**THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE PEACE AND SECURITY PROCESSES IN AFRICA .**

**Abstract**

This aim of this paper is to elucidate on the various roles women play in the peace and security initiatives. It shows how extreme violence that women suffer during armed conflict does not arise solely out of the conditions of war; it is directly related to the violence that exists in women's lives during peacetime. Throughout the world, women experience violence whether physical, psychological and sexual because they are women, and often because they suffer the imbalances of power relations. This essay explains the role of women in peace making initiatives, peacekeeping and peace building and the role of women as armed combatants. The essay also explains the regional and international instruments that guide women in Peace and security processes.

**Introduction**

In a typical African setting, in almost all the African cultures, peace is equated with ‘freshness’, health, well being, harmony, calm and tranquility. The absence of such qualities was seen as the sign of conflicts, which could be either latent or overt. It is that harmony and freshness which provided farmers with good crops, fishermen with abundant catches and hunters with game. When there was enough food for everyone, peace would reign in homes and families, clans and tribes. As nobody had any reason to be envious of others, neighboring communities could live in peace, visit one another during the off seasons and attend weddings and funerals.

Armed conflict and the presence of weapons legitimize new levels of brutality and even greater levels of impunity. Often this escalating violence becomes a new ‘norm’, which continues into the post-conflict period, where chaos adds to the many frustrations that were not solved by war. Violence has been used as a tool to compel and keep women in their place. Women are exposed to more brutal forms of violence in these wars and are often ridiculed. For example, female combatants in conflict are raped, beaten and victimized even when they join rebel groups; a case in point is the black diamond of Liberia. They are reminded that whatever additional roles and status they may have attained in the movement, does not relieve them of their "traditional" role as providers of sex. However, despite the mal-treatment of women pre and post armed conflict, they have a role to play as active change agents in their societies. This is seen in the various roles women are capable of doing during peace time, in conflict and after conflict.

**Women as Mothers**

Despite having important roles and responsibilities in their cultures, women have struggled to participate in the formal peace process, which has been dominated by men. In situations of armed conflict, women play both an active and a passive role in the restoration of peace in Africa. This was what happened within the framework of peace pacts. For example, in the traditional Africa, with in a framework of passive peacemaking by women, a girl could also be offered to the family of the victim as a form of reparation. This ‘blood pact’ not only put an end to the conflict in question but also precluded any future conflict between the descendants of the two clans, with the two being henceforth intimately linked for life.

In the African tradition, women were wives and mothers, few worked outside the home, and with the exception of royals born to power. Women taught their daughters and sons, proper behavior and the ethos of society, and impressed on them the importance of such values as honesty, uprightness and the necessity to compromise. As such, women have always been active promoters of harmony in the community, which can be referred to as a "culture of peace".  This natural role of women is not unique to any particular ethnic group, but rather is generalized throughout the African continent. A similar trend of emphasis on the role of ‘mother as peace builder’ is also noted among women who have displayed the zeal to prepare and train the young boys who are one day going to be adult men of the society. They teach the boys the rules of the game, particularly norms relating to the wild animals that can be hunted and those that cannot and should not be touched.

**Women as educators**

Women also acted the role of "peace builder’ for example among the people of Somalia, women were shown to prepare and train the young boys who would one day be adult men of the society. They taught boys the rules of the game, particularly norms relating to the wild animals that can be hunted and those that cannot and should not be touched. Among the animals that cannot be hunted are the ones that are pregnant and those with calves, (Mohammad Abdi Mohammed 2003).

These observations and trends clearly demonstrate that an essential contribution of women in traditional African societies is their role as school for the young. For example, girls were taught how to take care of their younger siblings and also how to protect them from any form of external aggression. Therefore, through their important mothering role, the culture of peace is entrenched in children as a foundation for peaceful living in families, the community and the clan.

**Women as Mediators**

Given the extent and significance of women’s peace activism it is surprising how uniformly women have been excluded from formal peace processes. UN women’s 2012 report *Women’s* *participation in peace negotiations* provides countless examples of women being excluded from the peace table by national leaders and the international community alike. International, as well as national, organizations employ minimal numbers of women as mediators and at times, none in total disregard of the international and regional legal frameworks in the name of protocols and resolutions.

In traditional Africa, women played both an active and a passive role in the restoration of peace. For example within the framework of passive peacemaking by women in the Igbo culture of Nigeria, a girl could also be offered to the family of the victim as a form of reparation. This ‘blood pact’ not only put an end to the conflict in question but also precluded any future conflict between the descendants of the two clans, with the two being henceforth intimately linked for life.

Today, though women have not been fully engaged in the peace making initiatives in their societies, due to cultural stereo types, and political favoritism and hegemony, in some aspects of conflicts, women have played vital and selfless roles. For example during the 1994 peace talks between the Uganda government and the Joseph Kony Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels, Betty Bigombe, the then minister for pacification of Northern Uganda was the lead negotiator on behalf of the government of Uganda and later became an independent mediator in the peace process. Henceforth, she received recognition from the government and the international community for her role as a mediator.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, although women have been marginalized in the recent peace talks held in Kampala between the M23 rebels and the government of Congo, the past peace talks involved women at the negotiating table. For instance much as women were not initially invited to the Sun City talks in 2002 in South Africa, Women Partners for Peace in Africa (WOPPA), in partnership with female members of the Femmes Africa Solidarité *(*FAS) and United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) brought together a coalition of women to Nairobi, Kenya prior to the peace talks, to enhance their negotiation skills them to develop a common agenda on peace negotiation. The Nairobi conference resulted in the formation of the Congolese Women’s Caucus, which effectively lobbied for the inclusion of women at the peace table. Their lobbying efforts resulted in the inclusion of twenty five women in the talks, not as delegates, but as experts.[[1]](#footnote-2)

Also, the Goma Peace Conference, held between 6 and 17 January 2008, brought together various Congolese armed groups operating in North Kivu and South Kivu provinces in the eastern DRC, government representatives and members of churches and civil society to form an agenda for peace, security and development in the two conflict-ridden provinces. The conference included women’s participation; however, compared to the scale of violence against women in North and South Kivu, issues of violence against women, sexual violence, women’s rights and gender equality were not sufficiently addressed.

In Rwanda after the 1994 genocide, women’s active contribution in post-conflict reconstruction became a positive regional and continental example on the role of women in peace building because they played a critical role. When the genocide ended in 1994, women made up over 70% of the society of Rwanda. The government of Rwanda adopted a gender policy, signed and ratified the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa. Today, there is a ministry of Gender and Family Promotion in the government, as well as several women cabinet members, a woman head of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission and a woman deputy police chief. Furthermore, women make up 64% of the national legislature, the highest percentage in the world.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Consequently, Women should never be simply guests at the negotiating table. The roles they play as combatants, supporters of fighting forces and peacemakers qualify them to sit at the negotiating table and to assume an active role in implementation.

**Women as Peace Activists**

It is not easy to translate women's activism into a presence at the peace table. Certainly, not all women groups want to be at the table if it involves negotiating with the warlords or tyrants who helped create the conflict, but most peace activists feel that women's presence is essential. Women are rarely included in formal negotiations, whether as members of political parties, civil society or special interest groups. According to Inonge Mbikusita Lewanika, President of FERFAP, “Women establish their credibility as peacemakers at the grass roots level but are marginalized from official negotiations. Making it from the grass mat to the peace table has nothing to do with their qualifications as peacemakers. Once the foreign mediators come and the official negotiations start, you have to be able to sit at the table, and speak their language. Often women are not trained or given the chance.” Women’s concerns come not merely out of their own experiences, but out of their rootedness in their communities.

From Liberia, Leymah Roberta Gbowee a women's Rights Peace activist and a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, 2011 has spoken publically numerous times on the issue of women in conflict situations. She was a panelist at several regional and international conferences, including UNIFEM's "Women and the Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Repatriation (DDRR) Process," and the United Nations Security Council's Arria Formula Meeting on women, peace, and security. Also the Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, a peace activist and a Nobel peace prize winner too has contributed a lot in advocacy for example through the book she wrote entitled "Women War and Peace".

Women activists also promote a vision of peace that goes beyond the negotiating table. Women have contributed to stopping violence and alleviating its consequences in a range of ways: providing humanitarian relief, creating and facilitating the space for negotiations through advocacy, and exerting influence through cultural or social means. They have also spearheaded civil society and reconciliation activities. For example women in northern Uganda worked collaboratively to revive cultural institutions and prepare the community for reconciliation and the reintegration of armed groups through prayer meetings and peace education, as well as through songs and story-telling. Also women activists in India thou they have faced numerous injustices from being ridiculed by their governments for trying to protect women's rights, being imprisoned have played a vital role in promoting women's rights and their place in the society. Women activists have unequivocally rejected the patriarchal language which denotes women as daughters, wives or sisters entitled to protection in that capacity rather than as human beings who will assert themselves as change agents in their communities.

**Women grass root organizations**

Women's leadership role is most visible in their communities; it is here that they organize to end conflict and build the skills necessary for peace building and reconstruction. These organizations enhance possibly different but shared interests and aspirations and thus an opportunity to get different views and ideas. Women grass root organizations build networks of solidarity combining feminism and anti-militarism. For example, Women in Black organization members stood in silence outside government offices, holding placards calling for peace and denouncing the government of Slobodan Milosevic. Stones were thrown at them, they were spat upon, beaten, and arrested, yet every week they returned and stood in silent witness. "By turning our discontent into public demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience, we transformed ethical principles into concrete acts of disloyalty towards the regime,” stated Stasa Zajovic, one of the members from the Serbian peace group Women.

The Association of Genocide Widows (AVEGA) empowers widows to deal with their past experiences and to rebuild their lives originally met under a tree in Kigali. Within a week of their first gathering, more than fifty women had joined. Like so many other self-help and humanitarian organizations created by women, the Association provides psychological and social support and health services to its members. They are engaged in small income generating activities like making “peace baskets” for sale to generate income for their families. With little help from the government and local authorities, they try to bring hope to the hopeless through shared goals and interests.

In Kenya, in June 2011, women in Garissa were trained by Eastern African Sub-regional Support for advancement of women (EASSI) in peace building and conflict management. This dialogue and training were aimed to reconcile women from different clans that have been fighting each other for more than two decades. The training equipped them with skills in conflict analysis, conflict mapping, mediation and reconciliation, conflict early warning and responses and understanding the UNSCR 1325 on the role of women and peace building. The ultimate outcome was the formation of “Garissa Women Ambassadors of Peace”, a group to champion peace initiatives in the Garissa area.

**Women in Peace building[[3]](#footnote-4)**

Countries that are emerging from violent conflict may be potential sites of positive change for women. The profound effects of war on gender roles including women’s participation in labour previously seen as male only can sometimes produce new openings for women to influence social and political structures that, in peacetime, were closed to them.

However, because stereotypical notions of gender, appropriate labour often re-emerges when a society strives to return to normal, women’s participation in war-related work can also be overlooked or hidden away when disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) processes begin. Despite their active engagement in all aspects of social life in times of conflict, when postwar reconstruction begins along with the appointment of transitional governments women do not often gain positions of leadership.

The terrible irony is that women and girls are not invisible to armed groups, who see them as essential, accessible and often expendable military assets. Yet having survived the devastating experiences of war as combatants, sexual captives or military “wives” and slave or willing laborers in the conflict period, these women and girls often become invisible when DDR planning begins.[[4]](#footnote-5)

DDR processes are typically agreed upon during the course of peace negotiations. When women are absent from negotiations, their needs and views will usually be neglected during the planning of DDR operations. This problem is compounded by the fact that women are also underrepresented in both national and international policy and structures. A series of obstacles can stand in the way of implementing international commitments to include women in post conflict governance, democratization and peace building processes.

However, when gender is taken into account and women are incorporated into DDR planning and implementation processes, these processes can be very effective. For example, in dealing with the needs of former combatants after war, the carefully implemented gender-aware approach to demilitarization called for in SCR 1325 benefits both male and female ex-fighters. The first change is immediate and practical: attention to the requirements of women as well as men contributes to the fairer demobilization of all soldiers and support workers. Second, over the longer term, gender awareness during the demobilization process promotes the recognition that gender roles are dynamic and thus a potential site for change.

DDR is vital for successful reintegration because the gendered impacts of wars do not end

when conflict comes to an end. Those who are traumatized by war and then demobilized with inadequate psychosocial care frequently carry on the fight inside their own homes, turning the violence they have witnessed or perpetrated against family members. The lethality of this domestic violence is heightened by the large numbers of small arms that often circulate in the aftermath of war.

It is also important to remember that not all women who participate in war do so as fighters. In planning DDR processes, programme designers and implementers must not only address the needs of women ex-combatants but also of those who played other support roles, for instance as porters, cooks, or wives (which should include those abducted and widowed) of combatants. Women and girls associated with fighting forces are not always officially married to male fighters, and they might therefore be difficult to identify or be vulnerable in other ways.

**Women as Combatants**

Among the most dramatic ways in which gender roles may change during times of armed conflict is the taking up of arms by women themselves. Gender roles often suggest that only men enter the armed forces, while women provide for soldiers and the non-fighting members of the family. Women traditionally care for soldiers by treating the wounded, or by taking care of men’s needs through the provision of food or other various services. Stereotypically, men are seen as aggressors and perpetrators of violence, while women are defenceless and passive victims. Consequently, men are more commonly expected to speak in the name of nationalist or pro-war ideologies, while women are peace advocates and peace negotiators. These gender norms are socially constructed and are often manipulated by political ideologies to shape the behavior of men and women. However, the flexibility of gender roles becomes more apparent under the pressure of extreme circumstances like war. This can be seen both in recent conflicts and historically. Women can easily devote their lives to a cause once they are convinced that it is noble and in the defence of life and human dignity.

Rebel movements through propaganda have convinced some women to believe in their movements; hence, women pledged their total loyalty. Therefore, women have served in such oppressive and genocidal institutions such as the terrorist attacks they spearhead. For example, in Northern Uganda, Acholi women were armed combatants in the conflict. The most notable was Alice Auma ‘Lakwena’ who led the armed group that preceded Joseph Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). In the LRA, most girls and women were forced to join after being abducted, but nevertheless comprise a significant presence in the movement. The abducted girls were mainly allocated as ‘wives’ to LRA officers or used as sex slaves by other rebels. Some women also joined the National Resistance Army (NRA). Most women combatants joined the army out of a need to save themselves or their families. Their experience demonstrates that many Acholi women had to respond to the pressures of violence in extraordinary ways that are profoundly challenging to traditional social roles. While in general, women still predominantly serve in noncombat roles, armed forces are increasingly opening combat units to women as well. However, their exclusion from the combat divisions of armies (infantry, armour, artillery, and Special Forces units), where they can occupy only administrative supporting roles, has largely been retained.

**International, legal framework**

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) has played a an important role in emphasising sates' responsibility for women. It *reaffirms* the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building, and *stresses* the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution. It also *reaffirms* the need to implement fully international humanitarian and human rights law that protects the rights of women and girls during and after conflicts. All the sections in this resolution advocate for the inclusiveness of women in conflict resolution by member states and their representation.

UN Security Council Resolution 1820 adopted on 19th June 2008, explicitly recognized sexual violence as a tactic of war and constituting a war crime, crime against humanity, or act of genocide as defined by the Rome Statute. In this resolution, the Security Council made an immediate demand for an end to acts of sexual violence against civilians in conflict zones. Unfortunately, this resolution continues to highlight women and girls only as *victims* of conflict, without mentioning their role as *active participants* in the prevention of violence against themselves. UN Resolution 1888 adopted on 30th September 2009 emphasizes the responsibility of states to end impunity for sexual violence committed during war. It represents a visible milestone in the fight for women’s human rights to be protected by the international system. By further recognizing the gaps in how the UN responds to sexual violence, such as a lack of support for participation by women in peace talks, this mandate creates an opening for women’s leadership and agency. Through this Resolution, the UN further acknowledges that women experience conflict differently from men and that “sexual violence is not cultural, it is criminal,”[[5]](#footnote-6) as stated by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. UN Resolution 1889 was adopted on 5th October 2009 and was passed just days after 1888, called for the Secretary-General to devise a strategy to increase the proportion of women peacekeepers. It focuses on including women in the planning stage, and assures resources to satisfy security needs and access to services for women. It is important to note that this resolution stipulates agreement to develop a series of worldwide indicators to evaluate and monitor the implementation of resolution 1325.

Besides the UNSCR 1325 and its subsequent resolution, other instruments include; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women adopted by the General Assembly in 1981, the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, adopted by the General Assembly in 1993, and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted in Beijing in 1995, include all forms of discrimination as violence against women and girls and reaffirm States’ responsibility to eliminate them (WHO 2001)[[6]](#footnote-7). The 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) defines rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilisation or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity as a crime against humanity.

**Conclusion**

It is high time society started to treat women as change agents in the peace process and not merely as victims who are vulnerable. Women are not merely passive victims, but also are important agents and actors in the peace building processes in Africa. As agents or actors, women have played significant roles in terms of being mothers, educators, mediators, peace activists and community leaders, coping and surviving actors, breadwinners and decision makers. As peace activists and community leaders, women have played a variety of roles and have been engaged in various activities, yet their role and participation tends to be ‘invisible’ in the context of the formal peace building processes. Most peace building activities conducted and initiated by women peace activists and community leaders have been carried out outside of the official and formal peace building processes. It is against this backdrop that I believe that there should be a change in attitudes and behaviour and individuals should learn that women are effective and they should be incorporated fully and equally into participation at every level of decision making in positions having to do with peace and security issues.

1. FAS \_ACCORD report. Case Study, June 2006 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Inter Parliamentary Union, 23 September 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Peace building is the effort to strengthen the prospects for internal peace and decrease the likelihood of violent conflict. The overarching goal of peace building is to enhance the indigenous capacity of a society to manage conflict without violence...Peace building Initiative Strategic Framework” by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) (2002) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. UNIFEM, Getting it Right, Doing it Right: Gender and Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration, 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Becton Grace, [*Human Rights Advocacy*](http://madreblogs.typepad.com/mymadre/human-rights-advocacy/)*,* [*Peace Building*](http://madreblogs.typepad.com/mymadre/peacebuilding/)*,* [*Violence Against Women*](http://madreblogs.typepad.com/mymadre/violence_against_women/) UN Resolution 1888: A Victory for the Global Women's Movement, October 01, 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. http://www.who.int/gender/violence/womenfirtseng.pdf (Accessed 10th April 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)