

Nonviolent Peaceforce

Case Study:

Sustaining the gains of peace, equal rights for women and attaining reconciliation in Aceh



"A hidden pain
like a back mark
I've felt it
A lasting trauma that will
never go away
Even with millions of dollars."

Extract from 'Wounds and I' by Aulia, a participant of programming with Flower Aceh, a partner of NP Indonesia

Above: Aulia. Aceh, Indonesia. February 2024. © NP
Right: Partners at inception workshop in Aceh, Dec 2022. © Flower Aceh



A successful yet unfinished peace process

In 2005, months after a tsunami devastated Aceh, a groundbreaking peace agreement was reached, granting Aceh political autonomy. This ended nearly three decades of an armed conflict estimated to have killed 30,000 people.

The agreement included the formation of an Aceh Truth and Reconciliation Commission (ATRC), provisions for reparations, and the integration of Acehnese Islamic criminal law (jinayat) into the regional legal framework.

Nearly twenty years on, the situation in Aceh has improved significantly. The Aceh Truth and Reconciliation Commission (ATRC), while 11 years late in its establishment, has documented abuses committed in the civil war. Various efforts have been made to address reparations and reform the criminal code. Economic activity has increased, and poverty rates have declined. Yet, despite significant progress, aspects of the peace agreement remain unresolved. The ATRC has no judicial powers and limited resources. Reconciliation and justice efforts in local communities, including the reparation for victims of human rights violations and abuse, have suffered significant delays. New remains of victims from the conflict period are still being uncovered and many people, especially women and girls, have been excluded from the efforts to bring the peace process to completion.[1] Moreover, the implementation of Islamic Law in Aceh

as part of peace agreement has created serious barriers for women and girls to report rape or other forms of sexual violence, and many of its provisions are a breach of international and national human rights law and standards.

These lingering gaps are more than administrative oversights—they are areas of vulnerability where unaddressed trauma and systemic exclusion could reignite cycles of mistrust and harm. In this context, protection is not about physical intervention alone, but about creating space for healing, repairing relationships, and breaking the silence to restore dignity.

Over the course of 2023 and 2024, NP set out to support the completion of Aceh's peace process by supporting local efforts to strengthen transitional justice, protect women's rights, and promote civic engagement. Acting as a catalyst and convener, NP brought together six civil society organisations—including some that had lost touch with each other or diverged in focus—restitching a protective fabric that had begun to fray. Instead of providing frontline protection, NP worked behind the scenes to facilitate shared strategies, restore mutual trust, and promote collective action. It took an additional step toward localisation by establishing Nurani Perdamaian Indonesia, a local foundation led by Acehnese staff and governed by an Indonesian board, supported by NP.

From transitional justice to collective healing

Truth and reconciliation is one of the remaining loose threads in Aceh's peace process. The ATRC that was set up by the Aceh government has faced multiple challenges, including political sensitivities, limited institutional support, national level uncertainty about transitional justice, and funding constraints. The recording of personal experiences of violence remains an important issue for many victims in the process of addressing their grievances. Without it, many of them refuse to accept other forms of reparation. This open wound has stood in the way of completing Aceh's peace process. The absence of public acknowledgement of acts of violence has become a quiet threat to peace. Left unspoken, grief calcifies. Left unheard, it isolates. And isolation breeds resentment. NP stepped into this space, not to amplify the voices of victims, but to listen, to be in solidarity, and to connect. This was a key area local partners asked NP to support them with.

Throughout 2023 and 2024, NP and partners, notably KontraS Aceh and Koalisi NGO HAM, made progress by increasing civil society engagement and awareness of transitional justice, strengthening advocacy for reparations, and facilitating the empowerment of victims. The two local partners brought together victims, civil society organisations and government representatives to cultivate a more inclusive conversation around truth and reconciliation. More specifically, KontraS Aceh's advocacy efforts proved instrumental in influencing government commitment to reparations policy. Their targeted consultations and capacity-building sessions for TRC personnel led to improved documentation practices. This facilitated better data analysis and laid a stronger foundation for sustained advocacy. Meanwhile, Koalisi NGO HAM further reinforced these efforts through strategic legislative engagement. Their meetings with the Aceh Parliament helped solidify political will to address past human rights violations, bringing transitional justice to the forefront of legislative discourse.

Throughout this process, victims, in particular women, actively participated in statement-giving processes, allowing their experiences to be captured in formal reporting. Both KontraS and Koalisi NGO HAM also supported ATRC personnel in increasing their documentation practice and facilitating better data analysis that aided advocacy efforts. This strengthened political will among parliamentarians to address past human rights violations and brought the issue of transitional justice to the forefront of the legislative discourse.

Finally, NP's two partners collected 1,204 victim-statements that led to monetary compensation for 245 victims. Combined efforts supported a cultural shift towards more openness as victims began to speak more openly about past injustices. As more victims stepped forward, others followed, transforming silence into collective resilience. They also supported a deeper integration of transitional justice principles and practice within Aceh's governance structures and a stronger legislative focus on peacebuilding and human rights protections in parliament.

NP supported its two partners in the recording and analysis of statements and fostered a more holistic and creative process by drawing in a broader set of actors, including the women's rights organisations described below. When the partners struggled to maintain their efforts in the midst of national election campaigns, NP supported them in mobilising and training victims' organisations in the process of recording statements. This shift—supporting survivors to assume roles of truth facilitators—exemplifies NP's approach to community-centred protection. It improved the quality of statements, as fellow victims were more sensitive than the assigned ATRC statement takers and appreciated the nuances of details that make a difference to the statement. Victims spoke more freely, knowing they were not being observed, but understood. It also led to more statements being collected than expected, as victims felt more comfortable sharing their stories with fellow victims. In addition, it triggered a new wave of civic engagement and a shift from the pursuit of truth and reconciliation through formal channels towards efforts within communities to seek collective healing.

The broadening of the focus or evolution from formal accountability to community engagement and healing that took place organically showcases the potential of UCP as a practice of people-centred, relational security and the healing power of nonviolence. By creating a safer space for victims to voice their experiences of injustice in relationship to others, and by proactively engaging with those in power to address injustice and insecurity, NP and partners made a contribution to the healing of a long-standing cycle of violence in Aceh and to the growth of a culture of nonviolence.

Youth Empowerment in Aceh

Emphasis was also placed on empowering youth and providing education on the peace process in Aceh. This was largely undertaken by Las Kasspia, another local partner organization and member of the consortium in Aceh.

Between June and October 2024, La Kasspia conducted more than 10 workshops reaching a total of 340 participants, including youth, university students, and community members. In October 2024, a workshop on Civilian Protection was held for the youth in Sigli, of Pidie District, wherein twenty-two participants, aged 18–25, were introduced to the roles of state and non-state actors in protecting civilians' rights. For many participants, this was their first exposure to the topic and led to follow-up interest from local youth groups.

By fostering awareness of civilian protection principles among youth in rural and post-conflict areas, these groups are better positioned as key actors in local peacebuilding efforts. Greater connectivity and collaboration between youth groups, civil society organizations, and educational institutions also further enhances the facilitation capacity of local organizations to sustainably implement locally-led community education initiatives.

Enhancing protection of women and children within Sharia Law

The consortium NP put together in Aceh consisted of a variety of groups focusing on different issues. While KontraS and Koalisi NGO HAM focused on truth and reconciliation, three other partners focused on the prevention of sexual violence, the promotion and protection of women's

rights and the inclusion of women in peacebuilding, by means of policy advocacy, community outreach, victim support, and training on topics such as leadership, negotiation, and mediation.

One of these groups is Flower Aceh, a women's rights organisation whose leaders used to receive protective accompaniment from PBI during the war. Twenty-five years later, it is still working for peace and security, now confronting systemic violence against women. One notable task Flower Aceh and another partner, Balai Syura UIA, have taken on in 2023 and 2024 was campaigning for revisions to the Islamic Criminal Code practised in Aceh, Qanun Jinayat, for the lack of protection it provides against sexual and gender-based violence. This required a lot of courage as well as diplomacy, as it is a highly sensitive issue and the role of women in religious affairs has been limited, despite the active roles they have played as human rights defenders and architects of peace. At the beginning of their campaign, the women's groups struggled to gain access to influential stakeholders, including religious leaders, because of their public stance on the issue of reform. Stakeholders with opposing views would entrench their positions and only engage from a distance. This led NP to step in as a connector—actively fostering linkages between different stakeholders at the local, regional and national levels. It also mobilised other partners, including the partners working on truth and reconciliation, to use their human rights networks as additional channels for the women's groups to gain direct access to religious leaders. Once access was gained, NP supported its partners in scaling down combative campaigning in favour of constructive dialogue—an approach deeply rooted in nonviolence. This revealed that concerns about protections laid forth under Sharia law were shared to some extent, but only expressed behind closed doors. Aware that conversations in private circles were different from what was being spoken publicly, sustained engagement on multiple fronts was undertaken. This allowed religious leaders to gradually acknowledge publicly that room for policy improvement exists in the implementation of Sharia law. It ultimately led religious leaders to release their own expert opinion on the issues and the problems they identified in the Islamic Criminal Code for the first time, which increased buy-in from other influential actors.

Rasyidah, Acehnese community leader for mental health who has worked with NP and Flower Aceh. Aceh, Indonesia, 2024. © Denise Rafaeli Cadorniga/NP



These results are significant because the Qanun Jinayat is part of the terms of autonomy uniquely applied in Aceh as part of the peace agreement. Therefore, religious and government authorities have always refrained from publicly exploring or acknowledging any concerns about sexual and gender-based violence and women's rights under this code for fear of provoking discontent and undermining the stability achieved since the end of the armed conflict. Although there remains some regional opposition to revising the Qanun Jinayat, the efforts that the women's groups started and the support that was gradually gained from religious leaders, the central government and among the public have led to a policy draft of the revision of the Qanun Jinayat.

In addition, the combined efforts of these organizations had resulted in demonstrable success in changing broader perceptions of women's leadership in the

Aceh peacebuilding and reconciliation process. For instance, Balai Syura UIA reported increased support from male stakeholders for women's leadership, while Flower Aceh observed broader community backing—including from men—for women's involvement in peacebuilding and reconciliation. This gradual change in perception contributes to a more supportive environment for women's participation in decision-making and is demonstrated by a tangible increase in women's participation in leadership recorded by Flower Aceh and Balai Syura UIA—by 50% and 30% respectively—indicating that women have increasingly stepped into decision-making roles in their communities.

Another initial barrier to this was a broader lack of public exposure to and understanding of certain laws. This caused community outreach and awareness-raising to become a focal point of cooperation with civil society organizations, which ultimately proved successful: Flower Aceh reached an estimated 10,000 people through published articles promoting women's empowerment and leadership, while Balai Syura UIA conducted community outreach programs reaching over 200 individuals, while also disseminating their message through published articles that garnered around 8,000 readers. These efforts fostered community–level dialogue and contributed to the reshaping of norms surrounding women's roles in peacebuilding and leadership.

[1] The Helsinki accord recognised the crucial role of gender equality and the participation of women in the peace process. Women's groups in Aceh played a vital role in advocating equal rights and were instrumental in the inclusion of gender provisions in the peace agreement. See also: https://www.thejakartapost.com/indonesia/2024/04/01/komnas-ham-opens-probe-into-bones-found-at-acehs-rumoh-geudong.html