

WORKSHOP 2 REPORT

THEME: NATIONAL RECONCILIATION COMMISSIONS AND THE VULNERABILITY OF WOMEN IN URBAN AREAS

National reconciliation commissions are set up in countries which have suffered a serious crisis, usually in the wake of war. As their name suggests, it is the regime in power that takes the initiative to establish them. Such commissions seek to reconcile opposing parties so that the country's development is resumed in a climate of peace.

Generally speaking, the political regimes in power appoint officials and entrust them with the task of restoring the confidence lost and compensating for the moral damages suffered. However, in this process, women seem to be overlooked.

This workshop sought to analyse these problems and to put forward proposals.

Two countries were used as a reference in the discussion: Mali and Syria. Nevertheless, in the meantime, other countries recognised themselves in this process and their case was also addressed.

The National Reconciliation Commission: officially recognised framework for national reconciliation

A national reconciliation commission can be set up as soon as a peace treaty has been signed among warring parties in a country, with a view to disarming the combatants.

Such a context exists today in Mali, but it is not yet the case in Syria.

Workshop 2 therefore worked on the basis of reports by Ms. Nene Soukouba and Ms. Manal Alabdallat and Mr. Pablo Tosco, as well as on the basis of participants' testimony, which led to the following conclusions:

- The war, regardless of where it occurs, always takes the same victims, i.e. women, children, the elderly and the disabled – particularly women, who are at the heart of our concerns today.
- The war leads to the displacement of populations that become refugee populations, creating imbalances of all kinds in the host societies, which exacerbates the frustration.

Today, from Syria, the new stage of violence, populations were deported to the Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, leading to huge difficulties in these countries. The main victims are subjected to all kinds of violence, sowing desolation everywhere: physical, moral, psychological and socio-economic violence.

- Physical violence caused by small arms but also by missiles.

- Socio-economic violence which leads to misery through the destruction of material possessions and the environment.
- Moral and psychological violence caused by prostitution which turns women into beggars and exposes them to sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS, unwanted pregnancies, etc.

In such a climate, what have national reconciliation commissions done to protect female victims of war in urban areas?

What has been done or is being done

The case of Mali, a matter that we have discussed at length, presents a recent official framework, entitled “Dialogue and Reconciliation”, which features conflict resolution structures.

A legal framework supports the first three articles, based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Some measures have been undertaken, such as organising an awareness-raising caravan that toured the country. Nevertheless, many stumbling blocks still exist and hinder reconciliation, as armed men continue to commit abuses with absolute impunity.

- As regards the case of Côte d’Ivoire, Mr. Koffi Socrate, who represented the country’s Ministry for the Family, spoke of the helpline set up by the ministry and which operated full time in eleven municipalities in Abidjan during the post-election crisis. This unit dealt with at least 4,000 cases. The ministry has earmarked a “Women’s Fund” that awards women small loans to combat poverty, regardless of their origins.
- In Jordan, it is the NGOs that grant loans to women regardless of their origins.
- In the case of Syria, which generated a great deal of emotion among the participants, the process remains at zero because, at present, it is not known how the war will turn out, in a country where the regime in power faces opposition which is divided in itself and whose defenders of human rights are in exile. Everything points to the reconciliation process running into difficulty as regards its implementation. For instance, in the Lebanon, where women’s organisations have a great deal of power, there is real difficulty in identifying Syrian exiles because of the absence of refugee camps. These exiles blend into the native populations and are sometimes employed as service staff or agricultural labourers and are therefore very difficult to reach. The phenomenon is new for women’s organisations, which seek a legal framework to rescue Syrians and offer them better living conditions.

In general, the lack of framework afforded by conflict resolution structures in reality is noted. Hence proposals were put forward with a view to achieving better policy.

Proposals and recommendations

In order to protect women in situations of armed conflict and to preserve their dignity, Workshop 2 proposes:

- That women be properly integrated into the reconciliation process and the resolution of armed conflicts. To this end, selection criteria for the members of these commissions must be drawn up.
- That civil society be strongly represented in decision-making bodies so that, through its unique and legitimate status, it facilitates the conflict mediation process. It will monitor the different stages of a conflict and will facilitate swift deployment of action on the ground.
- That codes of conduct and disciplinary measures be developed for all parties in the conflict in the event of resistance in the disarmament process.
- That government and State structures really get involved through monitoring and controlling conflict resolution policies.
- That there be a willingness to develop, adopt and implement texts on gender equality and policies which respect, protect and promote women's rights.
- That the United Nations develop an international legal framework to assist the host countries of refugees in the event of armed conflict, in order to ease the tensions that may arise due to the imbalances inevitably caused by these newcomers and which leads to a rise in the cost of living.
- That governments reduce the budget allocated to military armament to save human lives.
- That the basic education given to girls and boys in families be harmonised so that girls are no longer limited to performing household chores and have as many opportunities to develop as young boys.