

“Women’s Participation in Peace Negotiations: Discourse in the Democratic Republic of the Congo”

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Background

Women play a critical role in peace processes. Yet from Dayton to Colombia, and from East Timor to Pretoria, women have either been absent or grossly underrepresented in diplomatic peace negotiations at which peace accords have been signed and the future of countries decided. Formal peace negotiations generally bring together the male leaders of the warring parties who engage in a series of facilitated talks to end conflict and to lay the foundation for the reconstruction of political, legal, economic and social structures. However, the process of reconstructing the nation following an armed conflict requires the equal involvement of men and women. Ensuring women’s equal participation in formal negotiations enhances the legitimacy of the process by making it more democratic and responsive to the concerns and perspectives of those segments of society involved in, and affected by, the fighting.

This paper concentrates on advocacy by women for gender-balanced representation in diplomatic peace negotiations. The peace processes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) serve as a case study.

The DRC – formerly Zaire – covers 2,345,410 square kilometres of central Africa and has a population of 56.6 million (UN estimates, July 2003), 55 percent of which is female.

Since gaining independence from Belgium in 1960, the country has been dominated by dictators. President Mobutu Sese Seko took power in 1965 and ruled the then Zaire for 32 years, until Laurent Kabila toppled him in 1997. Opportunities for women have generally been limited. Congolese women have borne the brunt of the economic decline. They are underrepresented in the formal workforce, especially in higher-level positions, and generally earn less than their male counterparts in the same jobs.

The war in Congo broke out in 1998 when neighbouring Rwanda and Uganda backed Congolese rebels trying to overthrow Kabila, accusing him of harbouring armed militias that threatened their own security. Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe stepped in on the side of the government. Despite continued fighting in some regions of the country, the war officially ended with the signature of the December 2002 Pretoria Agreement.

The DRC conflict was characterized by internal and external actors fighting for control of territory, especially areas rich in natural resources, including cobalt, coltan, diamonds and gold. An estimated three million people have died because of the war, most of them from war-induced famine and disease.

Women Mobilizing for Equal Representation at the Peace Table

In light of the growing number of armed conflicts and their differential impact on women, the international community has reached consensus on the need to include women in all aspects of decision-making related to peace. The Beijing Platform for Action, adopted by 189 governments at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, clearly defined – under Strategic Objective E.1 – the need to ‘increase the participation of women in conflict resolution at decision-making levels’. The outcome document of the five-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action, *Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century*, reaffirmed this objective and called on governments ‘to ensure and support the full participation of women at all levels of decision-making and implementation in development activities and peace processes, including conflict prevention and resolution, post-conflict reconstruction, peacemaking, peacekeeping and peace-building’. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), ratified by over 172 countries (as of July 2003), calls for the use of quotas and the introduction of other positive measures to increase the number of women at all levels of political decision-making.

Congolese women drew on these international commitments and policy guidelines – endorsed by the DRC – to mobilize across borders, nationally and locally, as well as to advocate for their participation in the diplomatic peace processes. As early as 1998, Femmes Afrique Solidarité (FAS) and Synergy Africa sponsored a symposium on women and peace-building processes. The meeting brought together delegates from Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda who shared experiences and developed strategies to encourage female participation in peace processes and to strengthen the building of a

network among women’s organizations from the three countries to promote peace and reconciliation efforts in the region.

In the DRC, mobilization and advocacy in regard to participation in formal peace negotiations reached new heights with the adoption of United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 1325. This was an historic document, as it stressed the importance of women’s full involvement in all efforts to maintain and advance peace and security. Unlike the Beijing Platform for Action or the provisions of CEDAW, the resolution urged the Security Council, the UN Secretary-General, UN member states, and all other parties (non-state actors, militias, humanitarian agencies, and civil society) to take action to increase women’s participation in formal peace processes. Being a Security Council resolution, 1325 is effectively international law. It is being used worldwide, including in 21 war-torn zones in Africa, as a mobilizing tool to demand equal and full participation at all levels of decision-making, including in peace talks.

Congolese women’s groups collaborated with the Office of Gender Affairs of the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) to translate Resolution 1325 into the country’s four national languages and to raise public awareness. With the support of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), female members of the FAS, in cooperation with Women as Partners for Peace in Africa (WOPPA), organized several fora, including a meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, on 15–19 February 2002. This brought together women from across the DRC and representatives of the warring parties, government and civil society, who developed a common position prior to the start of the negotiations known as the Inter-Congolese Dialogue. The meeting in Kenya resulted in the formulation of the Nairobi Declaration and a plan of action that called for an immediate ceasefire, the inclusion of women and their concerns in all aspects of the peace process, the formation of the Congolese women’s caucus and the adoption of a 30 percent quota for women at all levels of government in any final settlement. UNIFEM provided travel and accommodation for the women’s caucus and ensured that all parties to the talks were familiar with the requirements of Resolution 1325.

As part of its regional networking and capacity-building in leadership skills initiative, UNIFEM facilitated a meeting in April 2002 between the Women’s League of the African National Congress (ANC) and Congolese women who were attending the Inter-Congolese Dialogue. Representatives of the ANC women’s league shared the experience of their struggle

for political participation and the strategies that they adopted to overcome barriers. In addition, they made piratical recommendations.

In October 2002, the Association des Femmes du Kivu (UWAKI) organized a workshop that brought together 90 women from Burundi, the DRC, Kenya and Rwanda in Butembo in eastern DRC’s war-torn province of North Kivu. The objective was to discuss and share experiences on ways to promote the integration of women in decision-making.

Timid Participation at the Peace table

From the outset of the conflict, Congolese women actively sought to participate in the formal peace negotiations. Their efforts to mobilize at the local level and across borders helped to galvanize national and global support for their representation at the peace table.

Congolese women were practically excluded from negotiations leading up to the 1999 Lusaka Peace Agreement. Only one woman was designated to participate in the preparatory meeting of the Inter-Congolese Dialogue in Sun City, South Africa. Forty of the 340 delegates at the March–April 2002 diplomatic negotiations in Sun City were women. In order to increase the number of women attending the Sun City negotiations, UNIFEM and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) decided to invite an additional 40 women to participate as experts, selected from among those who had received training in negotiation techniques and leadership skills. This brought the number of female participants to 80 (23.53 percent). Yet, ultimately, only 40 women were allowed to participate in formal negotiations. The number of women present in the formal negotiations would have been lower if the warring parties had not come under pressure from the international community, particularly from UNIFEM and Sir Ketumile Masire, former President of Zambia and facilitator of the Congolese peace process.

Only ten women were able to attend the Sun City follow-up meetings in Pretoria, South Africa, in November and December 2002. Although group members were selected for their expertise on the issues being discussed, their role was largely symbolic and limited to private meetings with delegation heads.

Challenges to Women’s Representation

Women’s efforts to participate in formal peace processes have faced various challenges. The polarized and tense environment of conflict negotiations usually reinforces prevailing patriarchal and other social attitudes that exclude women from power circles.

The Congolese government, as well as the other warring parties, strongly opposed the inclusion of women in formal peace negotiations. For them, war and peace are exclusively the business of men. In addition, the men who attended the negotiations felt that women did not have any right to participate because they were not fighters and they did not enjoy meaningful representation in local or national decision-making bodies before the war. Unlike in relation to electoral processes, Congolese men involved in formal peace negotiations did not feel the need to 'woo' the female constituency. This left Congolese women with international commitments - the implementation of which are tributary to governments and others actors' good will.

In the Kivus, the Réseau des Femmes pour la Défense des Droits et de la Paix received threats from the rebel Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie (RCD) when mobilizing to send representatives to the Sun City gathering. Its offices were ransacked several times and peaceful marches were systematically interrupted for 'security reasons'.

Other barriers include lack of funding for women to participate in all diplomatic negotiations and in the implementation processes that follow. The majority of the formal processes take place in foreign countries. Women usually cannot afford to cover their travel expenses, as they generally come from among the poor. It is more difficult for them to participate in formal peace processes when their main concern is survival and fulfilment of the basic needs of their families in the chaos created by the war.

Assessing the Outcome of the Sun City Dialogue

The outcome of the Sun City negotiations reflected some of the priorities of the Congolese women active in the peace process, including the recommendations formulated in the Humanitarian, Social and Cultural Commissions.

In addition, the Transitional Constitution encompassed some female concerns and recognized the need for women to play a role in decision-making, as is evident in Article 51. Although this constitutional provision is vague and does not contain specific language on affirmative action measures, such as quotas, or the relevant language of the Beijing Platform for Action, it does call on the government to take all appropriate steps to ensure women's involvement in economic, social and cultural decision-making and their representation in local, provincial and national institutions. Article 51 is viewed as positive language that Congolese women can strengthen and build upon in the post-transition phase in order to achieve gender equality in

general and gender balance in decision-making in particular. Congolese women will have to explore new strategies to ensure that their priorities are specifically stipulated in the new constitution. This would, for example, help them to move beyond the seven percent representation that they currently enjoy in the transitional government.

Intense lobbying for gender balance during the peace negotiations did not guarantee significant female representation in the transitional government. This has certainly paved the way for debates on the adoption of gender quotas in all areas of public life.

An unprecedented number of networks have been developed. The city of Kinshasa alone registered over 150 new women's groups during preparations leading up to the Sun City negotiations. La Dynamique des Femmes Politiques au Congo Démocratique (DYNAFEP) represents women from all factions and political parties. It has been articulating the political views of women on the evolution of the transition process and has been working to increase their involvement and participation in the elections, through press conferences and other media activities. In a recent assessment of the first 100 days of the transitional government, the equal representation of women in the transition and in electoral processes was identified as a priority.

Lessons Learned From the DRC Case Study

- Awareness raising, mobilization, alliance building, lobbying and calling for the implementation of international instruments are extremely useful.
- A critical mass of women is more likely to be included in peace negotiations if there are mechanisms, such as requirements for gender balance in formal peace processes, trust funds and expanded training and capacity-building programmes.
- Peace agreements should include paragraphs drawn from relevant international and regional conventions and norms on women's rights and gender equality.
- Peace agreements and national constitutions should make specific reference to numerical targets to ensure gender balance in formal peace negotiations.
- Warring party leaders should be made aware the critical role that women play in preserving the social fabric and in peacemaking at the grassroots level.
- Women need key male allies, locally and internationally, to facilitate their participation.
- Connections with regional and international support networks need to be established to pressure warring parties to include more women in their delegations at formal peace talks.

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Web Links:

<http://www.drc.org>

<http://www.peacewomen.org>

<http://www.unifem.org>

<http://www.undp/governance/gender.htm>