

**PEACE AS A GENDERED PROCESS:
PERSPECTIVES OF WOMEN DOING
PEACEBUILDING IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Cheryl de la Rey and Susan McKay

Abstract

There has been little systematic gathering of information about women's conceptualisations of peace and peacebuilding within different national contexts. This article reports on a research project that examined how women involved in peacebuilding activities in South Africa understand the meaning of peace and peacebuilding. The principles of participatory research methodology were used in the design of the project. The methods and procedures were designed in consultation with an advisory group composed of South African leaders in the field. A two-day workshop was then convened. It followed a participatory process which brought together 16 women who are emerging leaders in present-day South Africa. The main objective was for participants to discuss the question of how women directly engaged in peacebuilding activities view the meaning of peace. With the permission of the participants the proceedings were recorded. This article presents an analysis of the transcribed proceedings focusing on key themes which elucidated conceptualisations of peace and peacebuilding. The dominant conceptualisation was that peace is a gendered process that involves both internal and external aspects. Emotional issues and processes were seen to comprise the internal aspects of peace, whereas the external aspects of peace were seen as the technical-procedural components. The article discusses each of these aspects, examining the complex and diffuse ways in which they were seen as gendered.

Introduction

There has been little systematic gathering of information about women's conceptualisations of peace and peacebuilding within different national contexts. A reason for this may be that peace itself is a difficult concept to define. Tuzin (1996), for example, pointed out that in the large body of scholarly literature on peace there is a notable lack of examination of the definition of peace and furthermore, when it is mentioned it is unreflective and often contradictory. Similarly, the concept of peacebuilding has been defined in terms of a wide range of issues, relations, activities and structural changes.

Notwithstanding the overall complexities and difficulties of achieving conceptual clarification, there is a general marginalisation of women's experiences and voices in debates about the meanings of peace and peacebuilding. This study builds on the pioneering work by feminists such as Birgit Brock-Utne (1985, 1990) and Betty Reardon (1985, 1990) in attempting to disrupt the male bias in peace research by examining the meaning of peace through the perspective of women directly engaged in peacebuilding activities. The aims of the project were to examine how women involved in peacebuilding activities in South Africa understand the meaning of peace and to explore how understandings of peace are influenced by gender and social context. Not only does the study add to the general debate by bringing in a gendered perspective, but it also contributes to knowledge about the conceptualisation of peace by focusing on women in South Africa, a third world society currently in the process of transforming itself from apartheid to a non-racial and non-sexist democracy. Studies such as this, which investigate understandings of peace and peacebuilding across national, gender and cultural boundaries are important since one's definition of peace influences how one goes about facilitating peace. By focussing on the voices of women, this project sought to contribute to the debates about ways to integrate gender into theoretical conceptualisations of peace and peacebuilding.

Methodology

The design of the project was influenced primarily by methodological considerations that may be termed feminist participatory research. The features of feminist participatory research may be summarised as openness in overall approach, a shift in the researcher-participant relationship such that the participants have a role in shaping the research process and the creation of spaces for women's voices (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 1994). All these features, to a greater or lesser extent were applied in this project.

Before the project proposal was submitted to potential funding agencies, the researchers consulted with several non-governmental organisations and individuals in the field to gauge their interest and support and to assess the appropriateness of the research question and methodology. Support and interest was consistently expressed by the various parties consulted. Many of these individuals subsequently participated in the project as it unfolded.

Once funding had been secured, the researchers planned the details of the process with the assistance of a three person advisory panel comprising leaders in the field of peace and peacebuilding in South Africa. The project implementation centred on the design, planning and execution of a two-day workshop.

The Workshop

The workshop was facilitated by two women identified by the advisory panel. A call for nominations of women to participate in the workshop was distributed to organisations

involved in peace-related activities. Of the nominees sixteen women participated in the workshop. Participants were selected with the intention of bringing together a diverse group of South African women. These women were from a range of organisations and as individuals they were from diverse ethnic backgrounds, regions, religions and ages.

The facilitators, together with the advisory panel and the researchers co-ordinated the invitations to participants and planned the programme for the two days. The intention at the outset was that the programme was subject to change by the participants. Overall, the process of the workshop was participatory and dialogic meaning that participants were active contributors throughout the workshop helping shape the agenda as it unfolded. The programme included a variety of activities – plenary sessions, small group discussions, brainstorming and drawing. Periodic consolidation of ideas and reviews of the process sometimes resulted in refocusing of the programme. The co-researchers participated in the workshop primarily as recorders, but they also participated in activities and discussions where it was deemed appropriate.

The workshop began by focussing on the meanings of peace and peacebuilding. On the second day the participants departed from the stated aim somewhat by deciding to have a discussion on the terms peace enforcement, peacemaking, peacekeeping and peace involvement. This included discussion on women's participation in these processes and how these processes impacted upon women.

Analysis

With the permission of the participants the discussions were audiotaped and transcribed. The co-researchers independently analysed the transcripts – coding units of meaning, merging these codes into categories and then into themes of meaning. Initially, the analysis was incorporated into workshop report that was distributed to all participants. In addition, two participants wrote a report that was published in a South African feminist journal (Lazarus & Taylor, 1999). The discussion that follows is based on the joint analysis of the co-researchers.

Central Themes

Peace as a Process

There was agreement on the conception of peace is as a process. This idea of a process pervaded all the discussions during the workshop. There were very few references to peace as a state and/or outcome. There was consensus around the image of peace being a process that “is a long, long road.”

A drawing exercise that involved small groups jointly illustrating peace and peacebuilding produced the image of a symbolic journey as the essence of peacebuilding. Depicted within the drawing were a road, a train, a clock, a ticket window, and a rainbow. During a plenary, the participants indicated that the road showed that “it is a journey we are

on.” People were seen to be involved in different parts of the journey but to sustain the initiative, there must be common understanding of what is involved. The picture depicted that during the journey the environment can change—for example, from sunshine to wet roads and wind. A rainbow was used to symbolise seeking to reach out toward a goal. Communication skills and energy were seen to be necessary to keep the process going. The ticket window showed the need to buy into the peace process as part of the commitment. On the train, people were seen to work and do different parts of peacebuilding but it was viewed as all linked. There was acknowledgement that the journey will involve conflict; however, what was noted as important was dealing with the conflict constructively.

Although the centrality of process has been widely noted in the literature on peacebuilding (e.g. Lederach, 1995a, 1995b), the view of peace per se as a process is hardly documented. This view contrasts with the notion of peace as a state or outcome. Mazurana and McKay (1999) drew attention to the emphasis on the outcome orientation to peacebuilding as promulgated by numerous donor agencies and how this is often at odds with local perspectives that place an emphasis on process.

Peace as a Gendered Process

As the workshop discussions evolved the participants noted that peace as a process is deeply gendered. There was agreement that “[Peace is] about men and women and how they relate to each other.” The unfolding of the discussions to deeper levels of meaning led to the shared realization that many of the activities that the participants were engaging in were part of the process of peacebuilding but that they had simply not named it as such. For example, it was agreed that:

“... this process is already happening in most organisations, it's just that we don't call it by these names. The example that we used was the Domestic Violence Interdict Act which is already happening and in a way is part of that enforcement of peace. It's just that we haven't, we don't use it in these terms. We just use it according to the organisations we belong to and how, you know, people see it.”

That these women did not define their activities as peacebuilding is perhaps not surprising given that the term peacebuilding is relatively new in South Africa but also globally (Mazurana & McKay, 1999). Besides the recency of the term, the fact that the activities of these women were not defined within the ambit of peacebuilding may also be an indication of the general invisibility of women's actions from more mainstream peace initiatives.

Difference

The sub-themes on peace as gendered reflected two assumptions about men and women. First, there was the notion that men and women are essentially different; women viewed as the peacemakers and men viewed as the aggressors. This was typified by accounts

such as the one below: “We've seen it within our organisation and for us, if we're to have democracy in this country, and if we're going to have a future, we believe that one of the proponents of that future is peace and the best people to do that are women, to make it happen.” Another illustrative account was:

“I was telling (participant) outside that I haven't worked with a group of women for while. I've been doing lots of work with mixed groups. I've been working a lot with men and I'm telling you it's just so amazing when... It's such a learning experience for me! I am honoured to be with all these women! I think that at this time we should just hug ourselves, to affirm ourselves, in the things that we believe in as women and what was portrayed here just doesn't come out in workshops with men, it doesn't! It doesn't, it's not there!”

This perspective of essential difference was, however, challenged by the observation that men can sometimes be victims and women perpetrators of violence and abuse. Although this second view challenged the first, it was a comparatively minor theme.

The predominant theme of women and men as different resonates with some feminist sentiments that gender differences in attitudes and perspectives on war are the result of women's innate, inherent peacefulness and men's inherent aggressiveness (Forcey, 1995). Such a female-centred perspective has been attributed to women's experience of birth and nurturing (Chodorow, 1989). This line of argument typically emphasises feminine traits of co-operation, caring and nurturing as opposed to the masculine traits of dominance and aggression.

From a feminist post-structuralist perspective such views have been criticised for assuming an essential nature of man and woman, based in the extreme on biology and more moderately on socialization differences. This assumption denies the diversity of women's and men's experience and the similarities between men and women (Bohan, 1993). This assumption also entrenches a hierarchical thinking about gender that leaves patriarchal dualism unopposed (York, 1996). The notion of all women as intrinsically nurturant and peace-loving has also been challenged by black feminists who have commented on the capacity of white women to oppress black people and black women in particular (e.g. Hooks, 1984). Furthermore, essentialist notions of gender cannot fully account for the active role women play in war (York, 1996) and studies have not consistently supported women as more caring or peaceful than men. But, since 95% of all direct violence is committed by men (Galtung, 1996), the difference debate will continue.

Gender Exclusions and Inclusions

A theme that surfaced and resurfaced several times was about gender as an axis of difference that produced exclusions and inclusions. A selection of quotations to illustrate is listed below:

“And what I was seeing was that women are not involved in the process. So as the first three being the conditions for peace, that's where one of the problems is, is that we are like involved in the background but when it comes to the actions, we are only the recipients. We are not active.

What I commented on also, what I find is that there is an inner circle and there's an outer circle. The inner circle has the power. The outer circle doesn't care about what the inner circle does and if you put the outer circle, because she was saying that what she was going to do was that these people who are directors or whatever who always have the power, they put them in the inner circle, the men, put them in the inner circle. They put all the women who work in the communities outside and let them be powerless and that's.... Those outside have to struggle.”

Men were clearly positioned as active agents inside the circle of power, with women in the background playing a supportive role. It was observed that: “If there's a major issue of violence happening in the community, it's only the males who go in and do that...” Men were seen as “in control of the process and so on, with their guns and stuff.” The women participants acknowledged that they were not doing enough to position themselves more prominently in the process. It was recognised that “we're again excluding ourselves from those areas because you're saying that for the males, let's leave it to the males.”

Peace as an Internal Process

This theme covered the emotional aspects of peace, such as love and forgiveness. These aspects were identified as something one has to learn or engage in, in order to facilitate the peace process. The various components that were named included:

- Collaboration/ Support
- Trust
- Compromise
- Forgiveness/Reconciliation
- Love
- Responsibility
- Anger/Conflict
- “Walk your talk”
- Other necessary emotions

The theme of women and men as different resurfaced with women being identified most closely with the emotional component as in: “The people who were the most ashamed, of course, were the women. ... There were just mainly men who congregated. It was like an ego state.”

Peace as an External Process

This theme dealt with more technical aspects of peace such as peace enforcement, peacekeeping, monitoring and prevention. There was substantial discussion on the definitions of each of these terms. However, peace as an external process was also linked to the importance of social development, basic needs and poverty alleviation.

There was a clear association between gender and the external aspects of peace, with men being positioned as the active agents in these processes. However, as dialogue on the meanings of these terms deepened, there was a growing realisation that, as one woman expressed it, “we tend to realise is that we were more involved actually in the peace-enforcement and peace-keeping and peace-making than we thought we were. And that we were involved in different ways.”

Micro Macro Foci

The participants noted that there is a web of interdependence between the individual, the family and the community and that a peaceful community is dependent upon each individual's commitment to peace. There was agreement that the individual, the family, the community and the nation must accept responsibility for creating peace by learning the necessary skills.

Rinehart (1995: 386) argues that the idea of peace as radiating out from the individual and filtering up through society, as was discussed by the participants in this project, is “poorly recognised and under-utilised.” He suggests that there has been an overemphasis on macrosystems that make up negative peace, rather than on microsystems, which are involved in a positive peace. This micro-social approach to peace contrasts with the more popular conception of peace as a macro-social issue. The workshop participants observed that women are clustered in micro-level peace initiatives while the macro-level processes are dominated by men.

Acting for Change

The participants recognised that their peacebuilding initiatives were constrained through lack of power, voice, and recognition by self and others and that what they do differs from what men do to build peace. The women noted that although peacebuilding work at community levels is important; they need to work at all levels to involve themselves in macro and formal peacebuilding structures so that women's perspectives are integrated within mainstream peace processes. Hence, there was a great deal of discussion on strategies for achieving changes in gender relations.

A strong point of consensus was that initially there has to be public recognition and value for the numerous ongoing activities that women are involved in. It was noted that: “We have to devise ways, and we haven't discussed what those ways are exactly, but we are going to devise ways to get women involvement recognised and valued. And that would be

part of the peace-building process because there's a lot of women are doing within the peace-building process that is going unrecognised”.

The importance of using whatever limited power already available to women to achieve change was emphasized as shown in these extracts:

“If we're not sitting on executive boards, that there are other strategies and powers that we have access to. And we're talking about the withdrawal of marital rights. So there are a lot of things that women can do. Women can bash their pans in their homes when there's domestic abuse happening. So there are small things that can be done that are very powerful, and that, you know, there's no excuse for doing it in a way.”

Another strategy that was emphasised was networking and providing support for one another. Collaborative efforts were endorsed. There was a call for “ support from one another,” but it was noted that “In order to do that we need to know who is out there so that we know that we are not alone.” As examples of women competing with other women were described, the need for trust to enhance the capacity of women to support one another was emphasized. The advice was that this could be avoided if we:

“ challenge one another if we get sucked in and lose sight of what it is that we are trying to achieve and basically that we are all engaged in transformation and there is already a history in this country of women resistance. Women were the first ones to burn their passes in 1912 (sic). They were the first ones to march in 1956. So there is a process and we are all engaged in it and we just have to support one another”.

The role of men in achieving change was also discussed with the agreement that women cannot act alone but that men can play a valuable role as change agents. There was a commitment to involve men initially in small ways. One of the participants described how she would begin: “Within my own organisation, ... that's a little bit more daunting. I shall certainly be sharing the experience of these two days with them and then include the male members, it would be a very good to get an awareness for them, too, to realise what's been going on.”

These discussions on strategies to achieve changes in the ways in which peace as a process is gendered, affirm Utting's (1994) plea that a peace process should not be seen merely as a means to returning a society to normative gender inequalities.

Discussion

In many respects the perspectives of these South African women participants in this project confirm gender-specific trends reported in other parts of the world. Several themes

evident in the discussions echo the patterns identified in Mazurana and McKay's (1999) international review of women's peacebuilding activities at the grassroots level. The emphasis on process, human relationships and consciousness of the need for strategies to increase the participation of women in all levels of peace work and activities have been noted among women in many different parts of the world. However, the South African women seemed to differ from the general patterns in explicitly articulating peace itself as a process as distinct from an emphasis on process that leads to an end goal or outcome. Moreover, the participants were unequivocal in noting that gender is an integral aspect of peace as a process.

The workshop discussions made explicit the way that gender impacts on peace processes and activities by marking boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. It was noted that women's activities are concentrated at the micro-level and that women are typically excluded from more visible macro-level processes that gain national and international recognition and acclaim. At this point there was agreement that gender is relational and social and that these differences were attributable to practices of exclusion and inclusion. Although a view of women as essentially more peaceful and different from men was expressed, there was no suggestion that the clustering of women's activities at the micro-level was related to any notion of fundamental gender differences.

Given the history of racial oppression in South Africa, it may seem surprising that race did not emerge as a theme in the analysis. There were references to differences among women such as race, age, income and religion, but none of these emerged as a clear theme. This may be due to the race composition of the project as a whole. Although white women participated, black women were in the majority. Furthermore, the focus on gender was clearly conveyed as the primary concern at all stages of the project; and indeed, all the participants were nominated on the basis of an active commitment to gender equality. Another factor may have been that for all the participants this was the first time that they had the opportunity to specifically focus on gender and peacebuilding. It is likely that as these discussions continue over time in various forums, they will deepen such that differences among women doing peacebuilding may be given more attention.

Overall the discussions of South African women participants in this project showed that from their perspective peace is a process that is deeply gendered. This perspective strongly resonates with Enloe's (1993) argument that the war-ending process is profoundly gendered. We believe that studies such as this one make an important contribution to the literature on peace and peacebuilding especially because of women's historical exclusion from peace studies and related disciplines such as psychology and international relations. By drawing women's voices into the ongoing debates about the meanings of peace and peacebuilding, project such as this potentially contribute to the development of a more inclusive, multidimensional approach to the social problems that we face at the beginning of this century.

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