

Women start taking their places at the peace table

by Miriam H. Zoll

UNITED NATIONS (ANS) -- For millions of women worldwide, the very idea of making political or economic decisions is a cultural taboo. But in matters of war and peace, where death does not discriminate by gender, a shift is beginning in the tradition that women spend their lives treading softly in their homes and villages while the broader work of governance and negotiation is left to men.

In Cambodia, Guatemala, Burundi and the Middle East, women are succeeding in a drive to participate in peace and reconstruction talks in unprecedented numbers. And their voices help ensure that fledgling governments have an opportunity from the outset to be more democratic and responsive to the priorities of all their citizens, by insisting that women's rights be integrated into new constitutions and legal systems.

Many women's groups and human rights activists say they view the increasing requests for women to formally participate in rebuilding societies after war as a critical stepping-stone toward building greater equality between the sexes overall.

It's not surprising that more women are becoming involved in an official capacity to rebuild their societies and communities after war, said Dr. Noeleen Heyzer, executive director of the U.N. Development Fund for Women, the agency coordinating women's participation in peace efforts in Burundi and the Middle East. During armed conflicts, while men go off to fight, women often become the heads of households and the leaders and decision makers in their communities, she said.

When soldiers return, however, women's newly acquired status is often threatened by the pressures to return to traditional roles. Collaborating as partners in peace and reconstruction efforts helps to ensure that the gains women have made will be retained and even strengthened, she said.

"Historically, women's absence from peace-negotiating tables has resulted in damaging setbacks in development and economic recovery," Heyzer said during a recent interview at the United Nations in New York. "At Dayton, Arusha (Tanzania) and Colombia, it has predominantly been male leaders of fighting parties negotiating an end to war and laying the foundations for peace. But the process of rebuilding a society emerging from war requires equal contributions from women and men."

Last month, a high-level women's team from the United Nations was asked to join chief negotiator and former South African president Nelson Mandela in peace talks in Burundi. Another team departed to the Middle East to take part in a joint Israeli-Palestinian project aimed at formulating and integrating a parallel women's peace plan into ongoing negotiations there.

In Burundi, a nation in east-central Africa that borders Rwanda and Tanzania, the U.N. women's team advised Mandela, 12 peace facilitators and 19 political parties about the importance of building gender equality into a new society. The team's role was to ensure that women's perspectives were reflected in such issues as land rights, repatriation, the right to serve in public office, resettlement and reintegration of refugees, judicial and electoral systems, and constitutional and land reform.

As a result of those meetings, each of the 19 political parties has committed to ensuring women's full participation in implementing the peace accords by appointing two female representatives from each party and convening, with the U.N., a women's peace conference at the end of July.

Case studies

Mu Sochua's rise to power illustrates how a presence in government and peacemaking can help guarantee basic human rights for women. Sochua, the head of the Cambodian Ministry of Women's and Veteran's Affairs since 1998, lived in exile for 18 years and spent six years working as a U.N. relief worker on the Thai border. She returned to Cambodia in 1991 and established an organization called Khemara, a nongovernmental organization dedicated to advancing women's leadership through social, economic and political means. In 1995 she was appointed special adviser on women's affairs to the Cambodian prime minister.

As Cambodia prepares for its first democratic elections in 30 years, Sochua is working hard to increase safety for women and girls. Part of her strategy is to place strong pressure on male police officers, prosecutors and judges to punish crimes of violence against women. Another is to personally invite rural women to run for elected office and voice their political opinions.

"If you don't have the power, you can try all you want, but the change will be slow," she said during a talk at the United Nations in June.

As in Cambodia, Burundi has suffered ethnic and political violence for the last three decades, linked to fighting between two main ethnic groups, the dominant Tutsis and the minority Hutus. The current peace negotiations began in July 1998, led by former Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere, under the auspices of the Mwalimu Nyerere Foundation. Today the talks are headed by Mandela and a team of 12 conflict resolution experts from Africa.

Emilliene Minani, chairwoman of the Burundi Women Refugees Network, is one of seven women granted permanent observer status by her government. When formal negotiations first began in 1998, Minani and her colleagues were prohibited from even entering the room where male leaders were meeting.

Denied entry but determined to be heard, the women proceeded to lobby for gender equality through more informal tactics. Minani and her colleagues intercepted political party leaders in the hallways of government buildings, strongly urging them to consider

and integrate women's perspectives and needs into formal peace plans. Now that the 19 political parties have agreed to bring 38 new women into the formal peace talks, Minani realizes that her hard work has paid off.

"Burundi women have continuously demanded inclusion in the peace talks," said Minani. "We have been jointly fighting for our right to be included, irrespective of our ethnicity, political affiliations and geographic diversities. We, as women, want to make sure that the rights of all Burundian women are protected in all aspects of political, social and economic spheres."

Luz Mendez's experience with the peace process in Guatemala is almost opposite from Minani's. In her country, women were invited to participate, and she became active in the reconstruction process in her country when civil war ended there in the mid-1990s. Today she is the general coordinator for the National Union of Guatemalan Women, a national organization working to ensure equality for women and girls in labor rights, political representation and economic equality.

She said she believes that developments in Burundi and the Middle East represent a major victory for women and establish a new trend that will yield positive results for both men and women.

"I believe that (these kind of opportunities) respond to the demand from women worldwide to have greater visibility in peace processes," Mendez said. "It is also an important step forward for the United Nations and will increase its contribution to peace negotiations."

Breaking down barriers

And now there are female faces around the peace table. Through a project funded by the Dutch government, Palestinian and Israeli women are now formulating their own criteria for establishing and sustaining peace in the region. A U.N. women's team joined them in Jerusalem last month.

The project goal, according to Heyzer at the U.N., is to find points of intersection among the women that can then be formulated into a viable and parallel peace plan.

"The Palestinian and Israeli women have already gone a long way toward formulating a common vision of peace," said Heyzer, who has been asked to assist the group. "On the Palestinian side, facilitators are working with women experiencing varying political, social and economic hardships as a result of occupation. It was quite remarkable to come across women living in refugee camps who were willing to lend their support for a joint peace initiative."

On the Israeli side, she said the Dutch initiative seeks to give equal voice and weight to three major sectors of Israeli society: Israeli Palestinian women, Jewish Mizrahi women

who are born in or originate from Arab countries, and Jewish Ashkenazi women of European ancestry.

"The premise is that viable peace can only be achieved if women from all these communities are mobilized to support a peace process that includes gender equality," she said.