

Culture, Power Asymmetries and Gender in Conflict Transformation

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1

1. Introduction	2
2. Culture, Gender and Power: The relationship	2
The culture of domination	
The impact of dominatory patterns on conflict and its conduct	
3. Implications for Conflict Transformation	6
Culture transformation: responding to charges of neo-colonialism	
Addressing power asymmetries and injustice	
Dilemmas in terms of supporting equality	
4. Good Practice	13
Cultural sensitivity, gender equality and the respectful exercise of power in organizations	
Cultural sensitivity, gender equality and the respectful exercise of power in intervention	
5. Ongoing Questions and Perspectives	14
6. Reference and Further Reading	15

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1. Introduction

To try and address these three issues in one chapter is quite a challenge. It also makes sense, since they are intimately related. I shall argue that the overarching culture of domination, which has prevailed for thousands of years, provides the framework and cultural sanction for oppression and exploitation, and is characterized by oppressive male/female relationships. I shall relate the need to challenge this culture – and its manifestation in asymmetrical gender constructions and relationships – to the need to address another global power asymmetry created by the last five hundred years of colonization, the asymmetry between ‘the West and the rest’. This history and the resulting structural relationships have made respectful and honest dialogue about culture-related issues extremely difficult. It also explains the suspicion with which conflict transformation is regarded outside the West. Unless it gives due emphasis to questions of power, to the need for justice in global relationships and to the right to equality of women and other marginalized groups, it will not be taken seriously by most of the world’s people, or enriched by their experiences and insights. It will also fail to address the question of domination, and arguably help to perpetuate it, acting as a tool for pacification, rather than for the achievement of genuinely peaceful (i.e., just) relationships.

In the first part, I shall discuss the relationship between culture, attitudes to power and power asymmetry, constructions of gender and gender relations and the impact of all three (and of their mutual influence) on conflict and its conduct. In the second part, I shall examine the implications of this for conflict transformation, some of the tensions between the values and ideals it embodies and the realities of the situations it seeks to transform. In the third part of the chapter, I shall consider how the needs of equality, cultural sensitivity and constructive approaches to power can be incorporated into organizations that seek to contribute to conflict transformation, and suggest some elements of good practice in conflict intervention itself. I shall conclude by reflecting on the immensity of the challenges that face us, suggesting that we need to add to rigour and analysis a more fluid and tentative approach.

2

2. Culture, Gender and Power: The relationship

2.1 The culture of domination

Cultures are not fixed or monolithic, but fluid, complex and changing. Culture is indeed quite hard to define. The best my very large dictionary can do (for the sense we need here) is „[a] particular form of intellectual development“. What I mean by culture is the patterning of assumptions about life, its realities and requirements, and intrinsic or accompanying values and norms. One could argue that the very notion of culture is itself a cultural construct – and in this sense, a relatively recent one. It could also be argued that it is a concept so nebulous and problematic as to be near meaningless; yet its difficulties do not disprove its importance. Since it provides a way of talking

about the foundations of human thought, activity and relationships, and bears such a close relationship to the equally difficult and important concept of identity, it is far too important to ignore or dismiss.

While it is essential to the very notion of culture that it is variable and particular not only to societies but to individuals within them, Riane Eisler (1990) argues convincingly that a thread running through almost every generalized, mainstream culture in recent millennia is the central value placed on domination: of one species over others; of one group over others; of one person over others and of one sex over the other. She describes this as a „dominatory culture.“ Eisler’s contention is that, despite assumptions to the contrary, egalitarian, cooperative relationships have, in the past, in some societies at least, been the norm – and could be again. In the meantime, the culture of domination overshadows our view of both past and present, and that perspective reaches out, depressingly, into the future.

Domination has power asymmetry as its goal and is dependent on it. It represents the kind of relationship that most people, in most cultures, most readily associate with the word power, i.e., meaning power over people and things, as against the capacity to do something or the responsibility to act on behalf of others (Boulding 1978). There are many different vehicles for the exercise of power over others: wealth; control of resources and terms of trading; language; education; fashion; political structures and practices; laws (their enactment and application); imprisonment and physical violence, or the threat of it, on whatever scale, including military systems and wars. Violence, the harmful and destructive exercise of power over others, is both the means and the outcome of domination. A culture of domination is a culture of violence. In the words of Johan Galtung, „cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right – or at least not wrong.“ (Galtung 1990, p291)

The oppression of women is often explained, and indeed justified, in terms of culture. Gender can be defined as the social construction of sex difference, expressed in constructions of masculinity and femininity (Francis 2000). As traditionally constructed, gender differences are integral to the culture of domination, having power asymmetry at their heart. Masculinity is constructed as powerful, aggressive, controlling; femininity as inferior, weak, submissive, serving or (more positively) nurturing. In the more extreme versions of this construction, women are regarded as a subspecies, to be treated by men as their chattels. Since women are those who also spend the most time with children and are their chief educators, it is clear that they participate in the perpetuation of this cultural viewpoint. The domination of men over women is the most fundamental and widespread form of power asymmetry in human society and societies. In some parts of the world, the oppression of women by men is lessening; in others it continues unabated. However, in most (if not all) societies, domestic violence against women is common and in many it is tacitly, if not explicitly, sanctioned. In some countries, women’s movements and activities are restricted and their treatment under the law is harsh and discriminatory. Women are also oppressed economically. The work that they do, overall, far exceeds that which is done by men, yet they ‚earn‘ on average far less than men, control a small fraction of the world’s wealth and are often debarred from inheritance. In global terms, then, there is a clear power asymmetry between men and women.

The colonial activities of the last few centuries have brought about another global skewing of power: the domination of a few nations over the others (what Alexander, 1996, calls „global apartheid“). Broadly speaking, this can be seen in terms of the North and West on the one hand and the South and East on the other, though in reality the picture is far more complex. The domination takes different forms: military; economic and cultural. The cultural imperialism of the West, combined with its military and economic power, colours interactions between those who are associated with its domination and those who are on the receiving end. It engenders patronizing and dismissive attitudes – and underlying fear and hatred (*see* Said 1978) – on the one side and suspicion

and resentment on the other. It means that expressions of difference, particularly in relation to culture, are liable to be seen as either unwarranted and disturbing or disrespectful and autocratic. Since culture and identity are closely related, cultural differences in dominatory relationships are seen as a threat.

Since identity, like culture, is complex, so are experiences of domination. Western women, for instance, and men in other parts of the world, belong in global terms to the categories of both dominators and dominated; and within any country there will be different social or ethnic groups that are in unequal relationships. In all rich and powerful countries there are poor and marginalized people – the so called ‘fourth world’. Sometimes identity groups that constitute a numerical minority within a given society are, overall, more powerful politically or economically than the majority. At times, victimized groups use their victimhood as a source of power, both as moral leverage and in building support.

Individuals within all groups and in any sphere of life compete for power, and most individuals in some areas of their lives are likely to be relatively powerful and in others relatively powerless. Furthermore, all human beings are likely to display, in different contexts, both dominatory and cooperative approaches to power. I do not wish to suggest that men are born more aggressive and controlling than women, or that those born in the West are by nature more aggressive and controlling than those born elsewhere. There are many powerful and exploitative women and men, North and South. I am arguing that within an overall culture of domination, it is the ‘power over’ or dominatory power model that is favoured, as against the cooperative, ‘power with’ and ‘power for’ model. Within that overarching cultural context, the gender roles assigned to women and to men result in gross power asymmetry between them, which is expressed both structurally and in terms of behaviour. In addition, the acts and processes of colonialism, supported by the culture of domination, have resulted in structural power asymmetry between different parts of the globe. This occasions structural injustice and cultural imperialism, and renders dialogue about anything – particularly about things attributable to culture – sensitive and difficult. In the context of existing geopolitical power asymmetries, since the emancipation of women is seen as a Western project, it is liable to be associated with cultural imperialism.

Although the broad, overall, power asymmetries between men and women and between the West and the rest, constitute the main focus of this chapter, the relationship between culture and oppressive power structures and behaviours is one which applies in a multitude of spheres (for instance, in employer/employee relations, within organizations, in political systems and between ethnic groups).

2.2 The impact of dominatory patterns on conflict and its conduct

Conflict is likely to be experienced whenever ideas, activities, structures and people change in relation to each other. Since change is not only inevitable but also often desirable, conflict is unavoidable as well. Broadly speaking, it may be handled either cooperatively or competitively. In a dominatory culture, as we have seen, it is the competitive model which is chosen, associated with violence in different forms. The hostility associated with conflict in such a cultural context is typically exacerbated by cultural differences: dominatory motives are imputed to others, and ‘otherness’ is seen as a threat. When difference is associated with power asymmetries, fear and mistrust will be further increased, with those in power expecting insurrection and those underneath feeling threatened and abused. Cultural difference is then a source not of enrichment, but of alienation, misunderstanding and misinterpretation. It is associated with disapproval or non-respect on the one hand and feelings

of victimhood, resentment and affront on the other.

The desire to dominate or escape from domination is a constant motivation for organized violence, whether for control within existing territory or for territorial expansion (territory here being both literal and metaphorical). The hidden conflict of injustice is perpetuated and opposition suppressed by organized violence and the threat of it. Organized violence is also often seen as the only effective recourse for those who suffer injustice. When those with little power act to become more powerful, they are accused of causing conflict (*see* King 1963) and, in all too many circumstances, those who have benefited from their powerlessness use violent or controlling means to keep them in their place. Women are beaten, slaves are punished, revolutionaries are attacked by government forces, and small nations are attacked or threatened by the superior armies and nuclear arsenals of big ones. The culture of domination and violence makes all of this seem 'normal'.

In war – the archetypal dominatory exercise – the male dominatory gender role is played out in particularly crude and brutal ways. The culture of domination gives glory, approval and status to men for their participation in violent conflict, especially when it is associated with collective identity. The world's towns and cities are disfigured by symbols of martial domination – typically, men on horses brandishing swords. From this cultural viewpoint, women are regarded as mothers and supporters of fighters, but also as victims and peacemakers. Rape, of both women and men, is part of the pattern of war behaviours – a horrible emblem of domination and the brutalisation of human beings. The wholesale rape of women because they are seen as belonging to a particular group is not uncommon, signifying not only male/female domination but also the triumph of one group of men over another.

The victimization and suffering of women in war does not mean that they play no part in hostilities. Although there are impressive stories of women's peacemaking, women are also involved in the social polarization that lays the ground for war, and there are other stories that recount their role in encouraging and goading their men to fight and sometimes fighting themselves. At the same time, war can give women greater domestic, economic and social power than they enjoy in times of peace. When their husbands are away at war, women often become the sole breadwinners and heads of household. When families are displaced, it is often the women who manage to earn enough for them to survive, by making and selling things, for example. (Their men folk may resent this and feel marginalized, but the needs of children exert an undeniable pressure.) In industrialized societies, women may be drafted into jobs that have previously been closed to them, and in others forced into domestic service (Reimann 1999). At the same time, there are countless examples of women's involvement in challenging those who are waging war and in efforts to bring war to an end, as well as in caring for those displaced or otherwise affected by hostilities. (Men also may choose to take a role that deviates from their gender stereotype: opting for draft avoidance or resistance; joining the peace movement or aiding those who are victimized.) However, since wars are fought not for the rights of women but for other goals, once they are over, those who have traditionally assigned women their place in society will expect to do so once again, and it will be hard for women to hold the ground they have gained. It is even difficult for them to get redress for gender related crimes against them (particularly rape). In the aftermath of war, levels of domestic violence against women are high, and the objectification through the sex trade is common (with the male staff of UN, OSCE and other international organizations sometimes among the main users).

3. Implications for Conflict Transformation

3.1 Culture transformation: responding to charges of neo-colonialism

It is widely acknowledged within the field that a key to the constructive management of conflict is to understand and address the basic human needs of those involved (Burton 1990). The way in which these are experienced and can be met will be culturally influenced. Max-Neef (1985) argues, for instance, that in Western cultures material considerations play a more central role in meeting identity needs than they do in other cultures where dignity suggests other priorities (*see also Salem 1993*). The challenges that such differences imply for the cross-cultural development of conflict transformation are not, in themselves, insurmountable. Indeed, to address them is a potentially enriching process, likely to sharpen our overall understanding of the nature of conflict and of the range of human responses to it. If women begin to have more voice, that may also have an impact on the cultural range and insights of conflict transformation.

It is clear that war, as a method of dealing with conflict, does not address the needs of women, children and other socially marginalized or oppressed groups caught up in it. It is also clear that it is widely sanctioned culturally. However, particular cultures not only shape, but are also shaped by, values and those who hold them. Their variations and manifestations in time and place are infinite, and they are changed by those they have helped to form. There are endless variations within any culture, and some of these can be described as counter-cultures. In addition to this, conflict transformation too can be seen as counter-cultural by seeking to address the immediate manifestations of violent conflict, as well as its structural and attitudinal causes, and to bring about long term change. The term not only refers to action for change and a body of theory informing and informed by action; it also implies certain goals, based on particular values. It is not domination by one party over another, but the transformation of dominatory and violent relationships and structures and manifestations of violence. Conflict transformation instead aims towards relationships of respect, cooperation and consent and constructive means and norms for dealing with conflict.

Many people outside the West – academics, politicians and socially active people among the vast majority of the world's population – are suspicious of a field which they see as emanating largely from North America and Europe, most often referred to as conflict resolution and frequently in association with the term conflict prevention. Their arguments can be summarized like this: „Of course they want to stop conflicts – not theirs, ours. Conflicts disturb the status quo, which is to their benefit. They don't want opposition. They don't want their power contested. They march around telling others what to do, bombing and threatening, but they want us to stay in our place and keep the peace. There is no peace without justice. We have to be prepared to fight, when our honour and our dignity are at stake. We won't be pushed around forever. This is the latest insult. They, who are the biggest militarists, tell us how we should deal with conflict. They're too ignorant to understand us anyway. Their theory is based on cultural assumptions that just don't apply for us. We may have to pretend to go along with it all sometimes, because they have the money and call the shots; but it would be better if they'd stay at home and put their own house in order. Most of the world's ills come from there anyway.“

This is, of course, a crude simplification of the argument (for a more measured and refined expressions, *see Salem 1993*), but I believe it is a reasonable generalization of what is a just case, which I have heard voiced in one way or another on many occasions. If conflict transformation is to be found useful and relevant outside the West, it will need to be clear that its goal is not conflict

prevention, but rather the prevention or diminution of violence in all its forms, direct, cultural and structural. It will need to communicate more strongly the message that resolution cannot happen when peace is bought at the expense of perpetuating gross injustice. It is a process in which the needs and identities of all are understood and respected. I believe also that the proponents of conflict transformation will need to acknowledge that the current mainstream conduct of affairs between the West and the rest is not in line with its principles and aspirations, and that they are in solidarity with those who seek a more just world order. If these things are done, maybe the space will be created for the further development of conflict transformation in cultures beyond the West, so that it finds different forms and expressions, and is enriched by the knowledge and experience of others and a truly international exchange.

The need for constructive engagement in conflict is indicated by global injustices and also in relation to many other forms of oppressive power relationships, including gender issues and the place and treatment of women in society. As I have already suggested, since the notion of human rights and its application to women are seen as originating in the West, to query their place in society means to question the culture of that society; hence feminist agendas are easily dismissed as imperialist. In countries where discrimination against women is justified by dominant local traditions, many men and some women defend that discrimination in the name of culture, accusing those who question it of cultural infidelity and collusion with this imperialism. However, while cultural influences and power asymmetries may help to explain attitudes and behavioural patterns, they do not justify them. Cultures, like structures and actions, are open to evaluation, critique and change. Counter-cultures can become mainstream. Wherever I have travelled, I have met women who are outraged when violence against them is justified in the name of culture, and who are working with courage and determination to confront it – whether it takes the form of female circumcision, restriction of movement, debarment from inheritance, or discrimination and harassment at work. They are also aware of the need to challenge the cultural basis for this oppression. Unfortunately, there are some societies which are at present so oppressive that to speak out is to court terrible punishment. In such cases, international pressure seems not only justifiable, but also necessary. Solidarity and imperialism may be open to confusion; they are nonetheless distinguishable and the distinction needs to be made. The same applies to other culturally sanctioned forms of oppression, whether related to caste, ethnic identity, sexuality or ability.

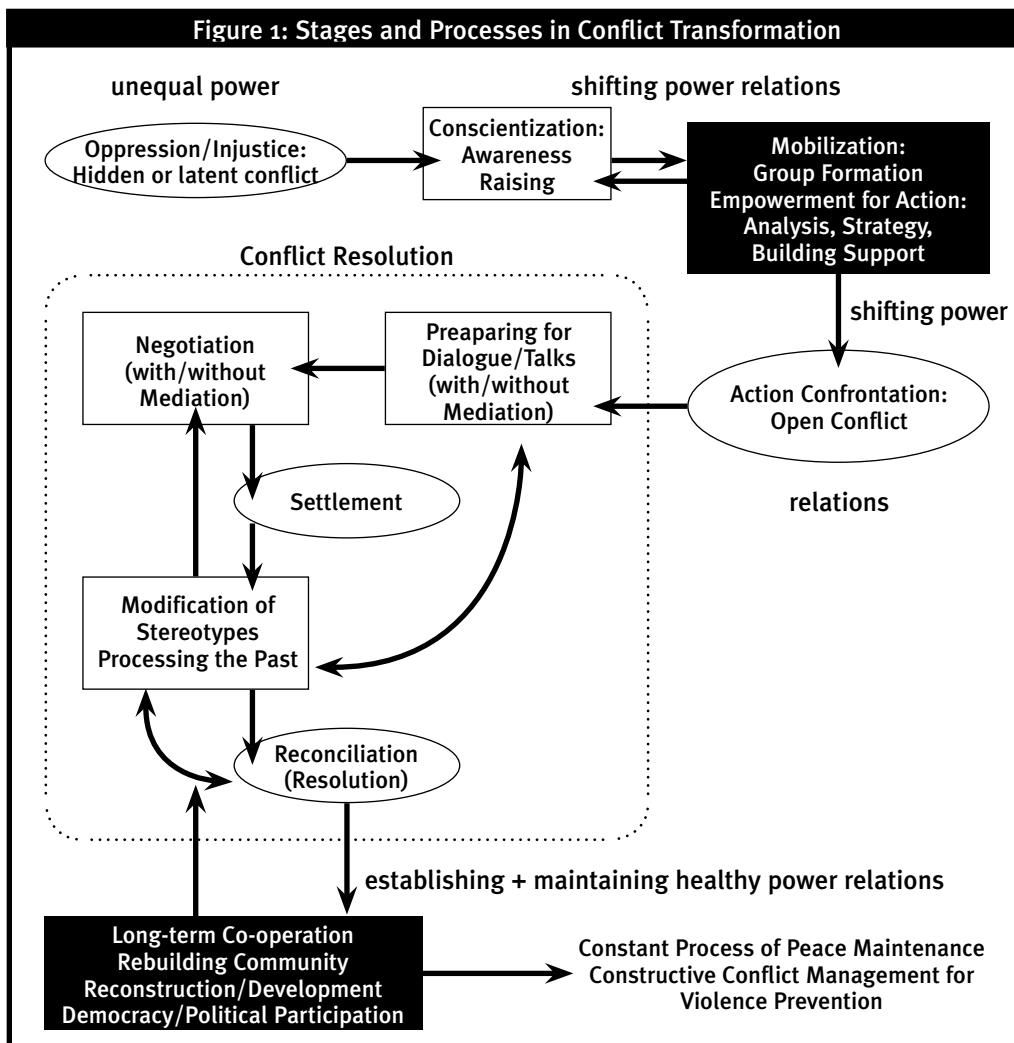
3.2 Addressing power asymmetries and injustice

Oppression can be considered as a hidden or latent conflict: one waiting to happen or to be brought into the open (*see* King 1963 and Curle 1971). When groups organize themselves to increase their power and confront their oppression, they are acting within the framework of domination, in order to break out of it. They are in a position to act cooperatively with each other and with those who support them, and they need not seek domination over their oppressors. They cannot, however, cooperate with them, since the existing relationship will not allow for cooperation. Within the model of conflict transformation, they will seek to increase their power in relation to those who oppress them through nonviolent⁴ means. Only when they have done this will the cooperative processes of conflict resolution become a realistic option.

If addressing power asymmetries and consequent injustices is a major component of conflict transformation, the emphasis so often given to preventing and ending conflict, and to facilitative mediation (which can be effective only when there is relative power parity), can be seen as disproportionate. The notion of conflict prevention has to give way to that of constructive,

nonviolent engagement in and with conflict. Impartiality, from this viewpoint, is not the automatic and only good. Partisan roles can be seen as potentially constructive, and support for constructive action by those in conflict (whether that support is partisan or non-partisan) as the primary form of intervention.

Figure 1 (developed with Guus Meijer) depicts stages and processes by which a situation of oppression, or latent conflict, characterized by major power asymmetry, can be transformed. The words contained in oval shapes describe conflict stages, while those in rectangular boxes describe actions or processes by which those stages are reached. The arrows go in different directions because these processes are mutually reinforcing. Power relations begin to change when those who are oppressed bring their oppression into awareness (a process which Paulo Freire (1972) termed 'conscientization'); then to mobilize themselves and others for action. Mobilization involves the formation of groups and networks, the articulation of common values and goals, the development of a common strategy (within the framework of conflict transformation, this will be a nonviolent one) and building support of all kinds. Only when they have increased their own relative power, and acquired sufficient leverage to make a difference to their oppressors, will they be able to confront them effectively – whether that confrontation takes the form of private dialogue, public action or (most likely) both.



Once that stage has been reached, it becomes realistic to think in terms of the conflict's resolution, and the processes indicated within the dotted lines can begin. However, it should be noted that at no stage is progress likely to be smooth. Nor is conflict simple or monolithic, and the stages are never really separate from one another. The diagram represents not the messy reality of conflict but a set of objectives that are roughly sequential. Reconciliation, which can be seen as the fruit or culmination of conflict resolution, is often, in practice, reached only after generations – if ever. It is nonetheless a valid aspiration, and it will be achieved/ consolidated largely through long term cooperation in rebuilding society. The maintenance will require mechanisms and a culture for constructive conflict management; and conflict management will include the management of power asymmetries within society.

Most people who find themselves caught up in a conflict, whether in its hidden form of oppression or in open confrontation, have not chosen to be involved. In complex political situations, deliberate political decisions and actions are taken by a relatively small number within the wider group, while the rest are in a position of powerlessness. One aspect of conflict transformation is the conscientization or awakening of those who currently take no power, so that they become active for constructive change. If they are to act effectively, they will need to consider their own possibilities in relation to the conflict: their understanding of what needs to be changed; their existing involvement, if any; their standing in relation to different groups and individuals; their personal gifts and capacities; and the forms of support they can enlist. If they see their own group as disempowered, needing to strengthen its position before conflict resolution can become a possibility; they may well choose a partisan role, working as educators within their own group and preparing them for non-violent action; they may undertake the function as advocates for it in relation to other power-holders (including the wider public and political opponents); they may work as movement organizers, public activists and support-builders, reaching out to and involving others and building coalitions.

Those insiders who, despite their identification with one or other of the conflicting parties by birth and by ascription by others, wish to play a bridge-building rather than a deliberately partisan role, may choose to leave the addressing of power asymmetries to others. They may work instead to establish contact and understanding with appropriate members of the opposition and acting with them as public educators, and to help prepare the ground for conflict resolution.

At this stage in an asymmetrical conflict, outsiders may be involved in supporting the nonviolent empowerment of an oppressed group, so that the inclusive resolution of the conflict becomes a possibility. (It is all too easy to regret now that the ten year campaign of non-violent action by the Albanian population of Kosovo/a² received so little international attention and support.) Outsiders may help in the process of conscientization and capacity building; they could provide resources (money, information, expertise); they may act as advocates for them in relation to those who oppose them and to potential supporters; and they can take public action in solidarity with them. Since conflict resolution is not yet a realistic option, mediation between the different sides is not likely to be useful, but outsiders may act as bridge builders, helping to establish contact and understanding between the conflicting sides (pre-mediation). They may also play the role of human rights monitors (often in practice seen as partisan, since in such situations most human rights violations are committed by the stronger side in relation to the weaker). Although in situations of clear, one sided injustice related to oppressive power asymmetry, outsiders or third parties are likely to opt for partisan roles, if they are particularly qualified as future mediators, they may decide to remain on the sidelines at this stage in order to keep themselves available and acceptable to both sides for a facilitative role at a later stage. Others may elect to work at least nominally with both sides, but concentrate their efforts on helping the weaker side to increase its capacity for effective negotiation.

Once the disempowered group has achieved sufficient leverage for conflict resolution to be possible, those who are members of conflicting parties and have opted for partisan roles, will continue as advocates for the needs and rights of their own side in seeking an inclusive solution to the conflict. Those who have opted for bridge-building roles will likewise continue in them, encouraging and involving themselves in dialogue at all levels, acting as advocates for the peaceful resolution of the conflict and helping to build a 'peace constituency'. For whatever reason, this is a role often taken by women – as for instance in Sierra Leone, where the Women's Movement for Peace (formed in partnership with the pre-existing Women's Forum) has been both active and influential, and in Russia, where the mothers of conscripts ran a high profile campaign for an end to hostilities against Chechnya.

Having reached this stage, third parties will, ideally, leave the work of advocacy to the parties themselves, confining their efforts to support for peace constituencies and for the resolution process itself. They may now act as facilitative mediators of unofficial political processes such as problem-solving workshops and other forms of pre-negotiation (even of official negotiations), and corresponding dialogue at the grassroots and local level. (Power mediation, in which a third party imposes a process of 'negotiation', and even its outcome – even though it may be part of the way things currently often happen – is not part of the concept of conflict transformation.) Once a settlement has been reached, efforts to address continuing tensions at the local level, and to deal with the traumas and crimes of the past, may well benefit from third party facilitation. There may also be a role for outside monitors to check, for instance, human rights violations or ceasefire infringements.

In societies which have suffered from violent conflict, the (re)establishment of participatory, democratic politics (though not necessarily on a Western model), and the development of a culture, structures and skills for the positive handling of conflict will be vital for the maintenance of peace. Since conflict is integral to everyday life, and power asymmetries will constantly need to be managed and exclusions and injustices addressed, the development of these capacities is vital for the prevention of future violence, whether cultural, structural or direct.

At this peacebuilding stage, as at all stages of conflict, support from outside may have an important role to play in the form of the provision of training and consultancy, whether for constructive partisan groups, bridge-builders, human rights monitors, workers for democracy or others, at whatever level. It should, however, be offered tentatively and given sensitively, with close attention to local culture, perceptions, wisdom and realities. This means that a flexible, context specific and broadly elicitive approach is needed (Lederach 1995), rather than off the shelf, didactic packages.

3.3 Dilemmas in terms of supporting equality

Women are commonly very active in processes of conflict transformation, whether in women-only groups, like the international Women in Black, or as the backbone of gender inclusive organizations: resisting war and calling for peace; fostering dialogue between different groups; working for human rights; supporting refugees and others affected by the war; or developing peace education for all ages. Supporting women's work is therefore productive both in terms of helping them to play a full role in social and political life, and in terms of the transformation of the political conflict they are helping to address. However, as already noted, since wars are not fought for women's rights and they are not often involved in military and political decisions to end them, once war is over the contribution and rights of women are all too often overlooked.

Sometimes the supposed solution to a conflict is to give greater autonomy to minority groups and the freedom to organize civil life in line with their own culture and traditions – that is, according to the dominant culture within that group, which is often oppressive towards women (*see* Saghal and Yuval-Davies 1992). So, in many circumstances, after the emancipation of their ethnic or cultural group, to which they have contributed, the need for women's emancipation has been overlooked or denied by the male leadership, so that the lot of women is not improved or is even worsened. More generally in post-war situations, those who have played an important role in the search for a peaceful solution to conflict or who have stepped into new roles during a war are returned to the margins once an apparent peace has been secured.

Marginalized ethno-political groups remain peripheral throughout, are co-opted or caught in the crossfire and their needs are often excluded from the provision and/or implementation of any settlement.

When levels of violence and suffering are high, there is strong moral pressure to focus actions and interventions on immediate and urgent needs and solutions. This tends to translate into working within existing cultural constraints and power realities. Not only women, but also cultural minorities outside the main axis of the conflict (Roma, for instance, in South East Europe), are excluded from the top level and, at the same time, they themselves often avoid explicit political involvement and are unwilling to be seen as players, so that each tendency reinforces the other. Those who wish to intervene in favour of rapid progress towards the settlement of violent political conflict are therefore likely to devote their attention to the key players, so confirming the marginalization of women and weak minority groups. In other words, there is a tension between the long term goals and values of conflict transformation, which include societal change, and the short term goal of ending immediate political violence.

Box 1: International Campaign „Women Building Peace“

In order to strengthen women's role in peacebuilding the British NGO International Alert (IA) has launched an international campaign named „Women Building Peace: From the Village Council to the Negotiating Table“. IA addressed an open letter to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and the International Community, with calls to sign and circulate the following appeal³:

„Dear Secretary-General Kofi Annan,

Women everywhere applaud the efforts made for peace by the United Nations. Women recognise the progress made in including women in peace making and peace building efforts within the UN itself and the pledges made to women during the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. However, we believe that five years later not enough has been done to make these pledges a reality. They must be implemented, as sustainable peace can only be achieved with the full participation of women from all levels of society. We ask the governments of the international community and the United Nations to stand by the commitments they have made to women. These are to:

- Include women in peace negotiations as decision-makers;
- Put women at the heart of reconstruction and reconciliation;
- Strengthen the protection and representation of refugee and displaced women;
- End impunity for crimes committed against women and ensure redress;
- Give women and women's organisations the support and resources they need to build peace.

„The organizers aim to collect a minimum of 250.000 signatures. The campaign is supported by

more than 100 NGOs worldwide and works to achieve global policy changes to strengthen women's participation on all levels of peace processes – locally, nationally and internationally.

The exclusive nature of peace processes will also have implications for the choice of personnel in interventions. For instance, I know of one organization which has reluctantly chosen to use all male teams in unofficial political mediation in Sri Lanka, since their first concern is to gain access to, and credibility with, political leadership there. This tension between long term goals of conflict transformation and the short term expediency of using existing power structures is felt also when internal democracy is sacrificed to the perceived need for decisive action by the main political players in a given context. For instance, leaders who have a sense of urgency about reaching a settlement do not consult adequately with their constituencies during the negotiation process. The secrecy that negotiations often entail militates against accountability and the building of internal democracy. Those who hold the power to sign a cease-fire or endorse a settlement are, moreover, often those who have abused their power and will continue to do so. The problem is the same: in order to reach a situation of long term peacebuilding, it seems necessary to work through existing power relations, which are in themselves contrary to what a just peace requires. The result is that the long term needs and rights of marginalized groups are never adequately addressed. Their continuing oppression represents a deeper, hidden layer of ongoing latent conflict.

The use of armed 'peacekeepers' or 'peace enforcers' presents the same dilemma in another form. By the exertion of dominatory or coercive power, they constitute a continuation of the mechanisms and relationships which erupt in wars; yet often they seem to offer the only practicable route out of them. They also represent a shift in the use of coercive power. Ideally, instead of being an instrument of selfish domination, it is used to provide space for the establishment of more equal, cooperative relationships; but the contradiction remains. The development of peace and human rights monitoring is arguably less problematic, and the idea of unarmed peacekeeping is being developed and pioneered by many groups around the world. In any case, it is important that the composition of such forces or teams is mixed in terms of gender, ethnicity and other identities – both because of the message that this will convey and because of the capacities it will bring. It will also be a matter of equal opportunities at the point of recruitment.

The values of equality and inclusion which, in conjunction with the current realities of war, underlie the dilemmas alluded to above, are the values of a particular identity group: that which is formed by the adherents to conflict transformation and the wider value group from which they come (culturally liberal, philosophically egalitarian, politically democratic, concerned with socio-economic justice and unhappy about war). These values are confined to no particular culture and are universal in none, but they constitute a culture in themselves. They are in clear opposition to the universally prevalent culture of domination, which has its own long term as well as short term agenda. They are also in clear opposition to sexism, racism and discrimination of all kinds. This needs to be honestly acknowledged. It also challenges those who work for conflict transformation to do their work in respectful, non-dominatory ways – in line with their own theory and values.

In my next section I will consider ways of doing the work of conflict transformation respectfully and responsibly; in other words, good practice.

4. Good Practice

4.1 Cultural sensitivity, gender equality and the respectful exercise of power in organizations

The first challenge for those who wish to promote the theory and practice of conflict transformation is to develop non-dominatory, respectful culture, structures and processes and live them in their own organizations. The example set by such organizations may have a multiplying effect; but in any case integrity requires it:

- **Embodying respect in the organizational culture:** this is fundamental and, within the parameters of transparent organizational values, should include respect for different cultural, gender and other identities and the needs and rights of minorities. This culture will be expressed in the organization's collective vision, its articulation of its mission and goals, its policies, publicity and ethos.
- **Creating and implementing equal opportunities policy** for the recruitment and selection of paid and volunteer staff, and for appointments to the board; also for chances of development and promotion (and, of course, pay) within the organization, and the opportunity to contribute to the body's vision and culture. When it comes to field work, the dilemma may have to be faced of choosing to challenge local stereotypes by appointing, for instance, women to positions that, in the local context, would be unusual or even unacceptable for them to hold, as against bowing to local custom for the sake of minimizing obstacles to immediate goals. If the latter choice is made, it and the reasons behind it should be made explicit, in consultation with those thereby excluded. When the organization in question works on behalf of one particular identity group, it may be appropriate for members of that group to hold key positions within it; but this should be clearly and honestly reasoned and communicated. The question of approaches to power, and other aspects of culture and identity (including gender, if it is not a women's organization) will still be relevant.
- **Creating organizational structures and practices that embody the ,power with and for' approach,** being designed in terms of responsibility and function rather than hierarchy and involving cooperative processes for learning and the preparation of decisions. Participatory processes and power sharing will require transparency and clarity about the goals and realities of procedure and structure, with codes of practice to set standards and provide a reference point.

4.2 Cultural sensitivity, gender equality and the respectful exercise of power in intervention

The term conflict intervention can tend to suggest that the actors in question come from outside the area of conflict. This is the first question to be addressed, in terms of conflict transformation and the respectful exercise of power. Who are the primary actors in transforming conflict? I would argue that, both morally and practically, it is those who are most directly affected by it. The following suggestions for good practice are framed in terms that allow them to apply either to inside actors or to those who intervene from outside, or to both. Some, however, are clearly directed mainly at outsiders:

- **Paying explicit attention to questions of culture** in preparatory research and project/ program design; identifying cultural differences within and between conflicting groups and seeking to understand how those relate to power.

- **Identifying cultural differences** between any who are intervening from outside and those who are involved in the conflict, and exploring the implications of those differences, both in terms of what is respectful to the human beings involved and of what will be needed in addressing the conflict.
- **Paying explicit attention to the ways in which women are affected by and can have an impact on the conflict**; considering the potential for contributing to the empowerment of women – both short term and long term – in any intervention; seeking to include work with marginalized groups where this is feasible.
- **Paying explicit attention to the role of power asymmetries in conflict** – to the ways in which these are being exploited and experienced by the parties – in order to make well informed decisions about effective action in support of conflict transformation.
- **Assessing the likely impact of proposed action on changing power dynamics** and being aware of the extent and limits of one's own power and responsibility; being sensitive to culture/power perceptions and language capacities; not using (even inadvertently) language to dominate; making clear agreements with partners and being open about values and goals.
- **Considering the full range of constructive roles** which are possible and for whom they are appropriate – partisan, semi-partisan/bridge-building, non-partisan (facilitative/supportive of processes and capacities) – and making a clear and open choice; remembering that third parties are less important (or should be) than the parties to a conflict; acting on the 'power for and with' principle, rather than seeking to impose.
- **Being wary of motivation by one's own personal/organizational need or desire for power**; asking whether the proposed action is something that will be really useful and who is best equipped to do it; providing training for staff to strengthen personal and organizational self-awareness and to create willingness to confront and wrestle with dilemmas and contradictions; building in processes for feedback, monitoring, reflection, evaluation and adjustment in relation to all aspects of practice.

5. Ongoing Questions and Perspectives

Those who work for conflict transformation are constantly confronted with the fact that current realities conform only exceptionally to the theories and values they espouse. The present global culture of power, the broad realities of power relations and the destructive approaches to contemporary conflict make the project of conflict transformation seem more than a little quixotic. Yet if there were nothing that needed to be transformed, the notion of transformation would have no meaning. The heart of the challenge is that it is necessary, in a largely hostile (though changing) climate, to advance on so many fronts at once, trying at the same time to hold together both short term and long term objectives, and balance competing benefits. Fortunately, those individuals and organizations committed to contributing to the project of conflict transformation are as many and various as the problems to be confronted, have different priorities and expertise and work at different levels of the socio-political pyramid (Lederach 1995). Given the size of the overall task, however, and at a time when devastating wars are taking place in so many parts of the globe, it is easy to be discouraged. At a time of rapid change, culture has become, for many people, a desperately needed garment for identity; at the same time it is used to cloak injustice and cruelty and to justify violence. Moreover, our theories have to be dragged through the hedges of situations which they did not envisage. In practice, conflict transformation has to find ways of operating in the midst of conflict as usual (or even worse).

One thing that may help us to deal with the size and complexity of what we are trying to do is to turn away from the illusion that we can control outcomes and accept that we can only participate in processes, recognizing that means and ends are, in the last analysis, inseparable. Insistence on hard approaches to planning and evaluation, the reification of outcomes, and unwillingness to acknowledge that they can never be fully predicted or assessed, are part of a culture of control which, according to currently prevalent constructions of gender, is male (Belenky et al. 1986). It is also very Western. While clarity of purpose, thorough analysis and strategic planning are important, they need to be complemented by flexibility, responsiveness and even (dare I say it?) intuition. Assessment will need to include the evaluation of changes made to what was originally planned and outcomes that do not correspond neatly to those that were envisaged. It will have to evaluate work in terms of its own quality and reasonableness, even when outcomes are disappointing or surprising, and it will need to accept that longer term impact may never be known. This may be difficult, in the light of the demands of funding agencies that the resources they provide should be used to good effect and of the criteria by which they propose to judge such effectiveness. (Power relations between conflict transformation organizations and funding agencies would make an interesting area for study and reflection.) I believe, however, that if we allow ourselves to be dominated by demands for hard evidence and instant rather than long term, diffuse results, we are in danger of being led into dishonesty, illusion and disillusion.

Conflict transformation, wide scale and long term, will involve the transformation of culture and of structural relationships. If we are to replace the methods of domination with those of equality and cooperation, we shall need the equal involvement of all kinds of people in that change: women and men and those from all cultural backgrounds. Not only does justice require it, but, without the involvement and contributions of all, there can be no adequate and inclusive process. We have to work within current realities and at the same time be open and steadfast in holding to the values of justice and respect which conflict transformation implies. This will involve us too in conflict, as we struggle to confront our own internal differences and divisions, and to find ways of being in dialogue with different world views; – but conflict is our business.

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