

Empowering Women in Northern Ghana for Peace
Ghana
International House Philadelphia
Nana Sarpong Agyemang-Mensah (USA/Ghana), University of Pennsylvania

The empowering women in Bawku for peace project began as a dream to help women in Bawku become key players in the peace building process to attain lasting peace in the area. My goal was to first determine how the conflict had affected the lives of the women in the Bawku municipality, and then based on the data gathered, organize a women empowerment workshop. To determine the effects of the conflict, I held focus group discussions with a few women's groups in the municipality and also interviewed key players in the peace process. These included the Municipal co-coordinating director, a reverend minister from the Presbyterian church and staff of the NGO BEWDA (Bawku East Women's Development Association). From the key players and the women I learned that the main effects of the conflict were loss of life, loss of access to health facilities, loss of income and savings, halted development projects which had led to an increased level of poverty in the municipality.

However, after conducting focus group discussions with women in Bawku municipality, I realized the focus of the workshop had to change. The women expressed that they were afraid fighting would erupt at any time since the underlying cause of the conflict had not been solved. They said the only reason the fighting was at a standstill was due to the military personnel stationed there, and the ban on men riding motorcycles, which is the main mode of transportation. They wanted to do something about the conflict but didn't know how to go about brokering for peace. The women who had been most affected were those in the urban area, since this is where fighting was the heaviest. In addition, the level of fear displayed by the women interviewed indicated that a workshop focusing on laws and reproductive health would not have the desired impact, hence the decision to have the workshop focus on empowerment and peace building skills.

Another change that had to be made due to unforeseen changes in availability of resource persons was that the project had to be divided into two trips instead of one. While I would have preferred to have had women from all walks of life present, due to the variety of languages spoken in the area, workshop participants had to be literate in English, which limited the number of women who could participate. The number of women was reduced to thirty due to budget constraints but four more women were invited to increase representation for one of the factions involved in the conflict. The women represented not just the factions involved in the conflict, but also other tribes in the area that are affected by the fighting and are sometimes also involved.

The workshop was held over three days and covered topics like women and peace building, the role of gender, understanding and resolving conflict, empowering women for peace building, assertive communication skills, dialogue skills, mediation skills, leadership qualities, self-esteem building and decision making skills.

In addition to the group activities that were part of the learning experience, the participants also came up with an activity that involved putting together statements about peace to show what they had learned about peace. Some of these statements were: **Without inner peace, it is impossible to have world peace; Peace is not only God's gift to His creatures, peace is our gift to each other; In times of peace sons will bury their fathers, but in times of war fathers will bury their sons; Having the wisdom to face the truth will bring us closer to peace.** Throughout the workshop, the level of participation showed the women were not only understanding the sessions, but also that they were willing to make an effort to bring about a change in their community.

The last afternoon of the workshop was spent on networking and action planning, since most of the women had no experience with these. Some of the action plans made include: organizing women in the community to talk to them about conflict resolution; sensitizing community members to recognize the early signs of conflict; formation of peace clubs in junior high schools; teaching children to be assertive and talking to family and friends about the need to eschew violence.

At the end of the workshop, participants expressed their satisfaction with proceedings, though they would have wished it had been a residential workshop, which was not possible due to logistics and the

state of tension in the area. One participant, Elizabeth Apibil said that she received her invitation late and had wanted to make an excuse not to attend. However, when she saw the topics to be covered she decided to stay and said the workshop had clarified a lot of things for her. Another participant, Fati Musah said she most enjoyed the assertive communication and self esteem building sessions, while Lawrencia Azure enjoyed the networking aspect and plans on using her newfound knowledge to ensure peace prevails in Bawku.

While the grant has allowed me to achieve my desired goal of providing women in Bawku with the skills they need to become effective peace-brokers in their homes and communities, I have also realized that it will be necessary to not only provide some financial assistance for some of the projects, but also follow-up will be essential to determine the impact the women have on the peace process. As such, my current goal now is to raise funds to follow-up with the women, provide assistance for their projects and also refresher training. I believe that the women trained have the ability to influence not just their family members but members of their community to turn away from violence and seek non-violent solutions to the conflict.

Personally, I define peace to be living in harmony with others. Living in harmony with others does not mean everyone must agree on everything, but rather when there is disagreement, taking the time to listen to the other party to understand their point of view and then working towards a middle ground. Peace comes when we make the effort to understand each other and compromise to ensure everyone is treated fairly.

My project provided selected women in Bawku with the opportunity to express their feelings about the conflict and learn skills with which to prevent further fighting in their community and has also made their concerns known to the municipal assembly.

In the short term, I believe that with the assertiveness training, the women will recognize their worth as valuable members of society who have the right to express their opinions. This will in turn help them to be more confident and earn the respect of the men in the community which will in turn allow the women to convince their male children and husbands not to engage in violence as a solution to conflict.

In the long term, I believe the women trained can have a positive influence on other women in the community who will also take up the challenge of maintaining peace in the community. In addition to maintaining peace, it is my hope that more women in the area will run for local government positions such as unit committee members and assembly women. Currently, there are no elected female assembly women in the Bawku municipality; all the assemblywomen have been appointed by the government. With more women in local government who have the support of their communities, the needs of women can be made known to government and this can guide development projects to improve the quality of life in the region. With increased development, there will be more job opportunities for the youth. Since it is mainly the young men in Bawku who engage in fighting, if they have some form of employment they would be less likely to leave their work to go and fight. I therefore believe that this project can at least reduce the numbers of people engaging in violence and make it possible for people to regain their lost capital and improve their quality of life.

One of the most important things I've learned from this project is that while we all share a common humanity, there are differences that exist between groups of people, even those who live in close proximity that must be taken into account to ensure peace and harmony. Ghana is a small country, but there is a lot of diversity such that the way people react to situations varies greatly within the country, and interventions must always be adjusted to be beneficial to the target group. It is also important for those organizing these interventions to be as objective as possible in order to build the trust of the groups involved.

In Bawku presently, the current 'peaceful' situation is due to the military presence in the area which has had to use the threat of violence to keep factions from fighting. However, true peace cannot be achieved through violence, but rather through trying to understand each other and working towards a common ground.

