

**Anna Diamantopoulou**

European Commissioner responsible for Employment and Social Affairs

**Open article - Women in Conflict -  
Contribution of women to peace.**

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Visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories

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In wars, battles and strife both men and women suffer. However, the suffering of women is multiplied because of the many roles they have in society. First, as individuals, they are at risk physically, with potential injury or worse. Second, as wives they are frequently the mainstays of the home and family unit. In times of conflict, women may have to take on the role of men in maintaining the family, finding shelter and housing and carry on the daily routines for the civil community to survive. Thirdly, and perhaps most painfully, as mothers they strive to protect their babies, children and the elderly members of their family, often struggling to find food and clean water.

On top of all that, women are frequently frustrated with their exclusion from the mechanisms of searching for peace - not being allowed or involved in the dialogue and negotiation efforts to resolve the conflict.

Women have nonetheless fought back, and with success.

- In Sudan, women from both sides of the conflict have long warned of excluding any sector from the peace process, and they have proposed new avenues that merit exploration, if only negotiators will listen.
- In Northern Ireland, women's groups spent a decade building the trust between Protestants and Roman Catholics that was the foundation for the ultimate agreements.
- In Latin America, mothers, wives, and sisters dared to question the military juntas about "disappeared" relatives.
- In Bosnia, women cross ethnic lines to rebuild working coalitions in Parliament.

The different causes of conflict mean that there is no single 'fix-it' solution. Each case is unique and only those directly involved can find and follow the path to reconciliation. But the world community needs to support the efforts of women in their endeavour to find peace.

The European Union is committed to supporting such peace initiatives. As recommended in the Oslo Accords a series of peace projects/people to people projects have been financed. Thus far, 76.3 million Euro has been allocated to peace building programmes fostering Israeli-Arab / Israeli-Palestinian co-operation through joint projects and awareness campaigns promoting tolerance and peace. In 2000 alone, 22.9 million Euro was provided, including 6 large targeted projects on civil society (university and media co-operation) and 13 People to People projects. Already in 2002, a further 8 million Euro has been made available to continue support for local and international initiatives which promote peace and tolerance, and to contribute to the development of ideas for resolving final status issues (borders, refugees, Jerusalem, water, etc.).

The EU acts as a facilitator of regional dialogue through the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: Although separate, the Barcelona Process and the Peace Process are complementary. One of the successes of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership is to have allowed, against a tense background, dialogue to be pursued between Mediterranean Partners involved in the Middle East Peace Process in a context of regional meetings on all questions of common interest. The Partnership still remains the only multilateral forum outside the United Nations where all the conflict parties meet.

The United Nations itself is also aware of the important role women have to play. Security Council resolution (no. 1325, October 2000) endorsed the need to finally bring the missing half of the world's population to the table where peace is sought. This resolution links gender equality to global security committing governments to include women's voices in peace negotiations while protecting them from the abuses of war. Giving Resolution 1325 teeth means making sure that women's participation in peace and security become a regular item on the political agenda and that women are considered each and every time a country situation is addressed.

Women's peace initiatives, often undertaken across warring factions that involve taking high risk in extreme conflict situations, are insufficiently recognised and supported, both politically and financially. Women's rights are rarely integrated in peace agreements and in the structures supporting post conflict reconstruction. What is needed is a new approach to seeking and preserving peace; one that brings the neglected energies of half the world's population to bear on the problem that the other half has not quite succeeded in solving. Recognising and supporting women's contributions can prevent many lifetimes of untold sorrow.

The existence of conflict is a shared problem and in order to resolve it, there needs to be dialogue. Such talks must be available to all as a collective, shared project, and must incorporate actors outside the political process. Local communities and other interest groups need to participate in this process of peace building, and to feel a share of responsibility for the future of their society, rather than leaving the task exclusively to the owners of the negotiating table. At the same time, the overall climate in which negotiations are being carried out must be assessed. When hatred, rejection and thirst for revenge are the predominant feelings of entire societies, how could there possibly be compromises, mutual concessions and trust among the negotiators? Dulling the edge of negative feelings and making an effort to understand the 'other', in other words, to empathise, is of major importance to any kind of settlement. This is where co-operation between women's organisations can and must build bridges to ensure communication. Out of such a process all sectors of society can feel that they are respected, and that they can associate themselves with the peace-building process.