

## **Women Building Peace: Using Narratives to Understand Impact**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Recent analyses of conflict and post-conflict dynamics typically regard women as innocent victims or valorize them as the key to building peace. Between these one-dimensional categorizations is a more complex reality. Women in societies and countries torn by violent conflict are often simultaneously victim and agent. Each experience informs the other and ultimately determines the avenues women pursue in building peace.

Existing definitions of peacebuilding – particularly at the level of the United Nations, as exemplified in their nascent Peacebuilding Commission – and evaluation frameworks fall short in comprehending women’s peacebuilding methods, particularly at the grassroots level where their endeavors often unfold gradually in informal spaces. Understanding the breadth and depth of women’s peacebuilding methods has a direct bearing on the future of peace in countries experiencing or emerging from conflict, who is funded to move toward and accomplish that peace, and the impact that is thus achieved.

This paper will use a narrative from the Women PeaceMakers (WPM) Program at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice (IPJ)<sup>1</sup> to demonstrate how weaving historical, political, and cultural contexts together with women’s perspectives produces a holistic depiction of peacebuilding. The narrative of Zandile Nhlengetwa of South Africa, titled “Deepening the Peace,”<sup>2</sup> serves as a case study, in many respects representative of other narratives in the program, to offer insight into the lessons women are learning – through both success and failure – and the impact they are having, as well as provides a point of departure for future peacebuilding endeavors. Though we have chosen only one narrative for the current inquiry, other narratives from the IPJ’s program exemplify similar notions and will be highlighted in future contributions on the topic, including a more exhaustive critique of current evaluation frameworks.

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<sup>1</sup> The IPJ’s Women PeaceMakers Program will begin its eighth year in the fall of 2010. It documents the stories and best practices of international women leaders in peacebuilding and human rights. Their stories are captured in written narrative and on film. The narratives are available on the IPJ’s Web site:

[http://www.sandiego.edu/peacestudies/ipj/programs/women\\_peace\\_makers/publications/narratives/](http://www.sandiego.edu/peacestudies/ipj/programs/women_peace_makers/publications/narratives/)

<sup>2</sup> The narrative was written by 2008 IPJ Peace Writer Alicia Simoni, co-author of this paper.

### PEACEBUILDING DEFINED<sup>3</sup>

The United Nations, as a general rule in its policies and practices, views peacebuilding as the third and final stage on the peace process continuum: it sees peacemaking as the first stage (diplomacy to get parties to end conflict through a ceasefire and peace agreement); peacekeeping as the second stage (a third force maintaining the ceasefire and keeping those armed parties from each other). Peacebuilding then, as understood by the UN, occurs in the post-conflict stage, only after the first two; it is generally seen as a longer-term process. As the UN's relatively new Peacebuilding Commission views it, peacebuilding is most concerned with reconstruction, institution-building, and sustainable economic development in countries emerging from conflict.

In practice however, there is not such a clear distinction. For instance, the United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM) distances itself from the UN's standard definition and sees peacebuilding as occurring at all stages of the peace process continuum. Elisabeth Porter concludes in her work *Peacebuilding: Women in International Perspective*, "This lack of clarity is not academic, but has practical relevance for who does what, who is recognized for doing what, and who is supported for doing what in transitional societies,"<sup>4</sup> hinting that women are being overlooked, underfunded, and ignored as the UN attempts to establish peace in various countries. She writes, "restricting peacebuilding to 'post-conflict' misses the practical, informal work that women (and men) do to build peace in grass roots groups, communities, villages, tribal groups, clans and families."<sup>5</sup> As Dyan Mazurana and Susan McKay explained in the late 1990s, "Few women doing grassroots peacebuilding work [as opposed to work within the structure of the UN] classify it according to Boutros-Ghali's definition – that almost exclusively emphasizes post-conflict reconstruction of State institutions."<sup>6</sup> This study will rest on Porter's simple but essential assertion that "conventional peacebuilding methods do not capture the full range of areas across which women work toward regenerating their communities."<sup>7</sup>

Academic notions of peacebuilding, however, go much further than the UN – and we will base our study on the definitions given by Porter and also by noted practitioner John Paul Lederach. Lederach's brief and encompassing definition sees peacebuilding as "a comprehensive concept that encompasses a full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict."<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, he acknowledges these processes "both precede and follow formal peace accords" and are not relegated to "merely a stage in time or a condition," but rather peacebuilding is a "dynamic social construct."<sup>9</sup> Porter reiterates that peacebuilding "involves all processes that build positive relationships, heal wounds, reconcile antagonistic differences, restore esteem, respect rights, meet basic needs, enhance equality, instill feelings of security, empower moral agency, and are democratic, inclusive, and just."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This brief section is taken largely from Emiko Noma's "Women Taking Agency During Violent Conflict: Case Studies of Women PeaceMakers at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice," Portland State University, master's thesis, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Elisabeth Porter, *Peacebuilding: Women in International Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 23.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>6</sup> Dyan Mazurana and Susan McKay, *Women and Peacebuilding* (Montreal: International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, 1999), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Porter, 29.

<sup>8</sup> Lederach, *Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997), 20.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Porter, 34.

## **WHY NARRATIVE?**

The WPM Program has found that narrative is an effective and useful method for documenting women's peacemaking work. What women remember, the stories they tell, and the ways in which they do so are expressions of their identity and voice. There is meaning in both what is said and what is left out. Narratives offer a tool to capture these important nuances. They also provide a means for capturing an elongated time horizon and non-linear trajectory, both of which are central characteristics of peacebuilding.

## **FROM VICTIMHOOD TO AGENCY**

It is not enough to recognize that women are both victims and agents during and after war; the reality is not a simple dichotomy between two distinct identities. In many circumstances, women are simultaneously victim and agent – each experience informing the other and ultimately determining the avenues women pursue in building peace. The uniqueness – and the value-added – of women's peacebuilding efforts stem from the specifically gendered perspective of conflict, violence and social divisions that women have and the ways in which they resultantly navigate society and envision peace.

In the narrative of Zandile Nhlengetwa, the reader learns how her husband's death marked the beginning of her involvement in the anti-apartheid movement. As the following excerpt shows, several decades later her son's death was the catalyst for her own transformative journey through forgiveness and reconciliation – and eventually the impetus for her efforts to unite women across the divide of violent strife. Zandile, like most black South Africans, was a victim of apartheid, and the specific nature of that suffering as a woman shaped the ways in which she engaged in peacebuilding activities. For Zandile, like most women, it was not a clear or straightforward trajectory from suffering to action, but rather a multi-part journey.

### ***Narrative Excerpt – A Resounding Gong***

Zandile had driven along this road many times before. The only antidote to the inescapable dread that always accompanied the route was a sense of familiarity – Zandile had both driven this road and felt this fear before. She reassured herself continuously, “I drove here the other day. Nothing happened.”

The area, known as Mshayazafe (“Beat him until he dies”), was renowned for violent crime, particularly at the hands of young men referred to as izintandane. They were merciless, but unlike hardened criminals these boys were prone to an instantaneous chain reaction of fear-panic-shoot. It was common knowledge: If you meet a scared young person with a gun, he will kill you.

Zandile had worked late into the evening alongside fellow community workers – the year 2004 was coming to a close, so they were busy writing a development plan to present to next year's parliament. She was now on her way home with her son, Xolani, and her colleague, Themba.

Xolani was Zandile's son by circumstance not by birth. When two of Zandile's closest friends died in a car accident in 1999, she promptly took in their son, Xolani, as one of her own. From a young age Xolani was a perceptive child; he was always acutely aware of the people and activities around him. He, more than her other children, noticed and responded when Zandile was

despondent or anxious. Xolani was a smart, responsible boy; he was also prone to mischief and Zandile suspected he might be a strategist for one of the petty youth gangs.

Zandile had pleaded with Xolani to accompany her to this meeting; she was relying on his keen sense of observation to shield them from danger as they drove through Mshayazafe.

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Neither Zandile, Xolani nor Themba muttered a word as the traffic light overhead turned from green to red. As if on cue, four teenage boys emerged from the darkness blanketing the intersection. Zandile did not need to see their guns to know that these boys were primed to attack. She instinctively clutched Xolani's arm, sternly pleading with him: "Don't resist. Do not resist. God, help us. Do not resist." She knew there was nothing he could do to protect them now.

Within an instant the four boys stood poised on both sides of the car. They didn't ask for, or demand, anything. They simply peered through the windows. And fired. Fractured glass and anguished screams pierced the air. Blood streamed from Xolani's chest. The boys sprinted away.

Zandile gently cradled Xolani in her arms as he whimpered again and again until he could no longer speak, "I did not do anything. I didn't do anything."

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Within 24 hours of the shooting police had arrested Thulani Nzama and Nhlanhla Dube. They were 15 years old and guilty of a long list of offenses – burglary, drug abuse, rape, attempted murder. This was not their first time in police custody; however, because they were juveniles they had always been released to their family's charge after only a short stay in detention.

Anger consumed Zandile. It had been nearly 15 years since she silently endured the murder of her husband and then the bombing of her home. The grief and resentment she had kept pent-up during those years erupted. She wanted the boys who had killed her son to rot in prison. Justice needed to be served this time.

As an empowered woman Zandile felt an obligation to take charge of this situation. She was determined to prove once and for all that although Thulani's and Nhlanhla's age defined them as juveniles, their actions demanded the maximum adult punishment. If she did not take action, there would be nothing to stop these boys from continuing to terrorize people.

With a decade of community work behind her, Zandile possessed the know-how and the respect to garner widespread support. She enlisted the backing of organizations, teachers, women's groups, lawyers and anyone else willing to speak out against the violent crime that racked their communities. Everything she heard about the boys and their families validated her conviction that they were a danger to society. Zandile employed this information at weekly community-policing forum meetings, insisting that the police thoroughly investigate this case. She pressured the court to hold Thulani and Nhlanhla in custody until their trial date.

Zandile would not allow the murder of her son to fall by the wayside, like so many before

his. Guaranteeing Thulani and Nhlanhla's punishment would bring the community one step closer to peace. She also longed for their imprisonment to ameliorate her pain and restore a sense of control in her life.

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Eight months after Xolani died, Zandile sat at the front of the courtroom as a magistrate convicted Thulani and Nhlanhla to 20 years in prison. As the words settled over the crowded room, Zandile felt neither excitement nor remorse. She was simply satisfied with a job well done. Justice would be served.

Zandile had accomplished what she had set out to do. Yet the tension and helplessness gripping her body remained. She wondered, now what? Thulani and Nhlanhla would be 35 years old when released from Westville Prison. Would the harsh conditions of prison harden them into even more brutal criminals? Would the community be any safer now that they were off the streets? Had she gone too far in seeking a maximum sentence?

As Zandile quietly reflected on the verdict, bellowing cries resounded from across the room. Zandile saw Thulani's and Nhlanhla's mothers for the first time. For months she had asserted that these women were unfit parents. Innumerable people had described them as violent drunks, as drug dealers, as a family of nuisances. Zandile had relentlessly insisted that the fact they were single mothers did not abdicate them of the responsibility to raise decent children. Without ever having met them, Zandile despised these women.

Surrounded by her family and community, Zandile quietly walked out of the courtroom. As she passed through the doorway two women shouted, piercing Zandile with their words. "The way you do things, it's as if you are not a woman, as if you have never given birth. You are using your power because we are powerless."

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In the aftermath of Xolani's death, Zandile returned with ardor to her work as a peacebuilder in the communities of KwaZulu-Natal. She led workshops on peace and reconciliation. She counseled men and women against seeking revenge. She encouraged people to understand that by blaming individuals they were exonerating the system of apartheid. She listened to young people express their longing for forgiveness.

But as Zandile preached reconciliation and advocated forgiveness, she nurtured anger and vengefulness within herself. Zandile was unpacking other people's suffering, yet keeping her own pain tightly sealed.

Gradually Zandile realized that she loathed the person she had become. She was neither a peacebuilder nor a Christian – she was a fraud. The words of Jesus' disciple Paul rang true to her: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal."<sup>21</sup> Zandile despised herself for her own hypocrisy, but was terrified to face it. It had become her shield, guarding her from her sorrow.

Zandile turned for guidance to the one constant in her life – her Christian faith. In her

prayers, she begged for strength and clarity. She recalled what MaMajozi and Baba Zungu had taught her as a child: Revenge is not yours, it is God's.

Zandile was terrified to face the deluge of emotions that rested beyond her anger and vengeance. She also understood that the courage she needed to relinquish her pain rested in putting her unquestioning trust in the Lord. With prayer and spiritual dedication sustaining her, Zandile committed herself to a journey of healing and reconciliation.

The first step on this journey was to visit Thulani and Nhlanhla.

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Zandile was plagued by trepidation. She feared undermining her family's pain and losing credibility within the community. She questioned if she was being selfish. Zandile was not the only one who had suffered as a result of Xolani's death, nor was she alone in pressing for Thulani and Nhlanhla's imprisonment. Family and community members had rallied around Zandile in a long, arduous struggle for justice. When they heard that she intended to visit the boys in prison, these same individuals accused Zandile of betraying her own son's blood.

Again and again Zandile made appointments to visit the prison; she cancelled them each time.

Zandile wanted the support of her family and community, yet she knew that ultimately this was her own journey. As a peacebuilder she had always asserted that peacebuilding required taking risks. This was a personal risk she realized she needed to take.

In the face of persistent fears and doubts Zandile reflected on the lessons she had learned while working in communities. She had spent years encouraging others to find the courage to heal. She had witnessed joy and meaning return to peoples' lives when they shared their stories and relinquished the pain, guilt and anger they carried within. The transformations she observed in others were now her guide.

Two years after Thulani and Nhlanhla's court sentencing, Zandile stood at the roadside wishing a traffic jam would suddenly halt the cars streaming by or that an unexpected rainstorm would flood the road. If only the bus didn't come she could say that she had wanted to go, that she had tried to go. But the bus rumbled to a stop in front of her. Zandile couldn't delay any longer; today she was going to see Thulani and Nhlanhla at Westville Prison.

Squeezed among 20 other passengers, all headed to the same place, Zandile listened as they shared unassuming pleasantries – one woman was going to see her son, another to visit her brother, more than one woman was making the weekly trek to see her husband. An elderly man sat next to Zandile. Sensing the rigidity in her body, he patted her hand reassuringly, "This must be your first time. It is hard. When I went to see my son for the first time, it was hard. It is going to be OK." Zandile silently nodded in thanks, all the while inwardly questioning whether he was right.

The bus slowly rolled to a stop adjacent to large metal gates that marked the entrance to

Westville. Everyone quickly unloaded and walked briskly in the same direction: toward the visitor's hall. It didn't take long before Zandile was alone, metal gates to her back and a long gravel pathway ahead.

Every muscle in Zandile's body was stiff; it was as though her body weighed more than she could carry. Each step forward was painstakingly difficult. A prison guard breezed by, waking Zandile from her pained daze, muttering, "Ma'am, if you don't move faster visiting hours are going to be over."

Eventually Zandile reached the visitor's hall. Inside, a wire screen divided the otherwise austere room in half, separating the prisoners from their visitors. Small cardboard partitions ran perpendicular to the screen, providing each visitor a semblance of privacy. Zandile found an empty plastic chair, hesitantly sat and blankly stared ahead. When asked whom she was there to see, Zandile mumbled the boys' names, and waited. A guard was sent to bring Thulani and Nhlanhla from their cell.

Anger and bitterness suddenly overwhelmed Zandile. It felt as though everything around and within her was feverishly crumbling. She wondered out loud: "What am I doing here? What the hell am I doing here?" Her body was frozen in terror.

Without warning, out of the corner of her eyes Zandile noticed two tall, thin boys walking toward her. In unison, they sat across from her.

With her eyes glued to the floor, Zandile greeted Thulani and Nhlanhla. Like an icicle melting in the heat of the sun, the rigidness lodged within her body dissipated. Tears poured from Zandile's eyes.

She slowly slid her hands through the small hole in the wire screen and grasped each of the boy's hands. These were the hands that had pulled the trigger, the hands that had killed Xolani. Zandile sobbed; the boys sat in silence, somberly resting their hands in Zandile's palms.

In Thulani and Nhlanhla, Zandile saw her son. For the first time she grasped the rejection, sadness and fear that characterized their lives. She understood that these boys were innocent; it was the system that was guilty. Zandile wanted Thulani and Nhlanhla to have a chance to change their lives.

Zandile didn't stay at Westville long – she left without saying anything more to Thulani and Nhlanhla.

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That evening as she prepared food for her family, Zandile chanted: "... His arms are around me and I am feeling free again. I am free again. I am free again!" It was the first time she had sung in years.

Zandile had parts of herself back that she had long ago relinquished. The anger and tension she had carried since her husband's death were draining away. The sense of helplessness was gone. The relief she had sought in punishing Thulani and Nhlanhla came through the process of forgiving them. She was not condoning what they had done to her son, but she was choosing to forgive them. Whether they accepted this reconciliation or not, Zandile had reconciled with herself. She had freed

herself of anger and bitterness. When she spoke of forgiveness, Zandile would no longer be a resounding gong.

As she relished in her newfound sense of liberation, Zandile reflected on the words Thulani and Nhlanhla's mothers had shouted at her two years earlier, on the day of the sentencing. "It's as if you are not a woman ..." These words often echoed through her mind. Zandile longed to share her healing with these women; she had started a journey of reconciliation that she wanted them to be part of.

## **PEACEBUILDING METHODS OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER**

Because there was no straightforward trajectory from victimhood to agency for Zandile, this section will examine some of the peacebuilding methods that arose from her multi-part journey. For the sake of space and time constraints, only two methods are described here, though many others can be found in the full narrative and will be highlighted in future IPJ contributions on the topic.

### **Entry Points and Social Ties**

Women's peacebuilding endeavors are often grounded in the entry points and social ties that link women to their socially accepted identities as mothers, wives, sisters, teachers, community members, etc. Most women hold numerous identities simultaneously and are motivated by and act within the confines of one or many of these identities as they build peace. For example, a woman acting as an embattled social advocate at the same time as she is a compassionate mother and devoted wife.

One of the many assets of women's peacebuilding is their familiarity with social spaces and ability to navigate within and across various cultural contexts. The challenge is to not overlook women in these informal, often deemed private, spaces and also to not further entrench traditional identities, thereby missing a window of opportunity to establish gender equality alongside peace.

Below is another excerpt of Zandile's story, highlighting how as a teacher and a mother she was building peace.

### ***Narrative Excerpt – The Grass Listens and Tells What it Hears***

High-pitched shouts and bellowing wails greeted Zandile as she walked through her back gate. She stopped and watched as a throng of children paraded through the garden. The boys, led by Zandile's eight-year-old son Thuthuka, had their fists raised in the air and were emphatically shouting "Amandla! Amandla!" (Power! Power!). The girls, including her 10-year-old daughter Silindile, trailed behind wailing mournfully. Silindile and Thuthuka, along with their friends, were enacting an ANC funeral.

Zandile's heart sank at the realization that to Silindile and Thuthuka, a childhood game of "playing house" meant being a widow and a comrade. Resistance and death were the norm for her children. Three years ago they had mourned the murder of their father and not long after that been imprisoned, along with hundreds of other innocent primary school children, for the simple act of being late to school. Silindile and Thuthuka were barely old enough to read and write, yet they had already learned to carry a damp handkerchief at all times in case of a tear gas attack.

Witnessing this childhood enactment of grief confirmed Zandile's decision: Silindile and

Thuthuka and the students in her classroom would be her contribution to the struggle. She owed it to these children, to her husband and to the cause he had fought for to teach young people about their identity and their country.

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Zandile had accepted her first teaching position immediately after graduating from college in 1975. At the time there were two career options available for educated, young, black women – nursing or teaching. Zandile’s sister was a nurse so MaMajozi decided that Zandile would be a teacher. Once she made a decision there was no discussion or debate with Zandile’s mother; whether she wanted to or not, Zandile would be a teacher.

Although teaching was not her choice, Zandile was a natural. She effortlessly balanced her training which taught her to be authoritative and dictatorial, with the sense of justice and compassion she had learned from her father.

Zandile’s official mandate as a teacher of black students was to ensure they knew the bare essentials of reading and writing – nothing more and nothing less. The Bantu education system had a subtly masked objective to cultivate a class of perpetual jobseekers who had no hope of either authority or advancement. Corporal punishment and constant emotional degradation were an unspoken yet widely accepted requirement of every school’s curriculum. As a result, Zandile was groomed to believe that her highest honor as a teacher came in the form of students’ fear.

Although Zandile practiced this approach, her natural compassion invariably came through in the classroom. To her students, she echoed the inevitably disarming question she had learned from her father, “You are such a good person. What made you do this?” She encouraged them to acknowledge their own powerful potential, despite the barrage of degrading criticism that surrounded them in their homes and communities. As a young teacher Zandile talked to girls just a few years younger than she was about the dangers of capitulating to a man’s aggressive assertions. Later, she challenged boys’ justifications for why they raped their girl classmates. From her first days as a teacher, Zandile believed in education as a tool for empowerment.

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Zandile quietly pulled the classroom door shut and closed the windows. Zulu tradition had taught her that the grass was always listening and ready to tell what it heard. Ever since she stopped following the official curriculum, Zandile had become more conscious of the grass outside her classroom.

Thami’s death had ignited an insatiable desire in Zandile to understand everything she could about the past and the present of her country. In books surreptitiously borrowed from the church library, Zandile discovered versions of South African history she had never known – and in the process realized that the education she had received, and resultantly taught, was a biased version of the truth. There was more to the 1879 Battle of Isandlwana than blacks savagely killing innocent white settlers. The Shaka hadn’t simply been a barbarian and blacks hadn’t willingly given over their land to the whites.<sup>15</sup>

Zandile shared everything she learned with her students, but only in the dim light of a

shuttered classroom. She also waited until then to remind the young girls and boys huddled behind their desks: “This country needs sharp men and women. The power of white people is flailing. Older black men are dying. We are relying on you for our future.”

Oppression and the struggle against it were not new to the 70 12- and 13-year-old students in her classroom. Like Zandile’s own children, they lived with the effects of both apartheid and resistance on a daily basis. Many had lost fathers, brothers and uncles in the violence, and all of them had known nothing other than discrimination all their lives. Although only the most courageous spoke about it, fear and confusion were ever present in all of their eyes. All of Zandile’s students were scared that they might die soon too.

Zandile tried to provide her students with an alternative to the fear and hopelessness. She talked about why it was important for them to feel proud of their identity, the significance of not using skin lightening creams or straightening their hair, and why it was unjust that they carry identity passes. She often used traditional idioms to emphasize her points, reminding her students, “The darker you are the better. You are like the berries of the river – dark, smooth and preferred.” Zandile was speaking the language of Black Power, though she knew enough not to use those words.

Whenever Zandile questioned the wisdom of discussing these issues in her classroom she remembered something Thami had often said: “Don’t be paralyzed by fear. Don’t let your fear keep you quiet.” Zandile did not consider herself an activist; however, she did believe that her students’ awareness needed to be raised. They deserved to know the truth about their country’s history.

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By 1993 Soweto township, like most urban areas in South Africa, was ablaze. The revolution was at its height and the government was responding with ruthless brutality – these two powerful forces were at war against one another. The result was violence, bombings and frenzied mayhem throughout communities – and once again, in Zandile’s life.

“We need to go. Now. Your house has been petrol-bombed.” Zandile stared at her colleague, speechless. Together they sprinted from the classroom, leaving a room full of students in silent shock.

By the time Zandile ran the short distance from school to home, her house was engulfed in flames. As she stared at the raging fire her only thought was, “Where are my children? Where ARE my children?”

Fortunately Silindile and Thuthuka had been delayed coming home from school that day. Zandile’s family was intact. But all that remained of the objects she owned and cherished was a colossal heap of rubble and ashes. The identity documents that guaranteed her employment, movement and existence were gone, as were the few cherished mementos she possessed of her life with Thami. Amongst the charred debris were photos of Thami that she had regularly gazed at, the shirt she often clasped knowing that it had once touched his skin and the letters that reminded her of their young love. Now all that remained to remember her husband by was a black leather wristwatch, the one he had forgotten to wear the night he left and which Zandile, for the past three years, had clasped to her wrist each day in memory of him.

Moments before Zandile had been swept out of her classroom, her neighbor had watched a white car with no number plates slow to a stop in front of her house. He had stared as a petrol bomb floated effortlessly through the air, silently landing on Zandile's front door step. He had stood paralyzed, mouth gaping as flames hungrily moved from the front of the house to the back, from the ground to the roof, devouring everything in between.

There was absolutely nothing Zandile's neighbor, or anyone else, could have done. Calling the fire department was futile – one fire truck served all 2 million people living in Soweto, where countless fires occurred each day. Furthermore, doing anything to help Zandile would be construed as evidence of association and therefore an invitation for punishment.

Zulu wisdom says, "If you want to destroy a cockroach you can't just kill it, you also have to destroy the eggs and everything that it has touched. Otherwise the poison will continue to spread." The system had killed Thami and now they were determined to decimate everything associated with him, including his family. This fire was a warning: Zandile must be silent, or be destroyed.

The grass must have been listening and told what it heard.

### **Deepening the Peace**

Particularly for women whose peacebuilding work occurs at the grassroots and mid-levels of society, their efforts often entail taking what is done in official peace processes and actualizing it. This is done primarily at the personal and relational levels of engagement (between individuals and within/across communities). Without this work – the critical processes of building trust, re-establishing a sense of worth, reinforcing identity, etc. – peace processes would ultimately be meaningless.

Zandile's peacebuilding illustrates the integral role that individual's and community's sense of integrity and self-worth play in ensuring sustainable peace.

### ***Narrative Excerpt – Kuzakahle / Zamani (Things Are Getting Better / We Are Trying)***

"Trust No One."

These words greeted Zandile upon her arrival to Bhambayi. Scrawled across a large wooden placard, they boldly proclaimed the community's ethos. Decades ago Bhambayi was the breeding ground for Gandhi's satyagraha;<sup>17</sup> in 1995 it was one of the most violent regions of KwaZulu-Natal, of South Africa and perhaps of the world.

With a warning from the taxi driver lingering in the air – "I'd be careful" – and fear firmly settled in the pit of her stomach, Zandile slowly approached the decimated settlement. Huts made of mud, corrugated tin or a haphazard amalgam of both stood huddled together. It took little more than a cursory glance at the men, women and children milling all around to confirm what Zandile already sensed – people here were barely surviving.

Since 1985 political violence between the ANC and the IFP had displaced tens of thousands of people throughout KwaZulu-Natal province, many of whom had settled in Bhambayi. The ANC represented a progressive voice that appealed to young people; for older generations the IFP was a

harbinger of Zulu tradition and culture. The origins of factional divisions between the two parties were manifold; the result was violence that had a stranglehold on people's sense of self and other. One year after national reconciliation and the election of Nelson Mandela as president, a deeply entrenched culture of violence continued to divide the two black communities in Bhambayi.

Newspapers were regularly reporting on the violence in Bhambayi and experts were debating its causes and effects; however, very few people were talking to the 20,000 people living in its clutches. Residents seldom had the means to venture beyond the community's perimeter, and outsiders – including the police – were too scared to venture in.

Zandile was sent to Bhambayi by the organization she worked for, Survivors of Violence. After a year of reluctantly relying on her mother's pension to support her and her children, Zandile had finally found work. Her compassionate nature and commitment to empowerment was now being put to use in community groups rather than a classroom. She was seeing KwaZulu-Natal as she had never seen it in her childhood – decimated by violence and conflict. Zandile had resigned as a member of the ANC and was now actively promoting peace and reconciliation.

Her mandate in Bhambayi was to identify individuals traumatized by violence and refer them to counseling. However, Zandile's intuition told her that a counseling approach would not work here. Unable to share her own pain, anger and fears with a stranger, she could not expect others to do so. Despite struggling to support her family, Zandile knew she had no choice but to defy her employer's agenda.

Violence had stripped Zandile of her husband, her home and everything she owned, yet she maintained a firm belief that violence is not inherent in anyone; no one is born to be violent. This left a persistent question: What makes someone want to arm himself or herself? Zandile was determined to understand violence from the perspective of its perpetrators and its survivors. Zandile allowed her intuition to guide her in pursuing a holistic approach to building peace.

As soon as she arrived in Bhambayi, Zandile went to the Development Forum office. Located in a "free zone" – a small patch of land 300 meters from homes on either side of the divide – the forum was the official point of entry to the community.

Several months earlier a group of church women had arrived at Bhambayi. Methodist, Catholic, Anglican and those from the African Independent Church – these women had come calling for peace. Dressed in their church uniforms and singing as they walked, the women entered the community through the ANC side and walked from there to IFP territory. Community women joined them all along the way. Before long hundreds of women stood beside the stream that divided their lives and communities, chanting songs of worship.

That day marked the start of a ceasefire in Bhambayi. Negotiations between the ANC and IFP began shortly thereafter. The process culminated with the formation of the Development Forum, comprised of equal representation from the ANC and the IFP and tasked with rebuilding the community's infrastructure. Thus far that meant building homes and watering taps. For Zandile the first step in building trust within Bhambayi would be gaining the trust of those in the Development Forum.

For eight months Zandile presented herself at the forum meetings every Monday,

Wednesday and Friday. On the first day Zandile announced her purpose – she was interested in helping community members deal with painful past experiences, create opportunities for community development and deepen existing community peacebuilding activities. That day and every day for the following eight months, Zandile was told to please come back another day.

Each day, without fail, Zandile returned. The Development Forum had no reason to trust her, no reason to believe that she was there to do anything aside from jeopardize their precarious state of peace. Zandile was determined to prove she was worthy of the community's trust and support.

At the same time she was displaying her respect for the official forum procedures, Zandile was nurturing relationships with Bhambayi's "invisible" gatekeepers – the men and women who existed closer to the community's pulse and oftentimes exerted considerable influence over its official and unofficial affairs. Some of these individuals were ex-combatants, some mothers, others children. Conversations with them did not necessitate negotiating a slot on a meeting agenda; it simply required being present, offering acceptance and listening.

Zandile spent days walking through Bhambayi, casually offering an ear to anyone who wanted to talk. Slowly she learned the community's story. Everyone was carrying the weight of painful, traumatic experiences with them. Many had witnessed their husbands, children or siblings being killed. Most men did not have jobs. Women were beaten in their homes. Young boys were joining gangs. One mother explained to Zandile: "Now when I look at my son I see a zombie, a young man who has no hopes and dreams, a young man who is full of anger, a young man who I fear to live with." This was life. The reality was fitting for an idiom: Whether you are eaten by a lion or bitten by a tiger the result is the same – you bleed to death. Bhambayi was bleeding to death.

One afternoon, during one of her many walks through the community, Zandile entered a hut and deferentially explained to the woman hidden in the dank darkness that she needed water. The woman stared at Zandile, slowly rose from her place on the floor and walked out the door. Panic momentarily seized Zandile. Had she offended this woman? What would happen now? Zandile's pulse quickened as she heard shouting and clapping in the street. She hesitantly emerged from the darkness to find a dozen women and children gathered outside. The woman whose home she had entered gently touched Zandile's arm and exclaimed: "You are coming to see me? You are coming to see me? A clean person is visiting me. My life is going to change today!"

By simply entering this woman's home and asking to share her water, Zandile had shown her more respect than she had received in ages. Zandile had helped her reconnect with her sense of dignity and purpose. To Zandile, this was peacebuilding; this was the journey of rebuilding the brokenness inside of individuals, families and communities.

Several months later the Development Forum's chairperson approached Zandile, saying, "I am sorry it has taken us so long to get to you. When can you begin?" He did not realize that work had already begun.

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When the Development Forum called a meeting announcing the start of Zandile's project,

hundreds of young people appeared. Many arrived carrying their identity documents. As Zandile stood at the front of the room talking about peace and personal development, one by one young men and women stood up and left. They needed someone to tell them how they were going to get food and where they could get jobs. Zandile did not have this to offer. In the end 30 ANC and 30 IFP youth remained, agreeing to work with Zandile on peace issues.

Every week Zandile met with the ANC youth on one day and the IFP on another. In each meeting they discussed their challenges: the anger and bitterness they felt, the violence they witnessed, the hopelessness that surrounded them, the crime and substance abuse that was a constant temptation. For many of these young men and women it was the first time they were talking about these issues. It was also a rare opportunity for them to listen and be heard – some of them had forgotten the sound of their own voice.

These young men and women had all been involved in the liberation movement. From a very young age the movement had provided a sense of purpose; it had been the compass they lived by. Now, without a unit to belong to or a commander's rules to follow, they had nothing. They had lost their status as freedom fighters and were considered by the community to be nothing other than troublemakers.

Participating in the meetings was their attempt to find new direction and purpose. It gave each individual a sense of belonging and restored his or her worth within the community. Zandile encouraged the groups to formalize their structure, emphasizing the importance of having a name to identify with and a set of rules to be accountable to. The ANC group called themselves Kuzakahle (“Things are getting better”). The IFP youth chose Zamani (“We are trying”).

After months of meeting, each group decided they were prepared to take the next step: They would spend a week outside of Bhambayi with their enemy. It was a risk for the two conflicting parties to come together – a risk for each of them and for Zandile. But she was convinced that this was one of the calculated risks that peacebuilding required.

The two groups traveled in separate buses to a game reserve 100 kilometers away from Bhambayi and from the violence and despair that defined their daily lives.

As they sat in separate corners of the same room for the first time, Zandile began the retreat the way she typically began their community meetings – with a “go-around.” Participants had the opportunity to share what they were feeling and why they were there. She also encouraged them to share their names and what that name meant. Whether they were from the IFP or the ANC, all of these men and women had been given a name at birth that meant something in African tradition. Sharing their names was the first of many neutral, non-threatening things they could share with each other.

Zandile then asked each of them to take off one shoe, place it in the center of the room, and choose someone else's shoe to wear as they walked around the room. A palpable sense of tension lifted as 30 young people stumbled around the room, nudging their friends and chuckling to themselves. After several moments of uninterrupted laughter, Zandile reminded them that wearing someone else's shoe is like hearing someone's story – it is not easy because only ours fits, but we need to respect the path others have walked in their shoes.

Zandile also asked the participants to reflect on the baggage they all carried with them – the positive and negative experiences that impacted them and that they still carry. Even if they didn't feel comfortable yet to share their own life journeys, she asked them to think about why it was important to reflect on these experiences and express their emotions.<sup>19</sup>

Zandile was gently coaxing these young men and women to take small steps from out behind their walls. She was striving to help them feel safe, so that they in turn could make each other feel safe.

The first three days of the retreat were spent establishing ground rules – rules that did not need to apply at home but that would allow them to spend this week together. The issue that vexed the young men and women most was their weapons. How could they sit in the same room together without their arms? Gripping his gun, one man explained to Zandile, "I'd rather go home than let go of this. This is my life. I feel empty if I don't have this. I feel vulnerable. You guys are not going to protect me. I have my enemies sitting across from me. What if I surrender my ammunition and he doesn't? How will we know?"

Zandile could not promise anything. She only knew that it was crucial not to force these young people to put down their arms. Instead she asked them to reflect on why they wanted to arm themselves. If it was a gun that made a man feel like a man, Zandile asked him: What will make you feel like a man without this? If it was a knife that allowed a woman to feel protected, Zandile asked her: What else will help you feel protected? If it was a pistol that provided a man with power and respect, Zandile asked him: How else can you gain respect? If it was violence that helped them all feel safe, Zandile asked them: What can we do to help you feel safe?

They talked about their childhoods, about the difficult decisions they had to make in their lives, about their dreams for the future. Among the various issues that emerged, revenge was a common theme. All of these men and women had witnessed or participated in horrific events and suffered as a result. Revenge was one of the only methods they knew to find relief from their anguish and pain.

One young man stoically explained to Zandile and a small group of companions, "I was very young when our house was attacked. My dad pushed me under the bed to hide me. As I lay there I saw my father get shot and bleed to death, my mother and sister were raped. My sister has HIV and my mother died too. I know the guys that did this. I saw them. I want revenge. I want them dead too."

Zandile heard the pain and sorrow fueling the desire for revenge in this man's story and others like his. Her response to each story was, "I am not here to tell you not to seek revenge. Because if I had seen what you saw and felt what you feel I would want revenge too. But if you are going to revenge you need a clear plan. Tell me your plan."

Zandile asked for the details of their revenge. Do you have a gun? What kind of gun? Have people agreed to help? Does the person you are going after have brothers, cousins or friends you need to worry about? Where will you run to after you do this? What will happen to your girlfriend and your child – do they have somewhere they can go for safety?

As these plans emerged, Zandile asked the participants to make a pact: after this retreat they would continue to talk about their revenge plans and they would not take action for the next six months.

Zandile was once again taking a risk. According to the law, she should report each one of these young people to the police. She knew that doing so would only incite more hatred and hopelessness. These young men and women had trusted her with their pain; she made a decision to trust that if she helped them work through that pain and regain hope in the future they would no longer need revenge.

Zandile was touching the nerve of the issues in people's lives. She was allowing people to tell their stories. The healing process began as they shared these stories and as they listened to each other's stories. Her objective was not to end conflict; it was to rebuild trust so that people could differ in ideologies and yet live together in peace.

During the last evening of the retreat Zandile watched with joy as these young men and women gathered together, raucously singing and dancing. In this moment it didn't matter if they were ANC or IFP; together they were Kuzakahle and Zamani.

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When they returned to Bhambayi the young men and women from Kuzakahle and Zamani continued to meet separately, as they had before the retreat. As Zandile had hoped, within a few months all the plans for revenge were replaced with plans for community activities and trainings. These young people had a sense of hope that they never had before. They felt, "I am going to miss out on things. I am going to mess up my future if I get arrested. I am involved in the community now. I am not here to fight anymore."

They also decided to continue meeting together. Their plan was to talk about strategies so they could continue the cross-community work they had begun. Each group selected four representative members, who then agreed upon Wimpy's restaurant as the first meeting place.

But not everyone in their communities was prepared to let go of the pain from the past and reconcile. As these young people sat together, the restaurant was ambushed and sprayed with bullets. Hardliners within the ANC and IFP viewed them as sell-outs; they were a threat and needed to be eliminated. Three died, three were injured.

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After this incident, Zandile hesitated to return to Bhambayi. Had she pushed too hard for peace? Were her goals practical? Was the situation too volatile for this work?

An answer came in the form of an embrace and these words from two community leaders – one from the IFP and one from the ANC: "Please continue. We know this is about peace. We want peace."

## **CONCLUSION**

As demonstrated through Zandile's narrative and in other stories from the Women PeaceMakers Program at the IPJ, women are doing varied and profound work toward developing their communities and nations during and after periods of violent conflict. But notably, because there is no "aftermath" for women and victimized communities – and thus the terms "post-conflict" or "post-accord" are misnomers as violence and its effects continue – the period officially designated "peacebuilding" cannot be relegated to after a peace agreement has been signed. To reiterate Porter's assertion: "Conventional peacebuilding methods do not capture the full range of areas which women work toward regenerating their communities." As women see it, peacebuilding must be accomplished at all stages of the peace process and at all relational levels of engagement (including between individuals and within/across communities) in order for peace to be made real in a community and country.

While acknowledging this is neither an exhaustive overview nor a complete in-depth analysis of even one narrative from the Women PeaceMakers Program, this paper is a step toward understanding the breadth and depth of women's methods in peacebuilding, and thus critiques the standard UN definition of peacebuilding. This critique is essential if women's peace activities, as previously noted by theorists such as Elisabeth Porter, are to be acknowledged, highlighted, and – on a very practical level – funded in order to improve and deepen their impact in countries in and emerging from violent conflict.