

Women and Post-Conflict Political Order

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Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, former president of Liberia (Wikimedia Commons)

In 1993, the assassination of Burundi's first Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, catalyzed a 12-year civil war that killed over 300,000 people. The conflict ended in 2005 with the implementation of the Arusha Accords, which instituted a power-sharing agreement among the state military and various rebel groups. Thirteen years later, Burundi is still teetering on the brink of crisis. Why? In part, because the power-sharing agreement asked warring parties to trade weapons for political influence and in doing so, reserved power for key conflict actors. This paradigm leaves out a portion of the population that is fundamental to sustainable peace: women.

To be sure, women were deeply involved in the Burundian peace process. Female civil society actors mobilized to convene the All Party Burundi Women's Conference and draft the Women's Proposals to Engender the Draft Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement. However, women were not initially included in the peace dialogue, nor was their proposal for a 30% quota for women in political bodies accepted into the Arusha Accords. The negotiators at the Arusha dialogue maintained that there were not enough adequately qualified, educated women to hold that number of political positions. In the interim, between the installation of a transitional government in November 2001 and the completion of Burundi's new constitution in

2005, the gender quotas for representative bodies never took hold. Women made up only 17 out of 184 seats in the National Assembly, and only 4 out of 26 ministerial positions, and 10 out of 54 seats in the Senate.

Fierce activism from women in the transitional government, in local civil society, and the international community eventually established a 30% quota in the 2005 constitution. However, inclusion and power are not synonymous. The major political parties contending for power in Burundi grew out of the armed groups leveraging violence to assert dominance during the civil war. After his initial election in 2005, President Nkurunziza, an ethnic Hutu, struggled to control the Tutsi-dominated judiciary, and coup threats began to circulate. Since then, Burundian politics have only become more contentious and sectarian. In response, Nkurunziza has severely limited the political rights of Burundian citizens, becoming increasingly autocratic. Female parliamentarians and cabinet members have been constrained by the male leadership of their parties and the authoritarianism of the Nkurunziza regime. The power-sharing agreement put in place by the Arusha Accords created a political system that encourages ethnic and political isolationism, with little to no cooperation among parties. It legitimized violence as political currency, making status as a war actor the prerequisite for power.

As a result, the post-Arusha political landscape is neither peaceful nor democratic. The ruling party has tightened its hold on power, and President Pierre Nkurunziza has become increasingly despotic. Nkurunziza's disputed victory following his campaign for an illegal third presidential term sparked the latest bout of political violence.

Making Power Sharing Work

This pattern is not unique to Burundi. Empirical analysis demonstrates that 50% of post-civil war power-sharing agreements from 1989 to 2006 saw widespread violence recur within five years.

In Chad, violent conflict is endemic. The country has undergone five major periods of civil war as defined by the Correlates of War project: 1966-1971, 1980-1984, 1989-1990, 1998-2000, and 2005-2006. Although the most recent conflict period in Chad technically ended in 2006, there were 20 major rebel attacks in the country between 2005 and 2009. Today, Chad is still plagued by violence. Boko Haram is terrorizing civilians near Lake Chad. The Chad-Libya border is considered an active war zone. Peace has failed to take hold.

This is largely because post-conflict transformation initiatives in Chad have never been transformative. President Idriss Déby came to power in a military coup in 1990 and won reelection in a largely contested election in 2016. Chad has yet to experience a non-military regime change; armed takeover is the most viable strategy for gaining power in Chad. The established rules of politics in Chad are brutal, uncompromising, and militant. Reconciliation has always been defined as the current leaders promising opposition figures positions of power, creating a paradigm where power is consolidated by co-opting warlords. There is little room for civilian opposition or non-violent social movements.

The Afghan Civil War from 1996-2001 is rooted partly in a failed power-sharing agreement.

After the Soviet Union ended its invasion of Afghanistan in 1989, multiple rebel groups vied for command of the state. After four years of fighting, the rebel groups (including the Mujahedeen) and the government signed the 1993 Afghan Peace Accord. The agreement established government by conceding political and military power to rebel groups, but it failed to bring peace, democracy, or basic security to the country. The 1993 government shortly collapsed, leaving in its wake a power vacuum that the Taliban moved to fill.

Other power-sharing agreements abet the rise of authoritarian leaders. In Cambodia, Hun Sen, who became prime minister through a power-sharing agreement following UN-facilitated elections in 1993, has ruled for 33 years and recently outlawed Cambodia's main opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party.

Gender is rarely a key component of mainstream analysis on why power-sharing agreements fail or why authoritarianism persists, but it should be. Women's equal treatment and meaningful participation in civic and political life is critical to sustainable peace and inclusive governance. As gender parity rises, a nation's proclivity for both inter and intra-state conflict falls. Greater proportions of female politicians decrease the likelihood of civil war, use of violence in the face of an international crisis, and the likelihood of state perpetrated human rights abuses.

Data and illustrative cases suggest that when women can wield their agency and influence in post-conflict settings, real change happens. According to the UN, a peace agreement is 60 percent more likely to be reached, 20 percent more likely to last at least two years, and 35 percent more likely to last more than fifteen year when women participate in peace negotiations.

Following the end of The Troubles in Northern Ireland, women civil society leaders formed the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) to contribute to peacetime politics. The NIWC won one percent of the vote, gaining two seats at the negotiating table. The voice and influence of the NIWC had immense impact on fostering a more inclusive, accountable, and democratic post-conflict political landscape. The NIWC secured the inclusion of cornerstone pillars of the peace agreement, including victims' rights and reconciliation. The NIWC also proposed the Civic Forum, which cemented and formalized space for public participation in politics. Furthermore, the NIWC became a permanent political party; providing a path for greater gender equality in Northern Ireland's politics.

Following the civil war in Liberia, which began in 1989 and persisted through 2003, women in Liberia mobilized into an organized peace movement to end the civil war. Fed up with the constant barrage of death and destruction, Christian and Muslim Liberian women worked in concert to protest the war, met with both President Charles Taylor and the main opposition groups, and ultimately convinced both sides to come to the Accra peace talks. When the women felt the peace talks were moving too slowly, they protested in order to force a comprehensive agreement. Though women did not have a seat in the formal peace negotiations in Accra, they were fundamental to securing peace for Liberia. Liberia held its fairest and most democratic elections yet two years after its second civil war. Ellen Johnson

Sirleaf, helped along by Liberian women who became further involved in politics after the formation of the women's peace movement, was elected to the presidency in 2005 and peacefully transferred power to George Weah in 2017. The success of the peace process in Liberia hinged on women civil society actors exerting influence, even in the face of systematic exclusion.

Share Power with Women, Not Warlords

There is increasing recognition among the international community that gender equality is a strategic imperative for global security. The United States has demonstrated laudable leadership on this issue. Last year, Congress passed the Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017, which requires the U.S. to “develop a comprehensive strategy to increase and strengthen women’s participation in peace negotiations and conflict prevention.”

The development, peace, and security communities are spearheading an effort to rethink the foreign policy toolkit to break the cycle of recurring violence and civil war, and prevent, rather than respond to, crisis. USAID Administrator Mark Green has indicated that conflict prevention should be a core pillar of US foreign assistance. Outside of the US, David Cameron, alongside others have lead the charge on “escaping the fragility trap”. One of the core pillars of this agenda is to stop rushing to elections in post-conflict contexts and instead focus on fostering the building blocks of democracy. Cameron and the Commission on State Fragility, Growth, and Development contend that power-sharing agreements offer a viable alternative to immediately holding elections in the aftermath of civil war.

Women are not a panacea for peace, nor are all women innately peaceful. But democracy cannot exist without women’s participation and the participation of other civic actors. Women must be a critical part of post-conflict processes if those processes are to encourage sustainable peace and democratic principles. It is especially important for the U.S. to recognize this as it attempts to transform foreign assistance to prevent cycles of violence, conflict, and fragility. As Jamille Bigio and Rachel Vogelstien of the Council on Foreign Relations state in their report, “How Women’s Participation in Conflict Prevention Advances U.S. Interests,” taking steps toward ensuring women’s inclusion in post-conflict processes “will help the United States respond effectively to security threats around the world, improve the sustainability of peace agreements, and advance U.S. interests.”

The shift toward preventative foreign assistance and foreign policy is promising. It is important to rethink the assumption that elections confer inclusive, accountable, democratic governments. However, until power-sharing agreements share power across the citizenry, and not just among warring parties, post-conflict political orders will remain fragile.