

Four Case Studies of Women's Peace building Experiences

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Women In War: A View From Ethiopia

Naamat Issa, Ethiopia

The Ethiopian government has usually represented one nationality. It has often used brute force to suppress the majority of the people in order to promote the political, economic and cultural interests of the minority nationality it represents. The oppressed nationalities want to put an end to their century-long domination and attain their legitimate and democratic rights. These diametrically opposed objectives have been the major cause of the recurrent conflicts in Ethiopia. Ethiopia has also had border disputes with Somalia, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s.

I have witnessed, both as a distant observer and as one of the direct victims, the impact of these conflicts on human rights, and in particular, on women's human rights.

The Impact of Conflicts on Women

Conflicts have psychological, physical and material impacts on the lives of women. For many women, seeing their children sometimes forcefully conscripted into the army by the government, and subsequently perish or come back as handicapped invalids, is a shocking experience. This has happened in my country during the Ethiopia-Somalia war in the 1980s and during the Ethiopian wars against the liberation fronts, the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Tigrean Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF).

After the overthrow of the military regime of Mengistu H. Mariam in 1991, there was a great hope for democracy, justice and peace. After only a year, we were driven back to the same vicious circle of conflicts and gross human rights violations by the new regime. The irony is that women are forced to support these wars, mostly against their own will. During the Somalia war and the liberation war in the 1980s, women

were forced by the government to contribute money, other materials and their labour to the war front. They were obliged to contribute utensils to the war front and prepare food for soldiers in a war that they never supported. No one ever asked their opinions.

There are many other hardships and humiliations that women undergo during violent conflicts:

- **The burden of shouldering family responsibility alone:** In Ethiopia, men are the major breadwinners of the family. During violent armed conflicts, bringing up children, taking care of the elderly and earning the livelihood for the whole family becomes the sole responsibility of women because of the absence of men.
- **Intimidation, harassment, beatings and rape:** During armed conflict, women mainly remain behind to take care of the children and the elderly. These are the moments when the government forces come and ask them the whereabouts of their menfolk. These questions are accompanied by intimidation, threats of death, beatings and sometimes rape by a group of soldiers. In some cases, the rape results in the birth of unwanted children. One can imagine the helplessness, humiliation and psychological trauma this can bring to the women concerned. Most of the children born in this way do not know their fathers. For the mothers, these children are their flesh and blood, and at the same time, permanent reminders of the crimes committed against them by enemy forces.
- **Arrest and torture:** Even though most women have no direct participation in the conflict, they still face arrest, and mental and physical torture. Being the close relatives of men involved in the conflict is enough for them to be implicated as supporters of the opposition. There are also scores of women who are killed. Such crimes against women are still prevalent in Ethiopia, but have never received international attention.
- **Disappearances:** Like their male partners, women have disappeared without trace.
- **Forced migration and prostitution:** Some women who cannot stand the harassment and intimidation, or the economic hardships, move to the big cities. Many of them have little education or are illiterate. This makes their chances of finding a job virtually nil. In many cases, they are forced to become prostitutes and those who have direct political involvement, either join the armed struggle or go into exile.

Women's Responses to the Conflict

How do women deal with their difficulties during conflict? Women's responses depend on a number of factors, including:

- whether they are from the aggressor or victim communities;
- their level of political consciousness;
- the degree to which the conflict has affected their personal and family life;
- the role they play in the socio-political and economic life of their societies.

In Ethiopia, since there is no effective women's association independent of the government, the opportunities for women to exchange views and forge a common policy against violent conflicts

are minimal. Women from the aggressors' side remain more or less passive observers, since the conflict takes longer to affect them personally. The women from the victims' side are more actively involved in the conflict.

I would like to conclude by describing my own experience as a woman political prisoner. In prison, we tried to comfort one another to overcome the psychological and physical torture. We shared food and other necessities that we received from friends and relatives, and we tried to establish a sort of communal life. Those who had no children with them tried to share the burden of bringing up children born in prison, helping with their education. We shared our knowledge and experiences. We tried to enhance the future participation of women in political, social, cultural and economic activities in a peaceful and democratic atmosphere by raising each other's political consciousness. This support was the source of our moral strength and survival. Outside prison, women who faced common problems continued to give this type of support to one another.

All these wars have cost tens of thousands of lives. What is worse is that these wars are meaningless because those against the liberation fronts have been against freedom, equality and the democratic rights of others. All the conflicts could have been resolved by peaceful means if there had been goodwill on the part of the government.

*Born in Ethiopia, **Naamat Issa** graduated from the faculty of education and was qualified to teach English and Amharic. Between 1980 and 1989, Naamat was detained for active participation in the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and became a prisoner of conscience. She was invited to the UK by Amnesty International to share her experiences as a prisoner and decided to remain in the West. Naamat currently lives with her husband and child in the Netherlands. She is still an active member of the OLF.*

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Women's Community Action in Northern Ireland

Carmel Roulston, Northern Ireland

The conflict in Northern Ireland has been serious and bitter but the violence has been relatively confined. The figures, however, conceal the differential effects on particular subsections of the population. It has been pointed out that bereavement, for example, has not been shared equally. Some neighbourhoods, families and individuals suffered multiple and repeated losses. Women have been directly affected by the conflict as victims of violence, as bereaved relatives and friends and as the people who have often had to cope with direct and indirect effects of conflict on families and communities.

There has been a tendency to use stereotypes of women and men in Northern Ireland. Women are seen as passive or innocent victims of

violence, men as the perpetrators, women as peacemakers and conciliators, men as intransigent warmongers, women as pragmatic, problem-solving people keeping track of daily life and men as pursuers of impossible or irrelevant schemes. Recent research, however, has shown that women have not always been innocent, passive spectators, but have actively supported violent and sectarian organisations on both sides of the national divide. It is, nonetheless, fair to say that women have been at the fore in a kind of politics that has helped to limit the effects of the conflict on the fabric of society. This is a form of politics that has laid the foundations for a future in which the two major traditions learn to accommodate each other and to express differences without aggression.

The Democratic Deficit, the Gender Gap and Community Action

As a traditional society, and a violent society, mainstream politics has included few women and has rarely allowed women's concerns to come to the fore.

The Opsahl Commission in 1992 pointed to the energy and commitment of women's activism in voluntary groups, most of which did not highlight women's particular needs, but spoke of families, youth and community regeneration. Community activism was important in achieving particular goals for some of the most marginal and socially excluded areas of Northern Ireland. It also brought benefits of confidence-building and empowerment for activists and supporters. Often the campaigns and projects would lead to the creation of contacts and joint activities involving men and women from loyalist/unionist and republican/nationalist traditions. This was of necessity a painful and slow process, especially given the high degree of residential segregation in Northern Ireland. In the poorest working-class areas, which usually suffered most from violence, there were few opportunities for casual or informal contacts across the sectarian or national divide.

The key features of women's community activism

- The inspiration for much of the work has been both top down and bottom-up.
- Funders have sometimes made excessive demands on groups, for example, requiring them to create 'cross-community' links at a time and in circumstances when this has been difficult and/or counter-productive. The groups on the ground have had to decide for themselves when to confront potentially divisive issues.
- The range of issues covered by women's community groups has been very wide. Some -a minority- have focused specifically on peace and reconciliation, but many of these groups have also found it necessary to become involved in campaigning or otherwise attending to 'social exclusion' issues.
- Most women involved in such activism tended to describe their participation as "not political." In part, this is due to the perception of politics in Northern Ireland as highly conflictive and narrowly focused; it is also due to women's perception of their activism as an extension of women's domestic responsibilities.

- Community activism involving women was more likely to take place in Catholic neighbourhoods in the 1960s and 1970s; from the 1980s, it grew quite rapidly in Protestant areas.
- Voluntary and community groups devised participatory and consensual decision-making processes.

The activism described here has many valuable features, but it is often taken for granted, ignored or undervalued by political elite. In Northern Ireland, there have been very few women at the top levels of party politics and little space for women's concerns to be voiced.

Women in the Talks Process

As the British and Irish governments and the major parties prepared themselves for fresh political talks in 1994 and 1995, many men and women in civil society organisations expressed worries about the likely outcomes if they followed the pattern of earlier initiatives. Women's groups held several seminars and conferences expressing their fears and desires for a future peaceful Northern Ireland, in which all interests and identities could be included.

When the British government decided, in February 1996, that admission to the all-party talks would be via election to a Forum for Peace and Reconciliation (a proposal not welcome to nationalists and republicans), some women protested that this would restrict access to the major parties, excluding not only women but also smaller parties. The electoral system finally adopted was designed to include 10 parties-the main objective of which was to include the 'fringe' parties linked to the loyalist paramilitary organisations. Women's groups became aware that a party representing women might just win enough votes to be represented in the all-party talks. As a result, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) was born. Its founder members came from a variety of backgrounds, including trade unions, community-based networks, feminist organisations, civil liberties groups and peace and reconciliation groups.

Many lessons had been learned in their previous histories of campaigning, including:

- The importance of dialogue and respectful listening in building enough trust to move forward.
- The fact that not all women want to highlight their gender identity or gender issues at the expense of all other aspects of their experiences.
- That core values and principles must be agreed upon and respected (in this case, justice, equity and inclusive dialogue).

The NIWC has brought women, for the first time in Irish history, to the negotiating table as decision-makers. There is still a long way to go, however, before either a secure peace or the inclusion of women in all their diversity is achieved.

***Carmel Roulston** became active in the Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement in the 1970s and joined the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition on its foundation in 1996. She is currently a member of the Coalition's executive committee and Lecturer in politics in the University of Ulster. She has also participated in a research project on gender and democracy and is working with the community-based group "Women into Politics" to develop a series of classes on democracy and women.*

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Mothers Against Military Might: Activism in Israel

Linda Ben Zvi, Israel

The conflict between Israel and Lebanon has been frozen in time. Israel is a new country but we recycle our leaders. The generals of the past become the parliamentarians of the present. Mr. Sharon is now our prime minister, but seventeen years ago he was General Sharon and he launched what he called "Peace for Galilee," an invasion of Lebanon. It was supposed to take only 48 hours, but we are still there.

At the beginning, most people in Israel supported him. However, in 1985, when UN Resolution 425 required all parties to leave Lebanon, neither Syria nor Israel did so. Israel retreated from Beirut to what it euphemistically called the security zone. The argument is that if Israel were to secure its northern border it had to remain inside Lebanon. There were many that questioned this, saying the best protection between neighbours is peace, not walls.

Between 1985 and 1997, however, the conflict in Lebanon became the silent war; the war that nobody seemed to care about because the number of Israeli casualties seemed to be relatively small. Every year between 25 and 30 Israeli soldiers were killed, and hundreds if not thousands of Lebanese were displaced and died, but somehow it seemed to be a price that people were willing to pay. All that changed in 1997. In February, there was a helicopter crash in which 73 Israeli soldiers were killed on their way to Lebanon.

The passivity that had existed from 1985 to 1997 disappeared. Four women - four mothers - who lived, as they still do, in the north of the country, in the security zone designed to protect them, decided that they had had enough. They were angry and they decided to have a demonstration. They stood in the middle of a popular junction and demanded that their government explain why after 17 years, we were still sending soldiers to die in Lebanon.

I cannot begin to tell you the shocking effect that this had. In Israel, parents have always accepted that the military was central to the establishment and continuation of the state, and what the military did, they did in the name of the state. It is a variation on the biblical story of Abraham who was asked by God to sacrifice his son, Isaac.

Suddenly, Four Mothers were questioning the might of the military. One of the Four Mothers said "if God had asked Sarah to sacrifice Isaac, the answer would have been very different! God must have known that, so he didn't ask her."

These Four Mothers immediately received tremendous public attention. It touched a vital nerve inside Israel. Instead of being people who nurture children and then send them off to war because, as they say in Hebrew, there is no other choice, mothers were suddenly demanding answers. Their numbers grew tremendously and very quickly. When I first contacted them I said that theirs was the group I had been waiting for. I think others felt the same way.

The group started as a woman's group. We were called the Four Mothers and although we thought about changing the name, we decided to keep it because it has biblical implications. I should say, however, that 40 to 50 per cent of the Four Mothers are men. It is very significant that men consider themselves part of this movement of 'mothers'. It has been suggested that perhaps we need to feminise the whole process of how we deal with each other; this was our beginning. We now have ex-soldiers and young people who have joined our group.

What sort of things do we do? We stand on street corners, we give out T-shirts, we give out bumper stickers, we do everything we can to fulfill our primary goal, which is to put the question of Lebanon on the national agenda. We also lobby the 120 members of the Israeli parliament. Approximately 50 have now taken up our position. We also have study groups. We take people to the border, and when they see for themselves the impossibility of this artificial situation, they are very quickly won over. We also speak to those who lived along the border and remember what it was like before the late 1970s, when there were connections back and forth. We also meet with embassies and various groups to ask them to use their good offices. For example, when the Clintons were in Israel we were able to meet with the President.

What has been the effect of all this? I think it is very important that a woman's group has been inclusive and that men and women are working together in non-military ways to question the wisdom of staying in Lebanon. I also think we have been successful because suddenly all the politicians in our elections are taking up the issue of Lebanon.

I think another thing that has changed is the image of women - women as activists - particularly bereaved mothers. In Israel, when a family loses a son in war it is usual for the President, or some senior figure, to visit the bereaved parents. Now, these bereaved mothers are no longer simply passive victims of male actions. When the President goes to see them they ask him "can you tell me why my son died?" They demand answers. I think this is a very powerful change. Recently a group of bereaved mothers bicycled from the North to Jerusalem, stopping along the way, demanding to meet with the Prime Minister

and Cabinet, demanding answers to why this situation has not been resolved.

The existence of one group has led to another so we now have ten women's peace groups in Israel who have joined in an alliance to say that there is an alternative to staying in Southern Lebanon. At one point, various political figures asked us to join them. We decided not to because we found that this was an issue that crossed party politics. We are finding that women who themselves have never been part of the political system before, particularly those living outside the major areas, are now becoming politically active, and are demanding that their voices be heard.

What do we hope for the future? Well, we would like to go out of business. We would like Israel to pull out of Lebanon unilaterally and unconditionally. We hope that women activists in both countries will recognise that women can build bridges and have a dialogue with each other once Israel withdraws from Southern Lebanon so that people can be proper neighbours.

Linda Ben Zvi, Professor of Theatre at Tel Aviv University, is International Co-ordinator of the Four Mothers Movement. The movement's aim is to get a complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from Southern Lebanon.

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The Slow Birth of Civil Society: Cambodia's Struggle For Democracy

Kek Galabru, Cambodia

In the past, Cambodia was known as the country of smiles, an island of peace. But since 1970 it has been a country of horror, and of sorrow. Under the Khmer Rouge, some two million people out of seven million died from starvation, over-work, disease and political killings. Women suffered very much. Women were forced to marry men who had previously committed murder and rape. Can you imagine that? A woman watches her children and family being killed, and is then forced to marry that person.

Between 1979 and 1989, Vietnam expelled the Khmer Rouge and occupied Cambodia. Cambodia was isolated from the rest of the world. We had no seat at the United Nations. Internally, people were unable to move or travel without permission.

Efforts at reconstruction and national reconciliation have only had a genuine foundation since the 1991 Paris Peace Accords and the 1993 elections. The United Nations spent almost three billion dollars to organise the elections, and sent 22,000 UN officials to monitor the process. Although the elections were preceded by acts of terrorism and intimidation, and followed by the refusal of the defeated Cambodian

People's Party to leave power, which resulted in a power-sharing agreement, they nonetheless established a basis for constitutional government in Cambodia that led to other promising developments. A constitution was written and approved and a national assembly formed. Within a couple of years, there were hundreds of NGOs including six major human rights NGOs. Sincere efforts began to fundamentally reorganise the national health, judiciary, prison, educational and other systems.

I had gone into exile in France in 1970 following the coup in Cambodia, but I returned home in 1992. When I did, it was with the primary objective of making sure that the kinds of human rights violations Cambodia had seen could never take place here again. I founded the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO), with a mandate to focus on civil and political human rights. I felt that unless human rights were genuinely guaranteed, the success of work on other issues such as health care would be vulnerable and transient. LICADHO's initial work was in voter and civic education and monitoring the 1993 elections, which were the first multi-party elections and the most free and fair elections Cambodia had ever known. Since then, the organisation has broadened to include specific work on women's rights, children's rights, medical assistance for human rights victims and for prisoners, legal analysis and a project on torture and rehabilitation.

Building Civil Society in a Flawed Democracy

Nevertheless, the process of democratisation was deeply flawed, even at the electoral level. Although the Royalist party FUNCINPEC (National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Co-operative Cambodia), won 45 per cent of the votes, it was not allowed to take power but was forced into coalition with the Cambodian People's Party (CPP). There was thus no opposition to the government. The CPP in effect retained the power it had held since 1979. The coalition itself was always unstable.

The foundations for the rule of law were not well laid and lack of accountability is a persistent and deeply rooted problem in the Cambodian government. The lack of independence in the judiciary and the institutionalised impunity granted to all civil servants render laws unenforceable. These problems exist at every level of government, both with regard to the internal structures of government and law and in relation to the realities of people's lives. Freedom of association, freedom of speech, women's rights, children's rights, workers' rights, the right not to be tortured or abused in prison or elsewhere, the right to education, the right to health, and virtually every other right guaranteed in the constitution break down under the double burden of legislation. Instead of enforcing and providing for these rights, the law undermines their basis, and with the conflicts within the government, the law is either neglected or used as direct oppression.

The corruption, pervasive at all levels of government, makes it impossible for the country to function democratically. At the lower levels of all areas of government-health, education, civil service, police, and army-salaries are too low even to provide transportation to work. Teachers take money from students; health workers charge patients for medicines and treatment. This has been called "survival corruption." This corruption makes life difficult for many people. But the more significant corruption is not found at the level of survival; it involves much greater sums of money and other goods. This is the corruption which has allowed Cambodia's forests virtually to disappear within the past 10 years and which allows continued drug and human trafficking, including the trafficking of children, to cite but two examples. Both forms of corruption undermine democracy; but the second form is profoundly more disruptive.

The situation of democracy in Cambodia remains ambiguous. As human rights workers, we have an obligation to look at situations as they are and not as we wish they might be. In looking at Cambodian democracy I see many deep, systematic and pervasive problems. I see a long struggle ahead of us before democracy and human rights are firmly established in my country.

That genuine democracy must be gender neutral and that it must include women as fully as men and under conditions of genuine equality - should go without saying. Cambodia has done no better than most countries with regard to this; women are vastly underrepresented in positions of power at all levels and almost absent from the National Assembly and Council of Ministers. In our lives, women remain poorer, less educated and more physically and economically vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and injustice than do men. Infant and maternal mortality in Cambodia remains among the highest in the world. In addition, Cambodia's burgeoning AIDS epidemic will take a huge toll on women, not only as patients but also as caregivers. These are only a very few of the problems we face.

Women's Civil Society Activism

Yet, when I look at the ongoing work of people, especially women, in the NGO community, I feel optimistic about Cambodia's future. Since 1993, hundreds of local NGOs have been established. Among them, many are women's NGOs dealing with human rights, education, information, health, development, religion, counseling, training, re-establishing traditional skills, crafts and arts and textiles. There is a woman trade union leader. We have established a women's group to fight and lobby against violence against women. There is a women's media centre, because at the moment, the ruling party runs national television and radio. We undertook research on rape. Until now, rape has been treated as a civil matter where the judge asks the perpetrator to pay the victim for his crime. We want rape to be criminalised. There is too much impunity for the trafficking of boys and girls. Women are also working to ensure that prostitutes get free medical care. We are working against corruption at all levels. We run

seminars and advocate against delogging and toxic waste pollution. Thousands of women mobilised to act as observers during the elections. After the last elections in 1998, when demonstrations broke out, women were involved in saving and caring for people that were hurt and attacked.

Because we are not within the government itself we are not as subjected to political pressure and control as we might otherwise be; nor are we faced with the same temptations of corruption and impunity. I look forward to a time when I can stand and speak of my country fulfilling the promise of its constitution, when there is genuine multi-party democracy in Cambodia and when there is peace and abundance.

I like to think that we are building a genuine civil society-and with a genuine civil society must come a genuine democracy.

Dr Kek Galabru is President of the *Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO)*. It was founded in 1991 following the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements, but the organisation was only formally recognised by the Royal Cambodian government in 1992. LICADHO's goals are to promote human rights, including children's rights and to monitor human rights violations, committed by state and political establishments throughout Cambodia. LICADHO is a member of the *Federation Internationale des Droits de L'Homme* and provides regular information to *Amnesty International*, *Human Rights watch*, *International Prison Watch* and *Asia Forum*. Kek works as a workshop leader and facilitator as well as a lecturer on women and human rights issues in her country.