Understanding the Gender Dimension:
The importance of gender equality and female empowerment in peace building

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“A woman is like a tea leaf. When she gets in hot water, she just gets stronger.”

Gender equality is one of the fundamental building blocks for the peace building. Yet, little is done on a wide-scale to empower women and change the gender status quo. Ritual and the arts can provide women with the tools needed for social change. These activities allow women to experiment outside of their traditional roles and can facilitate equity between the participants.
“An understanding of gender is fundamental to making sense of the dynamic of conflict and addressing the conflict constructively. Men and women do have different social roles and different sources of power and influence”. It is extremely important to take into account the experience of women when analyzing political and social conflicts. However, women should not be thought of as a single, homogeneous group because class, age, race and ethnicity play a role in shaping their identities. These dynamic affect how women can operate in their communities.
Women must have the resources and opportunities to empower themselves to pursue vision of peace and equality

“In feminist ritual, women find a place to value the stories, experiences and changes in their lives. To do this, women need to feel empowered to go against everyday social structure...Creating a women-oriented environment allows women to share stories and break the solitude of living in a world where their voices are often not heard”
In many regions of the world, institutions of power and authority, the political economy, and entrenched social norms are reflective of the intolerance of women’s in the public realm. The arts and rituals can be used to empower women, transform social relationships, shift the status quo, and diminish conflict within the community.
Two Examples of How the Arts can empower women

Ghanian drummer Nicholas Kotei Duanie reflects on his experience working with women: “I remember facilitating a drumming workshop with one hundred White, Indian, coloured, and African women, in August 2001. The room was full of women smiling just to hide the fact that they felt uncomfortable and wary about what was going to happen. If we had tried to use words to break that air of mistrust and suspicion, I believe the process would have been heavy and drawn out. But using complementary rhythms, combining different groups of women on different instruments, and using rhythmic voice techniques, the icy climate was quickly dissolved. After about twenty minutes, the room was in a groove, with people smiling and spontaneously dancing, sharing the present, a moment of joy and trust that is so precious and yet so rare.” (22)
In 1998-1999, Bev Hosking and Christian Penny worked in two villages of the South Pacific nation of Kiribati.

“In Kiribati playback theatre was used to work with the whole community and all its stories, rather than making the topic of enhancing women's role in the community an explicit agenda item... As stories from women and men were told and performed, enough trust developed between the women and men in the group for some of the core stories and conflicts around gender to emerge. This happened privately in the workshop sessions and then more publicly in the performances.

While introducing the idea that playback theatre is a means to work directly with social themes, a brief but potent exploration of the theme of equality between women and men took place. It ended with a story illustrating changing values about the relationship between women and men in this community. The workshops provided an environment for modeling and enacting equality in the relationships between men and women. The trainers demonstrated an equal and respectful working partnership. Care was taken to ensure that women and men participated equally in group discussions and decision-making processes in an atmosphere of mutual respect.” (17-18)
These are two examples out of many where the arts and rituals have helped to promote gender equity and empowerment in a community.

However, it is important to acknowledge the challenges that women face today from participating in such events. Political, cultural, economic, and social constraints exclude women from participating in different activities, especially peacebuilding processes. Women's exclusion from these activities are reflective of the societal norms that cause the subordination of women.
One way to overcome these challenges is to acknowledge past injustices. This will allow the community to move towards a future of coexistence and equality.

For example, The New Artist Proof Studio in South Africa hopes to promote teaching across race, gender, culture, and tradition. The teachers and students have had to “grapple with the legacy of the historic imbalance of privilege, skills, education, race, and gender that are part of the apartheid’s legacy. The transformations within us and between us are crucial aspects of the changes taking place at APS. At various points, we have reflected on these dynamics and discussed them directly.”
It is important to recognize the interdependent relationship between gender equality, conflict, and peace building. Men and women must be involved in both building peace and equality.

"If we are to survive as a global community, we must understand the imperative nature of giving birth and space to the moral imagination in human affairs. We must face the fact that much of our current system for responding to deadly local and international conflict is incapable of overcoming cycles of violent patterns precisely because our imagination has been corralled and shackled by the very parameters and sources that create and perpetuate violence."
The potential to eradicate violence and achieve equality is found in humanity's inherent ability to imagine and create.

For this to be achieved, a certain type of moral imagination must be employed. "The moral imagination requires the capacity to imagine ourselves in a web of relationships that includes our enemies; the ability to sustain a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity; the fundamental belief in and pursuit of the creative act; and the acceptance of the inherent risk of stepping into the mystery of the unknown that lies beyond the far too familiar landscape of violence."
In order to overcome these challenges, women must strengthen their sense of themselves as able leaders.
What should we do now that we have an increased understanding of the gender dimensions of conflict and peace building?

All peace building initiatives should incorporate a gender analysis into the assessment of the situation and increase women’s participation in conflict resolution and transformation activities. Specific initiatives should be created to strengthen women’s empowerment and to reduce gender inequalities. These initiatives must directly target both men and women in order to achieve a shift in society’s gender status quo.