



Executive summary

# From the ground up

Women's roles in local peacebuilding  
in Afghanistan, Liberia, Nepal,  
Pakistan and Sierra Leone

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“Peace means different things to women and men because of their unique experiences as a result of the war, and as a result of how society is structured.”



Above: Estella Nelson, Founder and President of Liberia Women Media Action Committee.

Anastasia Taylor Lind/ActionAid

Young women perform a traditional dance as part of a song and dance competition and rally against gender-based violence in Nepal.

Brian Sokol/ActionAid

**“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.”<sup>1</sup>**

Despite the increased international attention to women’s participation in peacebuilding, the achievements and challenges facing women building peace at the local level have been largely overlooked. This study addresses some of these gaps by providing qualitative evidence on the roles of women in local peacebuilding in five countries: Afghanistan, Liberia, Nepal, Pakistan and Sierra Leone and examining how women, supported by women’s rights organisations, are building peace in their communities.

The research found many contextual differences between the communities and countries visited, including the degree of displacement and mobility restrictions as a result of conflict as well as differing levels of external involvement in peace processes and post-conflict recovery. However, it also uncovered important commonalities across the countries which provide clear guidance on how women’s rights and their peacebuilding efforts can be supported in conflict-affected communities.

## The meaning of peace

**“Peace means different things to women and men because of their unique experiences as a result of the war, and as a result of how society is structured. Peace to women means putting food on the table, economic empowerment, access to healthcare and education, and that we can speak up against abuse in the home. There is violence in the home, but too often women are silent, that is not peace.”**

– Estella Nelson, Founder and President of Liberia Women Media Action Committee (LIWOMAC)

This research found that women are more likely than men to adopt a broad definition of peace which includes the household level and focuses on the attainment of individual rights and freedoms such as education, healthcare and freedom from violence. In contrast, men have a greater tendency to associate peace with the absence of formal conflict and the stability of formal structures such as governance and infrastructure.

1. Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, Open Session of the UN Security Council Debate on Women, Peace and Security, New York, 24 October 2000.

## Barriers to women's participation in peacebuilding

**"We hear that we don't have women who are sufficiently educated to take part in peacebuilding. Yet we see men taking part who are neither educated nor care about peace. Women don't need to be educated to know how war affects them, and to know what they want from peace."**

– Selay Ghaffar, Director of Humanitarian Assistance for Women and Children of Afghanistan (HAWCA)

This research has revealed that women face multiple barriers as they attempt to build peace in their communities including the following:

**a) Restrictive social norms and attitudes** that reinforce traditional gender roles, making it difficult for women to participate safely and meaningfully in peacebuilding.

**b) Violence against women and girls**, fuelled by the long-term impact of conflict and militarisation, impacts on women's freedom to participate in peacebuilding activities. Women face intimidation and threats to their safety when they try to take active roles in their communities. Access to justice also remains a significant challenge for survivors of violence against women and girls.

**c) Poverty and economic inequality** also inhibits women's involvement in peacebuilding activities. Women report that they are unable to engage in peacebuilding activities because of the double burden of their domestic roles and income-generation activities as well as a lack of control over household income.

**"Women need economic empowerment, they need to be independent. If they have to work on the farm or other activities to feed their children they don't have time to be active... You cannot be part of training or activities if you don't have food to leave for the children. You need a livelihood, a better income."**

– Female key informant, Community A, Liberia

**d) Inequality in access to education** for women and resulting low levels of literacy were identified in many communities as

barriers to women's active participation in peacebuilding. However, it was also noted that women have many skills in conflict resolution and peacebuilding that do not necessarily require high levels of education.

**e) Women often de-value their role as peacebuilders**, and despite their achievements, women do not necessarily recognise the important role they play in building peace. They tend to focus much more on the importance of state institutions and local leaders as the key actors in peacebuilding.

**f) Sustainability of support:** organisations working to support women in peacebuilding activities also face barriers which impact on the sustainability of their work, including limited and short-term funding and the challenges posed by a lack of national infrastructure and lack of access to remote communities.

## Women building peace

The skills of women as mediators, decision makers within the home and their experiences building trust and dialogue in their families and communities are frequently dismissed as irrelevant or are not sufficiently valued by national governments, the international community or by women themselves. Yet this research demonstrates that at the local level, women continue to build peace within their homes and communities and to come together collectively to create change.

Many researchers have shown that peace starts with families, the way men and women relate to each other, and how children are educated.<sup>2</sup> In this study, women describe the importance of their role in building peace within their own families. Women's role in conflict mediation, building trust and dialogue, educating children and counselling family members not to engage in violence are common themes across communities. Significantly, women's conflict mediation in the domestic sphere is also recognised by male members of the community.

**"Most of the women try to dissuade their male relatives from taking part in violent action and provocative activities. They effectively solve family disputes."**

– Male focus group, Pakistan

**"Women face multiple barriers as they attempt to build peace in their communities."**

# Women's rights at a glance



## Sierra Leone

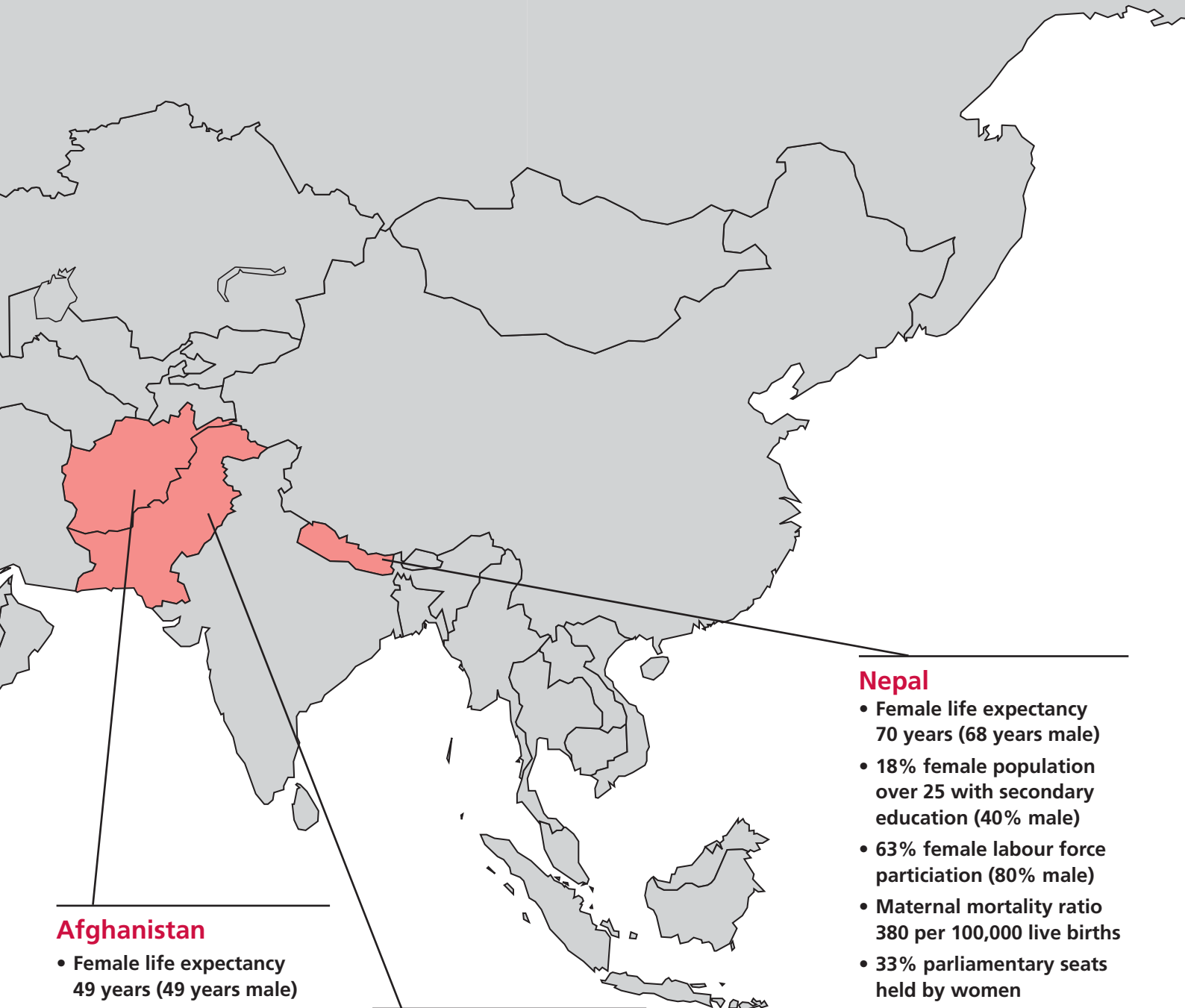
- Female life expectancy 49 years (48 years male)
- 10% female population over 25 with secondary education (20% male)
- 65% female labour force participation (68% male)
- Maternal mortality ratio 970 per 100,000 live births
- 13% parliamentary seats held by women

## Liberia

- Female life expectancy 59 years (56 years male)
- 16% female population over 25 with secondary education (39% male)
- 67% female labour force participation (76% male)
- Maternal mortality ratio 990 per 100,000 live births
- 14% parliamentary seats held by women

The designations employed on this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of ActionAid or Womankind concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

Sources: UN Statistics Division - Statistics and indicators on women and men: <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/indwm/default.htm> (consulted in April 2012); UNDP - Human Development Report 2011, Table 4. Gender Inequality Index and related indicators: [http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR\\_2011\\_EN\\_Table4.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2011_EN_Table4.pdf) (consulted in April 2012).



### Afghanistan

- Female life expectancy 49 years (49 years male)
- 6% female population over 25 with secondary education (34% male)
- 33% female labour force participation (85% male)
- Maternal mortality ratio 1,400 per 100,000 live births
- 28% parliamentary seats held by women

### Pakistan

- Female Life Expectancy 67 years (65 years male)
- 24% female population over 25 with secondary education (47% male)
- 22% female labour force participation (85% male)
- Maternal mortality ratio 260 per 100,000 live births
- 21% parliamentary seats held by women

### Nepal

- Female life expectancy 70 years (68 years male)
- 18% female population over 25 with secondary education (40% male)
- 63% female labour force participation (80% male)
- Maternal mortality ratio 380 per 100,000 live births
- 33% parliamentary seats held by women

**“A key characteristic of women’s involvement in peacebuilding across the study countries is that women and girls organise themselves collectively to achieve change.”**

A key characteristic of women’s involvement in peacebuilding across the study countries is that women and girls organise themselves collectively to achieve change. Some of the most important advances in women’s rights – including for example UNSCR 1325,<sup>3</sup> various legal reforms in all countries that expand women’s rights, and institutions such as UN Women – have been secured through the efforts of international and national women’s movements. This research has revealed that women’s peacebuilding efforts at the local level are no different.

**“In a patriarchal society, it is extremely difficult for women to be heard, so it is important that women come together. Unless they act together, no one is going to hear them. They find security and strength in each others’ experiences.”**

– Bandana Rana, Executive Chair, Saathi and member of UN Women Global Civil Society Advisory Group, Nepal

Across the study countries, women come together and form support networks to create spaces where they can be heard, settle disputes, address unjust treatment, promote women’s involvement in decision making, propose initiatives for community development and seek justice for female survivors of violence and sexual abuse. This collective action results not only in a greater impact in building peace in the community, but also offers a degree of protection and support for women.

**“Women build peace among themselves. They mediate and solve disputes at the community level. Most men solve conflicts at the ‘chief’ level.”**

– Male Interviewee, Justice and Peace Commission, Sierra Leone

While there is evidence in this research that in many study communities, women’s rights have regressed in the aftermath of conflict, it also appears that the post-conflict period has given women space to organise collectively and to assert their power in decision making. This change was most noticeable in Liberia, where women describe a new standing for women in the post-conflict period. However, there was also evidence across the countries of how the transformation of gender roles during

conflict as well as the post-conflict recovery work of external organisations has led to the emergence of women leaders or a stronger women’s rights movement.

### **The missing link – local to national**

Across the study communities, participants expressed concern with the disconnect between national peace and decision-making processes and local communities. Central government and associated politicians and political parties were not viewed as contributing to local-level peace by the majority of respondents. Women frequently did not see the links between their own peacebuilding activities at the community level and national-level activities. There are clearly few spaces for the voices of those working for peace within their communities to have dialogue with decision makers at a national level and this is compounded by remote geographical locations and technology barriers.

**“At the national level it’s the same people all the time. We need to start at the community because we’re not changing anything at the moment.”**

– Women’s rights activist, Afghanistan

A large number of research participants across the study communities agreed on the need for a bottom-up approach to peacebuilding with peace built from the individual, to the household, and to the community level before it can be achieved nationally. NGOs, and in particular networks, are seen as the key connector between local-level peace processes and priorities and the national level.

### **Supporting women peacebuilders – what works?**

This research found that the work of local NGOs and women’s rights organisations is recognised and valued by people across communities. These organisations become the focal point of support for excluded and marginalised women, who struggle to get attention and support from formal state institutions. The study revealed a number of key approaches to empowering women as peacebuilders at the local level:

**a) Long-term support and investment:** Peacebuilding requires long-term support

3. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325), adopted in 2000, recognises the importance of women’s equal participation and full involvement in peace and security.



Photo: Womankind

and funding. Changing structural and cultural barriers that have existed for generations is a gradual process that takes time and persistence, yet funding for women's participation in peacebuilding is frequently inadequate and not sufficiently long term.

**b) Empowering women through access to justice:** Many of the organisations interviewed in this research recognised the importance of access to justice for women in building peace. In order to achieve this, empowering women through increased awareness of their rights and participation in justice structures is key. Access to justice also requires providing support and safety for survivors of violence against women.

**"I'm proudest of solving conflict cases – particularly domestic violence cases where, as a group, we have held husbands to account and let them know they cannot get away with it. They know that we will take it further, even to court."**

– Head of Women's Peace Council, Community C, Afghanistan

**c) Creating safe spaces for women's participation:** Organisations can help facilitate space for women to engage in peacebuilding in the local community and build on the safe spaces women already create for themselves. This requires the creation of formal peacebuilding mechanisms at the community level as well as informal safe and secure spaces for women to collectively organise for peace.

**d) Changing attitudes towards peace and valuing women's contribution:** Gender-

responsive peacebuilding requires the prevention of violence against women and the recognition of women's rights in the household and in the community. This involves awareness-raising, such as through the media, on women's rights, the different impact of conflict on women and a broader understanding of 'peace' at the local level.

**e) Recognising the diversity of women's experiences:** Women in post-conflict countries are not a homogenous group. Widows, ex-combatants, survivors of sexual violence, displaced women, women living with HIV and AIDS or disabilities all face unique challenges and require different approaches to enable their participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery. Successful support for women's participation in peacebuilding at the local level requires recognition of the diverse needs, priorities and experiences of women.

The vital roles that women play as peacebuilders at the local level indicate that the meaningful participation of women in political structures can have significant positive consequences for peace and stability at a wider level. Given the findings of this research that women are instrumental as peacebuilders within their families and their communities, an ideal gender-responsive approach to peacebuilding should recognise the importance of gender equality for sustainable peace, support the important roles that women undertake within their families and communities as peacebuilders and bring these skills, experiences and priorities to the regional and national levels.

## Recommendations

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### Develop and implement concrete, coherent policy commitments

Just and sustainable peace, which includes meaningful participation of women and inclusion of women's rights, begins with coherent policy. All development, defence and diplomatic policy should have clear, strategic commitment to women's rights and gender equality including measures to promote women's participation. Women's rights and gender equality should be recognised in all peace processes, agreements and transitional governance structures, and policy on conflict should incorporate views and lessons from women building peace at the local level.

***To achieve this all national governments should develop and implement a National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 in consultation with women's rights organisations at local, regional and national levels, and with adequate resourcing, clear indicators and a robust monitoring and evaluation plan.***

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### Ensure women's participation in peace processes

To ensure a durable and just peace, national and international peace processes must include women as decision-makers, and reflect the priorities and views of women building peace at local levels including the views of women from ethnic minority groups, widows, ex-combatants, survivors of sexual violence, displaced women, women living with HIV and AIDS and disabled women. Further, all communiqués, declarations and agreements resulting from national or international peace processes should have dedicated commitments to women's rights and gender equality.

***As a starting point to achieve this, a minimum of 30% representation should be guaranteed for women and women's rights organisations in all local, national and international peace negotiation processes.***

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### Provide long term support and funding to women's peacebuilding

Women's rights organisations are at the forefront of innovative peacebuilding work at a local level. For them to reach their potential, this work needs to be adequately and sustainably funded. Furthermore, all funding to peacebuilding initiatives should demand demonstrable women's rights outcomes, including support for women's economic empowerment which enables their participation in peacebuilding processes.

***In line with the United Nations target, a minimum of 15% of all funds in support of peacebuilding should be dedicated to activities whose principal objective is to address women's specific needs, advance gender equality or empower women.***

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### Tackle violence against women and girls

Violence against women and girls is a pervasive element of conflict, and continues long after the laying down of arms. It is both a gross violation of women's human rights and a key barrier to their participation in peacebuilding and public life, and to building sustainable peace. Women need law enforcement and formal judicial mechanisms to be accessible and fair. In addition, no peace processes, whether at the national or the community level, should result in impunity for serious violations of human rights such as violence against women.

***All peacebuilding policy, funding or activity should contain a gendered risk analysis, and include targeted action and ring-fenced financing, to tackle violence against women and girls as a key barrier to peace.***

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### Build an enabling environment for women's peacebuilding

In order for women's efforts in local peacebuilding to be effective, national policies and infrastructure must ensure women's rights and participation. Gender discrimination must be eliminated and women's rights promoted and protected in all public infrastructure and institutions including those in the legal and justice, healthcare, transport and education systems.

Strategic partnerships between women's rights organisations and women in political parties, parliament and government should be promoted. Gender discrimination must be addressed at each stage of the political process including in citizenship, electoral registration and election processes. Voter registration drives and political education campaigns should be targeted at women, particularly those in remote communities.

***In order to achieve this, all national governments should ratify without reservation and implement the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, as well as relevant regional treaties, paying particular attention to institutional reform.***

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The photographs used in this report are for illustrative purposes only and do not depict any women who participated in this research, unless explicitly specified. September 2012.