



The Boston Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights

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# Workshop on Forgiveness and Reconciliation

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Twenty-five women activists and government officials from conflict areas around the globe gathered for a week at the Women and Security Executive Program. The Boston Consortium met with them one afternoon for a discussion, led by Professor Eileen Babbitt, about what might best promote coexistence among previously warring parties.

The question posed was as follows: *“Many now believe that violent conflicts cannot usually end in forgiveness. Nor, if the politics are likely to succeed later, ought the*

***conflicts to end in revenge. Between the extremes of vengeance and forgiveness lies 'coexistence.' Is this an appropriate goal, and if so, how can different polities achieve it?"***

The group explored the following specific questions:

1. If we define "forgiveness" as recognizing the harm done by another without feeling resentment against the other any longer, to what degree do you think "forgiveness" is possible? Is it a good goal in your context? Are there some instances in which it is a good goal and some instances in which it is not? Which groups and individuals are the least likely to forgive?

Answer: The participants differed in their assessments of these questions. Many decided that forgiveness was possible and good *if* 1) genuine regret was expressed and 2) some reparation was made to the best of the others' abilities.

2. If forgiveness is a good goal in any context, what social and political arrangements are most likely to bring it about?

Answer: The participants again differed in opinion, with Latin American participants being strongest against amnesties and "impunity." A discussion of different forms of tribunals – international and local – ensued.

Further questions posed in advance, that were not so thoroughly discussed, included:

3. Can anything be done during the peace negotiations to make later forgiveness more likely?
4. If we define "revenge" as exacting an emotionally appropriate price for wrongs done in the past, to what degree do you think "appropriate revenge" is possible in your context? Is it a good goal in your context? Are there some instances in which it is a good goal and some instances in which it is not? Which groups and individuals are the least likely to take revenge?
5. What social and political arrangements are most likely to bring revenge about?
6. Are there things that are or can be done during the peace negotiations that would make revenge more or less likely?
7. Let us think of "coexistence" as arrangements that allow people to live together with neither forgiveness nor "appropriate revenge" (a likely outcome in most conflicts). What social and political arrangements are most likely to bring "coexistence" about?
8. Can anything be done during the peace negotiations to make coexistence more likely?

9. Some current research suggests that because of remaining post-conflict hostilities, coexistence will most likely be guaranteed by coercive structures. This would impose coexistence on people who otherwise would continue to see one another as enemies. Do you think this would be the case in your context? What are some alternatives? Do you have experience with either coercion or alternative methods to produce coexistence? What are the advantages and disadvantages of having "third parties," such as international groups, NATO, or the U.S provide the coercion that makes coexistence possible?