

At the CPRF on November 12, Cindy Courville, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for African Affairs at the National Security Council, Hattie Babbitt, Senior Vice President of Hunt Alternatives Fund (Women Waging Peace), and Pamela Aall, Director of the US Institute of Peace Education Program and President of Women in International Security, spoke about the role of women in peacebuilding. Following is a summary of some of the important issues raised.

The role of women in peacebuilding needs to be comprehensive; every issue is a women's issue. Even if there is not a woman at the negotiating table, men need to recognize that all issues involve women. And women should take care not to segregate themselves.

Women have to take all aspects of peacebuilding into account, including political, economic, and social aspects. In order to be at the table, women need to have a wide range of skills and understand all the issues, or they will be left out of the discussion.

Women Waging Peace aims to get women's issues as number two or three on policy makers' to-do lists, rather than five or six. WWP brings women from conflict regions of the world to the US to meet with and influence decision-makers. 55%-80% of post-conflict populations are women. You can't marginalize over half the population and expect to have a stable peace. WWP provides policy makers with lists of women to call on for input into policy discussions.

"How do you raise a family and work at the same time?" is a question that we need to think about, especially if we are asking women to take on high levels of responsibility.

Women often bear the burden of keeping life going during war. They are also often the targets, killed or raped as a political statement, or to get to the heart of the enemy. Generally, women are not the source of conflict, although sometimes they fight, and sometimes they promote war.

Are we being fair by pinning such high hopes on women in conflict situations? Women have not traditionally held positions of power, yet we ask them to transform attitudes that caused war. Sometimes it works, and women take advantage of the situation to become empowered. Sometimes they become empowered with help from international organizations. This is when we have to stop and look at what we as Western donors are doing. We judge them by our own standards, and expect them to be self-sufficient very quickly. If not, we cut their funding. But peacebuilding takes many years.

Empowering women must include more than representation at the table; we must also provide training, media coverage, etc. and work with the men in power. In effecting these changes, getting to leadership obviously helps, but we also have to reach the grassroots. We must always remember that empowering women can put them at great risk, and we have to forgive them for sometimes dropping-out.