's position in society. In some cases, activists also provided special services to support women who had survived violence or were imprisoned.

The Sierra Leonean Women's Movement (SLWM) was formed later, in 1951, prior to the country gaining independence from Britain. Led by women like Constance Cummings John, Hannah Benka Coker and Paramount Chief Madam Ella Koblo Gulama, the SLWM focussed its attention primarily on the political sphere, seeking representation in government, fighting for respect of women's political, economic and social rights, and lobbying to reform discriminatory marriage and property laws.<sup>22</sup> Women activists organised petitions, public meetings and 'march-past' demonstrations, and ran for political office. Post-independence, this movement scaled back its activities, until the mid-1990s.

When violence escalated in their regions and developed into full-blown armed conflict, these women faced unprecedented challenges.

The increasing militarisation of their societies triggered a corresponding rise in the scale, severity and form of human rights violations committed against selected groups. Women and girls, in particular, were the target of increasing levels of violence because of their gender as well as, in some cases, their ethnicity. This included rape, harassment and detention, abduction, and forced recruitment into armed groups.<sup>23</sup> Escalating violence also prompted the movement of people to safer areas of the country or across national borders.

As the conflicts changed their lives, women and girls responded, fighting to protect their loved ones, to find family members separated by the violence, and to gain access to basic services. Those who were abducted or detained focused on surviving until they could escape. Some women and girls voluntarily joined armed groups, such as the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), for a variety of reasons, ranging from protection to resistance.

In the periods following the conclusion of ceasefires in these regions, they turned to rebuilding their lives in the face of a legacy of structural, physical and psychological damage, ongoing violence and ever-increasing poverty.

Experienced women activists recognised that, in order to meet these formidable challenges, they would have to change their own strategies and interventions fundamentally. Instead of working to *promote and advance* the rights of women and girls, they now directed their resources and energies towards *resisting conflict* and *protecting basic rights*, including, for example, the right to life and freedom of movement.

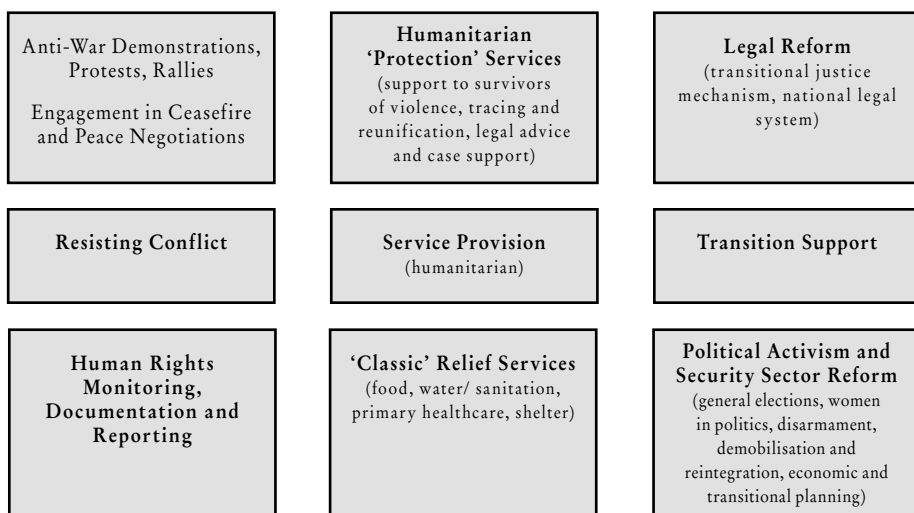
This meant developing new response strategies. In these times of crisis, activists simply did what needed to be done to the best of their ability, and frequently far beyond what their training had prepared them for and what there were resources available to support. Often they were figuring it out as they went along.

Crucially, their responses were grounded in the real and complex priorities of women and girls affected by the conflicts. Hence, their new interventions were often multidisciplinary and flexible, shifting rapidly to respond to the mounting and varied impacts of the violence.

These interventions rarely fit neatly into clear categories or sectors. Very broadly, they can be described in terms of three inter-related approaches, shown in the model below. First, women activists launched non-violent resistance movements that focussed on various forms of anti-war protest and the monitoring, documenting and reporting of human rights violations. As the conflicts developed further, they initiated their own conflict resolution processes and established systems to inform international actors engaged in emergency response and conflict negotiation.

Second, they provided essential specialised and basic support services to members of conflict-affected populations, particularly women and girls.

Third, after a cessation of hostilities, they expanded their activities to tackle legal and political reform, with a particular emphasis on ensuring women's participation in decision-making processes.



**The Range of Activist Response to Conflict**

*Links between Women's Rights  
Activism and Humanitarian Action*

Time and again, activists pointed to overlapping relationships, as well as to some tensions between human rights activism and humanitarian action. While the two areas have some very distinct elements, in practice women activists have often found it difficult to engage in 'pure' human rights activism without also responding to immediate needs. Consequently, a significant number of women activists have provided direct (specialised and basic) services to women and girls during both acute emergencies and the transitional phase of a conflict.

Interestingly, this mirrors a very similar development among many humanitarian actors, who are increasingly recognising that the delivery of 'pure' humanitarian services cannot be disconnected from the human rights violations that are at the heart of these conflicts. This is a choice between a concept of humanitarian action under which assistance is provided as a gesture of solidarity, because individuals have a *right* to it, or as an act of charity that is targeted at selected victims. As a result of this conceptual shift, many humanitarian organisations have incorporated the concept of 'humanitarian protection' and an overall 'rights-based approach' into their emergency and transitional conflict work.

Some activists simply do not distinguish human rights activism from humanitarian action. Marie-Therese Bockarie, for example, a self-described political activist in rural Bo, Sierra Leone, believes that 'a human rights activist is also a humanitarian because all the work she does is related to getting a person to become what he or she really is ... Human rights activists are really going all out to see that women are not marginalised, their rights are not violated, they are not discriminated against – that they can do what they want to do instead of people forcing them to do what they do not want to do. If a girl does not want to get married to a man, you cannot force that person to do it, or if you do want to have sex with a man you should not be forced into it.

They also go in to see that children are properly treated, they get their rightful places in society, they have their food, they have clothing, shelter, they are not thrown into the streets by their parents’.

Some activist groups use the provision of humanitarian services as a springboard from which to address human rights issues, particularly the supply of health services to respond to violence against women. A representative of the Women’s Development Centre in Sri Lanka noted that, while the centre started out (in 1986) providing ‘humanitarian’ services to individual women and families, it subsequently reached out to a variety of sectors and became involved in more rights-based work: ‘We started with health but went into rights – what to do if some kind of violence happens’. This is similar to the work of *medica mondiale Kosova*, which offers various types of assistance to women and girls in the community, including counselling and legal support.

Other activists, though, pointed out the distinctions between the two fields. In some cases, they described humanitarian action as the provision of material-oriented, short-term relief. Human rights activism, in contrast, was presented as a more holistic, dedicated approach designed to meet immediate and longer-term needs. Vesna Nikolic-Ristanovic, for instance, defined a human rights activist as ‘a person who is trying to identify the ways human rights are violated and trying to find a way to support people – to get not only assistance, but also to overcome what happened to them and to empower them’.

Radhika Coomaraswamy explained that many Sri Lankan women’s groups chose to engage in humanitarian action during acute phases of the conflict because it was the only form of action possible at the time. She said that ‘they were most effective doing humanitarian work, helping victims of the conflict in some way. What they were not able to do was really be political, effectively. Or really deal with women’s related violence issues in the conflict zones. They mainly focused on delivery of services to victims of conflict – that was what they could do’.



For some, frustration with the difficulties associated with, and the perceived limits of, humanitarian action led to a strategic shift away from direct service provision to a rights-based approach. Radmilla Kapetanovic and Ruzica Simic, for example, explained that they first worked in the humanitarian sector in Kosovo, often in conjunction with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), providing assistance to refugees. Although Radmilla initially thought that NGOs should only offer purely humanitarian assistance, she has since moved into rights-oriented work. She acknowledged that some of the problems connected to humanitarian work, including high stress and short-term funding cycles, contributed to her transition. 'But now I am really far away from all that – I would not like to work again in that kind of a job because it's a very difficult job. When the refugees came, none of the activists could sleep for 10 days. I think there are a lot of humanitarian organisations who can deal with that, there are the Belgian Caritas, Red Cross, etc. – there are a lot of NGOs who are taking care of those people. And they are not having donations, so they must go again looking for everything and doing things from the beginning again'. She also commented on aid dependency: 'I also think that humanitarian aid has a negative influence on people ... I would prefer to push them to think that they should take care of themselves and their families by themselves ... but people aren't interested in that, because they got used to just depending on someone'.

Pearl Stephens in Sri Lanka echoed Radmilla's concern about aid dependency in emergency contexts when she described her work in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Kandy: 'I found that the victims in IDP camps were really traumatised because they have lost their houses, their things were gone ... and then we came to a point where it was depressing to go into a camp and I hated it, because ... then you found that gradually people were getting into this thing of depending on hand-outs. That's the time we changed. Then we stopped, and asked "would you like to come for some training in Kandy?" We brought them to Kandy and then that is where we started mobilising them and that worked in a small way ... today we have 250 groups. It worked'.

Some women decided to alter their initial approach towards activism in response to changing priorities. Some, for example, expanded their range of support services to include emerging issues. Christiana Thorpe, for instance, worked with the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) in Sierra Leone to broaden its original organisational focus on education to encompass violence against women and girls.

Other examples include moving from discrete human rights monitoring to the provision of direct services. Naime Sherifi-Macastena, for example, moved from human rights monitoring with the Council for the Defense of Human Rights to providing direct services with the Center for the Protection of Women and Children. She said: 'The Council for the Defense of Human Rights just collected data, but did not give concrete assistance to the victims. But the Center and Sevdie (Ahmeti), they gave direct assistance to women who were raped. Because of the big work [they] did, I decided to come here to work last year ... because I realized that the contribution is much bigger when you work directly with the victims'.

While Vesna Nikolic-Ristanovic's initial work with women in Serbian prisons was research-oriented, she too became involved in direct response. 'After going to talk to women in prison for research purposes, I came back as an activist ... During the war and economic sanctions in Serbia, the problem was that women in prison didn't have elementary things like hygienic supplies and the food was awful. At that time, humanitarian aid was really important. So I organized with the Women's Centre – we went there with soaps, hygienic napkins, food and different things they really needed. Also just talking with them without any purpose. Giving them a sense that there are people who care for them'.

## *Resisting Conflict*

As violence escalated in the Balkans, Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka, some women activists formed or joined non-violent resistance movements to protest against the increasing militarisation of their societies. Later on, as tensions intensified and full-blown war erupted, they focused their efforts on pushing for appropriate, negotiated settlements. Throughout, women activists monitored, documented and reported human rights violations by all sides.

This was dangerous work, and the capacity of women activists to denounce publicly and to document increasing violence varied in each region. When it was possible, activists tried to draw external attention to the increasing violence through international human rights and feminist networks. In some cases, they successfully organised public protests, ‘march-past’ demonstrations and vigils, and distributed printed materials.

For example, many Sri Lankan women activists joined the civil rights movement that sprang up to address the human rights abuses that occurred during the JVP uprising of 1971.<sup>24</sup> In October 1984, at the start of the conflict between the government and the LTTE, Women for Peace (WFP) was formed to push for a peaceful, negotiated settlement. This intervention started as a signature campaign, involving 100 feminist activists and leading professionals in the fields of education, law, medicine and the arts – later it included 10,000 women of all religious, ethnic and class denominations. As the war progressed, Sri Lankan women’s interventions expanded to include community-based programmes in all parts of the country, including exchanges between the north and the south, workshops and seminars, and peace rallies.

In Serbia, Women in Black launched its historic anti-war campaign by staging a public, non-violent demonstration in Belgrade on 9 October 1991.<sup>25</sup> This marked the beginning of a women’s peace movement that would continue for years, resisting the rise in repression and the wars in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo.

### **Powerful, Non-Violent Resistance in Sierra Leone: The Push for Elections by the Women's Forum**

In January 1996, the military head of state made direct radio contact with the leader of the RUF and agreed to peace talks in Abidjan. Both sides began to argue for 'Peace Before Polls', a nice slogan that essentially meant the continuation of military rule. But vocal and widespread public support soon developed for a contrary idea: 'Polls Before Peace'. Sierra Leonean civil society played an extremely important part in this, particularly a coalition of women's organisations known as the Women's Forum. Some of the impetus originated in regional preparatory meetings for the Beijing Women's Conference, held in Dakar in early 1995. There, representatives of women's groups, the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and others, met women from other African countries, notably Angola and Somalia, who had also been through war and civil strife.

By mid-1996, the Women's Forum included 50 different groups based in six cities and towns. The Forum held meetings, marches and press conferences, lobbying donors, the media and traditional leaders. The government felt, however, that the case for 'Peace Before Polls' had been made, and that a free vote in a reconvened National Consultative Conference would verify its position. At the conference, women's organisations demonstrated the strength of their will and their ability to lobby other groups, especially traditional leaders. Despite threats of violence, the vote was 56 to 14 in favour of immediate elections.

– Ian Smillie, Lansana Gberie and Ralph Hazleton, *'The Heart of the Matter: Sierra Leone, Diamonds and Human Security'*, (Ottawa: Partnership Africa Canada, January 2000). Available online at <http://www.sierra-leone.org/heartmatter.html>

After the Yugoslav government revoked Kosovo's autonomy and introduced a repressive regime, women activists in the province made up the bulk of a remarkable non-violent resistance movement that established parallel health, education and social service structures. Some women activists also began to engage in the dangerous task of monitoring and reporting on the regime's systematic and increasing campaign of violence against the Kosovar Albanian population, including extrajudicial killings, and the arrest and detention of political figures.

Finally, the Sierra Leonean conflict served to revive the women's movement and transform it into a formidable force for change. In 1996, Sierra Leonean women activists, united within the Women's Forum, pushed the country's military government to hold the first democratic elections in almost three decades, bringing President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah to power. In 2002, as the country faced the prospect of the breakdown of the 1999 Lomé Peace Accords, women were again pivotal, organising mass demonstrations that led to the end of the war.<sup>26</sup>

These initial non-violent resistance efforts often served as a precursor to women activists' engagement in conflict negotiation processes – long before talk of peace was 'fashionable'. As Kumari Jayawardena pointed out in relation to Sri Lanka, 'now everybody is talking about peace – but when it was unpopular it was women's groups who were protesting and picketing and marching'. Much as in Sierra Leone, it was primarily through the efforts of Sri Lankan civil society, particularly the women's movement, that the government and the LTTE were brought to the negotiating table. As U.D.M. Seela Watthie explained: 'it is the work of people and civil society that brought the government and the rebels to the peace table, and not the government deciding to have peace and then causing the NGOs to work for peace. This peace movement has been people driven'.

In particular, ongoing activism by Sri Lankan women has ensured remarkable progress in incorporating the voices and experiences of women and girls into the peace process.

Sri Lankan women had long lobbied for a negotiated, inclusive political solution to the conflict through a variety of interventions, ranging from demonstrations to issuing petitions and memorandums to the warring parties. However, in 2002, inspired by a conference in Colombo, activists decided that the time had come to expand their strategies to include increasingly direct action, with remarkable results. Landmark achievements include the International Women's Mission to the Northeast of Sri Lanka and the subsequent establishment of the Sub-Committee on Gender Issues (SGI). The International Women's Mission, facilitated by the Women and Media Collective, assessed and documented the effects of the war on women and girls in the northeast and the 'border' areas of the country. Its report, submitted in December 2002,<sup>27</sup> sets out a series of important recommendations that should not only inform the current Sri Lankan peace process, but also should have value for conflict negotiation processes globally.

### **Shifting Strategies**

Radhika Coomaraswamy described the events leading up to the shift in Sri Lankan women activists' strategies for engaging in the peace process and their subsequent collaborative successes. *'Last year [women's groups] have done a lot. It was done by all the multiple organisations ... there were about eight to ten people meeting and feeling depressed most of the time. Then we had a big international conference on women for peace where we brought people from all over the world to come and talk to women here, and that was a well-needed injection. That resulted in a meeting held with women's groups from all over Sri Lanka to draft a memorandum to the LTTE and the prime minister – that took place about a year ago this month [August 2003]. Out of that came a project that the Women and Media Collective did which was sending fact-finding missions to the north and the east, out of that came some recommendations. From those recommendations, and with people lobbying the negotiators, came a suggestion that a women's committee be set up to advise the peace process. So then there was a direct link between NGO activity; in fact that's what led to the setting up of the women's committee'.*

Activists used this report to lobby for the integration of women's concerns into the peace process at the third round of peace talks in Oslo, Norway, in December 2002. As a result of their efforts, participants at the talks set up the SGI and charged it with advising on gender issues vis-à-vis the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Sri Lanka. The SGI includes women from Colombo and the north and east of the country and leaders of the LTTE's women's wing. To date, the SGI has analysed gender in the education and legal systems, and it has been involved in other awareness-raising and bridge-building activities between the north and the south.

In recognition of the fact that the conflicts in West Africa were interlinked, established women activists from the three West African countries that constitute the Mano River Union (Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone) came together in May 2000 to form an important regional women's initiative, the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET).<sup>28</sup> Via this network, women activists have worked to influence regional conflict negotiations at the heart of real decision-making processes. For example, in 2001, members of MARWOPNET met with the presidents of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone and successfully convinced them to resume dialogue, when all other efforts had failed. More recently, ECOWAS called on MARWOPNET to chair the opening session of the negotiations between Liberians United for Democracy (LURD) and the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia.

The Stability Pact Gender Task Force (SP GTF) in the Balkans is another important example of a collaborative regional initiative that involves women, this time to influence reconstruction processes. The Stability Pact, signed in June 1999, is a reconstruction plan that seeks to create stability in Southeast Europe, following years of armed conflict. Under pressure from more than 150 women's NGOs in the region, the Stability Pact established a Gender Task Force in November 1999 that operates under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). With support from the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the SP GTF developed an action plan focused on the political empowerment of women (most countries in the region were planning to hold local or national elections in 2000–2001).

The Gender Task Force gradually developed into the most active and visible part of the Working Table for Democratization and Human Rights in South Eastern Europe. The SP GTF has been able to implement political empowerment projects successfully, both at the national and regional levels. Highlights include successes in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the 'Women Can Do It' project helped female candidates to capture the highest ever number of seats on municipal councils (18%). The Media Information/Awareness Campaign project reached more than 200,000 female voters in Former Yugoslavia and some 30,000 in Macedonia.

In the wake of a massive, and potentially overwhelming, international response to the crisis in Kosovo, women activists mobilised to ensure local ownership of post-conflict reconstruction processes. After Igo Rogova and other women activists returned to the province, they found that they were excluded from internationally organised meetings on women's priorities: 'in those meetings, local women had no voice. It was just internationals – it was their agenda, their words'.

In 2000, they formed the Kosovo Women's Network (KWN) to ensure that the foreign-dominated reconstruction and reform process took into account the real priorities of women and girls. 'This is when we local women felt humiliated because we were not being recognized as experts in this field, so we decided to form our own network, and we invited internationals to attend these meetings, to have equal time between internationals and locals to say what they wanted to say'.

The KWN is now a leading network, involving more than 70 women's NGOs and groups from all over Kosovo. It has provided support to networks of Roma women's NGOs and to the Network of Serbian Women's Groups of Kosovo. Since its inception, the KWN has become a key advocacy network, working on behalf of Kosovo women at the regional and international levels. Its bimonthly meetings serve as a forum in which Kosovar and international NGOs that work on gender equality issues can exchange information, offer support for each other's programmes, and initiate joint public education and advocacy campaigns.<sup>29</sup>



## *Service Provision*

### **Core Issues**

As conflict escalated in the various regions, the increasing violence took its toll on the people, particularly on women and girls. During these times, the governments responsible for ensuring safety, security and the provision of essential services were either too weak to function or, in some cases, deliberately targeted specific groups. This left an enormous assistance gap that women activists, among others, stepped in to fill.

Once hostilities ended, essential services were slowly restored in conflict-affected areas, now provided by both state institutions and international and national non-governmental entities. However, just when it seemed that the most obvious ‘emergency’ needs had been met, and that these societies were gradually moving towards recovery and transition, the conditions facing women and girls started to deteriorate once again. Many activists were particularly concerned about three inter-related consequences of the conflicts: the legacy of forced displacement; the changing roles of women and girls; and the extraordinary rise in violence.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Legacy of Forced Displacement**

The nominal ‘end’ of these conflicts triggered further population movement in all of the study regions, in all directions. For some, this meant returning home. Yet all of the areas under review are still playing host to large numbers of IDPs and refugees, some with little hope of return. The return process can take years and, for many people, their status remains unresolved.

Families headed by women and girls are particularly affected by long-term displacement. In Sri Lanka, for example, Saroja Sivachandra described how displaced women and girls live in extreme poverty in the ‘Welfare Camps’ in the High Security Zones (HSZ) set up by the Sri Lankan army, without access to employment or agriculture.<sup>31</sup> Suicide rates in some of these camps are three times as high as those in the rest of the country – Sri Lanka has one of the highest suicide rates in

the world.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, in Serbia, the conditions facing large numbers of displaced and refugee women and girls remain bleak.

According to the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, by 2000 Serbia and Montenegro were host to the largest population of refugees and IDPs in Europe: approximately 630,000 individuals from Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo. Few are likely to return home.

Finally, although many Sierra Leonean IDPs have at last returned to their homes in the provinces, a significant proportion remains in the urban centres, either due to continued fear or economic factors.

### **Changing Roles**

In all three regions, the conflicts also irrevocably altered traditional family, community and societal dynamics. Women and girls faced these crises with courage and resilience, taking on new roles and responsibilities. In some cases, these changes offered unexpected opportunities for them to explore new, sometimes powerful, identities serving as activists, community leaders, fighters or business women.

But, as the ICRC points out, such changes to the traditional roles of women must be understood within a context of 'loss, poverty and deprivation endemic to war, and the fact that in many societies women still only gain status (economic and social) through marriage'.<sup>33</sup>

Activists in all three study regions said that various aspects of family breakdown had impacted significantly on the capacity of women and girls to survive and to rebuild their lives. Many married women were widowed, while others were divorced. Still others with husbands who are missing have been left in limbo, without legal status or access to support. Some are rejected by their families. As a result, a disproportionate number of women and girls have taken on the full economic and emotional burden of caring for their own family, as well as extended family members, with limited backing or recognition.

Unmarried women, meanwhile, face a life with far fewer prospects of marriage, either because they have been ostracised or because of a shortage of single men. In Sri Lanka, Saroja Sivachandra noted that, because so many young men fled the northeast or joined the LTTE, families are now competing fiercely for the few single men who remain, and dowries are becoming unaffordable. For young women in this area, their future (without a husband) is bleak. With limited economic options, increasing numbers of young women are turning to the commercial sex trade or are entering into polygamous marriages. Some commit suicide.

### **A Rise in Violence**

After a cessation of hostilities, the level of violence against women and girls does not diminish, it increases. This is due to a combination of related factors.

First, the **overall increase in the number of individuals and groups that pose a potential threat**, including national armed forces, non-state armed groups that retain territorial control and, in some cases, international military intervention forces, international police units and private military contractors. Furthermore, demobilised fighters are returning to communities and/or are being recruited into state security forces. Finally, there are an increased number of organised criminal gangs, with links to international organised criminal networks.

Second, the **expansion of certain forms of violence** including, for example, reprisal murders, other extrajudicial killings, and the rape and displacement of civilians based on perceived political affiliation or ethnicity. There has also been an increase in inter-communal and inter-familial violence. In addition, there has been a considerable rise in trafficking, sexual slavery, exploitation, harassment and prostitution.

Immediately after a ceasefire, women and girls are at particular risk of being the victims of reprisal murders, other extrajudicial killings, and rape and displacement – based on perceived political affiliation or ethnicity or, in some cases, simply to exact private revenge or to gain economically. Following NATO's entry into Kosovo on 12 June 1999,

ethnic Albanians were primarily responsible for abuses committed against non-Albanians (Serbs, Roma, Gorani), as well as reprisal attacks on some ethnic Kosovar Albanians. These events were marked by the significant lack of protection afforded to these groups by the international community. During the Sri Lankan army's 1996 occupation of Jaffna, activists recounted killings, rapes, disappearances, looting and the torture of civilians. Following LTTE attacks on the IPKF between 1987 and 1990 in northeast Sri Lanka, government troops exacted revenge on civilians they perceived to be collaborators, involving, for instance, killing, rape and the destruction of property.

International interventions also posed new, and significant, threats to the safety of women and girls. Higher profile conflicts, such as in Kosovo and Sierra Leone, led to a disproportionate influx of foreign civilians into the country, including staff of international governmental and non-governmental agencies and the UN, as well as private suppliers and business people. These international actors wielded tremendous power over the general population, both in terms of their real and perceived status as protectors, and the control that they exercised over scarce resources, such as money and food. In contexts where international actors normalised sexual violence and glossed over women's rights violations as an inevitable part of war, this extraordinary imbalance of power – combined with a sense of impunity – paved the way for some soldiers and international agency staff to abuse women and girls. At a minimum, these abuses took the form of sexual slavery, trafficking and exploitation. At their most extreme, they also included murder and rape.

The legacy of violence committed during the wars, combined with ever-worsening poverty, increases the vulnerability of women and girls to violence. In conjunction with the existence of an international 'market', poverty and prior exposure to violence increases the vulnerability of women and girls to organised sex trafficking rings. Naime Sherifi-Macastena believes that, after the cessation of hostilities in Kosovo, traffickers targeted rural Kosovar women in the cities and women who had suffered violence during the war. 'In Kosovo after the war, we know that there was a very big movement of the

rural population into the cities. Since the rural areas were much more destroyed during the war, the cities were sort of inundated by people from the rural areas. These families got settled into the cities with almost zero economic base. With not even one information about life in the city and the risks of life in the city. Most of the victims [now] are those who have gone through a lot of trauma during the war, who lost members of their family, who came out of the war with a totally destroyed economic base'. Lepa Mladjenovic pointed to a similar pattern of targeting in Serbia: 'Serbian women are exported to Italy, and now to Bosnia. Traffickers target vulnerable women – for example young women who are psychologically unstable, Roma women from Kosovo and village women'. Although less well-documented, there is some suggestion that rural girls have been forcibly trafficked for the gratification of government soldiers at the Anuradhapura military base in Sri Lanka.<sup>34</sup>

In Sierra Leone, young women and girls have also increasingly been forced into early marriages. Prior to the war, although girls were often engaged at a young age, they were not married until they were much older. However, post-war poverty has transformed these traditions: now, girls as young as 12 are married immediately for the cash – often to much older men. This results in ever earlier instances of childbirth and related health problems. As Jeanette Eno explained, 'Because of poverty, especially in areas where there was widespread devastation like ... the eastern part of Sierra Leone, say from Kenema going to Kailahun and Kono, you'd find the incidence [of early marriage] much higher there because a lot of things just broke down. In the old days you would contract a young girl for marriage ... but she wouldn't actually be taken to the man until she was at an age or had gone through certain processes. I guess now, no one is able to wait for that – and if there is money to be exchanged the sooner it is exchanged the better. And who is there to protect these young children? So if you go to some remote areas you see lots of very young girls ... between 12 to 15 years old ... pregnant ... You can even see their bodies actually distorted and looking really strained with this ... stomach in front of them. I'm not sure if there's any tracking as to what happens to these children, how they go through childbirth and what happens to them afterwards'.

Deepening poverty also forces women to seek employment outside of their own communities, exposing them to violence and exploitation. In Sri Lanka, increasing numbers of women have left for the Middle East in search of work as domestic servants.<sup>35</sup> Many women initially believe that they are going to take up legitimate domestic posts, but instead, they are trafficked, enslaved or exploited. Some are murdered. Others return home, only to become social outcasts.

Mothers in search of work also have little choice but to leave their children with other people, including friends and distant relatives. Because they are now living in households where they may be perceived as less valuable than other (immediate) family members, and as an economic burden, these children face a disproportionate risk of being abused by family or community members and/or being trafficked for sex or labour. Children in all three study regions have also increasingly been sent out to work, instead of attending school. In the short term, this has exposed them to further violence, abuse and exploitation; in the long term, they miss out on access to education and fundamental employment opportunities.

Finally, some women and girls remain at particular risk of further exploitation after a cessation of hostilities in their regions, particularly those who have been excluded, or ostracised, from society as a result of detention or abduction. Women who were incarcerated or detained in the Balkans received little attention from mainstream groups, and few resources are available to support them after their release. In Sierra Leone, women and girls who joined fighting forces, forcibly or voluntarily, were largely ignored during the early phases of DDR programmes. Those who managed to escape from their captors arrived in communities where they were offered little support, and thus had to rely on prostitution to survive. Others remain trapped in forced marriages. Some women and girls may have physically survived extreme violence, but they have been deeply emotionally scarred by their experiences. They have been left to roam the streets, branded 'mentally ill', and considered unclean – exposed, once again, to further violence.

The collapse of the rule of law, together with the normalisation and privatisation of these forms of violence against women and girls, encourages a **prevailing sense of impunity**. Radhika Coomaraswamy, for instance, said that currently in Sri Lanka, ‘women feel far less safe in terms of criminal violence than they did in the peace process, that’s true of women in the north and east’. She suggests that the increasing violence against women throughout the country is directly related to ‘a total breakdown of the rule of law, where murder, rape, everything takes place with a great deal of impunity. Now that the political violence has stopped, criminal violence has surfaced and it is often directed against women. And it’s usually the same people that were involved in the political violence’. This breakdown is sometimes compounded by amnesty agreements that signal that violence will go unpunished. Hence, women and girls who suffer this violence remain silent out of fear of retaliation or ostracism, especially as perpetrators often hold powerful positions within their government, community or family.

In Sierra Leone, for example, one activist explained that some women and girls were afraid to inform the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) about their experiences for a number of reasons. ‘[T]hey’re also afraid that the perpetrator will hurt them. Because we have all talked about peace, let’s live again and have peace ... and I know that that’s no peace. The guns going silent is not peace. You cannot force reconciliation ... it is something that has to come from in here. So the women were afraid ... we have a culture of silence, you are brought up not to talk, to keep quiet, you have to only talk when you are asked to, so if you go on talking then you are only going to create more problems’.

Worldwide, women activists have worked for years to combat a pervasive culture of blame and to prevent further harm to women and girls who have survived violence. In most cases, when the public becomes aware of incidences of violence, women and girls may be ostracised. These further consequences of violence can lead to self-harm and suicide. In some societies, relatives murder them to uphold family ‘honour’.<sup>36</sup>

## **The Response**

Prior to the start of the conflicts in the study regions, most women activists had limited experience of direct service provision, with the exception of those working with incarcerated women or survivors of community and familial violence. However, as the conflicts escalated, many women activists mobilised, shifting their focus towards direct service provision. Other women formed new groups and launched initiatives to address growing gaps in basic relief and specialised protection.

They often worked to ensure that at-risk women and girls could access essential services, including primary healthcare, food and water, sanitation, shelter and education. In some cases, this involved lobbying other actors to help them understand the priorities of affected women and girls. In the absence of other types of support, activists sometimes provided these services themselves.

This was particularly the case when activists were either displaced themselves by the violence or they were living in areas that became ‘safe havens’ or a refuge for incoming displaced persons. Early in the Sri Lankan conflict, for instance, women’s groups became involved in assisting thousands of Tamils who had become refugees as a result of riots and those Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala people who had been displaced from the north and the east by the conflict. In Sierra Leone, women activists worked with ever-increasing numbers of IDPs who were relocating in urban centres in Freetown, Bo in the south and Kenema in the east, as well as with an ‘older’ caseload (from the early 1990s) of Liberian refugees. In Kosovo and Serbia, activists worked initially with IDPs and refugees fleeing wars throughout the region, including in Bosnia and Croatia, as well as with rising numbers of Kosovar Albanians who were being oppressed in Kosovo.



### Emergency Education Response in Sierra Leone

While Christiana Thorpe and 20 other women came together to form the Sierra Leonean branch of the Forum for African Women Educationalists in 1995 in order to promote the education of women and girls, they soon adapted the organisation's mission, concentrating on responding to the humanitarian and human rights challenges posed by the conflict. *'The first real challenge was in May 1995, two months after we formed. Then the war escalated in Kailahun and Pujehun. Thousands of children came down from the provinces and it hit me ... we must try and put these children into schools'.*

After finding places in existing schools for the first 5,000 displaced children, they turned to working with the remaining 4,000. In partnership with other local NGOs and international agencies, such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Plan International and the World Food Programme, they established temporary schools with an emergency curriculum.

By September 1995, they were able also to integrate these children into the school system, including pregnant girls and young mothers – ultimately changing the national education policy that, historically, had excluded them.

The NATO bombardment of 1999 and the subsequent massive violence committed by Serb forces against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo forced approximately 90% of the population to flee across borders. From the moment these people arrived at international frontiers, Kosovar activists organised themselves, offering women and girls a safe space in which to recover and to locate missing relatives and friends.

After the hostilities came to an end, women activists once again expanded the type and scope of service provision to help women and girls recover and rebuild their lives in the face of past and emerging

challenges. Some activists developed interventions to strengthen access to income, employment, education and reproductive healthcare. These included: income-generation, micro-credit and agriculture programmes; formal and non-formal education, including vocational skills training, and conflict management and peace education; and the running of stationary or mobile clinics that provided reproductive healthcare and education services.

Throughout the conflicts, women activists responded to the increasing levels of violence by supplying essential, specialised services to particularly vulnerable women and girls who had survived physical violence, the loss of family members and incarceration or detention, among them widows, ex-combatants and IDPs and refugees. Such services were often provided as part of multidisciplinary programmes, or within networks, in order to meet a complex range of protection and support requirements.

In their work with the large numbers of IDPs and refugees who remained in their regions, activists combined innovative multidisciplinary assistance with an increasing amount of advocacy, human rights monitoring and awareness-raising work. The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children noted, in particular, that women activists in Serbia and Montenegro were 'leading some of the most innovative programs to assist refugees and IDPs'.<sup>37</sup> In 2003, when the conflict in Liberia escalated, pushing thousands of Liberians across the border into Sierra Leone, members of MARWOPNET from Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone mobilised and travelled to the Liberian border to consult with refugee women and girls about their key humanitarian concerns and to garner their views on the conflict negotiation process – and subsequently, to relay their priorities and opinions to the public through radio and television broadcasts.

### Supporting Survivors of Violence

Activists offered various kinds of assistance to the women and children who had survived violence, including physical protection, mental health support, reproductive health services, access to justice, and help with reintegration or relocation. Either in conjunction with this assistance or separately, some activists also worked to document the increasing levels and forms of violence perpetrated against women and girls, so as to develop legal cases and campaigns for change.

### Responding to Violence in Haiti

In February 2004, Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was forcibly removed from office and the country descended into chaos. Police units were absent and rebels controlled many rural areas. Activists with the Haitian feminist organisation, Kay Fanm, described a dramatic increase in levels of sexual violence against women and girls during this period: *‘Haitian women will tell you that rape has always been carried out with a certain level of impunity. However, with the removal of President Aristide at the end of February, violence against women has become an unanticipated norm’*.

Prior to the uprisings, Kay Fanm had operated for 20 years in Port-au-Prince, providing services to victims of domestic violence at its place of shelter, ensuring access to emergency healthcare, and acting as an advocacy organisation for women’s rights at the local, national and international levels.

In response to extraordinary levels of violence between January and April 2004, Kay Fanm activists expanded their work to offer emergency health and support services to women and girls who had survived rape, and to document these violations.

–Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights, *‘Select Non-Confidential Grant Descriptions’*, January–March 2004

Physical protection included offering survivors of violence a safe place to shelter. In some instances, local activists, often quietly joined by international women's networks, also supported witness protection schemes, including evacuating individuals to safe houses within their own countries or abroad. This work is usually conducted secretly and remains among the most dangerous, difficult and least known of women activists' courageous interventions.

Contingent on the context, activists organised mental health support services either in person or by telephone,<sup>38</sup> offering options like crisis and/or longer-term counselling.

Activists also provided legal information and advice, as well as representation for those who wished to seek justice, including acting as the interface with the police, the courts and the health services.<sup>39</sup> These services were offered either as part of an organisation's multidisciplinary work programme or through legal aid centres.

In addition, activists provided women and girls with emergency and reproductive healthcare assistance in order to address the immediate and longer-term consequences of the violence. This included medical exams and treatment, pregnancy testing and counselling, testing for sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, and care for those infected.

Finally, women activists have taken on the particularly delicate and crucial task of reintegrating survivors of violence and preventing further violence. This has encompassed raising the awareness of society, the community and the family of the consequences of sexual violence. In 2001, for example, Motrat Qiriazhi launched an innovative media and cultural campaign in Kosovo to increase public awareness of violence – and to shift the dynamic of blame by enlisting community members as partners in prevention efforts. This involved a range of initiatives, including playing popular songs on radio and television, and distributing posters and press packs.<sup>40</sup>

At the individual level, activists have offered survivors of violence various kinds of literacy and vocational skills training. In some cases, ongoing threats to these women and girls have prevented them from returning to, or reintegrating into, their communities. In such instances, activists have worked together with them to find alternate solutions, including relocation or evacuation.

### Responding to Violence in Iraq

Iraqi women have cited the breakdown in security and public order as the number one problem in Iraq since the US invasion. 'A sharp rise in abduction, rape and sexual slavery has made women afraid to leave their homes. Girls are being kept out of school and families now forbid many women to be in public without a male escort. It is estimated that more than 400 Iraqi women were abducted and raped within the first four months of [the] US occupation. The rapes have triggered an increase in honour killings, in which male relatives murder rape survivors because the attack has shamed the family. In many areas, Islamic militants now patrol the streets, beating and harassing women who are not "properly" dressed or behaved. Iraqi women's organizations have accused Islamic groups of taking revenge on each other by raping women'.

The Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) has worked for over a decade in the north of the country, providing shelter and legal services to women affected by violence. In response to this increasing violence, the OWFI is expanding its work to establish a safe space for Iraqi women to develop broader plans for protecting and advancing women's freedom in the region.

– **Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights**, *'Select Non-Confidential Grant Descriptions'*, January–March 2004

### **Working for Families of Missing Persons**

As the conflicts escalated, increasing numbers of people disappeared, typically at the hands of armed groups. Some were abducted, others detained or imprisoned. Still others were massacred, their bodies buried in mass graves. Families were also separated during mass population movements.

Although this was a new field for women activists, they nevertheless successfully embarked on work to support the families of the missing. Many women whose husbands or children had vanished formed their own organisations.

These activists offered vital emotional support, encouragement and solidarity throughout the terrible uncertainty associated with searches that, in many cases, continue today. Their interventions included: directly tracing missing persons themselves; reuniting families; networking with mandated organisations, such as the ICRC, and relevant government officials; providing legal advice on related rights and statutes; and offering support during a body recovery process.

At the height of the conflicts, particularly after populations had been displaced, women activists focused primarily on tracing and reuniting families. For example, Vjosa Dobruna said that, at the beginning of the refugee crisis in Macedonia, along with other activists, she worked to support families separated during the exodus from Kosovo. 'We had women who were crying because they didn't know where the rest of their families were. So we organised this network of taxi drivers ... we would get information that a certain woman is searching for her kids or the rest of her family, so we would go into the camps ... we'd help her get through the wire and get into our car or taxi and go to our Centre in Tetova. Then we would start the process [of finding her family]. Every woman had free access to our phone. Or we would announce in radio stations that a certain woman is in the centre and the members of [her] family can contact her'.

### Finding the Missing ... and Saying Goodbye

As part of the negotiated peace accords between the Sri Lankan government and LTTE rebels, both sides agreed to meet terms set out in a 'Memorandum of Understanding'. One of these was the release of all prisoners of war (PoWs). Thousands of families in both the north and the south were hoping that their disappeared sons and fathers would be among the released PoWs. In reality, however, tens of thousands of combatants who had disappeared had been assassinated and only a few hundred PoWs remained. Fearing that this knowledge might spark a resurgence of violence and jeopardise the tenuous peace accords, the Association of War Affected Women (AWAW) contacted Urgent Action Fund for support with a unique peace-building initiative: to bring together 100 southern Singhalese mothers of servicemen who had vanished and the mothers of missing LTTE fighters in the northern town of Jaffna.

On their way north, the Singhalese mothers stopped at a well-known area where the Sri Lankan army had cremated hundreds of unidentified soldiers. There, some found their children's remains. *'When we got there ... it was bare land. Because of the climate, there was no rain for a few months. The grass was dry, so you could see all the remains very clearly. We just walked into a place with all human remains. And of course all the soldiers, the helmets, everything ... that was something really very, very shocking. That was something that shows ... what is war'.*

While devastating, the discovery offered the mothers a chance to say goodbye and to conduct a small religious ceremony at the site.

They then went on to meet with the mothers of missing LTTE fighters in Jaffna, an area that has suffered widespread destruction. By the end of the trip, the women from the north and the south had formed common bonds and were resilient. *'It was a beautiful sight to see that mothers from both sides of the divide, who have fought for two decades, share the same thoughts ... their only wish was to secure their children's right to life'.*

After the conflicts, women activists continued to trace the missing, to reunite families and, in some cases, to support reintegration. In Sierra Leone, Adama Boima worked with GEMS to help young women who had been abducted and forcibly recruited by the RUF during the war. She recounted the story of one young woman who was abducted by the RUF eight years ago, at the beginning of the war. She could not remember the location of her home or her real name – she only knew that she was from Bo chiefdom, close to Kailahun. Adama travelled with her to Bo in search of her family. ‘After several discussions with her we went [to Bo]. I took her to the marketplace that is very well known to most of the people. As we reached there she said, “This is the footpath I used to pass to go home”. So we used that path until we came to her brother’s house, but found out he was killed by the rebels two weeks after she had been captured. Then I asked for the section chief for that area. I met with her and she gave me somebody to direct us to the village of this girl’s family, which was over 60 miles from Bo. We went there at night, around one a.m., and then we asked for the chief’s house. There we found her mother still alive. After eight years, she was not expecting to see her daughter again, because they captured her at the start of the war. In fact, the child asked me to ask her mum ... to tell her her actual name. Her mum said she was given the family name Kamara’.

Post-conflict, many women also have to face the possibility that their husband or children are dead, or may never be found. Those who may never know the fate of their loved ones are left in emotional limbo, unable to grieve. For married women and their children, a missing husband also means that they have unresolved legal status, and are unable to access those few benefits that are available to ‘official’ widows. As medica mondiale Kosova activists pointed out, the ICRC provided certificates to women whose husbands remained missing in Bosnia, but Kosovar women do not have access to this form of documentation and, therefore, do not qualify for extra assistance.

Finally, in some cases, the bodies or remains of the missing are found. Activists supported women as they identified their loved ones, sometimes at the site of a mass grave.



However, while activists are sometimes involved in supporting the recovery of a body, as well as its return and burial, these processes are often out of their hands. As a result, families have been handed the body of a loved one without appropriate support, completely unprepared for the shock. medica mondiale Kosova activists described such a case in 2003, when bodies of Kosovar Albanians were discovered in a mass grave and subsequently returned to their families.<sup>41</sup> One mother could not bear the sudden shock of the bodies of her two sons being returned to her. That evening she committed suicide.

This sad case underscores the importance of activists' efforts to support the families of the missing – throughout their search, whatever the outcome.

### *Reform and Political Engagement*

After a cessation of hostilities introduced some stability to their regions, the focus of women's activists shifted yet again.<sup>42</sup> As described above, some women activists continued to provide specialised services, now increasingly in cooperation with weakened, but reforming, state institutions such as social welfare ministries, the courts, the police, and forensics institutes. Many also started to concentrate on key reconstruction issues, including legal reform and political engagement.

### **Legal Reform**

In addition to providing direct legal services to women and girls, women activists in all three study regions situated themselves at the forefront of efforts to transform largely discriminatory legal systems. In particular, this has involved putting emphasis on laws related to violence against women, gender equality, trafficking, reproductive rights, property and inheritance rights, privatisation, and labour.

For Naime Sherifi-Macastena, legal reform is vital to improving post-conflict human rights protection. 'As an NGO, we are trying to make sure the laws that we are building in Kosovo are built on the human

rights conventions. I believe that if these laws are built and implemented on this basis, a lot of things will go better for Kosovo’.

In the Balkans, women activists have made remarkable gains in changing key laws. Activists with *medica mondiale Kosova*, for example, pointed out that, in Kosovo, women activists worked with UNIFEM to support the drafting of laws on sexual violence, domestic violence and alimony. Critically, their draft proposals were based on activists’ real experiences of combating violence and discrimination against women and girls.

In the past several years in Serbia, activists have effectively lobbied the government to make important changes to the criminal code and to laws on family violence, sexual harassment, trafficking in women, employment and parental leave. For instance, the Victimology Society of Serbia played a key role in ensuring the inclusion of domestic violence in Serbia’s criminal code. Activists are now pushing for further enhancements, especially concerning clemency for women who kill their abusers in self-defence. Vesna Nikolic-Ristanovic described their work: ‘In March 2002, there were changes in the domestic violence law and recognition by the state. We wanted to build on that and proposed to ask for clemency for women in prison. We received support from 30 groups and started campaigning. Normally, women’s cases are considered primarily based on the opinion of the prison officials, based on their behaviour. About two weeks ago [July 2003], they released the first woman prisoner specifically in consideration of the fact that she had suffered from domestic violence’.

In all three study regions, women activists are also deeply concerned about women’s lack of property rights, particularly post-conflict, when ever-increasing numbers of households are headed by women and girls. Hannatu Kabba underlined that women activists in Sierra Leone are especially committed to reforming discriminatory inheritance laws: ‘Inheritance rights is quite an area of interest to us because the laws are to a large extent very discriminatory, especially customary laws which are largely unqualified’. Other Sierra Leonean activists agreed that the reform of inheritance rights and property law is a top priority for women throughout the country. Barbara Bangura pointed out that: ‘With all the

human rights projects that we've done, this one seems to be creating so much interest amongst us. We have lawyers who are interested in this, we have other organisations who are working in this area. [We] are slowly realising that it's affecting women at all levels, because the laws are discriminatory at all levels. So it's not just the grassroots women. And we're forming alliances and networks as we go along, because luckily for us, we just initiated the reforms commission'.

### Property Rights and Poverty

*'A lot of women have been widowed by the war. In Sierra Leone, though, we have this system under which women in most areas are seen as property. And as far as society is concerned, property cannot inherit property. We employ three types of law: general English law; customary law, which is practiced in most of the country; and Mohammedan law.*

*'What we are saying is that **all of the laws are discriminatory**. According to customary law, a woman cannot inherit. So what happens when the man dies? His family takes whatever property he has. Then, in most cases, the woman is forced to marry a younger brother or uncle – but, usually, they are not looked after. Consequently, the family is now impoverished and the children cannot afford to go to school'.*

**– Barbara Bangura, Sierra Leone**

## Political Engagement

At the height of the conflicts in their regions, women activists were rarely involved in political activism. This was due to a combination of factors. First, many prioritised meeting the urgent needs of women and their families – they were simply far too busy to pay attention to politics. Second, women activists were usually excluded from decision-making processes. For example, as Rachel Wareham explained: ‘prior to the NATO bombing, Kosovar Albanian women could not engage in politics on a major level because the entire Albanian community were “parallel” and had no role in decision-making on a political level. The one Albanian political party was old fashioned and not women friendly – so they rarely involved themselves in the work’.

Furthermore, some women activists are reluctant to join a government that, at various stages of a conflict, has either ignored, ordered, or condoned massive human rights violations.

Nonetheless, most recognise that, in order to ensure women’s rights in their societies, they must engage in politics at some level. Broadly, this political activism is built on two inter-related approaches.

First, women activists have organised themselves around general election campaigns. In some cases, such as in Sierra Leone, they lobbied and demonstrated to ensure that fair elections were held. The next step was to make sure that women could vote. This meant providing access to information on election campaigns and creating the conditions that permitted women to travel in safety to polling stations.

In Serbia, for instance, the Women’s Forum of the Association of Free and Independent Trade Unions organised many events in the run-up to the elections of 2000 and during the subsequent struggle for the true results to be recognised (after Milosevic refused to relinquish power). This served to motivate women across Serbia and led to the launch of two major campaigns. During the ‘Recipe for Democracy’ campaign, the Forum distributed leaflets and encouraged women to vote. After

Milosevic ignored the result, it worked constantly on the ‘Get Out, Stand Up, Hold Out – Defend Your Vote!’ campaign, organising strikes, roadblocks, and street protests until Milosevic finally stepped down.<sup>43</sup>

Second, women activists have worked to increase significantly the number of qualified women in decision-making positions. In some instances, well-known women activists have stood for office themselves, such as Zainab Bangura in Sierra Leone and Flora Brovina in Kosovo.

### Engaging in Politics in Somaliland

Although local women’s NGOs made a significant contribution to peace and democracy in Somaliland, women have been unable to secure a significant role in the new political process. NAGAAD, an umbrella organization of women’s NGOs, informed the Urgent Action Fund that: ‘Their [women’s] visible support for Somaliland’s democratization transition, too, did not translate into [a] greater role for women in politics. During recent elections only two women were elected out of 332 councils’.

At the prompting of a woman activist, the South African government extended an invitation to representatives of the Somaliland Election Commission to come to South Africa to monitor its elections and to learn from the process. Only two women were chosen to be part of the 16-strong Somaliland delegation. The South Africans insisted that the team include more women, but they were unable to provide funding. NAGAAD appealed to the UAF for a grant that enabled two more women to participate.

South African women’s groups were to host the women delegates. A goal of the project was to establish a network between Somaliland and South African women’s NGOs.

– Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights, ‘*Select Non-Confidential Grant Descriptions*’, January–March 2004

In other cases, activists have focussed their energies on building women's capacity to engage in politics. Abator Thomas and her colleagues at the 50/50 Group in Sierra Leone, for example, work both to increase women's interest in running for office, as well as their confidence to do so. '[O]ur main thrust is training women to build their self-confidence, to build their self-esteem, to make them conscious and aware that they can participate in anything if they have the education, if they have the training, if they have the inclination'.

Similarly, when the Stability Pact Gender Task Force was set up in 1999, it was focussed on encouraging women to vote and to stand for office. As Sonja Lokar pointed out: 'First we had a very narrow, clear focus. What we needed most was more women in politics who really understood their potential new role in politics. This is why we focused on building a political movement of all women in each country bringing all groups together. We started working on a large scale – training thousands of women, developing Gender Equality Mechanisms in the parliaments and in the governments, campaigning for quotas. Then, little by little, we started to change the legal systems to make them more gender-sensitive'.

By 2001, the SP GTF had turned to the next stage of political empowerment: ensuring that these changes are sustainable by supporting women within political systems. 'Women have started to consciously enter political parties and now need strength to develop within them'. This means, in particular, strengthening female politicians' understanding of, and commitment to, women's rights.



## How do Conflicts Alter Women's Activism?

### *Relationships between Women Activists*

In some cases, the transition to armed conflict divided activists. As their societies became increasingly militarised and experienced a rise in nationalism and 'traditional' values, activists began to assume anti-war or pro-war stances. This heightened tensions among women's groups and internal splits emerged along political lines, creating schisms that remain to this day. Such divisions resulted in the further exclusion of already marginalised activists.

However, women activists often speak of the unity that they felt during the lead-up to, and at the height of, the conflict. For many, their activism allowed them to forge and consolidate identities based on collective resistance and response. First, activism offered these women a concrete opportunity to do something about the increasing violence in, and the militarisation of, their societies – the chance to analyse, strategise and to work together with other women to oppose the violence through protest and to provide emergency services. Second, activism generated a strong sense of common purpose and solidarity, and afforded these women a chance to make sense of the challenges that they now confronted, allaying the sense of fear and isolation. In the midst of these crises, activists often drew strength from each other, as Zorica Mrsevic explained: 'We supported each other, it was great to see so many interesting and strong personalities gathered around you, in your ideas, in your activities'.



Zorica pointed out that international women activists also offered critical practical and emotional support to local activists in the Balkans: ‘usually there were women – not in big organisations, not representatives with big money – they were just modest women coming here to express their support, to contribute in a very modest way [to] our activities, they just came with sums of money, so this was support for us’. In the absence of a functioning banking system, these international women activists also acted as a kind of ‘Western Union’, transporting money and materials across borders to allow women’s groups to continue to function.

### **Breaking through Isolation: Maintaining Contact in Conflict**

As the UK and the US geared up to invade Iraq in 2003, peace organisations prepared for possible repercussions in the Palestinian Territories. They feared that, while the world’s attention was focussed on Iraq, the Israeli Defense Forces would step up its military offensive in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Bat Shalom, a grassroots Israeli feminist organization including Jewish and Palestinian women, responded quickly and strategically to the impending eruption of violence by setting up a Women’s Emergency Network, which operated a 24-hour call centre connecting Jewish women in Jerusalem with Palestinian women in the Territories. As violence mounted, 30 women in the Palestinian Territories received regular phone calls from 30 Israeli women. The calls were recorded and served to document the actions of the Israeli Defense Forces in the region, which were otherwise hidden from public view. In addition, Palestinian women developed the sense that women on the ‘other side’ were paying attention to what was happening to them and their families, and that Jewish Israeli women were working towards peace. The facility also served as a 24-hour resource centre for various peace groups, allowing them to convene and organise their own responses to the violence.

– Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights, *‘Select Non-Confidential Grant Descriptions’*, January–March 2004

Because foreign women activists could travel much more freely, they were able to offer emergency support and, in some cases, to take women across borders and lead them to safety in Western Europe. Some acted as gatekeepers and advisors, interacting with international agencies and donors, and supporting fundraising efforts.

### **Displacement**

Forced displacement strengthened and weakened the bonds between women activists.

Violent fighting or targeted campaigns forced a number of women activists living in or near the most affected areas to flee their homes or sometimes to go underground. For the most part, this was the reality for activists living in: the northern and eastern provinces of Sierra Leone throughout much of the war; the capital of Sierra Leone, Freetown, during the 1997 military coup by the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) and the 1999 invasion by the RUF; north and east Sri Lanka; and most of the territory of Kosovo in 1999.<sup>44</sup>

Some activists were displaced to relatively safer areas within their own country. Others sought refuge on the other side of regional borders – leaving Kosovo for Macedonia or Sierra Leone for Guinea – or in Western Europe or the US.

Activists who fled rarely took more than their families with them. Those who later returned often found that their homes and offices had been looted. Along with their work, they lost irreplaceable personal belongings, including letters and photographs.

This was the case for Saroja Sivachandra, who fled with her family after the Sri Lankan army bombed and subsequently occupied and looted Jaffna in 1995. Both her home and the offices of her organisation, the Centre for Women and Development, were pillaged of almost everything, including books, research, furniture and equipment. Similarly, Igo Rogova and other Kosovar activists had no time to prepare before Serb forces drove them from their homes in 1999.

Despite the hardships, women activists also found that their displacement offered unanticipated opportunities, such as to meet and work with other regional and international activists and to gain access to, and exercise influence over, international decision-making bodies. In Sierra Leone, for example, most urban women activists left the country in two waves - the first in 1997 and the second in 1999. Some went on to establish important diaspora links, founding the Women's Forum in the UK or joining groups like Akina Mama wa Africa, also in the UK. Others went on to work with women's groups in the US.

Some women activists, though, may never return home and others may be delayed by a combination of factors, including lack of economic security and space for activism. Jeanette Eno pointed out that only a small number of urban women activists who left Sierra Leone have returned. She said that: 'there's still quite a body here, and they are quite a formidable group as well. But it's difficult to tell whether the ones who left would come back. I think again it is economics and livelihoods – quality of life ... and ... the situation of governance in the country as well would-be factors in attracting the women back. If they felt they were able to actually pursue a progressive agenda, if there was space for that without being knocked back or suppressed ... then yes, I'm sure they would consider coming back. But of course it has to be back to make some kind of [economic] security for themselves and for their families'.

For women activists living abroad and those displaced within their own countries, their reluctance to return may also be inextricably linked to complex emotions, including survivor guilt or fear of rejection by those who remained throughout the war. Return also means coming to terms with enormous personal loss: 'because of the trauma of what happened ... people's houses were burned down, they lost everything. There are some women who haven't been able to face that since they left. Even within Sierra Leone, some women who also came from places like Kono are unable to face some of that destruction; it's also traumatising for them, and some of them have just remained in Freetown'.

## **Transition**

Finally, as described above, following a cessation of hostilities, women and girls are *increasingly* at risk of further violence, their capacity to rebuild their lives shattered. In response to these mounting post-conflict challenges, women activists began to regroup and to modify their strategies, expanding and deepening their activism. They sought to improve service provision and to affect change at the societal level through legal reform, political participation and economic development.

At this point, however, women's energy levels sometimes faltered. Some found it difficult to maintain the strength and unity that kept them going at the height of the violence. After supporting people in crisis for many years, with little reparation or recognition, many activists were physically and emotionally exhausted. They now faced an uncertain future with few resources to care for their own and their extended families, much less themselves.

Furthermore, as many of the larger political and economic reconstruction deals had been done during the conflict with little or no consideration given to the priorities of members of the general population, especially women and girls, activists realised that they faced an uphill battle to influence post-conflict systems.

Typically at this stage, international interest in the conflict began to wane, and the larger international donors opted to fund the government directly under a bilateral arrangement, abandoning civil society organisations, including women's rights groups.

In some cases, therefore, just when activists needed to consolidate their remarkable achievements, some struggled to maintain cohesion and to take the movement forward. As Jamesina King noted in relation to Sierra Leone: 'I think we did a lot trying to achieve peace. Now what we need to do is try to sustain and consolidate – and actually think about ourselves, developing and promoting women's rights. But we don't know how to do it. This little bit I can do on my own, but it won't have much effect unless it's together with other people'. Vjollca Krasniqi echoed her concerns in

Kosovo: 'The women's rights/activist community is somehow lacking the solidarity we used to have. We had it during the apartheid era, and when we fled and regrouped across borders. But somehow it is not here anymore. Maybe it had to do with the intensity of working together through so many difficulties ... somehow the personal and professional got mixed up ... to the point where it was not possible to be objective ... That is a shame, because we need to come together now'.

### *Relationships with International Actors*

The foreign policy interests of neighbouring states, combined with public exposure through the world's media, largely shaped the international response to these armed conflicts and the situations that prevailed afterwards. The Former Yugoslavia, Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka all experienced one of the most contested and confusing kinds of external intervention<sup>45</sup> as international military forces used violence to combat violence.<sup>46</sup>

The extent and the composition of the international response that followed these military interventions varied significantly in each instance. An extraordinary number of international agencies entered Albania and Macedonia during the 1999 Kosovo refugee crisis, with even more entering the province later when it became an international protectorate. Serbia, however, received little international attention as IDPs flowed into the region, and despite the fact that a large West African military force was deployed in Sierra Leone from 1991, the international response remained modest until a major expansion occurred in 2002.

Sri Lanka's conflict, meanwhile, has witnessed comparatively little in the way of an international agency response. Oddly, there has been disproportionate international interest in conducting research on the peace process, as opposed to responding to the cumulative effect that the fighting has had on the general population.

These international interventions can significantly bolster, or hinder, the capacity of women's rights activists to respond to conflict.

Thousands of foreign civilians, as well as military and police personnel, arrived in the study regions during and after the violence as part of the international response. All had varying levels of experience and different interests, agendas and perceptions of the conflict.

In all three regions these international actors, including donors, international human rights and humanitarian agencies and individual activists, offered support such as funding, supplies and equipment, to women activists in numerous ways.

Perhaps most importantly, some international actors also provided information, training, solidarity and an opportunity for respite. For instance, international women activists from outside of the three regions lived and worked with local women activists during and after the conflicts. In addition, women activists formed constructive and positive partnerships with some committed international NGOs and donors, especially during 'lower profile' phases of the conflicts.

International actors have also ignored the work of women activists, particularly once the conflicts were perceived as 'internationally important' and thus triggered larger international responses.

In a bid to counter this lack of recognition, some women activists had to invest crucial energy in lobbying and educating international actors about realities on the ground. However, their efforts to ensure that women and girls had a voice in international processes – from the initial emergency response through conflict negotiation and finally 'transitional' reconstruction and reform – met with limited success. Many of the externally designed response programmes did not reflect the priorities and capacities of the women and girls they were intended to support.

This disconnect was particularly problematic after a cessation of hostilities in each of the regions. It was at this stage, when conditions for women and girls were further deteriorating, violence was on the rise, and the potential for future conflict was apparent, that international attention and support began to wane. Above all, the backing that had been provided for women's initiatives faded as larger donors began to 'mainstream' funding.

*'We greeted joyfully the decision that put Kosovo under a UN administration. The UN was to us the revered international organization that developed and passed key documents that stipulated women's rights and promoted their integration in all levels of decision-making.*

*'But when we returned home we were, unfortunately, disappointed by the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). We were eager to work with the international agencies in developing effective strategies for responding to the pressing needs of Kosovar women, but most of those agencies did not recognize that we existed and often refused to hear what we had to say on decisions that affected our lives and our future.*

*'Some of the international staff came to Kosovo thinking that this is an extremely patriarchal society where no women's movement can flourish. And there were those who wanted us to do all the groundwork for them: find staff and offices, set up meetings and provide translations, but were not interested in listening to us and acknowledging our expertise. They had their own plans and their ready-made programs that they had tried in other countries and did not want to change their plans to respond to the reality of our lives'.*

**– Igo Rogova, 'Keeping Spirits Alive',  
Pristina, June 2003**

## Barriers to Activism

### *Normalising Violence: The 'Post-Conflict' Myth*

One of the most striking findings of this study pertains to the fundamental misperceptions that exist about the realities that women face following a cessation of hostilities. In the rush to consolidate political gains, there is a push to redefine rapidly the situation as 'transitional' and 'post-conflict'. In many cases, however, these wars are not over.

While all of the study regions are generally viewed as 'post-conflict' societies, they remain unstable—with high potential for renewed violence. Although Sri Lanka's most recent ceasefire has held to date, peace talks broke down in April 2003 and the conflict remains unsettled.

Kosovo is still volatile. In March 2004, violent protests against the ethnic Serb minority in Kosovo left 19 people dead and some 900 others injured. In addition, approximately 4,500 ethnic Serbs and Ashkali and Roma people were forced to leave their homes. An April 2004 report suggests that these events were preceded (in 2003 and early 2004) by attacks on people and property. The report warns that: 'Far from returning to normal after the violence, Kosovo is now a highly unpredictable place, and is in danger of spiralling downwards in freefall'.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, several activists in Sierra Leone said that they were extremely concerned that the country may once again descend into conflict. Their fears were based on a number of factors, including the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL)'s plan to withdraw, ongoing regional instability, internal insecurity, Kamajor resentment



about the trial of Sam Hinga Norman, and popular dissatisfaction with the current government due to economic decline and the shrinking of the false economy (related to the extraction of the international civilian and military presence from the country). One Sierra Leonean summed up the concerns of a number of activists about the fragility of the current peace in the country: ‘When you imagine what women went through during the war, if anything happens in Sierra Leone, we are the targets. I don’t think we should sit down and allow these things to happen. For me, all the reasons why we had the rebel war are very much evident ... maybe even more now than ever before. Things are very bad in Sierra Leone, food is very expensive ... most Sierra Leoneans are living below the poverty line. The high cost of living, unemployment, the unfair (corrupt) judicial system. We have so many people in prisons just because they’re poor and illiterate – they haven’t even learnt about what the law says. If you listen to even the songs that are being produced these days, it’s all critical about the government. So you can see that things are building up. And I think because we had UNAMSIL over here, the government is comfortable about things, you know?’

Glossing over and normalising violence has serious consequences. In the immediate term, women and girls often pay the price. For example, the rush to hold elections in Afghanistan this year, despite massive insecurity throughout the country, has had deadly ramifications for the population. On 25 June 2004, Taliban militia members executed 16 Afghans who had registered to vote in Uruzgan province. The following day, they murdered two female election workers and injured nine others in a bomb attack on a bus near Jalalabad.<sup>48</sup>

In Iraq, after the US announced the end of combat operations on 1 May 2003,<sup>49</sup> coalition forces pushed for the immediate launch of reconstruction efforts to convince the population that the situation was stable, regardless of ongoing violence. For example, attempts were made in May 2003 to reopen schools in the capital of Baghdad even though armed actors were abducting children from schools in the city.

## Rising Militarism and Fundamentalism

*'Military power is gaining importance in all aspects of society. Even peace-seeking and humanitarian aid are now seen as the province of the military. While women may have gained ground in other forms of civil leadership, they are not a part of the military or arms trading power structures. As militarism grows, women's voices are dimmed.'*

*'In fact, armed conflict intensifies sexism and misogyny through extreme violence, especially sexual violence. As societies around the world become conditioned to being on a permanent war footing, women are placed in a forever subservient role. How can we contribute to building peace and changing society if we are not counted?'*

*'The rise of fundamentalism in all parts of the world has also been a serious impediment to women's human rights. It has contributed to the backlash that the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women pinpointed in her report to the 60th session of the United Nations Human Rights Commission. Essential women's rights have been curtailed in all parts of the world; rights such as freedom of movement, freedom of expression, freedom to plan one's family, the right to work and the right to education.'*

*'Although donor countries are aware of the critical importance for the developing world of women's rights to education and to reproductive health, we have seen diminishing funds for development aid in these areas.'*

*'These trends underscore the importance of our work here at the Urgent Action Fund. Underlying everything we do is the principle that, in order to act to ensure women's human rights, we must not be afraid to see – to recognize what is really happening in the world. We learn from activists who are struggling against these dangerous developments at the community level. We understand that women will have to be more creative than ever in their actions to counteract militarism and build peace'.*

**– Ariane Brunet, Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights,  
Annual Report 2003**

In the longer term, when a society is considered ‘post-conflict’, rather than potentially ‘pre-conflict’, early warning signs are ignored – and the *core response capacity to address renewed conflict embodied in civil society, and in women activists in particular, is further sidelined.*

Ariane Brunet believes that it is not just mainstream external actors, including governments, donors and international humanitarian and human rights agencies that accept this notion of normalisation but also, to a certain extent, international women activists. ‘We experience heightened solidarity when wars are at their height, but this fades when they become low intensity wars. Because we assumed that these countries were well on the road to recovery, rather than in an ongoing, unsettled state of conflict, outside support and international solidarity has faded away, and regional networking has diminished. Kosovo is a perfect example of this – it is an artificial being, incapable of moving forward in its current state. But for most of us, Kosovo is now a forgotten issue. International women activists have not come to terms with the fact that we have de facto accepted militarised societies, economic survival through arms sales, and peacekeeping operations that are excessively militarised’.

### *Protectors as Perpetrators*

In all three study regions, members of international peacekeeping and police forces, mandated to protect endangered populations from further human rights violations, have instead presented a significant threat to women activists and the people they are there to assist.<sup>50</sup>

Reported cases of sexual violence, including murder, committed by peacekeepers and international police officers in Kosovo and Sierra Leone include those set out below.

- The rape and murder of 11-year-old Merita Shabiu in 2000 by Kosovo Force (KFOR) troops (Kosovo).
- The rape and murder of a 14-year-old girl in 2002 by a UNMIK policeman (Kosovo).

- The rape of a 12-year-old girl in Bo in 2001 by a UNAMSIL soldier (Sierra Leone).
- The rape of a woman by two UNAMSIL peacekeepers in Joru in April 2002 (Sierra Leone).<sup>51</sup>
- The sexual assault on a 14-year-old boy living in a transit camp for recently returned refugees in June 2002 by a UNAMSIL officer (Sierra Leone).<sup>52</sup>

In addition, peacekeepers with both UNAMSIL and the Economic Community of West African States' Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) have sexually exploited Sierra Leonean women and children.<sup>53</sup> NATO personnel and UNMIK police officers have long been complicit in sex trafficking in Kosovo.<sup>54</sup>

The Indian Peace Keeping Force intervention in Sri Lanka – sometimes referred to as India's 'Vietnam' – provides perhaps the best example of this threat. Although there is broad agreement that the IPKF intervention was largely a failure<sup>55</sup> and that the behaviour of the peacekeepers was, for the most part, reprehensible,<sup>56</sup> there are almost no detailed references to the human rights abuses committed by IPKF forces during their three-year tour of duty in Sri Lanka, including the rape and murder of Sri Lankan women and girls.

When asked to describe life in the north during the IPKF operation, activists said that women and girls lived in perpetual fear of rape by peacekeepers of all ranks: 'not only the low-ranking officers, the high-ranking officers also raped'.<sup>57</sup> 'It seems [that] when the IPKF was here, there were more rapes and more sexual violence. A woman couldn't go out of the house. The ladies, girls, they were scared here. They were living in fear ... women were not sleeping peacefully. When a dog barked, they knew that they are coming inside the house. So they were right about living in fear'.

One activist witnessed this firsthand, when IPKF soldiers entered a house close to hers. 'They chased all the other people out and put one woman inside, and they tried to rape her. So she started shouting and

pushing them – they got angry and they hammered her with a rifle and made injuries to her on the head and on the chest also. Then a man, the landlord, heard her cry and came and he took a knife and chased them out of the house’.

In addition to sexual violence, activists recounted routine beatings and extrajudicial killings. ‘The IPKF were fighting with the LTTE during that time. So when the LTTE people came and threw a grenade or something, the IPKF got violent – they got angry and they took revenge on the ordinary people. They always beat up the women. During curfew time, nobody can come out of the house. But a girl was standing within her compound ... they shot her down and she died. And people were scared, they didn’t go for the funeral ... with nobody to help them, they had to dig a grave there inside their home yard and they buried her. There were a lot of burials like that within their house premises ... [of] people the IPKF had shot’.

Fear of the IPKF forced many women to seek shelter outside of their homes and girls were prevented from going to school. ‘Women were afraid to go to the IPKF forces and the checkpoints – when they went there, they beat them up and harassed them. The girls and women were scared to stay in their own house – at curfew time they can just walk in. No one will ask, no one will question. So because of that, they went for the temples, or where there are the people in schools ... they would sleep there’. ‘During that period, girls wouldn’t go to school, they stopped their education and stayed at home rather than going and getting raped – because of the culture, they said we don’t want education, we’d rather stay at home. So most of the children stayed back’.

## *Backlash*

The conflict responses of women activists in their regions, particularly their anti-war resistance and their work with other women across deepening ethnic and political divides, were often viewed by governments and community members as overtly political.

This made their work in the midst of a crisis especially dangerous, when they often ran the risk of becoming direct targets of oppressive regimes. Non-violent resistance efforts in Kosovo provide the most extreme example of activism that is at odds with the actions of an oppressive government. During a ten-year period of apartheid, public resistance was almost impossible, and women activists who were monitoring and reporting on human rights violations risked becoming political prisoners.

In most cases, a cessation of hostilities in the study regions not only engendered a change of regime, but also a slow process of institutional reform. However, while this led to limited improvements in the working relationships between some state institutions and activists, women activists continued to suffer a hostile reaction because of their work. Marginalised women activists, and mainstream women activists who tried to work with them, remained particular targets.

In northeast Sri Lanka, for instance, Saroja Sivachandra described how in 1996, she and other activists struggled to continue their work despite limited financial resources and the distrust of the Sri Lankan government. 'Local NGOs did not have funding because of economic bans in Jaffna and the government thought "NGO" was synonymous with "LTTE supporter"'. Links between women activists from the north and the south remain strained today, and it is especially dangerous for northern women activists to work with southern women activists. Radhika Coomaraswamy noted in 2003 that: 'there is a limited amount of work happening between women's groups in the south and north, but women in the north face serious security concerns if found to be working too closely with Sinhala women'.

Similarly in Kosovo, relations between Kosovar Serb and Kosovar Albanian activists are affected by deep tensions within and between communities. Radmilla Kapetanovic and Ruzica Simic explained: ‘We were verbally attacked by local politicians when we had meetings with [UNMIK Chief Michael] Steiner before the elections. They said, “What do women have to say to Steiner – they can just eat with him in the café bar and go to the bridge [demarcating the boundary between north and south Mitrovica]”. These political tensions remain the single most significant barrier to the work of women activists, particularly in the face of ongoing ethnic violence. ‘People who communicate with Albanians have a “mark” by the Serbs. And when things like the murders yesterday happen, in some ways, we feel indirectly guilty.’<sup>58</sup> Because we are working this job, but it is getting further away from the basic idea ... that Kosovo will be a place for everyone together’.

### The Potential for Backlash in Serbia

Zorica Mrsevic pointed out that initially, when women activists began to organise themselves in Serbia in response to the violence, they were not taken seriously and thus avoided the large-scale backlash of the government. *‘[T]his regime didn’t pay at the beginning much attention to us because patriarchal regimes never really take seriously what women speak about. So partly we were protected at the beginning because they simply didn’t pay too much attention. If you were a man you would be prosecuted much faster and much earlier’.* By September 1998, however, the Serbian government had banned the anti-war rally, ‘Against War’, and had issued threats in parliament against Women in Black and other groups that spoke out against the regime. Deputy Prime Minister Vojislav Šešelj responded to NATO’s warnings to cease military operations in Kosovo by threatening peace activists, referring to them as ‘Serbia’s inner enemies’.

Had their subsequent efforts to oust the Milosevic regime failed (in 2000), Serbian women activists might have faced violent repercussions.

*'I'm very sure that if [the] Milosevic regime didn't fall ... in 2000, the first next step would be repression against women, against the women's movement. I felt it very clearly and really it was just a matter of days, not only the women's movement, but all non-governmental type of organizations, because they all of a sudden realised that it was a huge and massive movement against them. It was not just providing humanitarian aid, or just a few women protesting at the main square ... they observed maybe too late that it was a huge movement of various interests and various people organising against them, and this movement really threw them out'.*

– Interview with Zorica Mrsevic; and Lepa Mladjenovic and Donna M. Hughes, *Feminist Resistance to War and Violence in Serbia*, *Frontline Feminisms*, (New York: Garland Press, 1999). Available online at <http://www.uri.edu/artsci/wms/hughes/warvio3.htm>

In addition, as mentioned above, during the conflicts many women and girls in the study regions took on new roles. Some discovered powerful identities as activists, while others consolidated their involvement in the movement. Over time, many realised that they had little interest in returning to their former lives. Manik Perera Gunatilleke, for instance, described how women in north and east Sri Lanka have embraced new freedoms, and will not give them up. 'We saw women doing some things in Jaffna that they may not do in other parts of the country because they've had to. Transport is one. In both the east and the north, most people on the streets are women on motorbikes and bicycles. Women don't ride bicycles and motorbikes in Colombo, it's unfeminine – it's just not "nice" for a woman to do that – you don't just hitch up your skirt and get on a motorbike. I hardly ever see a woman on a motorbike in Colombo; I've never seen a woman driving a three-wheeler, tri-shaw. But in Batticalao, some of the women from NGOs drive their own tri-shaws, because that's their official transport. They've taken on these roles because they have had to – and now they've settled in to it. I've



spoken to women in the east and asked, “What happens now? What if there’s peace? What do you do? Do you just go back and play the role of being just wife and mother and just support the children?” And they said “No, we’ll continue to do this work”. They feel that they’re not going to be stopped’.

However, when activists began to look to consolidate these unexpected gains and to push for political and economic freedoms and opportunities following a cessation of hostilities, they confronted resistance on several levels. In part this was because their work was seen to be taking traditional power away from men, rather than creating equal opportunities between women and men. For example, Flora Macula described Kosovar men’s perceptions of women activists’ work in the area of gender equality: ‘I think men started to be frightened by these [women’s] organisations, because everywhere you hear “Hey, what do you want – to take our place?” No, no, we want only ... to try to achieve this gender equality, we don’t want to dominate, we just want the same rights’.

At the same time as women are challenging their traditional roles, their societies are witnessing a resurgence of ‘traditional values’ that further restrict the freedom of women. Tanja Ignjatovic echoed the concern of many women activists in Serbia when she said: ‘Another very important issue for us is that somehow we are going back to the traditions ... getting religion in a bad way’. The rise in the influence of religion, combined with the increasing social pressure being placed on women to produce more children, has caused activists to worry that the government may attempt to restrict reproductive rights (for example, by banning abortion) further in the future.

In combination, these factors can result in various kinds of backlash. At a minimum, backlash erodes those limited gains resulting from the power shifts that occurred during the conflict. At a maximum, backlash leads to mounting attacks on women activists, and women and girls in general, committed with impunity by state and non-state actors, and by family or community members.

In the context of Sierra Leone, Jeanette Eno said: ‘I think there’s a growing fear from a lot of the conservative quarters in civil society – and this could be men and women – that perceives some kind of threat to what they see as the natural order of things, particularly within the family ... what they see as women trying to challenge men. In terms of women’s personal safety, it’s an issue because the backlash is normally expressed within the home in violence’.

Women activists are also in danger from the non-state armed forces that exercise de facto control over their communities, particularly if they seek to run for political office, or if they speak out about abuses committed by these units. One Sierra Leonean, for example, commented that while she was not concerned about her own safety when in urban areas, she did think that women activists were more at risk in the south and parts of the east because of the Kamajor militia’s continuing influence. ‘The south and parts of the east still have a very strong Kamajor influence and I am very, very honest – in that area I would be very, very careful about what I would do and what I would say, because even though we have a general security system, they are a law unto themselves’.<sup>59</sup>

### *Burn Out*

In the build-up to, and in the midst of a conflict, women activists draw strength from their belief that activism matters. They reject the notion that women are victims, consciously choosing to look beyond their own survival to help others, and also to look to the future. The alternative to activism – inaction or silence – is not an option.

During these times, solidarity with and support from other activists, friends and family members sustain them. Their successes, large and small, motivate them; their losses serve as a reminder to keep going in the face of sometimes insurmountable hurdles.

However, after a cessation of hostilities, and following many years of intense activity, this work can take a significant toll on an activist’s

physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. While women activists risk burn out at all stages of a conflict, it is during these ‘lulls’ that they may feel the full impact of sustained stress, combined with the realisation that they now face the daunting tasks of reconstruction and reform.

Jeanette Eno eloquently described this stage: ‘It’s certainly one of the things that I’m finding in post-conflict society – because there are so many things to fix and everything is just so critical. As opposed to in the midst of a conflict when you know, well, everything is just bad! But now we’re trying to rebuild the country. So you think we have to do things with an end in sight, with some kind of outcome, with some kind of vision of how we would like Sierra Leone to be, so you think you’re working towards that sort of a goal. [But] the women are tired ... because we’re hearing the same old rhetoric, time and time again, [and] nothing tangible seems to be moving forward. Women’s situations, their quality of life don’t seem to be improving in relation to some of the commitments that have been made at the international level and even at the national level. Now, until women have seen some difference ... they’re not interested’.

Other factors contribute to burn out, as Rachel Wareham pointed out: ‘Many of the barriers women activists face have to do with psychological health and support. Guilt, hero worship [by international feminists], and lack of personal space all play a role here. [At the height of the conflicts] what we never had was leisure. We never knew how to look after ourselves. It is also about energy levels and support, internal strength and health, about struggling to find space outside of activism – a way to stay sane by having a parallel non-activist life. Our homes are often our offices, our friends, our colleagues. And eventually it becomes our only identity’.

Manik Perera Gunatilleke suggests that, in Sri Lanka, women who might want to become involved in activism simply cannot afford to. ‘As an activist I would say the greatest barrier is actually the cost of living here. I know a lot of people who are struggling, and refusing to join the social community development sector because they’re not able

always to meet their regular practical daily demands of bills. Or maybe they have to take care of kids or extended family. Extended family is a big deal here – you don't just say my parents take care of themselves. There's always this huge tug of war between our commitments to just daily living – just surviving – and then our commitments to what we really want to do in our hearts for work'.

### **The Leisure or the Fear: Activism after Conflict**

*'The women's movement in Sierra Leone is resting and it's evolving. Because you cannot sustain the pitch at which it has had to work in the past. My personal view is that you either have the leisure for the activism or you have the fear.'*

*'So either what is facing you is so frightening and so awful, out of desperation you respond and you do something – which was the situation from '95 to '96 with the war – or you're in a situation where you can deal with your everyday problems to such an extent that you can actually think beyond your own individual needs and then you can be active. That's in your leisure.'*

*'Where we are presently is that the economic situation is such, the daily battle for survival just doesn't leave you the time to think about these bigger issues. You know you'd like to think about them, but frankly you don't give a toss, you've got to get the kids off to school, you've got to pay the school fees. You are just going from day to day and you're just battling the system, surviving the system.'*

*'You are complicit in it, your survival strategies involve a lot of shutting your eyes to things – so it becomes difficult to then turn around and scream and shout about them'.*

**– Yasmin Jusu-Sherrif, Sierra Leone**

After working for years for little or no compensation, the conflicts have usually absorbed activists' limited financial reserves. Economic conditions during transition phases, typically exacerbated by an influx of international agencies, are often rapidly declining, resulting in increasing housing, fuel and food prices. More family responsibilities have often been placed on their shoulders – they may have to care for extended family members and children in addition to their own. The decision to engage in activism, and to care for others, means that activists have not yet managed to secure their own future, or that of their loved ones. As Jamesina King pointed out: 'What does it take for a woman to do real women's rights activists' work? Dedication and commitment. But you see the other thing is that a woman has bills to pay. That woman has to pay school fees for her children'. Visaka Dharmadasa said that, in Sri Lanka, the struggle associated with balancing the needs of family members and those of society is familiar to most women activists. 'In Sri Lanka and I think anywhere – this is a global issue – for women it's difficult to put time in to come out [from their homes] and work. We have to understand that because as women, as much as we can make an impact in the society, if we fail at home as a mother then we have failed. So normally for a woman to be free, the challenge will have to be big'.

Individual and collective burn out significantly affects the ability of women's movements to cooperate, to sustain their activities and, critically, to plan for the future. According to Jeanette Eno, at this point, 'You're not getting enough sleep, you're working flat out, reports have to be submitted to donors, you've got meetings to attend ... I know lots of women who are just like working in this way, flat out. In terms of women who have the capacity to provide some kind of leadership, it's a challenge, because I really don't have much time left for anything else. So, for example, in terms of being able to go and give support to the Women's Forum or some other network, I'd really have to sit down and think about where I'm going to get the time. The commitment is there ... but ... a number of us in this position are facing that serious challenge – where do we get the time? And then at the other end you're looking at possible burn out, because you know that if you keep going

like this, you're going to face burn out and then you'll be of no good to anybody else, including yourself'.

Given the disproportionate level of physical, emotional and economic stress put on women in conflict areas, it is remarkable that activists continue to work at all.

However, women are often forced by a combination of burn out and economics to curtail their activism – and for some, to abandon it altogether. Others leave poorly paid local groups to take up jobs with international agencies, resulting in a 'brain drain' of activist talent.

Still other women, as described below, are essentially excluded from mainstream activism.

### *Excluded or Marginalised Activists*

It is of particular concern that a significant number of women activists remain disconnected and excluded from 'mainstream' urban women's movements. Rural women activists are often marginalised simply because of geography.

Other women are marginalised because of their ethnicity, religion, class or sexual orientation. For example, with some exceptions, Roma, Serb, Ashkali and other minority women activists in Kosovo and Roma activists in Serbia were disconnected from mainstream activists throughout the Kosovo conflict. Only now are they receiving attention because, as Sonja Lokar put it: 'It is fashionable at the moment'. Some women may simply never have had an opportunity to formalise their activism. This may be the case in Sierra Leone, for instance, where historically the conflict has never had strong religious or ethnic dimensions, yet Muslim women in the south remain largely excluded from activism.

Despite the incredible contribution made by lesbians to women's rights activism – often serving as key leaders of women's movements throughout the world – they are often forced to ignore their personal needs and to suppress their identity in order to work with other women. At one point in the 1990s, NGOs in Belgrade evicted a lesbian group from a shared space. Lesbian activists in Croatia have struggled to acquire external support for their work. To gain access to the very limited amount of funds made available to them they were expected to modify significantly their organisational focus and priorities.

These women are isolated within movements at home, and are cut off from movements in their own region and from larger networks around the world. They have limited access to information on funding sources, and confront language barriers and problems connected to a lack of transport.

Because they are marginalised, these women must expend considerable energy on gaining the recognition of, and establishing links with, other activists and donors. Limited direct access to external support has meant that rural activists in Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka have had to work through other urban women's groups in Freetown and Colombo, respectively. The latter act as 'fiscal sponsors', helping marginalised women to acquire funding through a 'sub-grant' system. This practice, in turn, has restricted their independence and their ability to speak for themselves. U.D.M. Seela Watthie in Sri Lanka, for example, pointed out that: 'If I had e-mail, and if I could pay somebody to keep on that specific job, then [support] would come directly through me, without going to some other organisations, who would then interpret it to me – always there is a go-between, no? It's not only me, I think a lot of organisations have that problem'.

As a result, it is urban or 'mainstream' women activists who serve as the primary link between rural and marginalised women activists and the outside world. However, they are not necessarily familiar with the priorities and the strategies of these activists. Many women activists recognise this fact and have expressed concern about it.

## *Operational Constraints*

### **Limited Freedom of Movement**

**M**ost women activists said that restricted freedom of movement within their own country and internationally has constituted a major obstacle to their work. When they cannot travel freely, they lose significant capacity to conduct day-to-day tasks, as well as to organise and network with other women activists and colleagues. At a minimum, this results in a host of missed opportunities. At a maximum, it means that they must continue to put their lives at risk for their beliefs.

Activists' ability to travel in safety can be particularly constrained at certain stages of a conflict, especially when armed groups, state and non-state alike, exercise control over an area, such as the RUF in north and east Sierra Leone, Serbian police in Kosovo, and various armed actors in north and east Sri Lanka, including the IPKF, the LTTE and the Sri Lankan military. Women activists were most in danger when they were held in detention facilities or stopped at borders or armed checkpoints.<sup>60</sup>

**Government restrictions**, often imposed after a declaration of a state of emergency, can also limit the movement of women. During the first few months of the Kosovo refugee crisis, for example, out of concern that this massive influx of people might destabilise the country, the Macedonian government severely curtailed the movement of refugees. As Vjollca Krasniqi pointed out, this significantly hampered activists' ability to reach out to and to support women and girls in the camps. 'Until April [1999], we had a lack of freedom of movement, we couldn't go from one camp to another, we couldn't go from Tetova to Skopje, and women could not get out'.

**Societal norms** can also affect the ability of women activists to travel in safety, particularly during and after a conflict. According to Visaka Dharmadasa, 'In my work, my husband comes with me as much as possible, because we are in a society where women normally don't go out



and spend nights outside. In this kind of work, if we aren't also sensitive to those kind of customs we can't really do a lot of work. I always have my husband accompany me and that gives a credibility to me – to the men and to the hotel where we are staying'. This point is confirmed in the ICRC's extensive study on women and war, which notes that during a conflict, 'Women's movements may also be hampered by cultural restrictions; for example, a woman may not be able to travel without her husband or a male family member without losing her respectability in the eyes of society. Therefore, women have to be able to maintain family and community ties in order to preserve their mobility'.<sup>61</sup>

After the nominal 'end' of a conflict, **ongoing insecurity and tensions** continue to hinder women activists' ability to travel, particularly marginalised activists. These limitations exacerbate their isolation: if they cannot travel, they cannot connect with other women activists, and they cannot engage in advocacy or speak for themselves. This has been the case, for instance, for women activists travelling into and out of the north and east of Sri Lanka. Similarly, travel into and out of the ethnic Serb enclaves of Kosovo has been severely restricted because of insecurity. As a Belgrade-based activist pointed out, although some Kosovar Serb women activists managed to travel from the enclaves of the province to Serbia,<sup>62</sup> in general, the insecurity was too great. 'There was an urgent need for women to meet each other, but because they couldn't travel, they couldn't organise'. Rada Kapetanovic added that her efforts in north Mitrovica, as well as ongoing attempts to bring Kosovar Serb women activists and Kosovar Albanian women activists together, had been consistently constrained by lack of access to safe transport. 'Though activists had gone as far as discussing cooperative efforts, at that point, they simply couldn't meet in person; the problem is to arrange the meetings because of the [lack of] freedom of movement'.

Even when conditions are safe enough to allow women activists to travel, they are further restricted by a **shortage of resources to pay for that travel**. In Sri Lanka, for example, Kumari Jayawardena explained that a dearth of resources limited the capacity of women activists to meet and organise: 'What we needed – and need now – is just a kitty, so that

we can go again to Kilinochi as individuals. We can't go [now] as the gender committee, because it's in abeyance. So who is going to pay for that travel for us to meet?'

In Sierra Leone, urban and rural women activists noted that the cost of hiring vehicles suitable for the rough terrain was a major barrier to cooperation. Jeanette Eno summed up the problem: 'In Sierra Leone, because of the infrastructure – the road networks outside the main towns are virtually impassable – you can't navigate those remote areas. There's a lot going on in the country in terms of women's groups, or women doing something in their own localities, but connecting them up and being able to meet up from the different areas – it's very, very difficult to do that. So there are lots of isolated activities going on, but because of the route problems, women are unable to link up'.

Emrika Miftari expressed similar concerns about her outreach work in Kosovo: 'One of the obstacles we have is that for two years now, we don't have a car and it's very, very difficult for us to travel ... this doesn't prevent us from accomplishing our projects, although it's very difficult. For example, now it's so hard – during the winter it's very cold, we need to travel and these villages are really far. But when I first went and visited these villages, I saw that they were very far and no one visits them, so they really need us to be there'.

Ultimately, this can mean that the voices of women and girls are not heard. Yasmin Jusu-Sherrif said that, when she was working as Commissioner for the Southern Region with the TRC, lack of transport prevented Freetown-based women activists from ensuring that rural-based Sierra Leonean women and girls could participate in the TRC process. 'What I would have loved was to get the people to give their support to the women in the regions – to get their own side. If we had gone as a group to sensitise them, to mobilise them, we'd have got a lot of information for the TRC, because they would have been able to say things which happened – which I'm sure we are never going to know about. That was the opportunity we missed ... because we didn't have

the funding, we didn't have the means, because it entailed travelling to the regions, just the basics ... vehicles'.

### **Lack of Access to Communications**

Activists require access to a range of reliable communication channels so that they can maintain contact with, and relay critical information to, groups that they are working to support, other activists in the region, international support networks, and their own and other governments. Such communication systems are activists' only means of acquiring vital information on rapidly changing security environments. Contingent on the context, these channels can include one-way communication (through the media, such as radio, television and the internet) and two-way or multiple communication (including word of mouth, post, telephone, mobile and satellite phones, VHF and HF radio and the internet).

However, most women activists pointed out that consistent lack of access to reliable and safe methods of communication presented another major obstacle to their conflict work. Many women activists, particularly those living in rural areas, simply did not have access to communication systems because network coverage did not extend beyond urban centres. For those who live in areas with a degree of access to communications, they are further constrained by the often prohibitively high set-up and running costs. Most urban women activists in Sierra Leone, for example, use mobile phones. But, as Jeanette Eno pointed out; 'The phone is very expensive – it's all pegged to the dollar – so again it rules out the majority of women in the country because they're not women of economic means to be running mobile phones'. Many women activists also often lack the training needed to make best use of the communication systems that they can access, especially the internet. This is a particular concern in terms of activists' ability to transmit sensitive human rights information securely.

Finally, an infamous case in Sri Lanka serves as a reminder that activists' ability to communicate can be a matter of life and death. On 7 September 1996 around noon, Sri Lankan army officers detained an 18-year-old schoolgirl, Krishanthi Kumarasamy, at the Chemmani checkpoint in Jaffna. Three hours later her mother, Rasammah, her 16-year-old brother, Pranavan, and her neighbour, Sithamparam Kirupamoorthy, went to the Chemmani checkpoint in search of Krishanthi, and were subsequently detained. At around 20:00, eight members of the Sri Lankan security forces gang raped and then murdered Krishanthi. Next they murdered her mother, younger brother and neighbour.<sup>63</sup>

Saroja Sivachandra, who was among the activists who investigated the case, emphasised that, 'When Krishanthi was arrested, nobody knew because there were no phones'. A phone call may have saved her life, and the lives of her mother, brother and neighbour.

### **Lack of Secure and Stable Work Space**

A secure and stable work space is essential for women's activism. Normally, such a space serves a dual function, offering activists a place to conduct their day-to-day work and to meet with other activists, and a location where women and girls can be provided with various kinds of support and services.

Women activists in the three study regions have struggled to gain access to secure and stable work space. For the most part, without external support to allow them to purchase property, they have frequently lacked the resources needed to rent an office. After Kosovar women activists tried to reorganise as refugees in Macedonia, for instance, they struggled to establish safe spaces to support affected families. Vjosa Dobruna noted that at this time, 'I was receiving chairs and computers ... but I had problems to pay the rent also. Nobody gives money to pay the rent for women's groups, it's always a problem. And you have to work someplace, you have to be mobile, yes, but you have to have a seat someplace where women can find you'.

Throughout the conflicts, and after their nominal end, women activists continued to make significant compromises to continue their work without secure and stable office space. Many ran their organisations from home, risking both their physical safety and their mental health. Others put their work temporarily on hold, including the Centre for Girls in Nis, Serbia, and the 50/50 Group in Sierra Leone.

### *Disconnected International Response*

#### **Externally-Driven Interventions**

**B**ecause international actors typically acted as the primary interlocutors with the outside world on the conflicts in the study regions, particularly when there was maximum interest in them, they often shaped international perceptions of the causes of the crises and their effects on the population. This analysis helped to determine the direction of the international response and the external resources made available to support it.

In addition to overriding foreign policy interests, decisions on the shape of the international response seemed to be influenced by two inter-related factors: which individuals and groups had access to international actors; and confidence in the appropriateness of the response and the success rate of past forms of international conflict intervention.

As a rule, especially early in conflict negotiation processes, it was largely state and non-state armed actors, as well as self-appointed political leaders, that enjoyed the greatest access to international actors and hence influenced international opinion. In this context, with some exceptions, the views of women activists, grounded in a deep understanding of the priorities of the population in general and of women and girls in particular, were largely ignored. This meant that women activists and other local civil society actors rarely served as respected partners in the assessment and programme design

phases of international interventions. Instead, during the subsequent implementation stage, they were largely seen as 'service providers'.<sup>64</sup>

Hence, international interventions in these regions were often detached from the realities of women and girls and the activists who worked with them. As such, women activists faced two major, inter-related constraints.

First, resources were offered in ways that were often inappropriate. In order to gain access to the bulk of the resources earmarked for conflict response programmes, women activists had to invest significant time and energy in learning to engage with unfamiliar, and frequently bureaucratic, funding systems. Long application forms had to be completed, usually in English, and there were lengthy delays before approved funding was received. Such funding was often short-term (three or six months) and project-specific, meaning that operational, management and security costs were rarely covered.

Second, resources were also tied to international actors' thoughts on which issues were important and which standard interventions were appropriate, rather than to an understanding of the conflict and structural issues. While such interventions may have been designed to address real needs, particularly during the acute emergency phase of a conflict, they sometimes faltered in regard to timing and approach.

In some cases, for example, critically important issues were only prioritised at certain times, when for some reason they were seen as 'hot', leading to disproportionate funding waves and attention being placed on particular sectors or interventions. After years of silence about violence against women and girls in Sierra Leone, for instance, gender-based violence (GBV) suddenly became an important issue, and funding was made available for a range of programmes to support the survivors. However, lack of external support prior to this meant that most civil society actors did not have the opportunity to acquire the experience and skills needed to work in this very sensitive area. Thus, when significant external funding was made available, the

response tended to vary: some programmes continued to function in an excellent manner, while at the same time, disconnected and sometimes inappropriate interventions were launched. As Valnora Edwin pointed out: 'In Sierra Leone ... since now there's a lot of funding involved in issues like [gender-based violence], everybody jumps in without grasping the concept, without having a plan, without thinking of networking or coordinating with other organisations and [to] see how you can really and truly create an impact'. Recent interest in HIV/AIDS prevention in Sierra Leone may result in a similar funding wave.

International interest in introducing externally-designed conflict resolution interventions at both the community, national and international levels was also at odds with the priorities of women activists in these regions, and of the women and girls they were working to support. In particular, investment in such interventions contrasted with the resources made available for more pressing women's rights issues, ranging from protection from violence and access to basic healthcare, education and social services to women's access to justice and their ability to participate in decision-making as part of political and conflict resolution processes.

In Kosovo, the push to resolve the conflict through reconciliation seemed to be particularly externally-driven, triggering a huge number of conferences, meetings and programmes. Women activists in the region told Teresa Crawford of The Advocacy Project that they needed to handle these very complex issues on their own, at their own speed, and using their own processes. 'I think it's been approached from the wrong way ... from the donor perspective it was all about reconciliation and return. Igo [Rogova] more than once said ... I don't ever want to hear that word again. Who is to tell me – and us – when we're supposed to reconcile with somebody else – and how? I don't want to hear another session related to reconciliation'. These concerns resonated in Sierra Leone, where women activists have been asked to participate in myriad conferences, workshops – or 'talk shops' – and community-level peace processes that do not necessarily reflect the reality of the conflict.

## **Mainstreaming: Shifting Resources and Funder Flight**

Finally, after a cessation of hostilities in each of the regions, the larger international donors tended to ‘mainstream’ funding. Resources that were previously earmarked for the conflict response programmes of civil society were instead channelled towards governments under bilateral arrangements. This move put a significant barrier in the way of civil society development in general in these regions and, more specifically, it further marginalised the women’s human rights movement within the larger civil society context.

As a result of this shift, smaller women’s groups may be forced to curtail their activities significantly, or to close down their programmes entirely. Larger groups may survive, but their effectiveness will be compromised, as the focus is increasingly on fundraising, rather than on programme development and implementation. According to Lepa Mladjenovic in Serbia, ‘There is a dip coming and it means that lots of smaller NGOs will disappear, and even the big ones will have a problem. For three big projects at our center we don’t have funds in three months. Money is definitely a big problem – for everyone. Groups who are not so developed ask us how we can help them. At least four groups in the last two months have asked us for assistance, and we don’t have more than enough for a couple of months. Always someone will ask you to help them, but that is unusual, because it is too much. Now there is really a concentration’.

The first activists to suffer will likely be the most marginalised – rural activists working outside of capital cities and those belonging to under-represented minority groups. Sepali Kottegoda in Sri Lanka believes that this shift will result in less money being earmarked for women’s initiatives and almost no funding being made available for groups located outside of Colombo. Vera Kurtic and Ana Zorbic, who run the Women’s Space for Roma women in Serbia, are concerned that recent interest in minority rights in the region will not result in sustained support for minority women’s rights. ‘Right now I am worried about long-term funding. We have money right now, but in the future, I am



worried that our government isn't interested in Roma women. They try to create some council for national minorities, and there is some interest in minority rights in general, but not for minority women's rights – there is no gender perspective on this'.

Sonja Lokar echoed this concern, suggesting that interest in minority rights will not be reflected in any kind of government commitment towards NGOs. She said that, ultimately, this trend will affect even successful regional mechanisms. 'For the [Stability Pact] Gender Task Force, we are facing a crisis moment with the donors. None of our four big regional projects [which have all been successful] are funded for next year. So, in the worst case, we may not be able to continue. This is happening partially because we are a regional initiative, but the regional approach is now being dismantled, with Slovenia and Hungary becoming EU countries, and Romania, Bulgaria, Albania and Croatia in line. The western Balkans countries have signed bilateral agreements with [the] European Union. Why has the donor interest changed? The US government changed and so did their priorities. The Star Network was closed down, but [the] National Democratic Institute and Republican Institute are still there and now the Balkans Trust has been created. They are not interested in building women's political power from the bottom up'.

This form of mainstreaming seems to be based on certain key, and likely false, assumptions. First, that these 'post-conflict' governments are committed to upholding and protecting women's rights, and that they value the involvement of women in decision-making processes. Second, that they have the capacity to take responsibility for providing the essential, specialised services that civil society has been supplying to date. Third, that they will have the capability to manage and support a transparent, accountable 'sub-granting' process, outsourcing to civil society those programmes that cannot be managed by the state, or are beyond its remit. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, mainstreaming assumes that civil society entities, and women's human rights groups in particular, can continue to function independently – monitoring and reporting on human rights

abuses committed by people and groups in power, when such groups are mainly government funded.

This shift in the allocation of funds raises a couple of critical questions, especially for independent human rights activists. First, when, if ever, is it possible for a human rights organisation to maintain independence without external support? Second, is it ever appropriate for a human rights group to receive the bulk of its funding from its own government?

Radhika Coomaraswamy stressed that, while women's movements can forge constructive relationships with their national governments, they must always maintain their independence. 'We don't want [the Sri Lankan government's] support and I don't think governments should support women's movements. It's one way of killing them. But they've not been hostile against them either. So at the moment they listen to some extent'. Flora Macula echoed the point in respect to Kosovo: 'They're moving towards having the municipal governments supporting NGOs, and that's starting, and that's good – but I don't know of any women's movement that's supported only by its government'.

A Sri Lankan activist summed up the situation best: 'Our usual funders were the Dutch, but a lot of funders have changed their policies ... they don't want to give [to] small organizations – they can't be bothered – they want to give to the government ... and the government can do what they like, with their absurd sort of policies'.

However, many women activists are learning as they go along and are not familiar with conflict cycles and the behaviour of international actors. Consequently, they focus on the task at hand during the acute emergency phase and are left unprepared for resource shifts during the transition stage. Lepa Mladjenovic said that several women's groups in Serbia had approached her for fundraising support at the last minute, once their resources had run out. She attributes this to a lack of planning, in part because they had become accustomed to short-term

crisis funding and in part ‘because this is the typical thinking from the totalitarian government and the war time – that you think only a little bit. Your experience of time is fragmented’.

Sonja Lokar stressed that women’s groups need to take responsibility for recognising this shift and for responding proactively by stepping up their cooperation. ‘This is not all the fault of the international donors; for example, in Macedonia, because the women’s groups all work together, they will survive’.

### *Violence against Women*

At all stages of the conflicts, women’s rights activists confronted considerable barriers to their work to combat and prevent violence against women and girls. It is particularly striking, however, that their crucial work is challenged most, and receives the least support, in the ‘post-war’ context. While many activists are struggling to support the survivors of ‘war-related’ violence and to cope with increasing levels of violence against women and girls, they receive little external recognition or backing. This is largely due to the external perception that the violent phase of the conflict is over. Ongoing violence is now seen as ‘normal’, and somehow unrelated to the conflict. Hence, it is not considered a reconstruction priority.

During a reconstruction process, the state systems required to combat violence are simply not geared towards capacity-building. Therefore, the immense tasks of ensuring safety, providing services and guaranteeing access to justice for women and girls affected by violence remain largely in the hands of women activists. However, the lack of public recognition and support for their efforts to address and end violence makes the work of women’s rights activists in this field increasingly dangerous. Ultimately, this means that it is also more dangerous for women and girls to seek justice. Without protection, they remain silent, thus completing the cycle of violence and impunity.

### **Lack of Immediate Safe Shelter**

An immediate priority in addressing violence is to prevent further harm. This means ensuring the physical and emotional well-being of women and children who have survived violence. Yet very basic physical protection, often in the form of safe shelter, was rarely available in the three study regions, leaving women and children exposed to heightened violence. For example, Vjosa Dobruna pointed out in relation to Kosovo that: ‘After the war ... I didn’t see the issue of sheltering women being addressed. Gjakove [Djakovica] was destroyed – there was a place with over 1,000 missing persons, many dead, and half the town [was] completely burnt down ... and women were coming to me and saying ... “We have domestic violence issues that are coming, and nobody sees them as a priority to address”’.

### **Weak and Unwilling State Response**

After a cessation of hostilities, state institutions such as the police, the courts, hospitals and social services should take primary responsibility for preventing and addressing violence. They should provide critical healthcare and social support services and access to justice for those women and girls who have survived violence.<sup>65</sup>

However, in all three study regions there is, in most cases, there is significant lack of capacity – and often commitment – within these state institutions. This has left the responsibility for responding to violence in the hands of women activists.

Activists with *medica mondiale* Kosova said that, while they have enjoyed some success in changing key laws related to violence, one of the barriers that they now face is ‘the lack of institutions and instruments to realise the law’. Naime Sherifi-Macastena reported that, due to under-funding, the Center for Social Assistance is only able to offer limited services to survivors of violence. ‘[It] has a really small state budget. To be able to help a mother whose husband is missing or killed – or who is violent and throws her out into the street with her children – and she doesn’t have a place to go, the Center for Social Assistance should have a bigger budget so that they could place

her somewhere, and help her financially so she could survive with her children until she gets a job'. Naime pointed to the limited capacity of the Forensics Institute, inter alia, to process evidence – to the extent that the Center for the Protection of Women and Children has to pay for forensics tests out of its own budget so as to allow women to pursue their cases in court.

### Preventing Access to Justice in Sierra Leone

Along with several other women activists, Valnore Edwin of the Campaign for Good Governance noted that rape cases can take years to resolve under the Sierra Leonean court system. Combined with a lack of financial and psychological support for the survivors of violence and their families, this presents a significant and almost insurmountable barrier to seeking justice through the courts.

*'We had problems with the judiciary because the cases go on for so long. In 2001, we had a girl who was 18 months old who was sexually abused by a 21 year old. The baby's mother ... had to come to court in Freetown from Lungbi once or twice a month for two and a half years, for two to three days at a time. At some point, we had to provide her [with] transportation and give her a small allowance for food and expenses. In the end, she said she was tired of going to court every day, every month, and she was going back and forth and nothing seemed to be done. So she said she had made up her mind that they should let the boy go and forget about everything'.*

This case has since been re-opened and may take several more years to resolve.

While relations with police forces are improving in all three regions, women activists have highlighted lack of training and lack of interest among police officers as key barriers to addressing violence against women. Manik Perera Gunatilleke summed this up in regard to Sri Lanka: ‘One other thing that prevents people from supporting the human rights of women and girls is the fact that the mechanisms that are there to deal with any human rights violations – man, woman or child – are very weak. When it comes to ... violence against women, it’s worse. So there are laws for all this, but there is no implementation, there is no training. Sometimes the police intimidate you until you drop a case. Sometimes they just refuse. They don’t take it seriously; it doesn’t matter if a man beats his wife black and blue. They say: “It’s a husband and wife’s affair, we don’t need to get involved”. So they have no idea – or they know, but they don’t care. The forces are not trained that *this is important*, that you need to do this, and there’s no follow up’.

Similarly, attitudes within the court system, combined with limited capacity, have stymied the efforts of women activists to help women and girls gain access to justice. In Sierra Leone, for example, the court system is weak and overloaded. Equally, court officials do not consider violence against women and girls to be important, and hence have limited interest in prosecuting such cases. As a result, those women and girls who do have the courage to seek justice are forced to wait for years before their case is heard. Often they drop the case because they cannot afford to travel to court on a regular basis.

In the absence of state institutions capable of and committed to addressing violence against women and girls, activists remain the primary support mechanism for survivors of violence. Naime Sherifi-Macastena, though, underscored the point that women activists cannot provide this support alone: ‘We are aware that we are just an NGO and that we can only give direct – but temporary – assistance to the victims. But the problems we face are solved by the laws of the state. That is where they get stuck. There are some cases that the laws aren’t enforced. And there are cases where there is a legislative gap’.

### **Impunity**

A legitimate fear of retribution, combined with the absence of formal witness protection schemes, has prevented many women and girls from seeking justice, especially when the perpetrators of the violence reside in their own communities. One activist summed up the concerns of many in Sierra Leone: ‘The war we had was fought among ourselves – in most instances we knew our perpetrators. And we are living with them ... they are brothers, they are sisters ... some people who were in the fighting forces are now part of the army, so you will have to be careful what you say. You never know where you are going to meet that person again if you go and testify and expose the person’.

Jeanette Eno confirmed this point, noting that while ex-combatants in Sierra Leone have gone through DDR programmes, this process has not adequately addressed past violence (or potential future violence) against women and girls. They have returned to their communities with a strong sense of impunity. ‘A lot of [ex-combatants] have learned different ways and perhaps no longer respect the sorts of things that may have existed before, and certainly would challenge certain norms that existed before, challenge what they see as authority. When they had the gun they were able to take any girl that they wanted to take, that was not a problem. So if you’ve been in that sort of mindset for several years ... I guess you’d continue with that. I’m not sure how much rehabilitation was done on that side of things. And I doubt very little ... during the DDR process ... the gender aspects were not really strong’.

### **Silent Issues**

Activists struggled in particular to address certain forms of violence, such as: trafficking in all three study regions; female genital mutilation in Sierra Leone; violence against female members of the Roma community in Serbia; and violence against female members of the Serb community in Kosovo.

Despite the risk, some courageous women activists have spoken out about trafficking and have provided protection to trafficked women

and children. For most women activists, however, the danger is simply too great. Trafficking is connected to international organised criminal networks and often occurs to satisfy the desires of powerful clients, including government officials, national and international police officers, peacekeepers, international aid workers and private military contractors. When the individuals and organisations charged with curbing trafficking are complicit in it, women activists have little room for manoeuvre.

Vera Kurtic and Ana Zorbic stated that security concerns significantly limited their capacity to address violence issues within the Roma community of Serbia, including violence committed within the family and trafficking. ‘We came upon some topics around trafficking. There are bordels here run by Roma men – most were closed down recently. We couldn’t reach [the women] in them. They are big and they are rich. So we couldn’t work on that topic – period. I wanted to ... but we couldn’t’.

In the city of Nis, Tanja Nikoli and Aleksandra Zikic have deliberately restricted their anti-trafficking work to prevention campaigns in schools, because they feel that local police units lack the training to work with women activists to tackle the bigger issues. ‘We work on prevention. That is the first. The second thing is that we are not ready for some other work. Maybe one day when we are more ready. In Belgrade, they [other women’s groups] are well-connected with the police. They are ready to cooperate now. When we are talking about certain activities in other cities, we should talk about changing the law first, then that the police have a certain education. They would be trained. In that case we could cooperate together and maybe do some joint actions. But at the moment not only are we not ready for that – but also the police aren’t ready’.

Although some women activists acknowledged that trafficking of Sierra Leonean children is a growing concern, they did not know of any women activists who were able to work on the issue safely, and they pointed to a shortage of information on the extent and nature of the problem. ‘Not much research has been done on that, though we know that it’s happening. Now UNICEF is doing research on child trafficking [girls] ... they’ve spoken to us and to a number of other



organisations and they will produce [a report] that there is this child trafficking going on ... from Sierra Leone out to other countries'.<sup>66</sup>

One Sierra Leonean woman activist said that even mentioning female genital mutilation in public was simply too risky. '[T]hat issue is so controversial ... the minute you're not within it or from that ... community who practice it and you start talking about it – you will run into serious problems'. Dr. Olayinka Koso-Thomas, a well-known gynaecologist and one of the few women to speak out publicly against female genital mutilation, was reportedly forced to flee the country after receiving death threats for her activism.

### *Political Participation: Private or Public Engagement?*

As described above, women activists have confronted considerable challenges to engaging with critical political processes in their regions. Part of the reason for this relates to the fact that women activists were largely excluded from the conflict resolution and political decision-making processes that occurred during the conflict and immediately after the cessation of hostilities.

Some activists believe that this exclusion may have been partially influenced by the fact that many women activists consciously chose to concentrate on service provision and 'informal' political processes, such as community-level conflict prevention. Vjosa Dobruna, for instance, noted that during the refugee crisis in Macedonia, and after the refugees returned to Kosovo, women activists opted to focus their attention on service provision, speaking out against human rights abuses and in favour of political solutions, rather than trying to engage in political campaigning.

For example, women activists were well aware that the influx of Kosovar refugees into Macedonia could destabilise the country and trigger further violence. They re-established their own networks in order to provide a range of services, and they worked to make

the priorities of refugees known to the UN and other international actors. Despite the personal risk, they worked particularly hard to maintain calm among the refugee population in the face of harassment by the Macedonian authorities. On their return to Kosovo, however, their contribution was ignored. Women were sidelined as new political structures were established.

### **The Price of Activism?**

*'Do you think that our work was recognised when we came back to Kosovo? No. The same structures took over and international communities started negotiating for the construction of Kosovo with people who were not present during those three months. The work of women was not recognised at all ... the UN ... dismantled existing power structures, and they didn't give recognition for a decade of non-violent organising in Kosovo, in the same way they undermined and didn't pay recognition for the work of women during apartheid, and especially during the refugee time – because during the refugee crisis it was 90% of women's organising and women's political work. And we didn't have recognition afterwards – this was basically the model that was imposed on us. Men in Kosovo really couldn't care less about that, they were just trying to impose their power and take recognition – basically ... they have hijacked the scene in cooperation with the UN'.*

**– Vjosa Dobruna, Kosovo**

Vjosa Dobruna believes that women activists continued to choose between rebuilding society and participating in politics. 'The women had different priorities. For most of [the] women in Kosovo, it was a priority to rebuild their life, so public life was not a priority when they returned. We know that over 60% of Kosovo was destroyed – so for every woman in Kosovo it was more important to have a roof over their head. So that gap was filled by [the] UN and men in Kosovo because we had allowed that ... because we had different priorities'.

Rachel Wareham offered a different take, contending that women activists' attempts to work with the new system were consistently rebuffed. Equally, they had little faith in the new political arrangements. 'The UN and men ignored all that went before, and the women activists tried very hard to be heard and included, but were ignored. Igo Rogova and others literally had to shout and still they had problems. In addition, women activists tend to regard international post-conflict work as fantasy politics, and they don't want to compromise and work with new leaders who they know have blood on their hands'.

It is very difficult to engage with and, in some cases, to join the political and military institutions that, historically, have failed women and remain largely discriminatory and dismissive of women's rights. Hence, some activists have chosen to affect change in their regions by remaining outside of the political system, while others have worked to bring women into government or have stood for office themselves.

Both approaches are unquestionably valid, but the divide nevertheless diminishes the number of activists involved in the public, political sphere. As one Serbian activist pointed out: 'Unless we have a strong women's movement that supports women politicians, we will have to follow party politics'.

## **Should Women Activists Rethink their Strategies for Political Change?**

*‘Women are the chorus at peace rallies, the front line of the humanitarian story, but they are not on the dais, they do not determine the agenda. In the end, they are invisible. History has little or no space to record women’s experience of war, as if it was undifferentiated from that of men; it carries no chronicle of women’s resistance and peace making effort, as if it made no difference.*

*‘Part of the difficulty of making women’s activism in peace building visible and therefore mainstreaming gender in the political activity of peace agreements and the actual planning for a society’s reconstruction, is that women themselves see their activity as non political and an extension of their domestic concerns – “stretched roles”.*

*‘Moreover, women’s visibility is further obscured by the fact that their language of support and resistance flows from their cultural experience, especially of being disempowered. The creative anarchy, non violence and non hierarchical characteristics that mark women’s innovative actions for peace, challenge traditional notions of what political action should and can be about.*

*‘Since women’s activism in building peace and reconciliation at the grassroots level is grounded in the informal space of politics, it gets undervalued and as post conflict politics moves into formal space, it gets marginalised.*

*‘Increasingly, women peace activists are emphasising the importance of women making the transition from informal space to the formal space of political structures’.*

**– South Asia Forum for Human Rights,**

[http://www.safhr.org/women\\_peace\\_movement\\_overview.htm](http://www.safhr.org/women_peace_movement_overview.htm)

Those women activists who are engaged in political activism underlined that it is not enough for women just to acquire political positions. If these women are to engender positive change in women's rights, they require ongoing training, encouragement and support from other women and men, both within government and civil society. Vjollca Krasniqi explained: 'Maybe [the] OSCE is supporting the larger [electoral] process [in Kosovo], but who is supporting the women politicians in a difficult situation? They need training – gender sensitive training – [as do others]’.

Many activists stressed that, unless a critical mass of women is elected – typically around 30% or more – female politicians will continue to struggle simply to survive as a minority. As Aleksandra Galonja pointed out with regard to Serbia, ‘The 30% is a critical mass. With it, women have sort of their community there, they feel more safe. They are not hiding. This is the reason why this 30% is important. [It is not enough] if you have only one woman, like Margaret Thatcher. They usually say, “Oh she’s a tough old woman” – but these women are tough because they have to be in order to survive. They have to act as men politicians ... most women that are in parliament are “acting as men” in their position because we do not have that kind of critical mass now’.

### **A Call to Bridge the Urban–Rural Divide in Sri Lanka**

The Women and Governance study, conducted by the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) in Sri Lanka in 1998–1999, noted that in recent years, there have been campaigns on the right of women to vote and there have been attempts to include women's issues on political party agendas and in manifestos (with some success). Women's groups have met with political parties and have appealed for more female nominations. They have organised around the subject of electoral violence.

However, while women have highlighted the need for representation on political bodies at all levels, there has not been concerted mobilisation around this topic.

Key findings of the study include those listed below.

- Sri Lankan women are very much aware of the flaws of the existing political system. It is tarnished by corruption and violence and thus is fundamentally undemocratic. They believe passionately that if women of *merit, commitment and strength* enter the system, they have the capacity to transform it.
- There is equal recognition of the need to address the *universal exclusion of women from decision-making*. A major concern emphasised throughout the project relates to the lack of women in the decision-making forums of institutions at the national and provincial levels, including civil society organisations.
- While middle class/middle aged community-based women activists from provincial areas are willing to seek political representation, many female leaders of women's organisations in the capital do not see themselves playing an active part in representative politics – that is, standing for office.

The study confirmed that it is not enough for some women to push for political change and to demand inclusion in decision-making processes. There is *'an overwhelming current need to fuse together these two forces [rural women and the urban women's activist movement] into a single cohesive powerful body capable of articulating women's political concerns and needs in the national and provincial context in Sri Lanka'*.

–Adapted from the ICES website,  
[http://www.kit.nl/gcg/html/sri\\_\\_lanka\\_\\_ices\\_projects.asp](http://www.kit.nl/gcg/html/sri__lanka__ices_projects.asp)



## Supporting Factors

With so many constraints, what helps activists to conduct their work? What keeps them going when faced with sometimes insurmountable obstacles? In response to these questions, women activists listed numerous factors, including: success and loss; the support of family members and other women's groups; and quality international backing and recognition.

### *Finding Motivation in Success and Loss*

Many activists said that they found strength and motivation in the success of their work.

*'The most important motivation was our will and our real desire to help our women'.*

– medica mondiale Kosova activists

*'The challenge is there, but for me I'm happy. I now see the motivation or the eagerness for women themselves to take up the challenge. If we can be a catalyst in that, I think we have achieved our work ... my life's work has been achieved'.*

– Christiana Thorpe, Sierra Leone



*‘I was speaking to another mother this morning – and that’s exactly my courage. If someone asked me where I was getting the courage, it’s that I believe my child is alive. The other thing is I know there are thousands of mothers who rely upon me to bring their children back, or to know their child’s fate. This is exactly my driving force’.*

– Visaka Dharmadasa, *Sri Lanka*

At other times, it was loss that reminded them that their work has the power to change, and to save lives. At one point, Vesna Nikolic-Ristanovic had limited time to devote to her direct work with women in prison, as she was also engaged in a variety of other tasks, such as legal reform advocacy, research on different forms of violence against women, and establishing a victim support system for women in the criminal justice system. During this period she received a sad reminder of how critically important this type of direct outreach can be: ‘[A] year ago, a woman I met when I did research on the connection between domestic violence and women’s crimes – she committed suicide in prison. That was a really difficult case because the trial was very sexist. It turned her children, who were also victims of domestic violence, against her and I think that was the main reason she committed suicide in prison because her children didn’t come to see her and didn’t communicate with her’.

### *Solidarity*

Most activists prioritised the practical and emotional support offered by family, friends and other women activists in their own countries, as well as regionally and internationally.

Perhaps most importantly, the solidarity offered by other activists, particularly at moments of great stress, relieved their sense of isolation and gave them the will to go on. Slavica Stojanovic, for example, said that the support that Swiss women activists offered to members of the Women in Black movement early in the anti-war campaign was priceless. ‘When we would protest with Women in Black ... you were faced precisely with

the blank perception from the citizens going around you ... for one hour you stand there, and it is like being on the stage. You make some kind of catharsis and it is good for you – but you have to go home. The people around they don't care, and nobody hears what you want to say about the war. We were isolated. We cared about the war, we had real problems with that war and we wanted to do something. We felt powerless, that nobody cares. In November 1992, some Swiss women organised themselves and they just arrived here. We had never heard about them before. I felt such a relief, that I always say that I know the feeling of being born again. I remember that was more precious even than the financial and other support that they gave us. Sometimes you feed people and you build on the resources through these important moments'.

Members of GEMS in Makeni, Sierra Leone, recounted how support from other women literally saved their lives. As they travelled through the bush to escape their RUF captors, older women along the way offered them shelter, food and care. After the war, it was women friends who encouraged them to approach GEMS for support, setting them on the path to activism.

Informal links with other women activists and friends are a critical means of relieving the stress, pressure and sadness associated with the work. In Sierra Leone, for instance, after supporting a young woman as she talked about a particularly disturbing experience, Barbara Bangura found that speaking to others helped her to cope with the situation. 'For me, talking about it sort of helps ... and also seeing [these women and girls] succeeding and improving'. Jeanette Eno confirmed that when women activists need to relieve stress in Sierra Leone, they come together informally. 'I think most women really just do one-to-one with close friends, on an informal basis. There's a lot [of] that, there's a lot of storytelling about things that have happened, so maybe that is one form of bringing it all out. But it's not being done at a conscious level. I have noticed women will engage in storytelling about their experiences, you know maybe 2 or 3 are in one place and they will start talking about things ... in a social way. And you know you just talk to friends, have a good laugh, that sort of thing, have a drink if you drink'. However, she cautioned that: 'we're not really

looking at the stress levels that women are handling on a day-to-day level in Sierra Leone in a very deep way. We're all just trying to manage the situation on a day-to-day basis'.

For medica mondiale Kosova activists, structured peer group meetings provided a safe forum in which to provide support to each other. 'It also helped a lot the way that we organised work here in medica (mondiale Kosova), because in the psychosocial sector, we have more direct contact with the clients. Once a week we have a [peer group] meeting to discuss our cases and to support each other. That's very important. Because there were cases when our staff would come back from the field and they would be really broken ... emotionally and very tired. So that group meeting helped us really a lot to exchange experiences and to help each other'.

Through formal and informal networking, activists provided each other with practical information and skills to design and implement their projects. medica mondiale Kosova, for example, pointed out that it worked closely with a local safe house. 'We have good cooperation with the safe house here in Gjakove [Djakovica], because most clients that are not safe to go back to their violent families ... don't have a place to stay, so we refer them for a temporary period to the safe house until the situation is resolved'.

Activists stressed the importance of sharing information and skills with other women's groups. For instance, women's groups in Serbia often exchanged vital information on legal reform developments. According to Vera Kurtic and Ana Zorbic: 'We get information from other women's groups – about new laws for example. It is very important, because when you have information you can work. We don't get much support from mainstream, national human rights NGOs – the big, male, white ones'.

Support and training provided by women activists with similar experiences of conflict was particularly vital. In both Kosovo and Serbia, women activists spoke with deep respect about their colleagues at medica mondiale Zenica and medica mondiale in Germany: 'The women from Zenica [Bosnia] helped us a lot, especially in working

with women that have missing persons in their families – because they went through war like us. We are very thankful for the help that we got from women from Germany and from Zenica who trained us. They took care of us as well ... to prevent burn out’.

Lepa Mladjenovic in Serbia said that medica mondiale Zenica’s support was particularly useful in addressing new, violent contexts. ‘In the very beginning, we decided that we didn’t really know how people react to fear and what to do with fear, so we called a Bosnian group, medica (mondiale) Zenica. We asked them to tell us ten rules of what to do with fear. We put that on the information board and had it for ourselves and all the girls who were working on the phone. It was clear to us that there were others who had more experience during war ... So that was good to have this connection. That is also something very important – if you all of a sudden find yourself in some extraordinary fear or war situation ... there are some other regions who have already been in that situation and know very well what to do’.

Activists also mentioned some significant events that helped to further their interventions. For example, Radhika Coomaraswamy reported that one particularly good conference gave Sri Lankan women activists’ work on the peace process a much needed boost, at a time when several activists doubted that there would be any progress.<sup>67</sup> Zorica Mrsevic noted that: ‘When we were invited to conferences outside then we saw that we are not alone ... we observed many other women from other parts of the world who also had very similar problems in conflict situations, so we realised that what happened with us it is not something very strange or something very unique – or something we were guilty or responsible for, but this is just this internal power game, a conflict game, a gender relation game ... these stories were very similar to each other ... in Africa or in the Balkan regions, or in Central Asia. It provides us with this global feeling ... and also it provided us with optimism – we believed that things are changeable. There were moments when I thought nothing is changeable, everything will last thousands of years ... that this evil won’t stop ever – but when I was going outside, then I observed that everything is changeable ... maybe tomorrow would be completely

different. So you've always got this injection of optimism, of outside shared experiences with other women'.

### *Quality External Support*

Activists consistently pointed out that it is not the amount of funds made available for their work that matters most. Rather, it is the way that international actors relate to them and supply those funds, as well as the value of other resources and less tangible forms of support. Women activists expect to be part of a respectful, trusting partnership; they need rapid, accessible and flexible support.

Lepa Mladjenovic stressed that, when donors provide women activists with resources, they are also sending an important message that they value and respect their work. 'It was good for us that UAF was sending us money by its own decision, that they were supporting us – and we were not alone. Because you always have this isolation. That someone is caring about you, and respecting your work, that is also very important and encouraging'.

Women activists noted that, while some international agencies were committed to encouraging women's activism as part of their long-term organisational strategy, it was largely individuals within these bodies who helped or hindered their work. Visaka Dharmadasa, for example, pointed to the importance of cultural sensitivity and accessibility in Sri Lanka. 'In organizations ... when women had all the decision-making powers, like in this USAID office in Colombo headed by Carol Baker, you walked into that office and you could see the difference. When women are in key positions you see this difference – they make the atmosphere different for a person to come in. They may offer you a cup of tea as well, they will as a woman. You can't ask men to do that, because they're not ... brought up ... to act in that way. A woman will offer you a cup of tea, and they will offer it in a sense that they will even physically get the cup close to you. But from a man the cup will be there, and they will say please

help yourself, but it won't happen like that with the women. So they may be very small things – but this makes a difference'.

Sonja Lokar echoed this point, stating that in the Balkans, 'The biggest actors, those who are organising everything from the top down in war situations – they are not gender sensitive – but you can see that [the] OSCE started to develop gender equality activities. But so much depends on the quality of the people sent in – if you have gender blind people, you have nothing. If you look at Bosnia, when Elisabeth Rasmusson and the US Ambassador Robert Barry were there, they worked miracles but when they left, it was step by step degraded to nothing. Another example is Moldova, which has a very small OSCE mission but great, committed people. If we want something to change, we have to send in gender equality sensitive international officers who have really important positions, not just gender advisors – they must be in the right position – they must be deputies of the UNMIK or OSCE missions or even at the top. What if Mary Robinson was leading the UNMIK? Or Elisabeth Rehn – it would change everything. I'm not saying of course that all local people are angels, but they aren't given the opportunity to listen to them – they are always underestimated'.

Women activists working in crisis situations needed resources to be provided quickly, with minimal bureaucracy and maximum flexibility. Commenting on UAF's rapid system of grant-making, for instance, Radhika Coomaraswamy underscored the need to have this form of support available in addition to core funding. 'Emergencies are real emergencies, no? I mean by the time you go through the normal grant-making [process] you'll be dead a lot of the time – or the event passes by and the opportunity to make the women's committee passes by. So there's something about an emergency that is very important, it's very special to have that kind of fund'.

When Vjosa Dobruna crossed into Macedonia from Kosovo and set up her centre to support Kosovar women, she had only a mobile phone and her support network. It was at this point that the smaller, flexible donors, such as the Soros Foundation, provided key practical support.

‘There were many, many groups that tried to contact us, because I was part of different networks, but you know how the procedures are – they can’t be fast enough to help in an emergency situation. The UN agencies were hesitant – they had their own structure in Macedonia and they were very slow in activating for emergency purposes. So who supported us? The small organizations. I’m talking about Urgent Action Fund, Caritas ... Crabgrass ... They came and they gave us the first \$500 for a down payment on our building’.

Visaka Dharmadasa in Sri Lanka confirmed that, often, women activists simply cannot wait for resources to be dispatched before they can take advantage of pressing opportunities in crisis zones. ‘Some things have to be done urgently. And if you wait for a proposal, you write it, then if you have [to] wait another two months for the grant – then it’s very, very difficult. It can be no use and the time is passed and then the relevance of that particular work, the urgency, is no more. That’s why this grant from UAF has been very important – you started something, and it’s growing. To tell you very frankly at that very moment, if I didn’t get the UAF grant to support this project, there would have been a stall to the peace process. Though that particular bringing together didn’t solve [the women’s] main problem of knowing what has happened to their children ... at least they knew the problem is common to both sides ... one day these mothers have to come to terms with the reality and work towards peace and living together. So that is why it was extremely important ... if I didn’t get the Urgent Action Fund grant, I wouldn’t have been able to plan that trip, to show to the other segments of society that we as mothers, we stand united ... It gave me a lot of credibility to bring these two groups together’.

Only a relatively small amount of money is required to support women activists at key moments. Without it, even major efforts can fail.

The SGI, for instance, plays a critical role in the Sri Lankan peace process. One Sri Lankan analyst explained: ‘If the [SGI] is allowed to function freely, and if its recommendations are incorporated into the

peace process, Sri Lanka will have pioneered a significantly different and relevant approach to resolving conflict and crafting peace'.<sup>68</sup>

Similarly, the SP GTF has achieved remarkable success in empowering women throughout the Balkans.

In both cases, however, these important initiatives have come perilously close to failing due to lack of external commitment and support, and a shortage of basic operational funds.

For example, as election campaigns were getting underway in the Balkans in 2000, funding for the implementation of the SP GTF action plan was still not available. At this stage, the absence of operational basics such as a computer, cell phone and support staff, threatened to halt work. The Task Force Coordinator, Sonja Lokar, appealed to UAF for a grant to purchase a computer and a cell phone and to hire a part-time assistant. The 'grant was crucial in the first steps of development of the SP GTF when no other funds for the logistics and manpower were available'. With a computer, a phone and a project manager, the SP GTF was able to put together its project plans and budget which, in turn, enabled it to secure funding from several donor countries.

### **Creating Security in the Balkans: The Budapest Base**

With violence and instability prevalent throughout the Former Yugoslavia, women activists continued to organise and communicate across borders. Two international women activists, Laurence Hovde, founder of Women at Work, and another activist working with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), provided women from the region with support and offered them use of the AFSC office in Budapest, Hungary. The office served as a safe place to stay and as a place to meet with other activists. Budapest was the one destination for which women from all over the Former Yugoslavia



could obtain a visa. Given Serbia's shattered economy, it was also the one place where Serbian activists could bank and buy supplies.

When the AFSC was no longer able to provide the space, the women decided to rent an apartment of their own. In June 2000, the group rented an inexpensive, centrally located apartment, which they named the 'Feminist Budapest Base'. The Urgent Action Fund provided them with a grant to rent the apartment for six months while they raised funds from other sources.

The Feminist Budapest Base gave activists a safe place to rest, as well as a safe place to conduct specific organisational work. *'The warm feminist exchanges that take place in our Budapest "base" have nurtured and inspired many women. Having a base in Budapest was an essential link as feminist activists organized across borders'.*

Lepa Mladjenovic said that the Budapest Base offered invaluable practical and emotional support to women activists for two years, and was particularly important during the NATO bombing campaign. *'The Budapest Base ... was such a safe haven. It was really so clever – whoever was dying of fear, you could send her there. It would have been totally different if we didn't have that place'.*

– Interview with Lepa Mladjenovic; and Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, *'Grant Descriptions and Reports'*  
September 1997 to December 2002

### *Recognition and Relations with State Institutions*

Radhika Coomaraswamy pointed out that being an internationally known activist (she was previously the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women), combined with the social status that she holds in Sri Lanka, shielded her from the kinds of threats that less familiar activists face. 'I have a class impunity that attaches to all of us of the upper classes, where we're allowed to get away with

much more than people from another class in Sri Lanka. I know how this works because once I had to go in a three-wheeler to court and we came across a checkpoint. The way I was treated then and the way I am treated when I drive my Honda Civic to a checkpoint is dramatic, a total difference. I think people who are from classes in which they don't enjoy that kind of privilege, can probably express it better to you. In a way, I have done practically everything I want to do. But I know that's so linked to my class position and that, say, a Tamil woman from a lower class would have a totally different sense of security than me ... first the knock on the doors at midnight, maybe even taken in her nightdress for a round-up, worried about her children. All the fears which I don't have'.

Further, activists noted that following a cessation of hostilities, the re-establishment of relations with state institutions such as social welfare departments, the courts and the police, can generate significant support for their work.

Relationships between police forces and women activists prior to and during conflicts in all three study areas were difficult. At best, police units were feared and kept at a distance. At worst, relations were extremely adversarial. In the most extreme cases, such as in Kosovo and Sri Lanka, members of the police forces implemented aggressive state policies and perpetrated violence against women activists, including rape and torture.

Despite these very serious issues, however, activists in all three study regions recognised that after a cessation of hostilities, police forces could *potentially* be an important source of support for their work, particularly in addressing violence. For example, medica mondiale Kosova activists reported that although they had enjoyed variable success in working with international police officers in Kosovo, they have developed a productive relationship with local police to combat violence against women. 'Now we have good cooperation with the community police, with the two women in charge for domestic violence. They come here quite often, and we call them when we

have campaigns and round-tables to speak about sexual violence. It's good that they are in charge to report cases of sexual violence or domestic violence – when they have a case to refer, the first thing that comes to their mind is *medica (mondiale)*'. Pearl Stephens also reported that, in some parts of Sri Lanka, the relationship between the police and women activists is slowly improving, partly due to the formation of community-based advisor committees that work together with police forces in the central province. Similarly, several women activists in Sierra Leone said that the formation of Family Support Units (FSUs) – led by Kadie Fakondo – within the national police force was a significant step forward in addressing violence against women and girls.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Established and experienced women's rights activists are engaged in every armed conflict. At the same time, other women and girls, of all ages and from all social backgrounds, begin to respond. After the fighting comes to a nominal end, women activists expand their range of actions, demanding critical political, legal and economic reforms, as well as combating the rise in violence.

These are the times when women activists, old and new, are often far too busy with the tasks at hand to seek out external recognition and support. Those who do ask for help may not be heard. In other instances, the assistance they are offered is, at times, too bureaucratic, slow or inflexible to be of use in such rapidly changing contexts.

It is our responsibility, as international actors responding to conflict, to reach out proactively to these activists and to strengthen their capacity to conduct their critical work in safety. This means working in partnership with them, providing rapid assistance and accessible and practical resources and tools.

The recommendations below draw attention to some such resources, tools and approaches. They are derived from an analysis of the experiences and opinions of activists in three areas of conflict, reaffirmed by happenings in other parts of the world.

The overriding theme of this study is the safety and security of women activists. All of the recommendations have been written with this in mind.

Finally, every conflict context is unique. *Women activists in each area of conflict should thus be given the opportunity to speak for themselves, to articulate their own priorities.*

It is hoped that this study, including its recommendations, will stimulate a constructive dialogue between activists and international actors that, ultimately, will improve the way in which we respond to conflict ... together.

### ***Develop New Strategies to Work Together with Women Activists***

#### **Ensure Access to Conflict Intervention Decision-Making Processes**

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) clearly calls for change in the way that international actors respond to conflict, in order to ensure that women and girls are protected and supported and that they are engaged in decision-making vis-à-vis conflict resolution and peace processes.<sup>69</sup> However, the key recommendations contained in this resolution will remain hollow until international agencies responding to conflicts establish practical mechanisms to ensure that women activists are consistently and actively engaged in decision-making processes, shaping the international response *throughout all phases of the conflict and at all levels of response.*

To make this a reality, we must challenge and reform the existing international response design and implementation processes to ensure that conflict response interventions are grounded in the realities of women and girls. From the outset, therefore, international actors must engage local women activists on a partnership basis. Specifically, women activists should participate in needs assessment processes, and they

should be involved throughout the response, to inform international agencies of the real concerns and priorities of women, girls, and the other people they work with.<sup>70</sup> Equally, they should work together with agency staff at the decision-making level to design appropriate solutions and strategies to address these concerns and priorities.

Finally, while women activists are often deeply involved in providing essential and specialised services during the acute phase of a conflict and immediately afterwards, these are often the times when international actors and governments are negotiating peace terms, including amnesty arrangements and transitional justice mechanisms, as well as making plans for an economic and political transition.

These processes must be transparent, accountable and inclusive. Women activists – and for that matter, conflict-affected populations – should have access to clear, accurate and timely information on planned mechanisms for conflict negotiations and transitional reform. Specific monies should be allocated to make sure that women activists and other civil society members can safely and constructively engage in negotiations, reform planning and implementation, covering the cost, for example, of secure transportation to attend meetings (locally and internationally), safe and appropriate accommodation, food, family care, and translation and interpretation services. It is also important that a ‘critical mass’ of women activists attend planning and negotiation meetings, both to guarantee their personal safety and to enjoy strength in numbers. Finally, in the longer term, women activists should be offered consistent, quality access to education and to training in security and foreign policy negotiation processes.

### **Ensure Consistently Available and Accessible Resources**

While support should be provided at all stages of a conflict, it is at the nominal end of the conflict that women activists face some of their greatest challenges. This is when they are once again shifting their strategies and expanding their work to address both increasing levels of violence and economic, political and legal reform requirements. It is also the point at which there is high potential for burn out.

*‘For the people in power, whoever they are, if they are coming with some knowledge and money, it is important for them to be responsible.*

*‘There are people who are now talking about responsible donorship – there are so many responsibilities. To have some money is a responsibility per se, and to decide what to do with that is also a responsibility.*

*‘So it is a chain of responsibilities’.*

**– Slavica Stojanovic, Serbia**

At this critical juncture, however, international attention often wanes and larger donors typically ‘mainstream’ funding, abandoning civil society groups, including women activists, by channelling monies directly to the government under a bilateral arrangement. As a result, many women activists are forced to expend increasing amounts of energy seeking support for their interventions, rather than continuing to fulfil their current tasks and develop new strategies. In volatile contexts, this significantly limits the ability of women’s rights activists to prepare to respond to another wave of violence.

If international agencies withdraw their support for dedicated, independent civil society groups too soon, via mainstreaming for instance, they will likely harm the very civil society that they encouraged at the height of the violence.

It is vital that international agencies ensure that consistent support is offered to women activists throughout all phases of a conflict, particularly after a cessation of hostilities, by maintaining a strong commitment to tackling increasing levels of violence and by addressing the challenges associated with transition processes and ending practices like mainstreaming.

Such support must also be much more accessible. First, women activists require much clearer information on the support available from international actors in a time of crisis, both who they are and how to contact them. In addition, application criteria should be much more broadly disseminated, including written guidance in appropriate languages. Other means should also be utilised for those women who are not literate, such as radio announcements.

Second, funding processes should be streamlined, making application and grant dispersal procedures easier and faster.<sup>71</sup> This could involve increasing the number of funding cycles, or establishing rolling grant application processes, rather than fixed funding cycles. Grants should be provided with more flexibility, to allow women activists to respond to shifting conflict contexts. Money should be made available to cover operational costs, as opposed to just project-specific funds, and long-term backing should be offered (three or six month grants are often not enough).

### **Strengthen Relationships between Women Activists and International Actors**

In order to engage with international actors, women activists are forced to travel, often long distances. This requires that they are away from their families – most women activists are responsible for children or older family members. Many do not have a ‘salary’ but earn money, for example, by selling crops or other goods that they or other family members have produced. While away from the home they are incurring costs.

International agencies, including donors, should offer practical support to women activists to enable them to participate in key meetings and conferences by covering, for instance, the costs of safe transport and accommodation, including escorts and care for children or older family members. Options that might be considered include those listed below.



- Where possible, try to hold meetings and conferences in rural areas, rather than in urban centres.
- At larger meetings and conferences, organise free care facilities for children and older family members.
- Offer women activists either a stipend to cover the cost of extra care, or provide support to allow more people to travel.
- Recognise the additional requirements of women activists with disabilities. This may also entail paying for escorts.

Finally, marginalised women activists have extremely limited access to external support. International agencies, including donors, should engage in outreach to understand the strategies and priorities of marginalised women activists – in order to identify ways to work with them more directly.

### **Strengthen the Capacity of Women Activists to Engage in Humanitarian Activities**

Women's rights activists are simultaneously addressing a range of complex issues and may be shifting their interventions and responses as situations change.<sup>72</sup> Often, they are unfamiliar with working in crises that involve population movements, particularly in camp environments. However, because they are overlooked as key actors within the conflict response, they are rarely given access to the tools and training necessary to provide essential services and support.

To close this gap, international agencies should offer women activists training in humanitarian action, particularly with regard to standards and codes of conduct, forced migration (working with IDPs and refugees), the provision of mental health support services (especially prevention of suicide and self-harm), working with particular groups such as children, older people and the disabled, and unexploded ordnance/landmine awareness.

## ***Address Women Activists' Operational Constraints***

Women activists confront basic operational constraints in their daily work that can limit their capacity and expose them to significant, but preventable, security risks. Such constraints should be recognised and addressed by providing consistent support that ensures freedom of movement and the ability to communicate and work in safety. Some options for international agency support are listed below.

### **Communication and information systems**

- Provide support to cover the cost of fixed equipment and the running costs of appropriate communication and information systems, such as mobile and satellite phones, VHF radios and computers, including back-up systems.
- Provide training in the use of information technology, with a particular emphasis on information security.
- Establish permanent or mobile women's information centres that offer access to internet services, particularly in rural areas.
- Provide support to cover the cost of translation and interpreting, allowing women activists to interact with one another and with international actors.

### **Freedom of movement**

- Provide funds to purchase vehicles or to rent safe transport and hire drivers and/or escorts.<sup>73</sup>
- Offer support to women activists to allow them to obtain the documents needed to travel inside and outside of conflict zones, including identity papers and visas.<sup>74</sup>
- Improve coordination between women activists by providing support to cover the costs of meetings and by assisting with the sharing of information.<sup>75</sup>

### **Permanent work spaces**

- Supply funds so that women activists can purchase safe work space outright.<sup>76</sup>

- If the above is inappropriate, as may be the case during a refugee crisis, provide ongoing assistance to cover rent and other related expenses, such as utilities.
- Offer additional support to increase safety levels within these spaces; for example, monies to cover alarm systems and perimeter fencing.

### *Sustain Activism*

During the interviews, women activists rarely spoke of their own need for rest and respite. Instead, they were most concerned with the well-being of the women and children they worked with, their colleagues and their families. Hence, it is unlikely that a woman activist would seek assistance to meet her own physical or emotional requirements. By suppressing their own needs at times of great stress, both during and after a conflict, women activists can significantly diminish their capacity to sustain their work and can endanger their health.

It is critical that international actors recognise that women activists tend to minimise or ignore the cumulative effects of stress and exposure to violence, and offer them opportunities to rest and to refresh their professional skills, as well as to recover physically and mentally. Some options are included in the list below.

- Ensure ongoing general support for activists. This may take the form of emergency regional conferences, debriefing breaks, individual assistance, training, and access to scholarship and sabbatical opportunities.
- Provide culturally appropriate mental health services and access to emergency healthcare for activists who have endured a high level of exposure to violence, either through working with survivors of violence or because they have survived violence themselves.
- Offer support to cover the emergency medical expenses of women activists who were forced to flee their homes.

- Provide the capacity and space (as well as encouragement) to allow activists to reflect on, and to write about, their experiences. This will add to a vital, but currently limited, body of work on the conflict experiences of women's rights activists.<sup>77</sup>

### **Recognition and Respite: The Irish Government Leads the Way**

A recent success in terms of gaining significant government recognition of, and support for, the work of human rights activists came at a Front Line Conference in Dublin, Republic of Ireland.

*'Ireland's Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Michael McDowell, announced to the conference that, at Front Line's request, the Irish Government will establish a system to provide entry to human rights defenders who need immediate protection. The aim is that this will also provide appropriate financial and other support while they remain in Ireland. In addition, the Irish Government has promised that measures to support and protect human rights defenders will be a priority while it holds the Presidency of the European Union during the first six months of 2004.'*

*'This is a very good example of practical co-operation between human rights defenders organisations and government. The creation of respite arrangements of this sort will address a problem that faces many human rights defenders and their families around the world. It also provides tangible evidence of the commitment of governments to the human rights defenders' Declaration. It is to be hoped that other governments will follow Ireland's lead on this issue'.*

**– Front Line, 'Steps to Protection: The Second Dublin Platform for Human Rights Defenders', 10–12 September 2003.**

Available online at <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/publications/71>

## *Enhance the Security of Women Activists*

### **Establish an Independent Security Audit System in Conflict Zones**

If international military and police forces deployed as part of a peace support operation are to fulfil their mandate of ensuring the protection of the population in an area of conflict, they must engage constructively with women's rights activists, particularly in preventing violence against women and girls. However, there are significant barriers to such engagement that must be addressed at the highest level of decision-making.

External security forces that perpetrate violence against women and girls are committing major human rights violations. If the governments responsible for deploying these forces to a country in crisis – ostensibly to protect the rights of people within that state – consistently fail to address these abuses, *then their intervention will have failed.*

Despite increased awareness of, and concern about, the behaviour of peacekeepers in areas of conflict – sparked partly by the February 2002 publication of the findings of an assessment of West Africa by Save the Children UK and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)<sup>78</sup> – as of 2004, behaviour on the ground remains unchanged.<sup>79</sup> It seems that current codes of conduct are failing to prevent violence by peacekeepers against women and girls, and that they do not guarantee any justice for the victims and survivors, as Amnesty International's recent report on trafficked women and girls in Kosovo confirms.<sup>80</sup> Perpetrators are typically repatriated to their home countries with no follow-up.

To address this inaction, an independent monitoring system should be established that allows security audits to be carried out in crisis and conflict situations, so as to review the relationship between women's rights activists and peacekeeping forces. These audits should strengthen the recommendations of the Independent Experts (see box) and UN Security Council Resolution 1325. They should be published and formally presented to the UN Security Council.

The Independent Experts' Assessment of the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Women's Role in Peace-building' called for the following.

- *The improvement and strengthening of codes of conduct for international and local humanitarian and peacekeeping personnel and for these codes to be consistent with international humanitarian and human rights law and their application to be made compulsory. An office of oversight for crimes against women should be established in all peace operations. The office should regularly monitor and report on compliance with the principles set forth by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Task Force on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Humanitarian Crises.*
- *No exemptions for peacekeepers from prosecution by international tribunals, the International Criminal Court and national courts in the host country for all crimes committed, including those against women. All states maintaining peacekeeping forces should take necessary measures to bring to justice their own nationals responsible for such crimes, as called for in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1400 (2002).*

– Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen J. Sirleaf, *Women, War and Peace: The Independent Experts' Assessment on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Women's Role in Peace-building*, (New York: United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), 2002)

In particular, such audits should assess:<sup>81</sup>

- the extent to which protection mandates included in UN Security Council resolutions are understood and integrated into peacekeeping forces' rules of engagement, both at the command level and in the field;
- the effectiveness of peacekeeping forces' protection mandates and human rights functions;
- the conduct of peacekeeping forces in areas of conflict, with an emphasis on violence against women and girls;<sup>82</sup>
- the feasibility of establishing mechanisms for ensuring appropriate relationships between women activists and peacekeeping forces as an integral part of the deployment process; and
- the feasibility of establishing an independent body to receive, document and investigate complaints about violence against women during and after conflicts, including violence committed by members of peacekeeping forces, state armed actors and international agencies.

### **Establish Regional Safe Houses**

The 'Budapest Base' safe house was an innovative, practical and successful initiative to support women's rights activists working in the Balkans. In consultation with women activists in conflict-affected countries, this model could be replicated, for example, in Ghana for Ivorian, Guinean, Liberian and Sierra Leonean activists.

Safe spaces provide activists with the opportunity to: address practical operational, logistical and administrative issues; meet to discuss strategic planning and response; and rest and recharge. In addition, such spaces offer the chance to assess extremely sensitive or 'silent' issues that cannot be examined within the conflict-affected country, such as trafficking or honour killings.<sup>83</sup>

### **Provide Options for the Protection of Women Activists**

Isolation and lack of recognition have constituted two of the most significant threats to the individual safety of women activists.

International actors should work to ensure the existence of a safety 'network' for women activists globally by maintaining contact with and support for activists during all stages of a conflict. Particular attention should be paid to providing support to women activists working in 'silent emergencies' when conflicts, for various reasons, are hidden from public view. This is most often the case when government officials contest that a situation of violence should be formally recognised as an 'armed conflict', for example, such as in the North Caucasus (Chechnya and Ingushetia).

In certain circumstances, international actors should assess the appropriateness of working with activists to raise their profiles nationally and internationally – particularly those of marginalised activists. Depending on the context, such contact can serve to heighten public awareness and to increase recognition of women's rights activism.<sup>84</sup>

In other instances, support should remain inconspicuous and confidential, providing women activists with the option to protect themselves in whatever way they see fit, ranging from increasing their own security to seeking safety within their own country or abroad.

### **Develop Security Guidelines that Reflect the Realities of Women Activists**

Existing security guidelines do not appropriately address the realities of women activists. International agencies, together with women activists in the field, should work together to review these guidelines in order to develop context-specific security resources and guidance specifically for women's rights activists working in crisis zones (in the form of handbooks and training packages). Such resources and guidance should cover: general security issues; emergency protection options (including evacuation procedures and legal recourse<sup>85</sup>); crisis and stress management; and information and asset security (including cash and documents<sup>86</sup>).



### **Provide Emergency Preparedness and Evacuation Packs**

When activists are forced to flee their homes and/or offices they rarely have the opportunity to take with them vital supplies, cash, documents or modes of communication. This leaves them exposed to significant danger while they are on the run, and with little to restart their lives and work once they reach safety. The documents and information left in their homes or offices may be stolen or destroyed.

International agencies should help women activists to prepare for such emergencies by offering resources to design and prepare emergency and evacuation safety packs. Some could be held for activists externally, such as in a regional safe house, or in-country.

Packages could incorporate, for example, copies of identity documents (for activists and family members), important personal items like diaries and photos, communication systems, such as mobile or satellite phones, electronic or hard-copy back-ups of key work documents, and emergency contact lists. Contingent on the context, they may also include basic medication, such as anti-malaria tablets.

In-country, individual activists or groups could design and maintain internal 'evacuation' packages, containing evacuation and protection procedures; emergency contact lists, including groups and donors that provide emergency support; a list of legal rights pertaining to their activism; memory sticks; small cameras; and good back-up systems in case communications fail.<sup>87</sup> Activists should also be encouraged to keep an evacuation bag at the ready.

### *Improve Mechanisms to Address and Prevent Violence*

#### **Shift the International Violence Response**

Violence against women and girls is at its peak following a cessation of hostilities. While some international agencies and most women activists in the field recognise this and are struggling with limited

resources to tackle the problem, for the most part, ongoing violence is now seen as 'normal' and, therefore, is not considered to be a post-conflict reconstruction priority.

Until international agencies work together with women activists, and governments, to address and prevent further structural violence in countries in transition, they will be failing the people they have come to assist.

The international community must send clear messages that violence against women – in any form – is unacceptable. A critical first step is to implement a policy of zero tolerance with respect to all forms of violence, including exploitation, committed by international actors involved in conflict response. Codes of conduct and policy papers alone are not enough. Mechanisms must be created to allow complaints about human rights violations to be registered safely and to enable a rapid, transparent prosecution.

Next, multi-sectoral programmes to address violence must be recognised, prioritised and financially supported as a critical part of conflict response.<sup>88</sup> Such programmes, covering reproductive health, legal and psychosocial protection, and reintegration, are vital to saving lives and to alleviating suffering – equal to other essential services, including food, water and shelter. Early on in conflict response, international actors should work with women activists to ensure that such programmes are founded on coordination and collaboration.<sup>89</sup>

Finally, real, effective forms of intervention to protect women and girls from violence – and to prevent future violence – must be prioritised.

In particular, international actors must recognise that many women and children who survive violence during all phases of a conflict require safe shelter to protect them from further harm. Such shelter must be supported financially.

Within the judicial system, international actors must prioritise and support the immediate reform of discriminatory laws on various forms of violence. They must also encourage and back precedent-setting cases that will strengthen this legal reform.

International actors must also ensure implementation of new laws through immediate investment in the development of the capacity of state institutions, as part of the post-conflict reform process, to provide access to justice and support for survivors of violence. Such institutions include ministries of social services, hospitals, the police and the courts.

International resources seem to be targeted disproportionately towards supporting 'soft' interventions, which typically place the burden of violence prevention on women and girls, such as raising awareness of how to avoid human traffickers, rather than on 'hard' interventions, which involve identifying and prosecuting perpetrators, including criminal gangs. Several activists also pointed out that men and boys are not adequately engaged as partners in violence prevention.

This compounds the difficulties associated with addressing violence in general and 'silent issues' in particular, such as sex trafficking or 'traditional' forms of violence within families and communities (including battery, rape and abuse) or practices like female genital mutilation and forced marriages.

International actors should liaise with activists on appropriate ways to strengthen the response to 'silent issues' and alter the perception of violence as a 'private matter' or a 'woman's issue'. This may entail having confidential discussions with women activists, probably outside of their country of origin, to design joint interventions that are appropriate, safe and effective. International actors and women activists should also identify ways to ensure that men and boys are engaged in and committed to processes to tackle and prevent

violence – by ensuring, for example, that DDR programmes address the violence committed by ex-combatants in the past, and potentially in the future.<sup>90</sup>

### **Strengthen Relationships between State Police Forces and Women's Rights Activists**

Women activists pointed out that they considered constructive relationships with law enforcement agencies, especially state police forces, to be vital to their work to combat violence. However, these potentially key alliances remain fragile, and state police forces are often in need of significant reform. There are a range of problems, including police corruption and collusion with organised crime, particularly in the trafficking of women and girls.

Women working within state police forces also confront the threat of violence from within their own ranks.<sup>91</sup> They also risk backlash from within the broader community. Jeanette Eno noted that, while the creation of Family Support Units is a key sign of progress in addressing violence against women in Sierra Leone, the local community believes that the FSUs are trying to break up families. 'For example, both at an institutional level and at a societal level, [and] at a traditional level, there has been work done, for example within the police – so there has been a lot of awareness-raising around issues like violence against women and women's rights, how these can be protected. They have even established the Family Support Units within the police structure. But of course the sort of awareness-raising on the societal side has not caught up with the institutional. Using the police as an example, you find there's a lot of backlash against people working in the FSUs. Because they're regarded as this unit, this institution, that's set up to break up families and promote divorce ... encouraging women to challenge their husbands'.<sup>92</sup>

In order to strengthen these relationships, international actors engaged in security sector reform should pay heed to the following recommendations.

- Further assess some of the success stories told by women activists, such as their relations with the FSUs in Sierra Leone and the police advisory committees in Sri Lanka, in order to identify ways to improve and strengthen women activists' relations with state police forces in transitional contexts.
- Proposals that stem from such assessments should be incorporated into international security sector reform strategies for countries in transition.
- Increase support for women who have a security role, such as policewomen – who may also need security training and special protection.

### **Ensure International Justice Mechanisms and Human Rights Monitoring Processes do No Harm**

Research and reporting on, and the documentation of, human rights violations are critical elements of women's activism. However, the process of gathering stories through interviews and direct testimony can also *compound the hurt* that such processes are meant to help alleviate, particularly if it occurs in the absence of critical referral systems and a respectful feedback process.<sup>93</sup>

The investigations of the TRC in Sierra Leone, for example, seemed to be shaped and conducted with little consideration of systems of follow-up, as well as of the support required during and after the process.<sup>94</sup>

International conflict and transitional justice mechanisms, including the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the TRC in Sierra Leone, and the Sierra Leone Special Court, are important elements of an international legal system that is vital to upholding and strengthening women's rights throughout the world.

However, these relatively costly mechanisms must be grounded in the daily realities and priorities of the very people they are meant to protect. International investment in these mechanisms must not detract from the provision of critical support to women and girls

who have survived past and *ongoing violence* without access to basic healthcare services, as well as to those who have courageously sought justice through overloaded national court systems, wasting precious time, emotional energy and financial resources.<sup>95</sup>

Before documenting cases of violence, researchers must be sure that the purpose of the exercise (to ensure future prosecution or to gain information for use in an advocacy campaign) is clear and understood. Furthermore, the process must have the backing of those who are taking part in it.

The collaborative International Initiative on Justice in Gujarat (IIJ) offers an excellent example of a human rights documentation process initiated by and for women (see box below).

**Seeking Justice through Solidarity:  
The International Initiative on Justice in Gujarat**

In February and March 2002, organised, brutal attacks were unleashed on Muslim communities throughout the Indian state of Gujarat. The assaults resulted in an estimated 2,000 people either being killed or vanishing and over 100,000 being forced to flee their land and homes. Despite this exceptional level of violence – and the specific use of sexual violence against women and girls – the international community remained largely silent and the UN failed to condemn the attacks as a clear violation of international human rights. Only one of the fact-finding reports that came out immediately after the pogrom focused specifically on women.

Hence, later in 2002, women's groups in India decided to develop a response strategy to end this silence and to seek justice for the survivors. They set up an extraordinary collective feminist movement known as the International Initiative on Justice in Gujarat. A panel of jurists, activists, lawyers, writers and academics from all over the world came together to work alongside Indian feminists to draw international attention to the impact of the violence on the lives of ordinary Muslim citizens of Gujarat.

The specific mandate of the IJJ Panel included an investigation of the violence – physical and sexual – suffered by women since 27 February 2002 and an analysis of the use of sexual violence in conflict situations.

What it found during its visit to Gujarat in December 2002 was shocking, even to seasoned women's rights activists. The scale and brutality of the sexual violence seemed unprecedented; the process of taking individual testimonies took its toll on both the activists and the survivors. Yet without such testimony, the unremitting silence would have continued. As the panellists explained in their subsequent report: *'The search for justice and the desire to let the voices of the survivors be heard was the one factor that united all the panelists in their work ... the IJJ is a tribute to the spirit and the strength of all the people, especially the women – survivors, activists, feminists – often in the same person, who were not silenced despite all the pain, the hardships and the despair. The courage of the women who spoke to us, who traveled to meet the panelists in the grim month of December 2002, when many had left their villages yet again because of fear of violence during the elections, is the starting point and the impetus for this process. That they spoke to us knowing that we may not be able to contribute anything tangible to their lives, reaffirmed our knowledge that justice is perhaps the most tangible of all things. And it is towards achieving the justice that they desire, the basic rights of citizenship in their homeland, and a democracy that will provide security to all [that this initiative is aimed]'*.

This report has since been published and is being used as a critical advocacy tool to seek justice for the people of Gujarat.

– Adapted from: **International Initiative for Justice in Gujarat**,  
*'Threatened Existence: A Feminist Analysis of the  
Genocide in Gujarat'*, IJJ, December 2003.

Available online at: <http://www.onlinevolunteers.org/gujarat/reports/iiig/2003/>

Finally, to the maximum extent possible, a clear and capable referral system should be put in place to support the survivors of the violence who are providing testimony. Such a system should offer: access to witness protection schemes; information on access to justice and reparation, legal aid and safe houses; trauma counselling; surgery for violence-related injuries, such as vesico-vaginal fistula (VVF), recto-vaginal fistula (RVF) and a prolapsed uterus; treatment for sexually transmitted diseases; reproductive healthcare; assistance for children conceived through rape; and help with reintegrating into home communities or finding refuge in a safe country.

However, it is also important to recognise that much of the violence in conflict and crisis zones goes unacknowledged by the international community, either because it is deliberately hidden (often when states are complicit in it) or because it is considered ‘normal’ and a private matter (when the perpetrators are community or family members).

In such instances, it is only when women’s rights activists have investigated and documented the abuse that they are able to draw public attention to it.

It is particularly important, therefore, that international actors support women activists by providing the resources needed to implement such processes, as well as to create the mechanisms required to establish and maintain critical services for survivors of violence.<sup>96</sup>

### **Strengthen the Mental Health Aspects of Violence Response<sup>97</sup>**

It was not until the mid-to-late 1990s that mental health and psychosocial interventions were recognised as important elements of international emergency response.<sup>98</sup> Since then, counselling, particularly for survivors of sexual violence, has become an increasingly common form of intervention in active and post-conflict contexts.

The provision of counselling services, however, remains largely unregulated. While it may be necessary and appropriate for untrained activists to provide immediate ‘triage’ support services to survivors of



violence in the midst of an acute emergency, in the long term many of these women and girls will require access to trained professionals.<sup>99</sup>

Well-intentioned but untrained ‘counsellors’ can inadvertently re-traumatise women and girls. Equally, because they do not have appropriate support systems and the training to recognise and address secondary trauma, women acting as care providers in such situations are at high risk of burn out.

In order to provide better support to survivors of violence in conflict zones, international actors should consider establishing minimum standards and codes of conduct for counselling work in conflict and post-conflict environments and increasing support for the training of those women activists who are providing care to survivors of violence, both immediately and in the longer term.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that researchers be prepared to respond appropriately to women who may need additional assistance during or following an interview about their experience of violence. Prior to conducting their work, researchers should:

- meet with potential providers of support, which may include existing health, legal and social services and educational providers in the community, as well as less formal providers of support, including community representatives, religious leaders, traditional healers and women's organisations;
- hold discussions with potential providers of support to identify the forms of support that each is able to offer and to reach an agreement with these providers to assist anyone who is referred; and
- develop a list of resources and offer this to all respondents, irrespective of whether they have disclosed whether or not they have experienced violence. The resource list should either be small enough to be hidden or include a range of other services so as not to alert a potential perpetrator to the nature of the information supplied.

In situations where few resources exist, it may be necessary for a trained counsellor or women's advocate to accompany the interview teams and to provide support on an 'as needed' basis. Generally, this can involve alerting participants that a staff person trained in counselling in women's and/or violence issues will be available to meet with anyone who wants at a set time and in a particular place. Preferably this location should be a health centre, church or office of a local organisation where women can easily go without arousing suspicion.

– Adapted from World Health Organization, *'Putting Women First: Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Research on Domestic Violence Against Women'*, (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2001)



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# Annex

## Further Recommendations

*Several other themes and issues arose during the course of this study that warrant further investigation and research. They are outlined below.*

### **Acknowledge and Address ‘Hidden’ Violence in Conflicts**

Violence committed against certain groups can often be overlooked because it is ‘taboo’ or because of prevailing myths that sexual violence is about sexual desire, as opposed to power. For example, sexual violence against men and boys during and after a conflict remains deeply hidden and has not been tackled.

Violence against older women is another example. Women activists interviewed in Sierra Leone, for instance, expressed some concern that the rights and priorities of older women in the country have been neglected. This concern was echoed in a December 2003 discussion meeting with Sierra Leonean women’s NGOs and community-based organisations on recommendations to be included in the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.<sup>100</sup> Taboos concerning the sexuality of older women may have contributed to the silence in Sierra Leone. Barbara Bangura suggested that: ‘In terms of older women who were raped, if there isn’t much about them, I suppose it’s because it’s taboo – more than for younger women, or even a child. You liken it to a child – because these women have stopped having sex. So it’s unheard of, and we don’t talk about the fact that this woman who has not had sex for ten years was violated’.

While some women activists do attempt to address such hidden violence, they face significant barriers due to a lack of interest in and support for this type of work. Until this kind of violence is acknowledged, survivors will remain largely unsupported.

Some steps to take to address the gaps in knowledge on violence against older women and men and boys in conflict situations are set out below.

- Acquire an understanding of the extent of these forms of sexual violence and appropriate support responses. This should involve, for example, a review of current violence statistics in an area of conflict, disaggregated according to such factors as age and gender, so as to determine to what degree survivors are reporting violence and seeking justice. Bearing in mind the extreme sensitivity and the emotional and cultural barriers that surround these issues, it is highly recommended that, as a first step, experienced gender-based violence specialists join together with other rights activists, including older women activists in rural areas and male human rights activists, to discuss suitable approaches.<sup>101</sup>
- Women activists and other members of the human rights and humanitarian communities should be provided with training and materials to help them understand the plight of older women in conflict and post-conflict environments.<sup>102</sup>
- Globally, there is a significant lack of research on working with older women as well as with men and boys who have survived sexual violence in conflict settings. If, as seems likely, none is available, interested agencies should be offered support to conduct this research and to develop suitable, practical guidance for response.

### Recognising Violence against Older Women

Christiana Thorpe of FAWE noticed that, during her group's work with women and girls who had survived sexual violence in rural areas of Sierra Leone, middle-aged and older women did not speak out about their experiences, although observation suggested they had likely endured the same forms and levels of violence as had been inflicted on women and girls in all other age groups. As a result, FAWE is now shifting its attention to older women: *'Our concern is the above 45s – they did not come forward, and this is what we are working on now – the older women. Because from up to 2003, this younger generation has had assistance: medical, psychosocial, trauma, and they are healing. Now, when you go to the villages, [you can] tell those who have been raped ... it is still inside. So we try through our branches and through one-to-one [meetings] with the secret societies to get to this category of people, the elderly, from 50s to 70s. Because we can see they are really in trauma, they are no longer themselves in the villages. So it's a challenge for us, that is the area where we want to take it now, because we have seen that need'*.

### Research Links between Suicide and Violence in Conflicts

Women activists' work with survivors of violence saves lives, particularly in terms of preventing suicide.<sup>103</sup> However, although there is some anecdotal evidence to suggest a causal link between violence against women and children in conflict zones and subsequent cases of suicide, there seems to be a lack of research on this issue. As a result, it is likely that women activists have limited access to information on suicide prevention. Clearer evidence on the connection between violence and the risk of suicide in areas of conflict may further strengthen advocacy initiatives that seek to combat violence in these contexts.

### **Rethink Economic Reform**

In all three study regions, the conflicts and the subsequent economic transition processes have had an enormous impact on women's livelihoods. Many activists believe that, in order to allow women and girls to recover, their governments must ensure that economic reforms afford them equal access to employment, business opportunities and credit. In addition, key legal reforms must be introduced in respect to property, inheritance, alimony and pensions.

However, it seems that in many cases, there is a fundamental disconnect between macroeconomic reform processes and economic assistance programmes for women. As a result, the structural inequalities that exacerbate women's economic disempowerment have not yet been addressed in these regions.

Instead, during and after the conflicts, most economic interventions that have targeted women have centered on small income-generating projects, typically entailing training in home economics and the production of low-profit handicrafts. These types of activities can be suitable in certain circumstances, particularly when they are a culturally appropriate way of bringing women together in a safe space. As a means of significantly increasing women's income over the long term, however, they are rarely of value.

For some activists, such programmes are in stark contrast to other economic opportunities on offer, and a distraction from much larger structural economic issues. Flora Macula summed this up by pointing out that, after Kosovar refugees returned home in 1999, 'Men got houses. Women got sewing lessons'.

In some cases, micro-credit programmes have been introduced to encourage businesses to start up. Such programmes, though, normally require a high level of collateral and rapid repayment, which does not reflect the reality of most women in these regions, who do not own property. Without property, they have seldom, if ever, been able to amass enough capital to apply for this credit.

Anberiya Haniffa pointed out that, in Sri Lanka, ‘Women are involved in micro-enterprise, but many more women in Sri Lanka would like to start up their own business, but they are not provided with the right opportunity to do so. Instead, they are offered business training or micro enterprise development training and capital is not provided. The donors who fund these projects say: “Link poor women to the banks”. The position of the donor is that we can provide training but not finance. Therefore they must be linked to the existing financial institutions. But the existing financial institutions do not support women, as they lack collateral. You need to give them some financial capital after training.

‘For example, there were four Muslim women who had been trained in welding and wanted to have a welding workshop, (but the) banks will not support them; as they do not have collateral. So how can they get money from the bank? A charitable person intervened, as she felt that Muslim women should venture into new areas and gave them Rupees 25,000 on easy terms and requested them to commence repayment in installments after six months. Now they are doing well.

‘So you need capital, and banks need to take some risk. All of them don’t do well but some of them do well in life. But then we are not talking about big money now, we are talking about small monies, you see? The banks are reluctant to lend e.g. Rs 10,000 to a poor woman, but the rich had taken millions and had defaulted. I find that kind of thinking is a lopsided way of looking at it’.

Vjosa Dobruna noted that, in Kosovo, what money did go to women was for the provision of services, rather than to set up businesses. ‘Since the beginning, women received grants to do up NGOs, or to do grassroots work or to provide unpaid, pro-bono services for the population. But there was no funding to women to develop businesses or to develop income generating work – not anything substantial. You could only get micro-credit programmes with a raised income, so it wasn’t possible for women to have it – the interest was too high. And then you have to return that money in a period of one year or a year and a half? What kind of business can be that fast that will return

money in a year and a half? So it was impossible. Men were even getting *grants* – not credit, but grants – to develop mechanic shops, restaurants, to start things like that, by international agencies’.

Those women who have been able to amass enough collateral face further, often insurmountable, obstacles to accessing credit. If women are known to have enough collateral to access credit, then they could be the target of an attack or robbery. They can also be viewed as unwelcome competition for businesses that sometimes have connections with criminal gangs.

Finally, some women activists said that, because women have been excluded from macroeconomic planning processes, it was inevitable that planners would not take into account the very different economic realities of men and women, and thus would establish systems that further impoverish women. Flora Macula explained in relation to Kosovo: ‘Because of the economic situation and privatisation, women are nowhere – they are in danger to not have anything tomorrow ... and no one cares about how to really include this gender dimension in this now. The bottom line is that the institution that was developed to address privatisation, the Kosovo Trust Agency, never had anything to do with women. They disregarded women completely. There is not a single woman who participated, even in the administration of that structure. It is a boys’ club that deals with privatisation. They were not sensitive to even consult women on privatisation. In a devastated country they are taking a very near-liberal approach to privatisation ... this doesn’t address the needs of the population of Kosovo, especially it doesn’t address the needs of women in Kosovo’.

Tanja Ignjatovic echoed this point with regard to Serbia: ‘It is very interesting for me to see some expert team, very professional people – they have never heard about gender equality. So when you make an economic policy it’s not equal, but they don’t care that we don’t have equal starting possibilities. In free markets, we all run. Whoever is the best will win. But you don’t have those kinds of races where you have a child of five years, a sportsman of 30 and an old man of 70 competing in the same race. Even in sports there are different categories’.

Some recommendations for improving international economic assistance programmes in conflict areas are as follows:

- Instead of investing in income-generation programmes, the most appropriate way to strengthen women and girls' access to income in the short term (during the acute phase of a crisis and immediately after a cessation of hostilities) may be to provide direct support in the form of cash, vouchers or business grants.<sup>104</sup>
- While micro-credit programmes may also be appropriate, it is important to recognise that, in most conflict-affected societies, most women are not allowed to own property and, therefore, do not have the collateral necessary to gain access to such micro-credit programmes. Hence, such programmes must be designed to reflect women's realities, forgoing collateral requirements and offering flexible repayment terms.

In the medium-to-long term, international actors must ensure that women activists are involved in macroeconomic reform processes, from planning through to implementation. They must also ensure that economic assistance programmes address those structural inequalities that exacerbate the economic disempowerment of women.





# Notes

## Acknowledgements

- 1 The names of some activists who contributed to the study, including members of the women's wing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), remain confidential.

## Chapter 1

- 2 The term 'women activists' is employed throughout this paper to refer to 'women's rights activists', also known as 'women's human rights defender (WHRD)'.
- 3 It is unfortunate that time constraints limited the study to the response of women in Kosovo and Serbia to the war in Kosovo. This is only one of many important aspects of women's activism in the Balkans. It is almost impossible to separate this from the vibrant women's movement that is active throughout the region.
- 4 Albanian and Serbian names are used to identify locations in Kosovo. However, 'Kosovo' is primarily employed throughout the study (unless in an official title), rather than 'Kosova', the Albanian form, as this is the spelling used by the United Nations.
- 5 In total, over 100 people contributed to this study in 71 interviews. Fifty-six interviews were conducted with a total of 82 women activists (88 women were interviewed during this process, but six were not classified as 'activists'. Fifteen supporting (key informant) interviews were held with 12 women and eight men.
- 6 Approximately one-third of the women activists interviewed was either UAF grantees or was working with an organisation that had received a UAF grant. Another one-third was recommended by these activists. A final one-third was purposively selected to represent more marginalised activists. It is important to note, though, that the objective of this study was not to paint a statistically valid picture of women's activism in areas of conflict. Currently, there is not enough research available to enable this kind of analysis.
- 7 Field interviews were conducted in Kosovo, Serbia and Sri Lanka between July and August 2003 and in Sierra Leone in February 2004. Activists were interviewed in several locations: Belgrade and Nis (Serbia); Gjakove, north and south Mitrovica and Pristina (Kosovo); Colombo, Jaffna, Kandy and Moneragala (Sri Lanka); and Bo, Freetown, Kenema and Makeni (Sierra Leone).

- 8 While activists raised a wide range of key issues related to women's activism and conflict, there was not enough time to do justice within this study to all of these issues, including in particular, education, health and economics.
- 9 Many of the women activists and advisors who we were privileged to meet through this project are themselves authors of a rich body of work on women's rights and activism in areas of conflict. Only a handful of references are included in the bibliography. Hundreds of other books, reports and articles are available to readers who wish to learn more.
- 10 Hina Jilani, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Human Rights Defenders, confirmed this point in a consultation meeting on women HRDs, noting that: 'women have been at the forefront of HRD work and are of significant numbers. Women have been defenders of human rights but their engagement lacks recognition and visibility'. 'Report on the Consultation on Women Human Rights Defenders with the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Human Rights Defenders', Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, August 2003.
- 11 Despite this overall lack of recognition, there are some notable exceptions. Activists spoke of several individuals and international and national groups that have supported their work in a variety of ways, providing them with moral, financial and logistical support, information and protection. Some are listed in the section on 'Supporting Factors'.
- 12 Mary B. Anderson, *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace – or War*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, February 1999); Ian Smillie (ed.), *Patronage or Partnership: Local Capacity Building in Humanitarian Crises*, (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and West Hartford: Kumarian Press, 2001); and the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership, <http://www.hapinternational.org/en/pages.php?IDcat=10>.
- 13 'Times such as after a war, when structures are weakened and traditions and communities have been disrupted, are likely to see an increase in physical violence against women, as women move into roles previously closed to them'. Rachel Wareham, *No Safe Place: An Assessment on Violence against Women in Kosovo*, (Pristina: The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), 2000), <http://www.womensnetwork.org/english/pdf/No%20Safe%20Place.pdf>. 'Women are often expected to withdraw again into the home because men are back (after demobilization, displacement, etc) and want the jobs, or because the community is trying to go back to the "normality" of the pre-war status quo'. Charlotte Lindsey, *Women Facing War*, (Geneva: International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 2001), p. 31.
- 14 Radhika Coomaraswamy pointed out that, currently in Sri Lanka, 'Women feel far less safe in terms of criminal violence than they did in the peace process, that's true of women in the north and east'. She suggests that the increasing violence against women throughout the country is directly related to 'a total breakdown of the rule of law, where murder, rape, everything takes place with a great deal of impunity. Now that the political violence has stopped, criminal violence has surfaced and it is often directed against women. And it's usually the same people that were involved in the political violence'.
- 15 Certainly the risk to humanitarian activists working in armed conflict zones has increased exponentially over the past few years. At particular risk are those who work for national NGOs, as shown, for example, by the disproportionate loss of life in Afghanistan. Twenty-three aid workers have been killed in the first six months of 2004, compared to

- 13 in the whole of 2003. Of deepest concern is the clear evidence that these killings were deliberate – the aid workers were targeted because they were perceived to be partial. See, for instance, ‘MSF condemns fatal attack on aid workers’, MSF Press Release, 4 June 2004.
- 16 Women and girls are trafficked primarily for sex in Kosovo and Serbia, and for labour and sex in Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka.
- 17 Often in partnership with international women activists, working quietly behind the scenes to support the efforts of local women activists.
- 18 It is only in the past few years that international agencies have adopted security guidelines to address some of the concerns of the host country staff members they employ, with limited references to partner NGOs in the host nation.
- 19 For example, an individual women’s rights activist would assess the risks associated with employing armed protection far differently to activists working for large international agencies, particularly in terms of community perceptions and the potential for backlash.

## Chapter 2

- 20 Ms. Vithanga’s husband went missing in August 1985, while Visaka Dharmadasa’s son vanished on 27 September 1998.

## Chapter 3

- 21 One article describes a sort of ‘self-unaware’ or ‘generic’ feminism in Yugoslavia prior to the formation of the first feminist organisation in Yugoslavia, Woman and Society, in the late 1970s, and the subsequent development of an organised feminist movement, which later expanded into human rights and anti-war movements. ‘In the last years of Yugoslavia’s existence, many women were in fact characterized by a more or less self-unaware feminism that, before the 1980s, only some of them could articulate. This kind of feminism could be found in most Eastern European countries but especially in Yugoslavia, where women’s emancipation went farther and cut deeper than in most other East European countries. This generic feminism was largely due to the ambivalent nature of the Yugoslav communist regime in the 1945–1990 period, when the emancipation of women was largely ideological, as were so many other proclaimed emancipations under communist rule’. Sonja Licht and Slobodan Drakulic, ‘When the Word for Peacemaker was Women: War and Gender in the Former Yugoslavia’, *Research on Russia and Eastern Europe*, Vol. 2, pp. 111–139, (Greenwich: JAI Press Inc., 1996). Available online at <http://www.zenskestudie.edu.yu/eng/selectedpapers/Sonja%20Licht%20%20Slobodan%20Drakulic.htm>.
- 22 Constance Cummings John was the first female mayor of Freetown, Hannah Benka Coker led the group that founded the Freetown Secondary School for Girls and Ella Koblo Gulama was the country’s first female paramount chief. For further information, see: L. Denzer (ed.), *Constance Agatha Cummings-John: Memoirs of a Krio Leader*, (Ibadan: Humanities Research Centre, 1995); and Talabi Aisie Lucan, *The Life and Times of Paramount Chief Madam Ella Koblo Gulama*, (Freetown: Sierra Leone Association of Writers and Illustrators, 2003). Jamesina King also describes the history and goals of the SLWM in her article: ‘The

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Situation of Women and Girls in the Pre-Conflict, Conflict and Post Conflict Sierra Leone', Campaign for Good Governance, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2002. Available online at <http://www.slccg.org/trcwomenstatus.pdf>.

- 23 'Between 1990 and 2003, girls were part of fighting forces in 55 countries and were involved in armed conflicts in 38 of these countries. Girls as young as eight are used in armies today. And girls work for more hours than boy soldiers since they serve not only in combat but also as trainers, spies, porters, mine sweepers, sexual slaves, and domestic workers'. Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, 'Annual Report 2003'. Available online at [http://www.urgentactionfund.org/documents/UAF\\_AnnualReportFinal\\_Web.pdf](http://www.urgentactionfund.org/documents/UAF_AnnualReportFinal_Web.pdf)
- 24 The JVP is a Marxist party with nationalistic leanings. It has resorted to two violent coups and has constantly opposed a negotiated settlement of the armed conflict between the government and the LTTE.
- 25 Women in Black, *Women for Peace*, (Belgrade: Women in Black, 1998).
- 26 Dyan Mazurana and Khristopher Carlson, 'From Combat to Community: Women and Girls of Sierra Leone', (Cambridge: Hunt Alternatives Fund, January 2004). Available online at [http://www.peacewomen.org/resources/Peace\\_Negotiations/WWPSierraLeone.pdf](http://www.peacewomen.org/resources/Peace_Negotiations/WWPSierraLeone.pdf).
- 27 Women and Media Collective, 'Women's Concerns and the Peace Process: Findings and Recommendations, International Women's Mission to the North East of Sri Lanka 12th to 17th October 2002', December 2002.
- 28 This was facilitated by Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS). 'FAS, with the support of UN agencies, the OAU, EAC and ECOWAS, brought together women leaders and representatives of local non-government organisations (NGOs), including networks of women ministers and parliamentarians, journalists, lawyers, academics, researchers, and individuals from the private sector who have demonstrated potential in the fields of peace, human rights and development. Out of their meeting MARWOPNET was born'. Femmes Africa Solidarité, 'MARWOPNET Awarded 2003 United Nations Prize in the Field of Human Rights', 3 December 2003. Available online at [http://www.peacewomen.org/resources/Peace\\_Negotiations/FASPressRelease2003.html](http://www.peacewomen.org/resources/Peace_Negotiations/FASPressRelease2003.html).
- 29 Kosova Women's Network, *Kosovar Women's Voice*, Vol. 2, No. 1, March 2003. Available online at <http://www.womensnetwork.org/english/KWN200403small.pdf>.
- 30 The following description of how women and girls were affected by the conflicts in the study areas only touches the surface. For an excellent, broader overview of the impact of armed conflict on women, please refer to Charlotte Lindsey, *Women Facing War*, (Geneva: International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 2001) and International Committee of the Red Cross, 'Addressing the Needs of Women Affected by Armed Conflict: An ICRC Guidance Document', March 2004.
- 31 Landmines in the High Security Zones also present a serious problem.
- 32 A recent survey by Médecins Sans Frontières of the trauma levels of displaced people living in the Vavuniya Welfare Camps found that suicide rates there were three times higher than among the general population. In the survey, 24% of respondents said that someone in their family had either attempted or committed suicide. Kaz de Jong, Maureen Mulhern, Alison Swan and Saskia van der Kam, 'Assessing Trauma in Sri Lanka, Psycho-Social Questionnaire, Vavuniya: Survey Outcomes', (Amsterdam: Médecins Sans Frontières, 31

- May 2001). Available online at <http://www.msf.org/source/countries/asia/srilanka/2001/psyc-soc.doc>.
- 33 Charlotte Lindsey, *Women Facing War*, (Geneva: International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 2001), p. 31.
  - 34 Some activists made reference to this forced prostitution, and there are some references in secondary materials. For example: 'There is strong anecdotal evidence that brothel owners in the Sri Lankan city of Anuradhapura are forcibly engaging girls from outlying villages for the gratification of the large numbers of government soldiers who come here for rest and recreation'. Jo Boyden, Jo de Berry, Thomas Feeny and Jason Hart, 'Children Affected by Armed Conflict in South Asia: A review of trends and issues identified through secondary research,' Refugee Studies Centre Working Paper No. 7, January 2002. Available online at <http://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/PDFs/workingpaper7.pdf>.
  - 35 Often these are extremely vulnerable women, such as those who have been internally displaced or widowed.
  - 36 Women and girls who are perceived to have shamed their family or community, because they have been raped, have sought to escape a violent marriage, or have in some way acted 'improperly' with a man, can be killed with impunity, often by under-age family members (to reduce the sentence if they are caught). Because so much of this kind of violence is hidden within families, it is particularly difficult to document and address. However, honour killings have been documented throughout the world, and they are reportedly on the rise in Iraq (see box on page 52). Women activists have worked to raise awareness of some of the best-known cases in Pakistan.
  - 37 The report goes on to point out that these women's groups 'deserve increased financial and technical support. Women's organizations have been running humanitarian assistance programs, gender-based violence prevention programs and peace initiatives since the start of Yugoslavia's collapse in 1991, often at great risk to their safety. These organizations and their programs will need continued international support for some time before their activities can be coordinated with the national and local emerging government structures. In addition to financial assistance, indigenous organizations need intervention and support to hone their financial, administrative, management and inter-agency coordination skills. Local leaders should be encouraged to develop cross-border initiatives that promote tolerance and peacebuilding. Care needs to be taken by internationals to support local initiatives that will outlast international programs'. Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 'Refugee and Internally Displaced Women and Children in Serbia and Montenegro', September 2001. Available online at <http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/yyu.pdf>.
  - 38 For example, in Serbia, women activists established SOS hotlines for women and children – the first was established in Belgrade in 1990 and others followed in Kraljevo, Leskovac and Nis. Sonja Licht and Slobodan Drakulic, 'When the Word for Peacemaker was Women: War and Gender in the Former Yugoslavia', *Research on Russia and Eastern Europe*, Vol. 2 (1996), pp. 111–139. Available online at <http://www.zenskstudie.edu.yu/eng/selectedpapers/Sonja%20Liht%20i%20Slobodan%20Drakulic.htm>.
  - 39 In the case of medica mondiale Kosova, it also paid for services at the Forensics Institute.

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- 40 Motrat Qiriaz, 'Report of Work During 2001', (Pristina: Motrat Qiriaz, 2002). Available online at <http://www.motratqiriaz.org/report2001.doc>.
- 41 'Amnesty International welcomes the signs of cooperation between the authorities of Serbia and UNMIK, in exhuming and transferring remains from Serbia to Kosovo. On 8 May 2003, the first group of remains identified by the ICMP using DNA analysis were handed over – at the administrative border between Serbia and Kosovo – to UNMIK by the Serbian Coordination Centre for Kosovo and Metohija. These were the mortal remains of 37 ethnic Albanians, whose bodies had been exhumed from the mass graves at Batajnica near Belgrade. The bodies were then taken by the OMPF for forensic examination, and were buried by the families on 1 August 2003, in their home village of Meja near Dakovica'. Amnesty International, 'Serbia and Kosovo: Day of the Missing', 30 August 2003. Available online at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGEUR700202003?open&of=ENG-YUG>.
- 42 Although none of the three study regions has yet achieved stable peace.
- 43 Lepa Mladjenovic and Donna M. Hughes, 'Feminist Resistance to War and Violence in Serbia', *Frontline Feminisms*, (New York: Garland Press, 1999). Available online at <http://www.uri.edu/artsci/wms/hughes/warvio3.htm>.

### Chapter 4

- 44 Approximately 90% of the population fled Kosovo in 1999.
- 45 Military interventions included: NATO's bombardment of Yugoslavia and the subsequent deployment of the Kosovo Force (KFOR); the three-year deployment of the Indian Peace Keeping Force in the north and east of Sri Lanka; the deployment of the Economic Community of West Africa States' Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in Sierra Leone; and the deployment in Sierra Leone of the United Nations Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL) and the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL).
- 46 These external military interventions are sometimes referred to as 'peace support' or 'peacekeeping' operations – terms that are not clearly defined in international law.

### Chapter 5

- 47 International Crisis Group (ICG), 'Collapse in Kosovo', ICG Europe Report No. 155, (Brussels: ICG, 22 April 2004).
- 48 Brian Whitaker, 'Taliban murders voters to derail election', *The Guardian*, 28 June 2004. Available online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/afghanistan/story/0,1284,1248721,00.html>. A recent article in *The Wall Street Journal* notes that 'nearly every step of the election process in Afghanistan has been shaped by concerns about violence'. A chief UN electoral worker in the south of the country is quoted as saying: 'The standard operating procedure is to put in place the security and then have an election – and we're not doing it here'. Yaroslav Trofimov, 'Voting Matters: Taliban, Militias Stand in the Way of Afghan Ballot', *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 July 2004.
- 49 'President Bush Announces Combat Operations in Iraq Have Ended', US Department of State, 5 May 2003. Available online at <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/20203.htm>.

- 50 This section emphasises the violations committed by international military and police forces in order to highlight the particular difficulties faced by women activists in these contexts: when the groups that should be partners in ending the violence are both armed and are engaging in violence with impunity. It is important also to acknowledge the role that some staff members of international non-governmental agencies, the United Nations and not-for-profit contractors, such as DynCorps, have played in the exploitation and forcible trafficking of women and children in these conflict zones and in others throughout the world.
- 51 Human Rights Watch, 'World Report 2003' (Sierra Leone). Available online at <http://www.hrw.org/wr2k3/africa10.html>.
- 52 Human Rights Watch, 'World Report 2003' (Sierra Leone). Available online at <http://www.hrw.org/wr2k3/africa10.html>.
- 53 Submission by the Coalition on Women's Human Rights in Conflict Situations to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Sierra Leone, May 2003.
- 54 Amnesty International, "So does it mean that we have the rights?" Protecting the human rights of women and girls trafficked for forced prostitution in Kosovo', 6 May 2004. Available online at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/print/ENGEUR700102004>.
- 55 'Originally sent to Sri Lanka as a neutral body with a mission to ensure compliance with the accord, the IPKF increasingly became a partisan force fighting against Tamils. The popularity of Indian forces, which was never high, decreased still further amidst charges of rape and murder of civilians'. Jagath P. Senaratne, *Political Violence in Sri Lanka, 1977-1990: Riots, Insurrections, Counterinsurgencies, Foreign Intervention*, (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1 January 1997).
- 56 On 2 August 1989, following the ambush of an IPKF patrol by LTTE rebels, which claimed the lives of seven Indian soldiers, IPKF troops retaliated in the town of Valvettithurai by killing 51 civilians, among them women, children and the elderly, and injuring 70 others. In addition, they burnt down 123 houses, 43 shops, four cinemas and a library, and set fire to 69 vehicles, 12 fishing boats and 129 fishing nets. Jagath P. Senaratne, *Political Violence in Sri Lanka, 1977-1990: Riots, Insurrections, Counterinsurgencies, Foreign Intervention*, (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1 January 1997).
- 57 All quotes in this section are anonymous.
- 58 This is a reference to an incident that occurred during the study visit. 'Another shocking killing occurred on 13 August 2003, when probably two assailants hidden in bushes fired with Kalashnikov assault rifles on Kosovo Serb children and youths swimming in the Pecka Bistrica/Lumbardhi i Pejës River between the Serb village of Gorazdevac and the Albanian village of Zahac. Two were killed and four wounded'. International Crisis Group, 'Reality Demands: Documenting Violations of International Humanitarian Law in Kosovo 1999', 27 June 2000. Available online at [http://www.crisisweb.org/library/documents/report\\_archive/A400057\\_27062000.pdf](http://www.crisisweb.org/library/documents/report_archive/A400057_27062000.pdf).
- 59 Quote provided in confidence. Other activists confirmed this concern.
- 60 One Sri Lankan activist pointed out that there are still checkpoints in Jaffna, presenting an ongoing threat to the freedom of movement of women and girls in the area.



## RIISING UP IN RESPONSE

- 61 Charlotte Lindsey, *Women Facing War*, (Geneva: International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 2001), p. 74.
- 62 In 2002, the Association of Women's Initiatives (AWIN) in Serbia, with support from Kvinna till Kvinna and the Star Project, brought together some 100 Kosovar Serb women from Kosovo and members of the Serbian women's network.
- 63 University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) reported that: 'The rape and murders took place more than 8 hours after the initial abduction. Four civilians were involved and at least ten service personnel, including another corporal, knew about it'. The report also examines a potential link between the severity of the sentences and the speed with which they were handed down to some of the perpetrators and the latter's alleged knowledge of the location of mass graves in the area. 'On 3rd July 1998 death sentences were passed on six service personnel, who in turn made disclosures of mass graves in Jaffna'. University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), 'Gaps in the Krishanthi Kumarasamy Case: Disappearances & Accountability', Special Report No. 12, 28 April 1999. Available online at <http://www.uthr.org/SpecialReports/Uthr-sp.rp12.doc>.
- 64 Ian Smillie raised this point early on in the post-conflict response in Bosnia and Herzegovina, publishing a well-received (and appropriately translated) study on the international agency tendency to view national non-governmental organisations as 'service providers'. Ian Smillie, 'Service Delivery or Civil Society? Non Governmental Organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina', (Toronto: CARE Canada, December 1996).
- 65 This includes collecting and analysing forensic evidence in relation to a criminal investigation.
- 66 According to ECPAT International: 'There is no concrete research or information on child trafficking in the country, however, reports indicate that the trafficking of children takes place mainly between Sierra Leone and neighbouring countries like Guinea and Liberia. The phenomenon has become complex with the advent of the war. In Freetown, it is reported that there exists a well-organised syndicate of child traffickers at Banana Water, Murray Town. From this place, boats ferry girls to waiting fishing trawlers, which in turn take them to other countries for various purposes including sex work. There are reports that children are trafficked to Senegal, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Lebanon, Costa Rica and sometimes Europe. A local NGO in Guinea "Groupe Guinéen Contre la Violence Sexuelle" reported that refugee women and children from neighboring Sierra Leone and Liberia are being sexually exploited'. See [http://www.ecpat.net/eng/Ecpat\\_inter/projects/monitoring/online\\_database/index.asp](http://www.ecpat.net/eng/Ecpat_inter/projects/monitoring/online_database/index.asp).

## Chapter 6

- 67 'International Conference on Women, Peace Building and Constitution Making', organised by the International Centre for Ethnic Studies and held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, between 2 and 5 May 2002. See <http://www.icescolombo.org/wpc2002/intro.htm>.

- 68 In a presentation on the Sri Lankan peace process, one analyst remarked on the significance of the International Women's Mission, noting that: 'The team's report is a blueprint that could be used in any peace process practically anywhere in the world. It foregrounds the impact of war on women, and spells out in specific detail what this means. It also recommends concrete steps that need to be taken as part of the process of negotiating a lasting peace'. Sanjana Hattotuwa, 'Overview of the Peace Process in Sri Lanka: 2002–2003', paper prepared for a conference on 'Strengthening Cooperation and Security in South Asia – Post 9/11', organised by the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1–3 July 2003. Available online at [http://www.cpalanka.org/research\\_papers/overview\\_peace\\_process\\_2002\\_2003.pdf](http://www.cpalanka.org/research_papers/overview_peace_process_2002_2003.pdf).

## Chapter 7

- 69 '2. Encourages the Secretary-General to implement his strategic plan of action (A/49/587) calling for an increase in the participation of women at decision-making levels in conflict resolution and peace processes'. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000). Available online at [http://www.un.org/events/res\\_1325e.pdf](http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf).
- 70 UAF's consultations with African women activists on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (in 2002) and on developing peace building instruments and mechanisms (in 2003) identified several serious flaws in the resolution specific to women in the Great Lakes region. These consultations are an example of a practical way of engaging women activists in security policymaking. Available online at <http://www.urgentactionfund.org/documents/1325FinalReport.pdf>
- 71 Many donors take months to transfer funds to activist groups. The latter cannot usually afford to wait that long, and do not have other funds that they can draw on in the interim to move forward with their interventions.
- 72 The Forum for African Women Educationalists, for example, shifted its focus from general education to emergency education, and then to responding to sexual and gender-based violence. It is now trying to address issues pertaining to older women's experiences of violence.
- 73 A women's law group was targeted because of its campaign against a certain government. Its vehicle was stolen and later, staff members, using their own cars, were physically attacked. In this instance, they required support in order to hire drivers. In another case, a group decided that it was less conspicuous to use public transport than its members' own vehicles. It required support to cover public transport costs.
- 74 As Slavica Stojanovic pointed out: 'Maybe if you think about some kind of structural plan, some kind of prepared action from some governments to send messages and pressure to the authorised embassies ... to transmit visas to the activists. For example, what the German Government did by giving that priority treatment was supportive – sometimes they trusted us that we are going to do something which is good, important – it was some kind of recognition'.
- 75 The Advocacy Project's work in Kosovo offers an example of a particularly successful model of such information sharing.

- 76 Laurence Hovde reported that some women activists in the Balkans received support to purchase buildings, thus ensuring some stability in their important work. UAF has also learned that women activists have been evicted from rented space in an effort to control their activities.
- 77 Zorica Mrsevic said: 'I regret I didn't write ... all over this period, I haven't written anything like a diary or some notes ... I really regret that now, because this period was not just one whole. There were ups and downs, there were nice moments, there were very critical moments, there were moments of desperateness, there were moments of fights among us, the moments when we split, the moments when we started all along to work something else but again concerning women's choice. Now everything is merged in my mind like one cloud. So this is bad and I think I lost something. I saw my international colleagues, they write diaries all the time, a few sentences everyday and that's it or maybe even one sentence or two sentences per week but that's it, then you have a clear idea of what's happening in certain periods of time'.
- 78 Although Human Rights Watch has previously published important information on the involvement of peacekeepers and government contractors in trafficking in Bosnia, the report by Save the Children UK and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has received the greatest attention to date. See Save the Children UK and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 'Note for Implementing and Operational Partners on Sexual Violence & Exploitation: The Experience of Refugee Children in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone – Initial Findings and Recommendations from Assessment Mission 22 October to 30 November 2001', 14 August 2002. Available online at <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk>.
- 79 While British soldiers serving with UNAMSIL in Sierra Leone are currently under investigation for a gang rape, it is unlikely that this case will ever go to court, as the woman's husband is pushing for an out of court settlement – that is, cash. (Information derived from author's communications with confidential source). Contingents serving with the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC) are now infamous for their sexual exploitation of displaced Congolese women and children. A recent article notes how girls as young as 13 who had been raped and impregnated by members of armed groups fled to IDP camps in the Congo seeking safety for themselves and their babies. Instead, they were shunned and excluded from aid distributions. The only way that they can survive now is to sell their bodies to peacekeepers in exchange for food. Kate Holt and Sarah Hughes, 'Sex and Death in the Heart of Africa: Sexual Exploitation of the Displaced and UN Peacekeepers', Independent Digital, 25 May 2004. Available online at <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/article/detail/1093/>.
- 80 All actors engaged in these contexts should abide by international human rights laws, as well as by national law. However, it seems that legal standards are consistently sidestepped. Particularly for UN staff members, immunity is proffered by the 1946 Convention on Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, although there has been some progress in clarifying that it does not offer protection with regard to crimes of sexual violence and exploitation. 'International staff members who enjoy immunity from personal arrest and detention under the 1946 Convention on Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations are advised that the immunity is for the benefit of the United Nations and not for them personally and that such immunity may be waived in the event staff are prosecuted for

crimes related to prostitution, including the use of the sexual services of a victim of trafficking'. Amnesty International, "So does it mean that we have the rights?" Protecting the human rights of women and girls trafficked for forced prostitution in Kosovo', 6 May 2004. Available online at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/print/ENGEUR700102004>.

- 81 With thanks to Sri Lankan activist Sunila Abeysekera for her advice on some of these recommendations.
- 82 Contingent on the level of interest among activists, an audit could be conducted of a past peacekeeping operation such as, for example, the IPKF intervention in Sri Lanka. In such a case, the Sri Lankan National Human Rights Commission should be given the mandate and resources to conduct a Fact-Finding Mission on IPKF-related violations as a documentation exercise which could be useful later on in lobbying for a full-scale investigation with Indian participation.
- 83 This may be appropriate for the North Caucasus. Women activists in Chechnya and Ingushetia have *extremely limited access* to external support.
- 84 This contact can sometimes advance campaigns designed to put pressure on relevant governments to respond if activists have been detained or have 'disappeared'.
- 85 Guidance should clarify the international legal framework to protect human rights activists in crises – including a review of relevant intersections with refugee law and instruments such as the Declaration on Protection of Human Rights Defenders.
- 86 Activists in Serbia hid cash reserves in the homes of older women friends – their 'granny bankers'. In a crisis situation, activists should be prepared to destroy computer records and hard-copy data.
- 87 Tanja Ignjatovic explained that, in Serbia during the 2000 elections, women activists developed a very basic list of rights to show to members of the police or security forces if they were threatened.
- 88 'To date, the multi-sectoral model forms the "best practice" for prevention of and response to gender-based violence (GBV) in refugee, IDP and post-conflict settings. The underlying principles of the multi-sectoral model recognize the rights and needs of survivors as pre-eminent, in terms of access to respectful and supportive services, guarantees of confidentiality and safety, and the ability to determine a course of action for addressing the GBV incident. Key characteristics of the multi-sectoral model include the full engagement of the refugee community, interdisciplinary and inter-organisational cooperation, and collaboration and coordination among health, psycho-social, legal and security sectors'. Reproductive Health Response in Conflict (RHRC) Consortium, 'Gender-based Violence Tools Manual for Assessment and Program Design, Monitoring and Evaluation in Conflict-Affected Settings', February 2004.
- 89 In particular, this should include collaborative efforts to address violence and to enable access to justice by supporting joint initiatives that bring together international and national human rights and humanitarian actors engaged in all response sectors. The Joint CARE/IRC Access to Justice Initiatives Meetings in Sierra Leone (which commenced on 20 May 2004) is a good example of constructive engagement between national women's rights activists and international agencies. This type of forum should be established early in a post-conflict response.

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- 90 Jeanette Eno explained that, in Sierra Leone, ‘there’s certainly more reported incidence of violence against women so it’s quite a huge area that some of the international organisations address, but I think one of the approaches that’s being used is only to talk to the women. I think in Sierra Leone, we really need to do it the other way round. *We need to really engage the men on that issue*’.
- 91 Pearl Stephens pointed out that in Sri Lanka, ‘there are so many cases of police raping policewomen, lawyers’.
- 92 A recent report noted that the Family Support Units within the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) still face serious operational and attitudinal constraints. ‘[T]he FSUs lack offices to privately interview victims, vehicles to investigate cases, and communication equipment. These units are seen as “soft police work” by [the] SLP leadership and are not considered a priority for funding as desperately needed new equipment becomes available. In addition, although female police officers have been hired, and the lower ranks of the SLP have been trained in gender sensitivity, the commanders have not. Female police officers are sometimes expected to do little more than cook lunch for the male police officers. Corruption within the police is still a huge issue. According to a human rights worker, “It is hard to safeguard human rights when management is corrupt. I am not sure there is enough time left to sufficiently implement human rights into the police force”’. Sarah Martin and Cliff Bernath, ‘Sierra Leone: Promotion of Human Rights and Protection for Women Still Required’, 18 March 2004. Available online at [http://www.peacewomen.org/resources/Sierra\\_Leone/RIUNAMSIL2004.html](http://www.peacewomen.org/resources/Sierra_Leone/RIUNAMSIL2004.html).
- 93 Regardless of good intentions, and clear explanations, activists involved in documentation processes can *raise the expectations* of the women they engage with: ‘It is rare to be in a position to offer protection to those persons whose allegations are being recorded, yet those who are not too afraid to come forward often believe that speaking to persons coming from the outside offers some kind of protection’. Camille Giffard, ‘The Torture Reporting Handbook’, (Colchester: The Human Rights Centre at the University of Essex, 2000), p. 20. Available online at <http://www.essex.ac.uk/torturehandbook>.
- 94 After consultations with Sierra Leonean women activists, UAF-Africa staff recommended that grants be awarded to activists to allow them to provide support services to women and girls testifying before the TRC.
- 95 The Sierra Leone Special Court will require at least 57 million USD over a three-year period. By contrast, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) operates with an annual budget of over 100 million USD.
- 96 The WHO study suggests that ‘*where few resources exist, it may be necessary for the study to create short-term support mechanisms*’. World Health Organization, ‘Putting Women First: Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Research on Domestic Violence Against Women’, (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2001).
- 97 The Reproductive Health for Refugees Consortium has produced perhaps the most comprehensive, practical compilation of experience of responding to gender-based violence against conflict-affected populations. See its Gender-Based Violence Resources web page at <http://www.rhrc.org/resources/gbv/index.html>.
- 98 ‘Until recently, emergency medical programs have been dominated by a perspective emphasizing physical health and immediate relief. Behavioral, mental, and social problems

were neglected. Since the genocide in Rwanda and the conflict in the Former Yugoslavia, it has become recognized that mental health and psychosocial programs can greatly contribute to the alleviation of the suffering of people in war and disaster-stricken areas (e.g. Ajdukovic, 1997). Focused primarily on the effects of post-traumatic stress, these programs have put the psychological consequences of massive man-made violence on individuals and populations on the agenda of the international community'. Kaz de Jong, Maureen Mulham and Saskia van der Kam, 'Assessing Trauma in Sierra Leone: Psychosocial Questionnaire: Freetown Survey Outcomes', (Amsterdam: Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), 11 January 2000).

- 99 This study specifically looked at how women's rights activists provide support primarily to women and girls. The tendency to overlook sexual violence committed against men and boys during and after a conflict is a matter of concern, *and should be addressed*.

## Annex

- 100 It was proposed that the Sierra Leonean government and NGOs: 'Provide protection to elderly women and take specific measures commensurate with their physical, economic and social needs, as well as their access to employment and professional training; provide social and medical services to elderly women; ensure that elderly women are free from violence, including sexual violence, and that they are treated with dignity'. Betty Murungi, 'Report to the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission of a Consultative Meeting with Women's Organisations on Findings and Recommendations on Women', (Nairobi: Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, December 2003).
- 101 It may be appropriate to hold these consultations in confidence.
- 102 HelpAge International is a good resource for information on working with older women in emergency contexts. See <http://www.helpage.org/publications/PapersEtc/PapersEtc.html>.
- 103 Pearl Stephens noted that women activists' work to support survivors of violence includes suicide prevention, because in Sri Lanka, suicide is a common response to post-rape ostracism. 'An older child might think of committing suicide, it's one of the highest rates here in Sri Lanka. Even if it is a rape, the child never wanted it, but the community looks as if she's the one to blame. There are a lot of things like this which these [women's] groups are able to approach'.
- 104 Although more research is required, international agencies are increasingly interested in the provision of cash or vouchers to aid the recovery of disaster-affected households.

## About Urgent Action Fund

**Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights** is an independent nonprofit organization with a strategic mandate to protect and promote women's human rights through rapid response grantmaking, collaborative initiatives and research and publications. Grounded in a human rights framework and focused on women in civil society, Urgent Action Fund supports women human rights defenders responding to conflict and crisis around the world.

Urgent Action Fund's international Rapid Response Grantmaking Program identifies three categories that represent areas of great need in the global women's human rights movement: response to armed conflict, escalating violence or politically volatile environments; security for women human rights defenders; and potentially precedent-setting legal or legislative cases. When unanticipated situations arise that provide an opportunity to either advance an ongoing strategy for the promotion of women's human rights or to protect gains already made, women activists often need immediate financial support to respond effectively. Urgent Action Fund exists to enable women to take advantage of these brief windows of opportunity by reviewing requests for small grants 365 days per year, in any language, from any region of the world and responding within a week.

Urgent Action Fund also conducts research and produces reports on issues of importance to women human rights defenders. These reports serve as tools for women activists and their advocates in the philanthropic and policy sectors who wish to better understand the needs and priorities of the women's human rights movement in order to better support it.

Founded in 2001, UAF's sister organization Urgent Action Fund-Africa operates similar programs on the African continent. Their focus is on rapid response grantmaking and collaborative initiatives to support the transitional justice and peacebuilding efforts of women in conflict-affected areas.

## About the Author

**Jane Barry** has worked in countries affected by crises and conflicts since 1991. She has designed and managed emergency response programmes, assessments and evaluations in the former Soviet Union, the Balkans, Africa and Northern Iraq. Ms. Barry currently consults on humanitarian response and policy in conflicts, with an emphasis on human rights protection, women's rights and security.





*“These activists come from all walks of life and are engaged in activism on all levels, from the grassroots to the highest echelons of politics. They have an impressive array of skills – a significant number learnt ‘on the job’. Critically, many of these activists emerged from the fighting, and were transformed by it”.*

**- RISING UP in RESPONSE**