Women as peacemakers: from victims to re-builders of society

While the plight of women in war often gets close media attention, what is often overlooked is the vital role played by them in negotiating peace and rebuilding societies.

The recent commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the Rwanda genocide brought renewed focus on one of the many troubling aspects of those events: the deep trauma faced by Rwandan women who had survived the massacres after suffering indescribable humiliation, violence and sexual abuse. But today, as Rwanda moves gradually towards democracy, a lesser-known story is emerging: the vital role played by former victims in the efforts to build a new society.

In the September 2003 parliamentary elections in Rwanda, women secured 49% of seats in the legislature – the highest number of women parliamentarians anywhere in the world, overtaking Sweden with 45% and way above the world average of 15%. In May 2003, Rwandans ratified a new constitution allotting 30% of decision-making positions to women, a step inspired by the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. However, the election results went beyond the prescribed quota, an outcome for which Rwandan women lobbied heavily. As the country undergoes a period of reconstruction, women are playing an ever more active role. With a cadre of women parliamentarians assuming leadership responsibilities, this praiseworthy development will need to be accompanied by sustained measures to promote democracy at all levels.

While too often reporting of women in conflict situations shows them as powerless victims, the reality, often glossed over, is that in post conflict situations women are in the forefront when it comes to negotiating and building peace. As Secretary-General Kofi Annan has pointed out, “Women, who know the price of conflict so well, are also better equipped than men to prevent or resolve it. For generations, women have served as peace educators, both in their families and in their societies. They have proved instrumental in building bridges rather than walls.” There are many stories that remain to be told about women from all walks of life who are making a quantum leap from lives in the private sphere to leading the way in reshaping their societies. Between 2000 and 2002, elections were held in 23 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, with increases in the number of women parliamentarians in 14 of them. In most cases, significant increases have been achieved through the use of quotas.

At the peak of the crisis in Liberia, women of the Mano River region (Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone) came together to form the Mano River Women’s Peace Network (MARWOPNET). So powerful was MARWOPNET’s voice that it was invited to the ECOWAS-sponsored peace talks on Liberia in Akosombo, Ghana, and later was invited to be one of the signatories to the peace agreement. Now upon their return to Liberia, many of them will run for political office.

Women as torchbearers of peace are making a difference in hot spots of every region of the world. Palestinian and Israeli women have joined forces and work together as advocates for peace. In Nepal, women who were victims of violence are seeking representation in peace talks between the government and Maoist rebels. Women’s Peace Caravans venture into the most treacherous conflict-ridden interiors of Colombia to protest against the civil war and negotiate with the guerrillas. Throwing themselves into peace processes with enormous courage and determination, women in politics, through their often unseen and unsung work, are bringing peace to many troubled countries.

For further information:
Ms. Katharine Burns, Senior Social Affairs Officer
Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women
UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)
Tel: (1 917) 367-5221; E-mail: burns2@un.org

Ms. Maha Muna, Advisor for Governance, Peace and Security
UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)
Tel: (1 212) 906-5110; E-mail: Maha.Muna@undp.org