



Report

July 2018

Inclusion of gender and sexual minorities in peacebuilding



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Background

What are the barriers to and benefits of meaningful participation of gender and sexual minorities in peace processes and how can their participation be supported? What can their experience tell us more broadly about inclusion in peace processes?

Conciliation Resources is an international peacebuilding organisation with a strong focus on supporting inclusive peace processes. We have learnt that gender, a key aspect of inclusion, continues to be misunderstood and overlooked.

Meaningful participation of women and other excluded groups in peace processes is important for sustainable peace, yet to date has been limited and lacking in diversity. Women and other excluded groups experience multiple forms of discrimination related to their diverse gender identities. These exacerbate social, legal, economic, cultural, as well as political marginalisation; and violent conflict compounds discrimination.¹

Highlighting the experiences and challenges of a particular minority group may offer insights applicable to inclusive peacebuilding practice more broadly. This short discussion paper explores gender and sexual minorities' political participation and recognition in peacebuilding in two conflict-affected contexts. It provides some initial examples of effective external support to their inclusion.

Two short case studies of Colombia and Nigeria, drawn from interviews and a review of background literature, focus on the experiences of organisations and activists working on inclusion of gender and sexual minorities. The findings identify trends and opportunities for further work addressing inclusion of gender and sexual minorities in peacebuilding.

Methodology

Case study participants were identified through a combination of Conciliation Resources' staff and partner organisations in the two contexts. Semi-structured interviews took place over video call and by email with two activists, one a member of a non-governmental organisation. Participants' permission was sought and granted as to the purpose of the research, how it would be shared and the identification of interviewees. Each interview explored the same core questions, with follow-up discussions where necessary. The research examined how the participants bring the voices of gender and sexual minority people and groups into peace processes or other political processes; how this work benefits peace processes; challenges they have experienced; and the role of international organisations in supporting this work. A literature review was conducted prior to these interviews.

A note on terminology: We have chosen to use 'LGBT' (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans) in this report, as the most frequently-used term, and to use 'gender and sexual minorities' to refer to the wider group who may not be encompassed by this acronym. Our research participants and the literature use a variety of acronyms, including 'LGBT', 'LGBTQ' and 'LGBTQI' (...Queer, Intersex).

1. See: Close, Sophia. Gendered political settlements: examining peace transitions in Bougainville, Nepal and Colombia. (London: Conciliation Resources, 2018) and Yousuf, Zahbia. Navigating inclusion in peace transitions: beyond elite bargains. (London: Conciliation Resources, 2018).

Key findings

- 1) Conservative cultural, religious and political gender norms limit and oppose the possibility of LGBT inclusion in peace processes.** The case study examples show how conservative political, community and religious groups have campaigned for the limitation of rights of gender and sexual minorities. However, where political, cultural and religious attitudes and behaviours have shifted towards acceptance of these groups, access to political institutions and decision-making processes has increased accordingly.
- 2) Gender and sexual minority groups face significant legal and financial barriers to participation in peacebuilding and other political processes.** Funding for work with an LGBT focus is extremely limited in both case study contexts. In Nigeria legal barriers prevent LGBT groups from organising formally. This work is therefore heavily reliant on volunteers and those who can finance their own engagement. This puts strain on relationships within and between groups among whom limited resources are shared. Societal inequalities become replicated within groups and can determine who has greater access to and influence in political spaces.
- 3) Personal safety is an essential first step in making space for inclusive political participation.** Explicit inclusion of gender and sexual minorities in activities seeking to increase political participation requires

sensitivity to ensure that individuals are not placed at increased risk. International actors must be aware of the risks associated with their support for increased visibility for members of these vulnerable groups. The case studies show how, to differing extents, internationally supported LGBT activism has been perceived as an external 'foreign' agenda that can result in greater social and legal pushback. Grounding work in a participatory gender-sensitive conflict analysis can help identify these risks and generate awareness of the exclusion of gender and sexual minorities and policy and programming options to support their inclusion.²

- 4) Adoption of international rights standards for gender and sexual minorities has created space for these groups within peacebuilding and political processes.** In Colombia standards set by intergovernmental organisations and other international actors have influenced national legal changes. This creates opportunities for gender and sexual minority groups to claim rights and push for increased participation, but these changes must be supported at multiple levels. Peace processes can themselves facilitate shifts in societal and legal attitudes to gender and sexual minorities. The Colombian peace agreement of 2016 includes specific requirements for LGBT recognition and protection, which is leading to their inclusion and practical change during the implementation of the agreement.

Case studies

These different geographic and conflict contexts illustrate different levels of inclusion of gender and sexual minority groups.

- In **Colombia**, the 2016 peace agreement incorporated protection and promotion of LGBT rights.
- In **Nigeria**, discrimination is embedded in the legal framework, and LGBT people face violence and abuse in their communities; their focus is therefore on personal security and wellbeing.

As shown in the case studies, members of gender and sexual minority groups experience disproportionate levels of discrimination and violence.

2. For a practical guide to gender-sensitive conflict analysis, see Conciliation Resources (2015) *Gender and conflict analysis toolkit for peacebuilders*

Case study

LGBT inclusion in the Colombian peace process

This case study draws on discussions with Diana Garcia Salamanca who works with Corporación de Investigación y Acción Social y Económica (CIASE), an inclusive feminist human rights and peacebuilding organisation. She is part of wider networks of LGBT activism across Colombia and internationally.

After five decades of violent conflict and a number of stalled peace efforts, the Colombian Final Peace Agreement was negotiated between the Government and the guerrilla group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and signed in September 2016. While the agreement was rejected in a national plebiscite, Congress endorsed a revised accord in November of the same year that is now in its implementation phase. Importantly, gender and sexual minority groups and individuals were active participants in the negotiation of the agreement and, as a result, the gender component of the final agreement includes explicit measures for the inclusion and recognition of LGBT people.

Following a series of legal reforms and civil society activism, many gender and sexual minorities' rights are recognised and protected under Colombian law; however, social attitudes towards gender and sexual minorities vary greatly. In Colombia, as elsewhere in the world, conservative cultural and religious gender norms oppose LGBT inclusion. LGBT people are often vilified by mainstream society and experience high levels of violence and harassment. Religious objections to the inclusion of gender and sexual minorities were used as a focus in the marginally successful 'No' campaign in the plebiscite on the peace agreement in 2016.

Proponents of LGBT inclusion in the peace process put forward that it can model ways for other excluded groups, such as ex-combatants, to be part of post-conflict Colombian society. Inclusion in the formal peace process benefits gender and sexual minorities directly, but also encourages other participating groups to take account of the specific needs and experiences of this group. For example, dialogue between LGBT groups and the armed forces has promoted understanding of the violence and discrimination that gender and sexual minority groups face.

Despite some positive developments, LGBT groups have encountered barriers to their meaningful participation in the peace process. Lack of

organisational financial resources meant that representatives of LGBT groups who went to Havana to meet with the peace negotiators were obliged to pay the associated costs themselves. Reliance on individual finance rather than organisational grants risks limiting participation to relatively wealthy activists. Lack of external support fuels a wider perception that the rights and wellbeing of gender and sexual minority groups are only of interest to members of those groups.

“*...If you can't [implement a peace agreement] with people that are different to the normality of society, like LGBTQ people, how can you implement a peace process and all that it means in a country with so many years of conflict?*”

Gender activists and organisations are not homogenous. Although some organisations, such as CIASE, are explicitly inclusive of gender and sexual minorities, this is not universal. Barriers to inclusion are created as limited resources and opportunities for participation are shared between all under-represented groups. Some activists are afraid that LGBT rights will encroach on the hard-won space and progress made by other groups. Competition for visibility and financial resources also exists within the LGBT community, and unequal power relationships between men and others are also present. These tensions suggest that an intersectional approach to gender activism, such as work that encompasses LGBT, indigenous and broader women's groups, strengthens connections between these groups and amplifies their voices to influence policy and peacebuilding practice.

LGBT peacebuilders in Colombia connected with international counterparts to share innovations and best practice; this locally-led advocacy, including in Havana, also increased political access for those seeking change at a community level. Pressure on governments to conform to the rights and recognition standards of donor governments and intergovernmental organisations can encourage and consolidate legislative change, although this can be tokenistic if it is the only approach. Engagement at multiple levels is essential to reinforce and broaden existing progress within Colombia's social movements.

Case study

Legal and social discrimination in Nigeria

This case study draws on correspondence with Rashidi Williams, Organisational Director of Queer Alliance Nigeria (QAN), a community and advocacy organisation which provides training and networking within the LGBT community and campaigns for social and political change.

The primary barrier to meaningful participation of gender and sexual minorities in Nigeria is structural violence and discrimination. Widespread political, economic and religious violence since independence has led to high levels of displacement, crime and conflict-related deaths. Violent conflicts include the Boko Haram insurgency in northeast Nigeria, conflict in the oil-rich Niger Delta region, ethno-religious violence in the country's middle belt and widespread herder-farmer clashes.

Legal discrimination centres on specific anti-homosexuality laws introduced in 2014. Same-sex marriage, public displays of same-sex affection and supporting LGBT organisations are illegal throughout Nigeria; wearing clothing deemed to be for the other sex is illegal in several states. This is reinforced by conservative religious teaching and cultural norms, whether in the predominantly Christian south or Muslim north. Gender and sexual minorities are portrayed in the mainstream media as 'un-African', and a threat to families and society. This exclusion affirms religious and cultural trends that reject gender and sexual minorities despite specific gender minorities traditionally being part of different cultures within Nigeria.

The ability of Nigeria's few LGBT organisations to support individuals and to advocate on a larger scale is limited by the risk of arrest and prosecution. LGBT individuals in conflict-affected areas of Nigeria are particularly isolated, and may not know that advocacy organisations exist. Many LGBT people conceal their identities, and stress related to the fear of discovery can lead to individuals seeking coping mechanisms that create additional vulnerabilities and further risk of marginalisation.

In this context, decriminalisation of homosexuality, recognition of the right to organise, and protection of these individuals and groups is an essential first step towards meaningful participation in political

and peace processes. Limited project funding, or cooperation with other groups, as in the other case study, are less pressing issues in Nigeria as concern for personal safety effectively prevents organisation on any significant scale.

Organisations such as QAN work to create space for LGBT voices to be heard in the wider social and political sphere. Where participation in or support of LGBT organisations is restricted by law, advocacy begins with increasing the visibility of gender and sexual minority communities. As well as an online presence highlighting the human rights situation to an external audience, the use of social media can enable groups to build community and allow online self-expression when doing so in their local communities puts them at increased risk.

There have been small gains in the opportunities for LGBT participation, following careful work to increase visibility. Where opportunities for dialogue arise, advocacy focuses on challenging existing laws and conventions on human rights grounds, for example on issues related to health and justice. QAN brings the voices of LGBT groups into political processes by also engaging with policymakers to explain gender and sexual minorities' specific experiences of violence and the implications of discriminatory and repressive laws. For proponents of the rights of gender and sexual minorities, their inclusion is fundamental to peace:

“ ...peace is an embodiment of human rights and by virtue of the fact that our work relates with human rights protection we are indirectly engaging with peace processes.

Local and community organisations find great value in international solidarity. There is scope for support from international actors at multiple levels, for example individual counselling or support for local organisational capacity. Careful advocacy with key government institutions and policymakers is required to remove discriminatory laws and implement human rights protections.

Conclusion

A society cannot be said to be peaceful when groups within that society experience persistent, multiple and targeted forms of violence and discrimination. This challenges notions of what constitutes a peaceful society far beyond countries experiencing armed conflict. An intersectional gender approach to conflict analysis, taking into account sexual orientation and gender identity as well as other factors that determine access to power, authority and resources, can allow for deeper understanding of the complexities of violence and peace.

Examining attitudes and justifications around violence towards and marginalisation of LGBT people can offer insights more broadly into fear of 'otherness'. This in turn can suggest new ways of working with other groups that may be excluded or feared. For example, new ideas may emerge for approaches to peacebuilding between those who have participated in, or are affected by, violent conflict, and the communities which may judge and exclude them. The common experiences of gender and sexual minority groups can, in some cases, help to bridge other divides in a conflict context.

A *do no harm* approach is necessary. With sensitivity, international actors can promote inclusion of gender and sexual minorities through:

- advocacy for the adoption of international rights standards,
- incorporating targeted inclusion of gender and sexual minorities in programmatic work, and
- supporting the work of existing LGBT organisations.

Questions for further enquiry

There are many opportunities for more research and engagement in this area.

1. Which interventions are more effective in supporting gender and sexual minorities in peacebuilding and peace processes, and why?
2. How do effective approaches to support the meaningful participation of gender and sexual minorities differ in more or less restrictive social, cultural and legal contexts?
3. How does inclusion of gender and sexual minorities impact on the broader peacebuilding work of international actors, in contexts where these groups are not widely accepted?
4. Are the needs of gender and sexual minority people in conflict contexts better served by organisations with a specific LGBT focus or by peacebuilding organisations with a wider mandate?

Further reading

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Peace Research Partnership



This report is funded by UK aid from the UK government through the Peace Research Partnership programme. The research focuses on economic development, peace processes, institutions and gender drivers of conflict. Note, in its first year, the programme was known as Global Security Rapid Analysis – GSRA.

The views expressed and information contained in this document are not necessarily those of or endorsed by the UK Government which can accept no responsibility for such views or information or for any reliance placed on them.

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July 2018

Conciliation Resources is an independent international organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence, resolve conflicts and promote peaceful societies. We take what we learn to government decision-makers and others working to end conflict, to improve policies and peacebuilding practice worldwide.



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Layout: www.revangeldesigns.co.uk