

2024 Women's Peace Conference

June 14th-Gulu, Uganda

1. INTRODUCTION

On June 14, 2024, the Fifth Annual Women's Grassroots Peace Conference occurred at St. Monica's Girls' Tailoring Centre in Gulu, Uganda. This gathering brought together eight grassroots organizations to discuss three main questions. The questions that guided discussions were, (1) what worked well for you in the entire process of peacebuilding activities?, (2) what are the challenges you've faced?, and (3) what are potential action plans? While the Peace Conference had previously served as an environment for women to share their post-conflict experiences and foster collaboration amongst grassroots organizations, the conference has evolved to include open discussions that will foster peacebuilding in their communities while reaching more people. Notably, last year's conference focused on COVID-19 conflicts.

Participating groups represented their communities to bring about insightful discussion about peace-building. The groups in attendance were Kitgum Women's Peace Initiative, Teso Women's Peace Activists, People's Voice for Peace, Women's Advocacy Network, Daystar Youth Services, Nakare Rural Woman Activists, Elderly Catholic Mothers Association, National Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS, and St. Monica's Girls Tailoring Centre. Others in attendance included the University of Oklahoma Center for Peace and Development, University of Oklahoma student observers, and University of Notre Dame student observers.

The report is structured around the three group discussions at the conference. The successes are combined in an overview of the participating groups. The challenges faced in communities cover the overall challenges all participating groups have faced. Lastly, the action plans discussed are broken up into each discussion group, detailing the groups and solutions. The guiding questions and resulting themes included:

- What worked well for you in the entire process of peacebuilding activities?
- What are the challenges that have been faced?
- What are some possible solutions to the challenges that have been identified?

2. SUCCESSES IN PEACEBUILDING

The Grassroots Women's Peace Groups included in their discussions what has worked well over the past few years that has positively impacted young women. This discussion highlights some of the major successes that have been profound and have been helping to impact the younger generations. Some of these successes that the women's peace conference has achieved are targeting key areas to work on, such as self-awareness, confidence, and reaching out to the public. In correlation with these positive changes, there has also been a positive impact in reaching out to the public, communicating gender inequality issues, and planning for future generations. Doing things piece by piece has allowed these women to have positive impacts in many different ways in many areas across Northern Uganda.

2024 Women's Peace Conference

June 14th-Gulu, Uganda

- **Self-Awareness:** One of the greatest success stories this movement has had in helping to recognize the impact that young women can have on their communities regardless of their personal backgrounds.
 - This also means being self-aware of the issues that young women still face in Northern Uganda and working to fix those issues that they have.
 - Examples:
 - Arranged/forced marriages (typically with teenage girls and older men)
 - This is usually done for money or for financial reasons to help support the family.
 - Sexual education/protection (especially for young girls)
 - Young girls used as sex slaves/sex trafficking
 - Marriage inequalities
 - Marital status laws, economic inequality, gender roles, marriage equality, and religious liberty

Helping to acknowledge that women cannot only become successful in certain fields that were only for men but that they can excel at them as well

➤ **Confidence**

- Women finally had the confidence to speak about the issues and tragedies that they have personally gone through.
- For the first time ever, they were able to share their stories with others, and these had profound impacts:
 - It helped develop new insights about other women who may have shared similar experiences
 - Being able to accept what happened, and start accepting closure
 - They were able to develop public speaking skills that can drastically help encourage other women to speak for themselves

➤ **Reaching Out to the Public/ Networking**

- Many women have been instrumental in educating young women in Uganda about some of these current systemic issues that they face
- Another issue is especially being more open to family members about the issues that are going on within their own households, and around their communities to each other
- They were able to find a community of women outside of their own, and realized that they are no longer just united in their village, but across the whole country

➤ **Communicating gender inequality issues** (especially to men)

- Spreading awareness to the male figures about certain issues they need support with - these include government officials/politicians, local church officials, and even the local people

2024 Women's Peace Conference

June 14th-Gulu, Uganda

- Helping put a better system in place where they can have more of an impact with the support of influential men who can help change things
- **Planning for Future Generations**
 - Helping to put into the minds of girls about changing how their system is affecting them in regards to women's equality issues there, and what they can do to help slowly change things culturally
 - Helping give opportunities to young women whose families did not have support in the past - this also coincides with not being educated enough about certain issues that they still face
 - This is helping to break generation burdens/cycles that the family may have

3. CHALLENGES FACED

The women from these grassroots organizations discussed the biggest challenges they have faced thus far in the peace building process. This can be broken up into five different sections: poverty and inaccessibility to resources and knowledge, systemic gender discrimination, violence and conflict, mothers and children, and a lack of unity among these women and their ideas to bring about peace.

➤ **Poverty and Inaccessibility to Resources and Knowledge**

The different groups discussed how one of their main challenges in peace building has been an inability to acquire and maintain funding and other resources. Some continued on to say how there are many ways to find resources and gain more knowledge and they need to begin searching for ways to save themselves rather than continuing to rely on others.

- **Poverty as a mindset:** There is an issue of people viewing themselves as irrevocably poor and vulnerable, they share this common perspective that they are in need of saving, rather than doing the work to save themselves.
- **Reliance on others:** People often expect someone else to bring them peace instead of saving themselves.
- **Funding:** There is a serious lack of funding for grassroots women's organizations due to gender discrimination and poverty throughout the region, unfortunately, loans often do more harm than good. All of this has led to a greater barrier to progress in women's peace-building initiatives
- **Inaccessibility to resources and knowledge:** Lack of exposure and education tends to limit the ability to think broadly, so women remain ignorant of policies and plans by the government and other developmental factors.
- **Cultural barriers:** Due to gender-discriminating cultural norms, money earned by women within these communities is often given to men within their families to decide how it is to be allocated.

2024 Women's Peace Conference

June 14th-Gulu, Uganda

➤ Systemic Gender Discrimination-

Continual and generational discrimination against women throughout society, within the government, and Ugandan cultures has also led to a multitude of issues for these women and their fight for peace.

- **Mindset:** Women have a mindset of inferiority, and always look to men for guidance.
- **Public perceptions:** Women often are not taken seriously when discussing serious issues and are not given the same freedoms as men. This creates issues with women's participation in grassroots organizations and the Peace Conference, as well as their ability to garner support from community leaders. Women-centered groups and activities are also often perceived as being anti-male, creating greater opposition to progress.
- **Discrimination in educational settings:** many parents prefer for the girls to get married for the dowry, rather than paying for their education.
- **Controlling husbands and fathers:** Some men prevent their wives from traveling or participating in public life activities.

➤ Violence and Conflict-

Current and past conflicts and acts of gender-based violence throughout Uganda continue to affect women's rights and their access to resources, education, and their greater communities.

- **Backlash:** The risk of violent backlash women face when discussing politics and regional violence, reporting crimes, and going against cultural norms to fight for the progression of peace and women's rights. This has sometimes led to a lack of women's participation due to fear of violent repercussions.
- **The products of captivity:** Women from captivity often are not given access to education, and children born in rebel captivity are now often raised by single mothers with little to no support from their families or communities.

➤ Mothers and Children-

Many of the groups also discussed the difficulties of motherhood and how in their society the majority of responsibility for raising their children falls on them and them alone. They discuss the effects this has on them and their children.

- **Lack of parental care:** Issues with parenting, such as time for children, exploitation, single parenting, and some women want their children to live the same lives they had to.

2024 Women's Peace Conference

June 14th-Gulu, Uganda

- **Teen pregnancies:** When teens become pregnant the blame and responsibility are almost always put on the teen's mother.

➤ Lack of Unity-

A recurring issue throughout discussions seems to be an inability to effectively communicate and a lack of consensus on what they are fighting for and working towards, and how they expect to achieve those goals.

- **Failure to come to a consensus:** Women's peace-building organizations still lack a long-term specific goal and have different interests and expectations for the peace conference.
- **Failure to effectively communicate:** Many people are unwilling to listen or be open and share their own experiences.

4. ACTION PLANS TO IMPLEMENT

The grassroots women's peace groups concluded their discussions by formulating various action plans to combat the challenges communities face in continuing to increase peacebuilding. These efforts are geared towards the sustainability of each women's peace group, working to reach more communities and women. The following section relays each of the three group discussions focusing on the action plans. Highlighting the specific grassroots women's peace group ideas and individual plans.

➤ *People's Voice for Peace, Women's Advocacy Network, Daystar Youth Services* "When you correct your mind, then you can move on."

- Funding Plans
 - Working on more proposal writing to increase funding resources
 - Networking
 - Playing active roles in various areas that one is equipped for
 - Looking into bigger peacebuilding movements to connect with
 - Being consistent as a group, doing activities together, illustrating the work and effort being done in communities.
 - Using the media as a means of locating funding
- Combating Cultural Negativity Plans
 - Creating role models and mentorships in communities for women
 - Involving gender-sensitive men in local work to reach more people
 - Locating cultural institutions to be involved in peacebuilding work with societal views
 - Collaborating with religious groups
- Working on Issues in Parenting Plans

2024 Women's Peace Conference

June 14th-Gulu, Uganda

- Reviving more traditional methods of parenting in families and communities
- Focusing on the involvement of the community/neighbors to positively aid in parenting roles
- Clarifying children's human rights and responsibilities they have, such as with songs and other cultural acts
- Creating parenting classes for single moms, including mentorships within classes and experiences moms or elders.

➤ *Nakare Rural Woman Activists, Elderly Catholic Mothers Association, and Teso Women Peace Activists*

“When you educate a woman you educate the world because she will tell her kids, her neighbors, her neighbors' kids, and everyone around them.”

- Continuing the yearly Grassroots Women's Peace Conference, ensuring the encouragement and education that occurs
- Becoming more active in lobbying for funds
 - Local and government funds
 - Communicating with religious leaders, NGO's, politicians, and other government officials
- Advocating for an education for all, including men and youth
- When the funding is available at the conference, invite men and other youth to participate
- Ensuring that partners are becoming more involved and dedicated to the peacebuilding

➤ *National Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS, and Kitgum Women Peace Initiative*

“How often do women get the chance to speak freely to explain ourselves?”

- Making clear the purpose for coming together at the yearly Grassroots Women's Peace Conference
 - Amplifying the voices of women and making them feel heard and listened to
- Redefine the group's goals and directions, stating clearly their different roles and peacebuilders
- Strengthening women's identity and capability in a more assertive way
 - Increasing confidence in women's self-identity with therapy opportunities
- Continuing to fight for women's voices to be heard in positive encouraging methods
- Using the conference as an investment for long-term peace-building, and psychological, and emotional well-being

2024 Women's Peace Conference

June 14th-Gulu, Uganda

- Focus working on members' willingness to share their experiences/ideas/areas of growth/etc. for the greater good of the group's goals
- Coming together as a point of networking and learning from one another
- Taking time to learn from other's experiences

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the organizations and members who attended this year's peace conference were able to identify what has made past conferences and community work successful, what improvements need to be made in the future, and ways to move forward to ensure future success for the individual organizations in their home areas as well as for the peace conference itself.