

## Significance of Gender in Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the relevance of a gender perspective of Conflict Resolution studies and practices. The author analyzes *why* and *how* women should be considered and included in conflict resolution theories and activities. In this paper the author emphasizes that women are effected *differently* than men, by social, political, economic and environmental changes and public decision-making in their country. Therefore, it is argued that conflict resolution processes and studies need to consider a gender perspective in order to be true to the situation, all-inclusive and effective. The author refers to Argentina's social and political condition during dictatorship, Mexico's change to capitalism, and environmental and security issues in Africa as examples for conflict situations. She considers the activities, initiatives and achievements of women in these countries specific means of conflict resolution.

These women's activities are then related to theories of conflict resolution theories that emphasize the importance of the *cultural* aspect in societies.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the author

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<sup>1</sup> References about women's activities are from the following texts: Corcoran-Nantes, 1993; Feijoo/Gogna, 1990; Jelin, 1990; Pires de Caldeira, 1990; Stephen, 1993; Karame/Tryggestad, 2000.

emphasizes that women should not only be considered *victims* of conflict and targets of conflict resolution, but they should also be considered *contributors*, *resources*, *methodological tools* and *active participants* in conflict resolution processes. She also suggests that by looking at such women's activities one can learn about *how* to organize, build networks and cooperate in order to achieve positive change.

Another example refers to women's involvement in alternative communication on the grassroots level in Ghana where participatory communication activities have become a successful means of conflict resolution.<sup>2</sup> The author then discusses how the idea of participatory communication offers a comparable analysis to Paul Lederach's *elicitive* approach for conflict resolution, in which he proposes to use people and their everyday understandings as resources (Lederach, 1995).

The proposal of a gender perspective on conflict and peace studies is also analyzed by various scholars in "Gender perspective on peace and conflict studies". Some of its discussions, such as the issue of empowerment through Lebanese women, the need to look at a perspective "from within" when looking at forms of protest and the importance of using women as resources and methodological tools are discussed in this paper.

The underlying hypothesis of this work is that a gender perspective is necessary for the studies of conflict and conflict resolution in order to offer effective guidelines for conflict resolution activities. This argument is supported with the observation that many scholars and authors of conflict theories point to the *cultural* significance in resolution processes. Gunda Sabel-Sheehan believes that in the social structure the gender aspect is as important as the cultural aspect. She suggests, that in addition to emphasizing the *cultural* significance, the *gender* significance must also be considered in conflict resolution studies and practices, otherwise a valuable opportunity to develop and pursue inclusive and effective conflict resolution is lost.<sup>3</sup>

## **WOMEN'S CONFLICT RESOLUTION ACTIVITIES**

### **MOTHERS OF THE PLAZA DE MAYO**

In April 1977 Argentinean women reacted to the government's actions that lead to the forced disappearances of family members, including their children. Despite their marginal position, these mothers began to protest publicly as they wanted to know the whereabouts of their kidnapped and missing family members during the repression. Originally 14 women, between forty and sixty years old, while searching for their children decided to "bring their pain out into the open" by demonstrating in front of the government's offices (Feijoo/Gogna 1990: 87). Their

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<sup>2</sup> The presented examples are from Pilar Riano's book: *Women in Grassroots Communication* (Sage Publication, Thousand Oaks, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> The definitions and statements about conflict and conflict resolution are based on the following texts: Caplan, 1995; Strauss, 1979; Gulliver, 1979; Rabie, 1994.

activity was the beginning of a solidarity resistance to brutal, oppressive power. As a means of getting attention, they occupied the center of politics: Plaza de Mayo.

By July, they had reached public opinion with a demand, that they published in the daily newspaper *La Prensa*: "All we want is the truth." With this request they asked for a reply from the government regarding the whereabouts of their family members (Feijoo/Gogna 1990: 87). Eventually they had handed in a petition to the authorities with 24,000 signatures, demanding investigation into the disappearances, freedom for the illegally detained and those without trial, and the immediate transfer to civil courts of those in trial. The *mothers* were dispersed, and tear gas and shots were fired into the air. About 300 were detained for several hours. In December those involved in the published text were kidnapped.

From 1979 onwards Argentinean women formed new feminist groups. The nature of women's problems became the issues of progeny and care of human life. They rebelled against conscription, started a campaign for shared parental authority, extended the issue of divorce and women's reproductive rights as well as the lack of sexual education. In August 1979, 20 women and a public notary signed the founding document of the *Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo Movement*. They were anticipating the problems for social movements in the process of transition to democracy. Furthermore, in 1979 a visit from the Inter-American Human Rights Commission of the Organization of American States (OAS) was achieved. Relatives of the disappeared made accusations and testimonies so that a more complete picture of the scale and magnitude of the horror was established (Feijoo and Gogna 1990: 88).

With the organization of a campaign for national mobilization, a change of direction in the *mother's* strategy took place. Since 1981 human rights movements shifted from a purely defensive position to one of greater initiative. They published a request with support from public figures and wanted to mobilize in order to obtain legitimate rights of the people (Feijoo and Gogna 1990: 89). As a result of the initial activities of Argentina's mothers, a bicameral parliamentary commission was created, which had full power in which not only mothers but also other representatives of human rights organizations had a voice (Feijooand Gogna 1990: 88).

#### ZAPOTEC<sup>4</sup> WOMEN IN OAXACA, MEXICO

In the 1930s a shift from mercantile capitalism to commercial capitalism took place in Mexico. It replaced subsistence farming and part-time craft production with migration and full-time craft production. With the changing politics and international economies, men migrated to metropolitan areas and a significant change regarding the division of labor among women and men took place. As a result women's identities and responsibilities changed. Women became responsible not only for childcare but also for their entire economic household and responsibilities towards the community. Women had to learn about the commercial capitalistic system in order to keep up with the requirements in the community. They were responsible for farming, animals, increased activities of weaving and selling blankets, and they brought up their children while their husbands emigrated. With the increase in their work burden and

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<sup>4</sup> There are several indigenous Zapotec communities in and around Oaxaca, Mexico.

responsibilities the women also sought ways to influence their community's politics and began to put forth their own agenda. Eventually women's political participation increased, they became involved in municipal and school committees, mother's clubs and health organizations. They expressed their needs and opinions through informal networks, channels and events rather than via formal political institutions.

The *Zapotec* women's life changed and their identity moved from the private to the public sphere; they began to redefine politics. Poorer, older illiterate women continued to use their ritually based traditional *respet<sup>5</sup>* to gain influence on politics. Peasant women for example pushed for lower prices for materials, access to land and agricultural resources which are issues that go beyond voting and membership in politics. Women also organized in opposition to individuals and bureaucracies that inhibited them from carrying out their traditional domestic role. They needed and demanded political participation to achieve goals, related to their daily needs as mothers, economic caretakers of household and community as well as participants in their traditional kinship.

After they achieved representation as a group they pressed for economic demands and recognition of their own rights to fully participate. They choose their own leaders and representatives and pushed their own agenda within the community. Their new focus became political marginalization, decision-making and leadership. In the 1970's new agricultural laws were established where women became formally included as *ejidatarios<sup>6</sup>*, with the same rights as men. This meant that women were formally incorporated in the agricultural production process. In the 1980's arose an awareness of the importance of gender in Mexico's politics.

With the above example of the *Zapotec* women, Stephen points out that there is "complexity" in being a Zapotec woman. She suggests that the institutional cultural ideological threads that tie femininity to marginality have to be broken, and women's power in kin networks has to be broadened.

#### EMPOWERMENT THROUGH LEBANESE WOMEN

This example refers to May Hazaz' interview with Lebanese women and their positive actions during and after the Lebanese civil war. She points out that Arab women are victims of a double injustice, as they are subordinated to men in general and additionally subordinated to men because of the eastern or oriental misunderstanding that women are odalisque, confinable and indifferent to their surrounding world (Essid 1998:19).

As Hazaz points out, Lebanese women face poverty , high rates of illiteracy and few of them are aware of their judicial rights. However, the absence of male patrons lead women to take initiatives and they engaged in social and collective activities. Similar to the Zapotec women, this process of empowerment encouraged the Lebanese women to leave their private

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<sup>5</sup> Traditional Spanish term for "respect", referring to influence and decision power in their community.

<sup>6</sup> Members of *ejidos*, which are units of land given to communities at the time of agrarian reform.

surroundings and take up new roles. With a new spirit for change they initiated a series of social activities. They became decision-makers and organized collective action to solve problems of their streets, neighborhood and village.

The interviewed Lebanese women show how crucial and effective each seemingly simple activity can be for empowerment and for bringing about change. Most importantly, they show how, despite their marginal and disadvantageous position, these women take the initiative to bring about positive change.

One woman used to save \$3 of the \$6 that her husband gave her, "for hard times." This lead her to create a "churkeh," an informal society of women, where everyone put \$6 into the savings box each week. The monthly savings were given to one member at a time in order to fulfill urgent family needs. This woman emphasizes that for success, solidarity, honesty and mutual confidence was necessary (Hazaz:47).

Another women worked in a nursery of the medical and social center of the district in order to escape from her oppressive family. There, she says she felt useful and received emotional support. After she noticed that her married daughter's health deteriorated because her husband beat her, she gathered all her courage and went to trial to obtain a divorce for her. Then she began to give advice, listen to and support other women of the district. She said, they discussed the cruel reality facing women, women's rights, and women's abilities to face difficulties. However, she points out, "domestic violence must be addressed on a higher level"(50).

A third woman created an association with other women in order to provide schooling for children between age five and seven. They also raised money. Today that association works on helping handicapped children to be integrated into schools. A fourth woman had been appointed mayor of her village as a result of her activities towards change during the war. She explains that she was the only girl who drove a car, and because she worked at the hospital she could pass the checkpoint, therefore she was the only contact between her village and the capital, the outside world. She secretly drove ill people to the doctor, brought medicine to her village while neighboring villages were opposed to them.

A villager was even attacked and kidnapped. However, she and her co-villagers did not want to leave their village. Eventually, she was appointed to a position in the village municipality by Mr. Haidar of the Lebanese parliament who supported the rights of the village people. In addition she worked for the Red Cross. She then was appointed mayor of the village and used her position to protect her village against exploitation. She emphasizes that "love and honesty in dealing with people are the most important qualities to succeed in such a job." (51)

Similar to the *mothers* in Argentina and the Zapotec women, these Lebanese women, while being wives and mothers, had a sense of leadership and brought the economic and political sphere together with the private sphere. These women were fully involved on a collective, social, economic, community, political, and human level, while continuing to respect their cultural heritage. As part of emancipation and empowerment they wanted to take part in decision making and through their activities they raised the level of critical consciousness. The women in Argentina, Mexico and Lebanon were all in a state of powerlessness, yet they initiated positive

social actions, they “resisted war in a positive and pacifist way” (Hazaz: 55). Furthermore, Hazaz points out, during war, women proved to have rational judgment and at the same time maintain respect for traditional and modern values.

### CONFLICT RESOLUTION STUDIES LINKED TO WOMEN'S ACTIVITIES

The women's activities described above can be linked to conflict resolution theories developed by various scholars. It should be noticed that the author expanded the definition of *conflict* by referring not only to violent war and political situations but also to economic as well as environmental crisis situations. This shifts and broadens the attention to smaller, less visible conflicts and conflict resolution activities and offers a wider range of possibilities to learn about how to achieve positive change. According to Rabie, means of conflict resolution are instruments to uncover hidden deficiencies, redefine existing problems and disrupt the status quo. They are to modify the existing systems, change the relationships and restore stability and balance (1994: 5-6).

The *Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* organized in innovative ways in order to uncover the suppression and the unequal use of power against the people. By asking for the truth and the whereabouts of their family members they attempted to disrupt the status quo. The women addressed the state as a means of fulfilling their responsibility as mothers by demanding the whereabouts of the disappeared in their own style, in form of a peaceful protest. The Zapotec women also attempted to address and change the existing system by using their informal channels and networks of communication and by organizing women's groups to approach political decision-making, with traditional as well as modern ways of *respet* and political involvement. According to Rabie, in order to reduce tension and to moderate conflicting views, the activists have to seek new ways and frameworks for a new consensus. They have to promote cooperation in order to preserve unity and eliminate discrimination. Rabie writes it “is an art and a social process to transform by peaceful means hostile relationships into new ones, more conducive to dialogue and socio economic cooperation” (1994:12).

The establishment of further human rights organizations in Argentina lead to new ways to emphasize democracy and human rights. They were the results of the initial actions of the *mothers*. It was the *mothers* objective to promote cooperation, moderate conflicting views and restore balance in the system. They were peaceful and they never attempted not to be. They used “Peace as a weapon” (Feijoo and Gogna 1990: 93). The *mothers* were defenders of life in a pacifistic movement, they were against all violence, symbolized by wearing a white headscarf and they tried not to be aggressive with words (Feijoo and Gogna 1990:93). They started not a passive movement but a pacifistic one. They were against all violence whoever the perpetrators would be and they were consistent with their moral principle of “no to violence” (Feijoo and Gogna 1990:92). The Lebanese women also emphasized that in order for their activities to be fruitful they needed honesty, confidence and love. Despite the violent circumstances and their marginal position they chose peaceful, positive means in order to bring about change.

Laura Nader's characteristics of conflict resolution or ADR (alternative dispute resolution) are also recognizable in the *mother's* movement, the *Zapotec* and the Lebanese women's activities. She refers to ADR as a move away from confrontation. It emerges from inequality of power and tries to decrease or even eliminate the gap between cooperation and conflict. Nader emphasizes harmony as the only way of pacification. The aspect of harmony was also emphasized by the Lebanese women. Several of them mentioned in their interview that love and harmony were crucial to the success of their activities (Hazaz, 2000). Also the mothers constantly emphasized their choice of action by saying "no" to violence. In the above examples the women's goal is interchangeable with Nader's hypothesis, as they tried to bring about positive change through positive action, cooperation and a peaceful, non-violent way.

With the examples of the Lebanese women May Hazaz describes a process of empowerment that leads to conflict resolution activities. Her analysis can also be related to the activities of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Zapotec women.. According to Hazaz, empowerment refers to "power." The underlying dynamic are resources and information, which need to be found, used, and then organized. However, not only is the quantity of resources a crucial part of empowerment and conflict resolution, but the power of actors also depends on the congruence between resource and strategy controlled by those who execute them and to whom they are applied (Hazaz: 52). Hazaz writes, "empowerment is associated with certain individual characteristics" which "pertain to personal competence, awareness and the motivation for social action" (52). For conflict resolution and empowerment to be effective, actors need to have the desire to take action and aim for positive social change. Empowerment, and with it conflict resolution activities, are dynamic processes. These processes, according to Serrano-Garcia, should bring "people who live in a state of disempowerment into the social and political action" (1984).

These characteristics of conflict resolution activities and empowerment are evident in all the described activities of women in Argentina, Mexico and Lebanon. Thus, it is important to recognize the impact these women had on positive change and start to consider women's perspectives on conflict and conflict resolution. These cases show that conflict resolution studies and activities can benefit greatly if women's activities are observed and noticed and if their capabilities, knowledge and experience are used as resource, information and tools to bring about positive change.

## **WOMEN AS METHODOLOGICAL TOOLS AND RESOURCES FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

### MOTIVATIONS FOR A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

Sabel-Sheehan demonstrates in the above part of the paper that women's roles and contributions to conflict resolution studies should be made more visible. She continues by emphasizing that it is time that women are no longer seen as victims of conflict but that their experiences and knowledge are included in conflict resolution studies and practices. In order to gain full

understanding of the conflict situation and to develop all-inclusive, effective conflict resolution activities, a gender perspective is crucial.

Karame and Tryggestad emphasize that especially in modern conflicts, where distinctions between military and civilian are more blurred a gender perspective is necessary. Modern, intra-state wars, they write, depend on the civilians to provide shelter and care. For example in situations like Mexico and Lebanon, men's absence caused women to be the caretaker, economic provider as well as "politician". Thus, Karame and Tryggestad point out that it is necessary to have a gender perspective in order to give justice to women's participation in military and civilian functions, to see the truth of the conflict by paying attention to how women are effected by war and finally to extend our knowledge and understanding of different stages of conflict (2000:10).

Heidi Hudson agrees that more women's associations have been established in the last decade but claims that women still do not have more access to resources and decision making power. Therefore she analyzes human security discourse in Africa and challenges the male-dominated security thinking. She claims that the sensitivity to the "marginalized" does not acknowledge women's specific gendered security needs" (Karame/Tryggestad:80). Furthermore, Hudson claims that a feminist perspective on security can elicit debate on how meeting women's security needs can work towards addressing many of the ailing continent's woes (80). Hudson also states that a feminist perspective can enhance an understanding of international developments and can offer alternative solutions to issues on global scale (109). She supports her argument by pointing out that International Relations feminists have shown how power, knowledge, politics and gender are linked (109). Thus she advocates that the paradigm must be rethought and a gender perspective must be integrated, women should not only be put onto the (male ) agenda (109).

The statements of Dorothy Smith, who argues for a "sociology of women," can also be transferred into arguments for gendered conflict resolution studies. She points out that "the everyday life should be seen as problematic," and that a discourse on a local realm would allow to look at aspects from where we are actually located. Women's standpoint should not be outside, women should not be excluded from the "making of culture" and modes of discourse. She emphasizes that we must work from an everyday standpoint that allows us to begin from a position of any member of the society. She also points out that the difference between observer and the observed has to be recognized. The sociology for women, she claims, should be an exploration, not destination. Smith also points out that women are knowers and subjects, and in order to achieve change we must understand the subject's world from the inside. These observations are also applicable to conflict resolution studies.

According to Smith, a "sociology for women" goes beyond methodology. Similarly, Hudson points out that feminism is an intellectual enterprise and a political movement, thus it can "provide insight into the tension between theory and practice (84). Women have created public discourses and made private troubles into public issues therefore it is necessary to open the discourse to new voices and utilize a gender perspective that can help to enrich and improve conflict resolution processes.

## WOMEN AND PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION

The following example concerning the WEDNET (Women, Environment and Development Network) initiative in Ghana shows how women can be involved in sociopolitical issues and conflict resolution through their participation in communications.<sup>7</sup> It furthermore shows that on the one hand they are subjects of conflict and targets for resolution and on the other hand they are essential “objects,” informants and resources for resolution. These examples show how specific communication strategies of women address social, political and institutional work in environment, research and economic development. It shows how participatory communication can be a tool of empowerment of women and a means of conflict resolution.

In Ghana, WEDNET used women’s participatory communication as a means of conflict resolution when they recognized and used women’s traditional knowledge and concern about their environment. They included indigenous women and their traditional knowledge to establish projects and strategies for rescuing Africa’s environmental crisis.

WEDNET’s initiative recognized that with imposing Western frameworks of socio-economic development, it lead to the rejection and ignorance of important traditional African practices. Because women play a crucial role in society researchers realized that it was essential to conduct an analysis of socioeconomic, cultural and political issues with a diverse gendered perspective. In recent years, the interest in women’s development issues rose and people recognized that women are necessary to be included in development process.

Mensah-Kutin emphasizes that women’s knowledge about their own environment is hardly found in mass media and that their knowledge is rooted in traditional informal channels of communication to create awareness and knowledge about the environment and socioeconomic life in history (Riano 1994: 225). For those reasons WEDNET focused on women’s knowledge and indigenous African knowledge in general, and planned to look at women’s roles, their contributions and their perception of environmental issues. They decided on a participatory communication strategy with and for women to find a solution for the environmental destruction.

Research on women’s role and position in society revealed that the tools of communication are more accessible to women and have to be recaptured in order to elicit the ultimate information about the environment (Riano 1994: 225). WEDNET researchers therefore established links between women’s informal “media” (interpersonal communication; dance; indigenous drama) and the themes of their tales which developed awareness about the environment (Riano 1994: 222).

WEDNET found ways to create conditions for making women active participants in the development. They focused on the fact that despite their different socioeconomic, ecological and linguistic backgrounds the women are conscious of the need for change and a better future. Women have deep concerns about the deteriorating conditions of their land and resources

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<sup>7</sup> Information and references about this project relate to Rose Mensah-Kutin’s article “WEDNET Initiative: A sharing experience between researchers and rural women” In Pilar Riano’s book about women’s grassroots communication; pages 221-234 (see bibliography).

because in the past it was their main source of living. They are willing to come together, discuss their own problems and suggest ways of solving them.

The researchers realized that women have their own ways of articulating their views and knowledge about the environment. Mensah-Kutin frequently points out, that to “examine aspects of the environment that are critical for a sustainable development” environmental studies need to combine issues of gender with communication (Riano 1994: 226). This is also a valuable observation for conflict resolution studies in general.

WEDNET’s activities show how women build their own communication bridges, how they share their knowledge and concerns and with it can develop informal research and communicative strategies to bring about social change. They realized that it is important to empower women’s knowledge as a crucial resource for the development of the whole society. To discuss development questions they combined issues of gender with grassroots communication mechanisms.

Mensah-Kutin emphasizes (Riano 1994: 231) that the audience (the women) was not the object of the study but subject matter, which brought critical issues out that ought to be addressed by policy makers. Recognition has to be given to the validity of their perception and their mode of thinking. Previously, women’s concerns had been ignored, WEDNET found a suitable medium to identify the environmental problems and utilized women’s views and knowledge about the environment. Their research shows the rewards of establishing horizontal and empathetic relation with women at grassroots level.

Mensah-Kutin states that “discussing real issues at stake and using forms that are close to women are the beginnings of finding solutions to African women’s precarious socioeconomic conditions and the environmental situation” (Riano 1994: 232). WEDNET’s use of participatory communication helped to share knowledge and experiences and lead them to develop projects and programs for the improvement of the environmental condition. Similar to this example, the inclusion of women in conflict resolution should be adapted to many other crisis situations.

#### *PAUL LEDERACH’S ELICITIVE APPROACH FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION*

WEDNET’s strategies of participatory communication represent a form of an “elicitive approach” of conflict resolution, described by Paul Lederach (1995: 55-69). Lederach writes, that “negotiation means that the various people ... involved recognize they cannot simply impose their will or eliminate the other side, but rather must work with each other to achieve their goals” (1995:13). He argues “people and their everyday understandings are key resources...not recipients”(Lederach 1995:26).

Women’s involvement in communication on the grassroots level as described above, represent Lederach’s conflict resolution theory in terms of his belief that “an appropriate education process has to be built that validates the knowledge and resources the people have

available" (1995:27). Similarly to the activities of WEDNET, Lederach promotes to seek solutions within the setting, not outside, discover the available and local resources and emphasize on the indigenous knowledge about the problem at hand (1995: 28-29).

As the above example from Ghana shows, this form of conflict resolution, attempted to study the people in their natural settings and gather social knowledge. WEDNET researchers followed Lederach's principle of respecting how people in the setting understand themselves and the importance of paying attention to their everyday talk; they realized that people in a given setting are key resources for a holistic understanding.

The most interesting overlap between Lederach's theory and the practice of participatory communication is that in these processes, culture is naturally understood and taken as the foundation and seedbed for model development and creation. With the inclusion of the people and their knowledge, social change is built from the cultural context and culture is used as an essential resource (Lederach 1995:70).

Paul Lederach's argument about the importance of culture and inside knowledge of the people shows similarities to Heidi Hudson's analysis of using gender as a methodological tool (Karame and Tryggestad, 2000). She emphasizes that the key to achieving peace, democracy, development, social justice and environmental protection is a "people-centered" approach (82).

Throughout this paper the author argues, that the consideration of gender is as important as the consideration of culture when analyzing conflict resolution studies, whether it be in the form of participatory communication, negotiation or grassroots activities.

## EXPANDING CONFLICT RESOLUTION STUDIES

Paul Lederach's "elicitive approach" for conflict resolution is an important point of departure for the hypothesis that both, culture and gender are essential elements for conflict resolution theory and practice. Following Lederach's principle of utilizing people, their knowledge and their culture from within the setting, the Sabel-Sheehan proposes to also include a gender perspective. Similar to the arguments throughout this paper, Lederach's approach includes, that women with their distinct knowledge, female point of view, and experience are an essential and helpful resource to bring about successful conflict resolution and social change.

Furthermore, according to Scimecca conflict resolution must be seen in the larger framework of social and cultural change in society and social context (1991). Strauss also argues, that it is important to relate the conflict and conflict resolution to the larger structural context which includes the consideration of the actor's view (1979). Sabel-Sheehan also emphasizes, the impact of gender has to be given special attention in order to achieve a successful outcomes in dispute settlements. Having analyzed various conflicts and ways of conflict resolution in the cases above, the emphasis on gender in conflict resolution becomes inevitable. Rabie's statements regarding the importance of culture in conflict resolution offer an opportunity to present the

argument that gender is as significant as culture when analyzing conflict and conflict resolution (Rabie 1994: 32-33).

Rabie wrote that “cultural backgrounds, beliefs, systems and social values shape people’s ways of thinking and influencing their perception of themselves and others” (1994: 32). Sabel-Sheehan emphasizes that backgrounds, beliefs, systems and social values also vary with gender. In the Argentine case, women were differently effected by the actions of the regime. Exclusion from politics, intrusion in their private life, etc. They had different views on the situation. Their interests also differed. Because they were women and mothers, they put different values on the disappearance of their children. Apparently, the men did not feel the same urge and emergency about this situation, and they did not have the faith as the women did, that any action would be successful. Thus, a gender perspective of the conflict situation and the activities towards a resolution is important

*“It should not be forgotten that it was the idea of a group of women to demonstrate in the Plaza de Mayo and challenge the military junta’s prohibition of meetings. It was the women’s idea to go to the square.” ... “This strange phenomenon of mothers meeting to create a kind of group awareness which gradually put pressure in the power structures did not fit into that (masculine) logic” (Feijoo and Gogna 1990: 91).*

As described above, the Zapotec women were also effected differently than men when the capitalistic economy was introduced. Most of the men migrated, the mothers however stayed in their community and had to cope with the new situation. Their responsibilities changed and the work burden increased, therefore, they have a different perception of the political and economic change in their country. This different effect is gender based, therefore decisions on conflict resolution should include consideration of gender specific needs and effects.

Rabie continued, that “in all conflict and conflict resolution processes culture largely defines values and interest of the conflict, they affect formation of states politics and influences the ability to communicate (1994:32). All forms of human interaction involve ways and means of communication, cultural perceptions are important to understand others and appreciate their position.” Similarly Sabel-Sheehan emphasizes that all forms of human interaction, communication as well as the interpretation of a conflict situation involve a gender perspective, which need to be understood and appreciated.

Some of the Argentine mothers’ comments show that the ability to communicate differed. Women took a different approach by pursuing a peaceful, non-aggressive way of confronting the state: “We had gained the respect of the community. Precisely because we have different moral principles including the no to violence” Feijoo and Gogna, 1990: 93). The example of participatory communication strategies in Ghana also reflects Rabie’s statement. The adequate use of women’s communication tools and their specific knowledge in the above presented projects, shows that in order to fully explore the social situation and maximize the knowledge of the people, it is necessary to acknowledge gendered communication styles and ways of interaction. The WEDNET initiative in Ghana and the use of women’s indigenous knowledge of the environment are advantageous to the development of their country.

Furthermore, Rabie points out: "Stereotypes and images may be used to dehumanize others, belittle their feelings, justify mistreatment and might cause conflict" (Rabie, 1994: 33). Since such discriminations have to be avoided, the image of the "silent woman" has to be changed. As Rose Mensah-Kutin (Riano 1994: 226) noticed, mass media in Ghana marginalized women, thus participatory alternative communication at the grassroots level is a possible means of conflict resolution that considers women as an essential group of the society. Women in Argentina were seen as passive silent and incompetent. This stereotype of women, as being passive and incapable of successful and useful action were always used as means of discrimination. Now that the *Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* as well as the Lebanese women and various women's organizations shattered this stereotype there is more reason to consider the issue of gender in conflict and conflict resolution studies.

Taylor and Beinstein also point out that gender is an important substance of the social context therefore a gender perspective needs to be included in the study of conflict and conflict resolution (1994). Like Rabie they point out that conflict is influenced by context as well as social and political structures, cultural beliefs and values. They write that most processes of conflict resolution involve gender as explicit or implicit element, thus issues of gender should be addressed further, as the perspective of gender might influence the understanding of conflict (1994: 2).

Taylor and Beinstein's answer to their provocative question: "What can a feminist perspective bring to theory, research and practice in these kinds of conflicts?" (1994: 3) supports Sabel-Sheehan's argument that gender organizes social life, social structure and social beliefs. Social issues like conflict have to be studied with the impact of gender because it points out that conflict can be managed differently, according to a gender perspective (Taylor and Beinstein, 1994:4). The example of grassroots communication demonstrates especially clear that alternative communication with consideration of women's own communicative strategies, tools and knowledge adds another level to conflict resolution and enlarges the available resources, necessary for the successful settlement of conflict.

Furthermore Taylor and Beinstein assume that gender carries different expectations for conflict behavior and for rights and responsibilities in conflict negotiations, thus gender must be included and considered. Otherwise, they warn, it means that a central element of human behavior is ignored and misunderstood (1994:5).

#### **FINAL COMMENTS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF A GENDER PERSPECTIVE FOR THE STUDIES AND PRACTICES OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

In this paper Sabel-Sheehan demonstrates that the world has to move beyond the view that women are only victims of conflict, it must begin to recognize that women are powerful and essential participants of conflict resolution.

The women presented above had to strive and "fight" for their own rights by organizing in innovative ways based on the recognition of their role in the family, their community, their

contribution to economic and social development and the utilization of their indigenous knowledge as women who respect the environment.

Successful resolution of conflict depends not only on the consideration of culture but also on the implementation of a gender perspective and the recognition of the specific “power” that women have through their experience, knowledge and determination for positive change. In the above examples of women’s conflict resolution activities, the women entered the public stage in the role of mothers and wives, as economic contributors, as informants, as resources of knowledge about environmental issues, as female citizens, and as observers and voices of the country. They defended and exercised their responsibilities as women in these roles in their private domain and imposed their request that their private issues as women have to be given access to the public domain of politics.

From an ethical point of view, such activities are not only possible but obligatory, since they took these actions to demand rights that would enable them to fulfill their roles as mothers, care takers of their family and community, agriculturalists, environmentalists and citizens. It must also be emphasized that these women strove for peace, equality, cooperation, a safe environment and democracy, not only for women but for all people on a local, regional, national and even international level.

It is inevitable to consider a gender perspective when approaching studies or activities of conflict resolution. Women, mothers, wives, economic contributors and female citizens as described in the above examples can not only have a strong impact on conflict resolution but can also be “tools” to find ways of resolution. Including a gender perspective is a fundamental step for social and human movements in order to bring about conflict resolution, as well as positive social, political, economic and ecological change.

The women’s peaceful, creative and “powerful” means of resolving conflicts demonstrate the effectiveness of being and acting as a woman. Certainly, the statement that all women’s actions have a positive impact on Conflict Resolution Studies may not be generalized. The examples of the women in Africa, Latin America and Lebanon prove that the shattering of the conventional female stereotype in those regions was not only a beginning point to learn more about women, but also about demonstrating their capabilities to make an impact on society, conflict and conflict resolution.

It does not matter whether these actions are categorized as pre-negotiation, dispute settlement, conflict resolution, management or ADR. What is important is that the power of women, their knowledge and capabilities can and should be used and recognized as essential resources to bring about positive social change and further development on a regional, national and even international level.

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