

ROLE OF WOMEN IN PEACEBUILDING: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO AND LIBERIA

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Abstract: This paper is an exploration of the role of women in peacebuilding within the African context. The paper specifically draws from the role and the position that women have played in peacebuilding in Africa and the challenges that they undergo. Some of the challenges discussed will be the exclusion of women in decision making and the role of illiteracy among various. The arguments presented here are grounded on the understanding that gender disparity is a deterrent factor in the achievement of peace and stability and the general development of African states. The study takes a comparative approach, with Liberia and Congo nations as cases under consideration. The two countries are examples of African countries that have suffered through civil wars. Often, women and children have been the most affected. The paper bases its arguments on Resolution 1325 that acknowledges the role of women in conflict and peacebuilding. In the closing remarks, the research advocates for heightened support of women involved in peacebuilding strategies in order to foster the stability of African countries.

Keywords: Peace Building, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Women, Resolution 1325 Challenges.

1. INTRODUCTION

Peacebuilding according to the United Nations peacebuilding support office is the collection of strategies, processes, and activities aimed at sustaining peace over the long-term with a clear focus on reducing chances for the relapse into conflict ("Alliance for Peacebuilding," n.d.). Globally, peacebuilding policies and programs have experienced noticeable changes over the years since the mid-1990s. Actors in the international arena have revised the different roles of the various conflict parties. In 1995 during the Fourth World Conference on Women, a platform for action was adopted and its section on women in armed conflict highlighted six strategic objectives aimed at increasing the involvement of women in conflict resolution at decision-making levels and urged governments as well as international organizations to incorporate gender perspectives in the resolution of armed or other conflicts. During a special session held by the United Nations Security Council on the 31st of October 2000, resolution 1325 was passed which recognized the role of women in conflict not as victims but as actors in the prevention and resolution of conflict (Nduwimana, 2000).

Africa as a continent has made tremendous progress too in terms of involvement of women in conflict resolution as seen during the 26th summit of the African Union where 2016 was declared the African year of human rights with a key focus on the rights of women and their involvement in conflict resolution as decision makers.

Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo can be traced back to the 1994 Rwandan genocide that caused Rwandese refugees to flood into the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo. In 1996, Rwanda and Uganda ransacked the Eastern part of Democratic Republic of Congo in an attempt to eliminate the remaining culprits of the Rwandan genocide. This later led to a power hunt where Ugandan and Rwandese soldiers in partnership with the Congolese opposition leader Laurent Desire Kabila finally defeated the President Mobutu Sese Seko who was a dictator. Laurent Desire Kabila then became the president in May 1997. In 1998, Laurent Desire Kabila ordered the Ugandan and Rwandese armies to leave the Eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo in fear that they might take control of the mineral-rich region. Angola, Zimbabwe and other regional partners supported Kabila's government which led to the emergence of a conflict commonly referred to as Africa's world war which saw nine countries fighting each other on Congolese soil (Malan

&Porto, 2004). Several agreements such as the Sun City agreement of April 2002, the Pretoria Accord of July 2002 between Rwanda and Congo and the Luanda agreement between Uganda and Congo put an official end to the war and the transitional government of the Democratic Republic of Congo took power in July 2003.

Currently, the eastern part of Congo is considered fragile with several armed forces continuously terrorizing civilians and getting in the way of long-term peace in the region. The conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo results from the struggle for power and ethnic clashes where women and children are the most affected .

In the case of Liberia, conflict can be traced back to 1980 when a Liberian sergeant Samuel Doe assassinated president Tolbert and executed 13 of the president's cabinet members through a bloody coup in order to seize power. ("Liberian Listener," n.d.). In 1989, a military official who was part of Doe's cabinet Charles Taylor returned the favor and tried to overthrow Samuel Doe's regime resulting in a civil war which continued for years up until 1996 following the intervention of African peacekeepers. Charles Taylor was elected as the president of Liberia the same year. Later in 1999, a rebel group (Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy in Northern Liberia) provoked by Taylor's actions, started a second civil war which lasted for 7 years. In 2003, the conflict escalated due to the emergence of a second rebel group in southern Liberia which led to the shutdown of the country and the flight of Charles Taylor to Nigeria. The civil war came to an end in June 2003 when Nigerian peacekeeping forces under the United Nations and the United States Marine expeditionary forces intervened and secured the country. A governance reform commission was set up with Ms. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf being the chair (Emmanuel, 2012). The 14-year civil war has resulted in a high number of refugees whose lives have been destroyed. The country still experiences several political and ethnic conflicts up to date.

Several networks have emerged over the years such as the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) and the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET). WIPNET, which spans across Nigeria, Liberia, Cote D'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Benin, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, and Ghana. These groups mobilized women during the Liberian civil wars with the goal of advocating peace and security within the nation ("ICRtoP," n.d.).

2. THEORETICAL REVIEW

Dominance Theory proposed by MacKinnon (1987) is key in this study as it postulates that female sexuality is socially constructed by the male to assume dominance. The dominance of men has led to inequalities thus making it hard for the inclusion of women in major areas, peacebuilding being one of them. In this study, the theory is illustrated in the challenges faced by women in peacebuilding in Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (MacKinnon, 1987).

Feminist theory has its key focus on avoiding the basis of sex and gender objectification and inequality especially radical feminism which emphasizes getting rid of societal rights divisions, privileges and power along sex and gender lines which oppress women and privilege men. This acts as a key basis to our study. Drawing from Feminism the role of women in peacebuilding is justified ("Lumen," n.d.).

Women Peacebuilding Movements in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Liberia:

According to Whitman (2005) women in the inter-Congolese dialogue (ICD), find it astonishing that male counterparts, who usually provoke war and strife, have been the ones expected to spearhead the peace process. She notes that organizations that unite women are vital in driving peace talks and treaties, creating sensitization on the roles of women in such accords (Whitman, 2005).

The contribution of women in the Inter-Congolese Dialogue was through two methods. First, women were directly represented in negotiations. The call for increased female representation in these negotiations was to ensure that gender issues were included in the talks. Secondly, they also took part in a high-level problem-solving workshop for women, which was held in Nairobi before the Sun City negotiations of the Inter-Congolese Dialogue. (Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative, n.d.). Other issues that were highlighted by the women included; the importance of women's participation in all decision-making processes in the Democratic Republic of Congo; and the importance of women's representation at all levels of government.

During the ICD process, women delegates joined forces to point out their dissatisfaction with the under-representation of women in a process found to be against the principle of equality between the sexes. In their open letter, these women demanded that the 30% participation quota of women delegates should be adhered to (Whitman, 2006). One of the organizations that advocated for the increased representation of women to the delegations was The United Nations

Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). UNIFEM organized events where women were informed about the aspects of gender in the constitutional reform. This was important in ensuring that regardless of education levels among women, a good fraction of them were informed of aspects of gender that are important in facilitating the critical process of peacekeeping. There is a great need for women who can raise the issue on gender sensitivity (Whitman, 2007). In addition, organizations such as the Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS) and Women as Partners for Peace in Africa (WOPPA) – DRC helped to organize meetings for women delegations in 2002 in Nairobi where representatives reached an agreement and action plan for all the women the peace dialogue.

The main achievement of including women in the peacebuilding process as outlined by the Inclusive Peace Initiative (n.d.) is that the women managed to secure the inclusion of several gender provisions in the final agreement. Despite an adverse political climate, women in the Inter-Congolese Dialogue were able to make several significant contributions to the process and final approval by forming a stable coalition across conflict lines and employing innovative advocacy strategies. First, the women were victorious in a rapidly growing population of women included in the Dialogue. Second, the women managed to get gender-related provisions into the final agreement. The requirements included a modification of laws discriminating against women, a 30 percent participation quota for women in all decision-making sectors at the national level, an increase of the marriageable age of girls to 18 years old, and the creation of rehabilitation centers for war-affected women and girls. Third, women were pivotal in the signing of the final agreement, in so far as they blocked exits to the negotiation room to put pressure on the delegates to sign. As the deal was the basis for the constitution, a commitment to gender parity in public institutions and the elimination of sexual violence was included in the law. (Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative, n.d.).

In Liberia, women organizations have played a significant role in the peacekeeping process that could be beneficial in the long run. The Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) acted as an official observer during peace negotiations, the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) organized mass protests calling for peace talks. Women were influential when the talks were underway. Their ideas were sought less when the strategies were implemented despite their inclusion in the transitional commissions. (Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative, n.d.).

Just as in any armed conflict, numerous women took on interchanging roles as both agents and victims. From the outset, women played an active role in advocating for peace, specifically through organizations such as the Liberia Women's Initiative (LWI), created in 1994. Women were involved in the peace talks both as formal observers and through mass action. The primary aim of the women's groups was to advocate for an end to the violence and armed conflict. This was particularly the case for the mass action campaign led by the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET). WIPNET was formally set up in 2002 as the Liberian chapter of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), an umbrella group for grassroots organizations involved in peacebuilding. WIPNET was not a formal part of the negotiations, but had a significant impact, primarily through their mass action campaign. (Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative, n.d.).

According to a case study by Tavaana, WIPNET concluded that there were urgent challenges in the peacebuilding process. First, was the conflict between the roles men and women play in the negotiation processes. Secondly, the wants of women were neglected when conclusions were made. Additionally, women who found themselves involved in the process of peacebuilding were undermined, and their knowledge and wisdom were not entirely used. Lastly, the women needed to be informed of peacebuilding techniques and principles (Tavaana, n.d.).

The same case study noted that in addition to calling for an end to violence, the women's groups advocated for the peace process to address the persistent gender inequalities in the country. The formal observer, MARWOPNET, focused particularly on this aim. MARWOPNET were less of a grassroots organization and were set up in 2000 under the auspices of ECOWAS. They are a regional body covering Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea, and they quickly gained a reputation as peace activists regionally and even internationally. A delegation of eight women represented MARWOPNET in the Liberia talks, including Amelia Ward, Ruth Perry (who had briefly been appointed interim Head of State in 1996), and Theresa Leigh-Sherman. Women's groups were well represented and played a prominent role in the peace process. They were influential in lobbying the armed actors to end violence as well as ensuring the inclusion of a Ministry of Gender in the transitional government.

There were several modalities of inclusion of women's groups in the peace process. First, WIPNET led a mass action campaign that began before the negotiations started and intensified during the talks. Second, MARWOPNET was given formal observer status during the peace talks, along with other civilian parties. Third, WIPNET and other women participated in informal consultations with the mediator and conflict parties. The influence of the women's groups is also reflected by their direct representation in the transitional government and various implementation commissions.

With the help of UNIFEM, female members of civil society, as well as the members of Femme Africa Solidarité (FAS) and those from Women as Partners for Peace in Africa (WOPPA), organized a meeting in Nairobi earlier in 2002. This brought women together from the whole country and women from areas with warring parties who were able to agree on a common position prior to the start of the Sun City negotiation. In 2006, the first national elections were held. A number of female leaders from the Caucus, other organizations and members of political parties ran for election. Unfortunately, most of them did not get elected. Nonetheless, the women's movement had become a political stakeholder. When the next major peace conference was held in 2009, the women were provided a space to speak alongside other sections of civil society (Hillhorst & Bashwira, 2014).

Hillhorst & Bashwira (2014) further indicate that the government body most concerned with gender is the national Ministry of Gender, Family, and Children and its technical branches of the Divisions of gender in the provinces. At the provincial level, there is a Ministry of Gender, Family, and Children which is coordinated by the provincial government and is seen as a political authority. In practice, the provincial Ministry usually uses the Division office of the national Ministry to implement programmes in the province. The Division of Gender, Family, and Children coordinates a number of programmes, mainly in collaboration with UN organizations and backed by international donors. The implementation often involves partnerships with local NGOs. For the Division, the 2006 Law on Sexual Violence is a leading policy framework. In addition, it works on UN resolution 1325 which it aims to disseminate throughout the Province.

Challenges to Women's Participation in Democratic Republic of Congo's Peacebuilding Process:

Challenges women face in the peacebuilding process encompass cultural boundaries, little recognition of their contribution and exclusion in various cases. Central to these challenges is the light in which women are viewed; if they are exclusively viewed solely in their maternal capacity or as victims of war, the perception of their capabilities and skills is greatly diminished. When this is the case, the instrumental role they play in civil organizations and social movements are downplayed and marginalization results. According to Nyirabihigo (2016), a middle-aged woman interviewed in the DRC expressed that she has never voted for a fellow woman running in parliament and would never do so because in her opinion, politics is neither a woman's role nor domain.

Examining the inter-Congolese dialogue (ICD) process of 1999-2003, it is observable that the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement of 1999 does not make mention of women's involvement in the dialogue process. Furthermore, among 73 delegates chosen to represent the DRC at the preparatory committee meeting in Gaborone, 6 were female which approximately 8 percent of the delegation was. 40 female delegates were present during the Sun City negotiations in South Africa which was approximately 9 percent of the representation (Whitman, 2006). According to the Declaration on Gender Equality by the South African Development Community, this quota should be 30 percent. Therefore, it is evident that the structural challenge during the inter-Congolese dialogue was in the implementation of this quota. Despite being small in number at Sun City, the female delegates were instrumental in ensuring the All-Inclusive Agreement was signed in December 2002.

This type of under representation extends to the political and educational spheres within the country. Whitman (2006) states that female candidates in decision-making bodies comprised less than 30 percent as of 2005 and that only 49 percent of girls attended school at that time. Selimovic, Brandt, & Jacobson (2012) report that a 2002 push for a 30 percent quota of women in parliament was rejected. Women, however, did succeed in attaining this quota in institutions like the Electoral Commission and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. These researchers state that during the 2011 election, female candidates won 47 out of 490 ministerial seats.

At the grassroots level, it is difficult for many women to participate in civil society activities depending on the region. This is because of insecurity which includes violence against women, especially in the eastern part of the country and other factors such as economic hardship and corruption which places limits on women's resources and time. Another factor that has presented a challenge is disunity and distrust between women's organizations at the grassroots level and women representatives at the regional and national level. According to Selimovic et al. (2012), this has partially resulted due to women at the national level prioritizing party objectives before women's issues and also a failure of those in parliament to support the advocacy issues of local women. This was highlighted during the 2011 proposal to amend the Electoral Act. Many female parliamentarians did not present themselves to vote for an amendment that would guarantee equal representation between men and women in subsequent voting. This scenario worked to reinforce negative perceptions that still exist.

According to the Pan African Centre for Gender Peace and Development, some of the successes on the inclusion of women in the process include the recognition of sexual violence as a crime in the constitution of the DRC

Challenges to Women's Participation in Liberia's Peacebuilding Process:

Women's experiences, capacities, and views on peace and development are still underrepresented within Liberia. According to former Liberia's President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, women's input towards achieving sturdy peace is exceptional and incomparable but frequently overlooked. (Shoofs, Nagarajan & Abebe, 2010). This statement goes hand in hand with Resolution 1325, which opines that all nations have a duty to include women and their priorities in peace and development processes (Shoofs *et al.*, 2010).

Instances of sidelining women in peacebuilding and democratization in Liberia are evident in a number of ways. For instance, entrenched discrimination against women operates as an elementary obstacle in the country. In addition, high levels of illiteracy and scarcity of qualifications – by virtue of restricted instructional opportunities and cultural marginalization are hampering women's involvement in decision making. Also, lack of basic civic exposure among women serves to bolster the standard politics that may be read as “a man's business”. This deepens the lack of confidence evident among women in native communities to actively participate in conflict resolution (Shoofs *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, women who try to enter the politics of conflict resolution are habitually confronted with intimidation, typically through deprivation of finances that are necessary to effectively partake in campaigns.

Overall, the combined effects of impoverishment, inadequate governance and exclusion within Liberia still have a substantial impact on women's prospects of coming into and collaborating within the peacebuilding domain. What emerges from such a scenario is that there is a complexity in the coordination between the country governance, the local and customary leadership structures and other establishments. The customary governance structures, for instance, can operate as an associate impediment to effective women's participation in community-level decision-making (Shoofs *et al.*, 2010). Women are relegated to traditional household roles as caregivers hence living and feeling trapped with no rights and voice. Most of the decisions are made by men thus reinforcing the traditional patriarchy.

Despite the strategies that women in Liberia have embraced to support political visibility such as rallying around a common cause, there are many challenges that they still have to grapple with. As such, the strategies have failed to sail through, creating even more perennial obstacles. Such a failure accounts for an unpredictable nature of donor support and also heightens donor fatigue that tends to inhibit strategic approaches to women's input. Additionally, the donor tendency to support quick-impact approaches towards peace attainment is seen as unlikely to foster Resolution 1325 sustainability (Caesar *et al.*, 2010). Lack of accountability in peacebuilding is a notable challenge to resolution 1325. The resolution lacks accountability mechanisms, disciplinary action, or monitoring and evaluative measures. Since the women are ignorant of what to be offered, their rights and how to claim them. This leaves the few educated in dealing with peacebuilding which should be every woman's role.

3. CONCLUSION

Women face many challenges in peacebuilding as discussed in this paper and it is evident that their inclusion in peacebuilding is instrumental. In ensuring durable and just peace, women must be included in the peace process at the local, national and international levels. Their inclusion in the process will bring about a perspective that balances gender equity. In order to achieve this a 30% representation of women and women organizations at the local, national and international level is needed to further the peace and reconstruction process. The implementation of the Gender Equity Bill in Liberia which states that no political party list of elected officials and public officers have no less than 30% and no more than 70% of one single gender is necessary.

Governments and stakeholders should provide long-term support and funding to women in Peacebuilding. Continual funding of women peace organizations that champion the rights of women as well as economically empower them is key in innovative peacebuilding and women participation. In addition, long-term funding will enable the empowerment of women in the peace process.

Gender-based violence should be tackled as it is a barrier to women's participation in the peacebuilding process, public life and their ability to build sustainable peace. Their access to justice is very crucial in order to empower them to fight for their rights thereby building a society that is accountable. All peacebuilding policy, funding or activity should contain a gender risk analysis and include targeted action and ring-fenced finance that accounts for violence against women and girls as a barrier to peace.

National and international policies must ensure an inclusive environment for women participation in peacebuilding. Discrimination against women should be eliminated and the championing of women's rights promoted and protected in all public infrastructure and institutions. At all levels, gender discrimination must be addressed to ensure women are empowered and participate in all political and peacebuilding processes of the nation.

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