

Chapter 4: History, Grievance and Conflict

History and grievance are often intertwined

105 Remembered injustices, including those that occurred decades, even centuries before, play an important role in justifying and sustaining many conflicts. Certain remembered processes, the most obvious being colonialism, slavery and the Holocaust, leave a backlog of potentially flammable grievances. Feelings of grievance around a sense of historical injustice need to be understood, not in the sense of what actually happened (this is always open to interpretation) but in terms of what they mean today. However long ago events occurred, it is their interpretation in the light of current circumstances that gives them relevance. These form a backdrop against which more immediate grievances become significant.

106 There are various examples of historic, retained grievance that shape the way in which potential conflict can be kept alive. The Commission observed that the nineteenth-century Irish Famine not only represented massive deprivation and hardship, but also led to deep-seated feelings of anger and disrespect that continue to live on in the minds of later generations that cannot have been directly affected (and sometimes more strongly in the diaspora than in those left behind).

107 In the context of peace and power-sharing in Northern Ireland today, wise and perceptive policy has been aided by an appreciation of, and sensitivity towards, persisting, subliminal grievances on all sides of the traditional fault-line of faith. The recollection of a past event as divisive as the Battle of the Boyne has been remembered in a way that, since the division of the island, has 'justified' enmity between the two sides.

108 Current leaders have been alive to the need not only to build new political structures but also to address and combat this kind of justification. Failure to do so, they have concluded, would result in a peace that was, and could only ever be, skin deep. What was required, by contrast, is something more ambitious that recognises the layered and uncritical way in which past grievance has been left to fester and potentially fuel enmity today.

Narratives of grievance can be pervasive

109 How the story of grievance is told to one's own children, community and to others, how it is then reproduced in the media and often, eventually, in school textbooks (thereby institutionalising it for generations of young people) is an important element in the maintenance and even escalation of disputes, including violent ones.

110 Such narratives bind a community together and unite them around a common cause and this can be positive. But it can also result in portraying the 'other' in a wholly negative light, divesting them of any moral authority or legitimacy; make feelings of hate and

distrust 'normal'; and, in extreme cases, be used to justify violence. That is why it is important to nurture across all groups within society a sense of shared common destiny that can transcend long-felt grievances and humiliations.

111 It has been the particular narratives created around shared Muslim global grievance that have been among the most powerful in recent years. Muslims continue to suffer, these narratives will say, simply because the world does not care, or because powerful non-Muslims, especially in the West, feel hatred of Muslims or contempt for Islam. This is a powerful narrative with considerable potential to mobilise opinion in a wide range of similar and dissimilar countries. It is also a narrative that can and has been underscored by attachment to the Muslim *Ummah* or sense of religious community and common purpose.

112 Sometimes narratives of grievance continue even after peace breaks out. In some cases, it may be that grassroots combatants feel undermined by the peace agreements made in their name – this was the reaction of some loyalist paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland to the Good Friday Agreement. Those involved in gangs or paramilitary groups may also have personal reasons for continuing to fight – it may afford them status amongst their peers or they may be making a living from the violence. Others may always have been involved in violence, since childhood, and never have had the opportunity to stand back and re-think the history of the conflict from their own perspective, but also from the perspectives of others.

113 Importantly, and as we have noted, in order to understand and respect others it is first necessary to be understood and respected oneself.

Reconciliation, often led by women, is a key to healing

114 When conflict ends and reconciliation begins, history needs to be revisited and reinterpreted so that people can move on. Ties that joined the two communities in the past need to be re-emphasised so that scant memories about what times used to be like can be re-ignited. If there was no previous contact, then the affinities they currently share (loyalty to a region, aspects of culture or language) need to be emphasised. Both women and civil society groups have played enormously important roles in reconciliation and peace-building and it is worth considering why their contributions are so significant.

115 Whether women were involved as combatants or not, they are likely to share aspects of their identity and their experience of warfare with women on the 'other' side. Like men, women know what it means to have sons, brothers, husbands and even mothers and daughters, who fought and died in conflict; like men, they know what it means to be displaced. But they are more likely to suffer high rates of maternal and child mortality and low rates of access to education and health care and to experience

exclusion from public life, and they will more often know what it is not to be recognised as full citizens. Women who have survived wars must find ways to live with the gross injustices that have filled their past and are haunting their present – acts of discrimination and violence committed before, during and even after conflict.

- 116 It is their common experience as women that makes women's role in peace-building so critical, a role that is now formally recognised in UN Security Council Resolution 1325. This resolution attempts to develop a more systematic way of consulting with and involving women in peace and reconstruction processes. The Commission recognises this crucial role of women, in the hope that their experiences, priorities and solutions contribute more than they have before towards the reconstruction of societies based on inclusive governance. Women can bring some particular strengths and perspectives. For example the fruits of their experience in relating through networks of relationships rather than hierarchical structures is especially important given what we have said earlier about the role of networking in 'government through respectful dialogue'.
- 117 In Rwanda for example, Tutsi and Hutu widows first came together to take care of war orphans, and are now supporting them by selling their woven baskets in the global market. Women ex-combatants, with first-hand experience as both perpetrators and victims of violence, met to share their experiences and learn ways to manage trauma, and a few have become trainers in the Demobilization and Reintegration Commission, ensuring attention to women's needs in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration. Most notably, by ensuring the inclusion of a 30 per cent quota for women in parliament in the new Constitution, Rwandan women ultimately won a full 49 per cent share – the highest in the world.^{xiii} In Burundi, women from each of the 19 parties to the Arusha peace negotiations came together in the All Party Burundi Women's Peace Conference in July 2000 to formulate an agenda for peace and reconstruction that would guarantee women's rights to rebuild their society alongside men, thereby positioning themselves to enter the political process.^{xiv} And through the International Women's Commission for a Just and Sustainable Palestinian–Israeli Peace, prominent Palestinian and Israeli women have come together to advance the peace process and speak with one voice to global leaders.
- 118 It is instructive to look at how India has opened up the panchayat system, enabling women to take on leadership positions at the local level. Many of these women, nearly 1 million, have been trained in how to analyse local budgets from a gender perspective, making the link between national gender equality policies and actual spending to implement these policies. By looking at budget expenditures, community members are able to ensure that a greater percentage of local resources are spent to provide clean water, health clinics or better local transport systems. They have also engaged in social

xiii UNIFEM 2004-05 and UNIFEM 2006-07.

xiv UNIFEM 2000.

audits, demanding public review of income and expenditure of village councils and holding officials accountable for addressing, or failing to address, local needs. The positive results of these initiatives show the importance of building women's agency from the bottom up.

119 The role of civil society in post-conflict situations is important for the same reason: civil society groups and organisations can bring together people on the basis of identities they share, not those that have previously divided them. When people meet, for example, as journalists, business people, educationalists or trade union members, and when they are drawn from both sides of previous divisions, they not only bring with them a ready-made network of contacts but also a means of communicating with those contacts. They then have within their grasp the possibility of generating new, jointly developed messages about new ways of relating to each other and working together.

120 The rehabilitation of young people in the immediate aftermath of severe conflict is one of the most challenging tasks facing civil society organisations. We are just beginning to understand the profoundly damaging effects on the personalities of young people who grow up in conflict-ridden societies. Often in the aftermath they find it difficult to live in a peaceful society and have stable personal relationships, and the rate of youth suicides may increase significantly. Where child soldiers have been part of the landscape of violent conflict, this task can appear daunting given the way in which violence has been habitually embedded in young, formative minds. One programme that has worked in Liberia promotes amputees who have lost limbs in the conflict to take up competitive soccer. People who had been on opposite sides of the fourteen-year conflict in Liberia now play soccer together, often in the same team. The team members themselves see playing soccer together as a great expression of reconciliation.

121 Another important group of people in post-conflict situations are those previously involved in the fighting, including those who have themselves committed atrocities. Very few ex-combatants are given the chance to be listened to and to put their point of view to the wider world. And yet this was a major achievement of South Africa's Peace and Reconciliation Commission, an approach that has since been emulated in many other countries (and had also been used earlier in a number of other countries, particularly in Latin America).

122 The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established in South Africa in 1995 in order to start healing some of the deep wounds of the Apartheid years. The main vehicle of the TRC for this purpose was public storytelling, the aim being to establish a picture of the causes, nature and extent of the violations that had occurred during the Apartheid period. This included both the perspectives of the victims and the motives and perspectives of those responsible for the violations. Amnesty was granted to everyone who fully disclosed what had gone on and this apparently helped enormously in restoring the human dignity of the victims.

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The TRC thus allowed individuals to tell their story from their own point of view, and to be heard. This proved a major step in the reconciliation process. But it is important to emphasise that its success depended in large part on the fact that it was not – and did not seek to be – a process of redress, and that it was constructed in a particular historic and socio-cultural context.^{xv} While the exact process cannot simply be repeated in precisely the same way elsewhere, there are important general lessons here on the use of constructive interaction that is an integral part of the civil route to peace.

