

Documenting Peace-Building Activities and Stories by Women Peace Builders

By

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Introduction

Women fight for justice and post-conflict reparations not only for themselves, but for future generations. The reparations they push for are long-lasting, peace building measures aimed at rebuilding communities destroyed by war to weaving together the new fabric of a community as well as setting the wounds of conflict on the long journey towards healing. This is the transformational work of women peace builders, who work tirelessly to broker and keep peace, rebuild their societies (Anderlini:2007). Despite strong evidence of the wisdom of these numerous, creative and courageous peace building activities, their stories are rarely recorded. Even when women play instrumental roles in forging and sustaining peace, when they are at the table, we do not hear enough about their contributions. Too often, women remain largely invisible in and sidelined from formal peace processes and negotiations (People Building Peace:1999).

It is against this backdrop that the organizers of the COADY conference saw it befitting that a session on “Documenting peace building stories by women be included with the hope to challenge women leaders in the area of peace building and peacekeeping to present their stories to the world at large and highlight the many achievements of women in building and sustaining peace, as well as challenges they face to their participation in these settings.

Documenting

For the purposes of this brief, documentation refers to the incorporation of stories /activities narrated by women, evidence provided, conversation facilitated with the story teller to learn more about the story or activity, the involvement of the story teller and how their actions helped in transforming the situation. The process of bringing all these activities together into one comprehensive and meaningful document is referred to as documenting. The end product of the process is a document.

According to Kroeger, J., & T. Cardy (2006), an effective piece of documentation tells a complete story and the purpose of an event, experience, or development. A good document, skillfully documented draws others into the experience by effectively describing a situation, telling a story that is authenticated by evidence and helping the viewer to understand the purpose of the action/document. To stay on track, the document should carefully select a topic, and explore the topic to the fullest. To become a documenter, one must first understand what to observe and what to do with the information collected. It takes time and practice to learn which experiences support effective documentation and how to collect artifacts and evidence.

The Value of Documenting Peace Stories

Documentation can be a rewarding process when peace builders and documenters understand the value associated with collecting evidence and producing a summary presentation, whether in a word or video format.

Documenting success stories by women peace builders “breaks the silence” and conceptualizes women’s experiences so that other women peace builders in similar situations can draw learning and inspiration. Documented peace building stories validates and strengthens the hopes being built by many courageous community based people walking the rough road in search of peace and justice.

Documenting peace building stories by women raise awareness about the contribution that women make across the world to preventing and resolving conflicts, and peace-building; inspiring future generations to actively engage women in sustaining peace. Failure to document these stories is failure to acknowledge women peace builders’ crucial work to bridge deep divides and mend their communities.

Peace building documenters are accountable to women, families, community members and generations to come to provide records, roles and evidence of peace building activities, stories by women. (Kroeger & Cardy, 2006). When peace building stories are and documented we deepen our reflections and build our future.

From the above discussion, the documentation of peace building stories is pertinent in breaking silence, and amplifying women’s peace building activities. As Chinua Achebe observed, it is only, the documented story that can continue beyond the war and the warrior. ...the (documented) story is our escort; without it, we are blind.it directs us.....to deepen our reflections and build the future.”

Teaching the Skill: Documenting Stories

The Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the early church in Rome to encourage the early first-century believers to actively share their faith with others. He used a series of questions to make his point. *“But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them?”* –Romans 10:14 NLT

Paraphrased..... How can women peace builders document their stories/activities unless someone teaches them? Women peace builders cannot document their stories nor learn to be good documenters unless they are taught the skill of documenting peace-building activities and stories. Documenters are trained in stages as they learn more about documenting and using different skills to support their ideas in the different stages of documenting

Good Listening Skills

The skill to document effectively is steeped in other skills meaning to say it is difficult for one to become a good documenter without learning and acquiring good listening, critical thinking and question and answering skills. These three skills enhance the participants’ documenting skills. Good listening skills are the first step to learning documenting skills. Listening is not only the ability to receive messages, but also the capacity to interpret the messages to avoid misunderstandings (Kroeger, J., & T. Cardy, 2006). As with every competence, it is possible to learn how to become effective listeners. Listening is particularly important for documenters, in their efforts to collect peace building narratives and document them for future use or policy making, to understand issues around the stories told and to be able to document these stories in a clearly structured, meaningful format. To truly understand the story tellers, documenters need to

effectively listen and focus on the speaker and what they are saying. Good listening requires time so there is need for documenters to exercise a lot of patience whenever they are dealing with story tellers Effective listening is not easy to master and requires patience and practice, practice, practice!

Listening requires mental, visual, hearing and physical concentration so the documenter has to be trained to engage all their senses so that they can listen from the heart as well as training to step into the shoes of the speaker to really listen and understand what they are saying. The documenter can demonstrate to the speaker that they are listening and understanding by non-verbal signs (smile, nod of the head) and verbal signs ('yes', 'I see what you mean') that give encouraging responses (Ayindo.Babu,S. Gbaydeeand J. Doe).

How to train the skill

Using mock stories the trainer should ask documenters to listen then ask participants to ask questions to be sure of the information being conveyed and to avoid misunderstandings. Thus without effective listening to the story there is no effective documenting. If they have been listening effectively the documenters should be able to recap what the speaker said and add paraphrased questions. Without effective listening one is not able to better understand and define the issues during the documenting exercise. Clarifications or recaps are done to ensure that what documenters understood is correct as well as enabling one to capture the whole picture. This skill is, again perfected through practice.

Skills in Critical Thinking

The second skill needed in documenting stories is that of critical thinking. Documenters need to apply effective critical thinking skills if they are to come up with a convincing, well presented document which is clearly structured i, and well-reasoned. Critical thinking skill is relevant if the a document has to be accurate, precise and dedicated to finding the best answer to a question, all these attributes are derived from the acquisition of effective critical thinking skills. Thus a documenter has to train and acquire effective critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is the capacity to actively question, to be open to multiple ideas, to understand others' perspectives and opinions, and to challenge personal views of the world, without fear of losing one's identity. According tocritical thinking for peace-building is also the ability to be aware of the context: the specific conflict issues, root causes of conflict, the ability to see similarities between different groups and above all, to understand how one`s own attitudes and behaviors shape one`s reality. Trainers can train documenters to sharpen their critical thinking skills by:

- Creating spaces for interaction and meaningful dialogue
- Using challenging and deep questioning to create powerful dialogues
- Allowing learners to ask and respond freely, and to ask again and again
- Repetition, asking documenters to repeat over and over again the same story to check that nothing has been missed.
- Encouraging documenters to taking different perspectives: looking at the same information from several points of view. (Bloom's Taxonomy:1956)

Critical thinking is a complex process which involves a wide range of skills and attitudes. In documenting peace stories one needs to be able to identify other peoples` positions and

arguments, evaluate the evidence from alternative angles, and weighing opposing arguments and evidence fairly. This is possible only when one has mastered effective critical thinking skills. A good documenter should be able to read between the lines to see behind the surface and to identify false or unfair assumptions as well as recognizing techniques used to make certain positions more appealing than others, such as false logic and persuasive devices. The acquisition of the skill of critical thinking enables a documenter to reflect on issues in a structural way, bringing in logic and insight; and to draw conclusions about whether arguments are valid and justifiable based on good evidence and sensible assumptions (FAO, 1990). Thus the interconnectedness of the two skills calls for trainers to combine skills training sessions with documenting trainings for maximum results. Training in critical thinking skills empowers the documenter to pay attention to detail, taking the time to note small clues that throw greater light on the overall

Combining skills training and documenting skills training

One effective way to training is adding a documentation practice element when holding a skills training class. This goes a long way in helping documenters practice the skill of documenting. Trainers should make use of mock peace building stories conducted by women in different settings such as war, mediation processes, peace settlements etc then ask documenters to put together the narratives into meaningful documents (Hope, Anne and Sally Timmel:1984). Such an exercise will prepare participants to become good documenters. The documenting practice method again gives room for documenters to apply critical thinking skills. As the mock stories are narrated documenters have to observe the situation, identify the problem, suggest and evaluate the suggested solution and take action. As documenters spend time practicing, interactive and meaningful dialogue can follow the mock practices and more suggestions aimed at sharpening documenting skills of the participants unfolds. The trainers could consider using scenario driven case studies as one of the tools to help participants practice and understand what needs to be considered as they prepare their documents. Regular scenario-based training followed by assessment findings go a long way in making the participant learn documenting skills and gain experience. Providing instruction through practice is more effective than the non-interactive lecturing approach (Hope, Anne and Sally Timmel:1984).

Documenters need to be grounded in ineffective listening, critical thinking and documenting practice skills. These are the major skills required in the documentation of peace building stories. Patience, practice, practices and practice is all that is needed to become good documenters.

The Documenting Stages

Documentation is a process that is learned, facilitated and created in stages. After acquiring the skills in documenting, the documenter has to be aware and should be able to identify, explore and act upon the stages in documenting.

1. Deciding to Document the Story

The first stage in documenting peace stories is deciding to document the peace building story. The decision to document the story comes after listening to the story, identifying and deciding on a topic and being aware of the context, the specific issues, and the root causes of the conflict etc.

2. Identifying and Exploring Documenting Technology

This stage involves identifying and exploring the technology required to the documenting process. Example being the use of voice recorders, batteries, digital video cameras, video recorders, writing pads for taking notes during questioning sessions, laptops for write ups. Documenters should familiarize themselves with the use and application of these documenting and technological gadgets.

3. Gathering information and Evidence for Story Documenting

This stage involves the gathering of information, supporting evidence, photographs etc. The documenter begins to write descriptions to write the story. Documenters title the stories available photographs, videos, events, and experiences and begin to write descriptions about the story. Documenters begin to connect s actions and experiences, work samples, photographs, descriptions, and miscellaneous information are combined as supporting evidence during the entire documenting process (Brown-DuPaul, J., T. Keyes, & L. Segatti: 2001). Documentation artifacts continue to be used by the documenter to connect the story teller`s actions and experiences. The data gathered and synthesized tell the whole story with a beginning, middle, and an end, using supporting artifacts.

4. Reflections and Assessment Documenting Stage

This stage involves the framing of questions, reflections, assessments, and building of theories, all with the support of documentation. Documenters become reflective practitioners who document meaningful actions/events, explain why they are important, and push themselves and others to continue thinking about these experiences.

5. Drawing Conclusions

The stage involves the documenter being able to read between the lines to see behind the surface and to identify false or unfair assumptions as well as recognizing techniques used to make certain positions more appealing than others, such as false logic and persuasive devices. Again, the stage requires the documenter to reflect on issues in a structural way, bringing in logic and insight; and to draw conclusions about whether arguments are valid and justifiable based on good evidence and sensible assumption. After reflecting and assessing the logic the documenter can arrive at informed, balanced conclusions.

Conclusion

Women`s numerous peace building activities are rarely recorded and women themselves must take up the challenge to document or have their stories documented. Documenting these stories raise awareness about the immense contributions made by women in conflict prevention, resolution and peace building; inspiring future generations to actively engage women in sustaining peace. It is only befitting that their stories are amplified through documenting them for the wider audience to read and acknowledge their efforts. Documenting these peace building stories continue the dialogue, for many years to come, on women`s role as peace builders under the Engaging Women in Sustainable Peace theme.

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