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## **A Gendered Perspective of Post-Conflict Reconstruction: African Women in Peace building**

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*This article examines the gendered approaches to post-conflict reconstruction which not only focus on women as victims of war and patriarchy but also explores how violent conflict transforms gender relations. The article explores stereotypical interpretations of gender and how these impact on our understanding of the diverse roles and needs of African women during and after violent conflict. Gender mainstreaming is proposed as a strategy for highlighting and correcting the gendered aspects of violent conflict. The implementation of gender mainstreaming will require political will and leadership if it is to be successful in bringing African women into decision-making processes in post-conflict contexts.*

### **Introduction**

Numerous intractable conflicts have plagued the African continent since the 1980's, from Liberia to Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea-Bissau and Côte d'Ivoire, to mention a few. These inter-state and unconventional intra-state conflicts which spill across borders have resulted in large-scale violence, involving massive infrastructural destruction as well as disruption of the social, political and economic lives of large populations.<sup>1</sup> Many of these unconventional intra-state conflicts are more violent and destructive in scope and intensity than ever before because they target defenceless civilian populations where vulnerable women and children are the victims of extreme brutality.<sup>2</sup>

Post-conflict reconstruction, the process of rebuilding civil society after violent conflict, has a crucial role on the African continent. Peace building, which is part of post-war reconstruction, involves activities that promote the conditions for sustainable peace. The role of women in these processes, especially African women, has increasingly received the attention of international institutions, national governments and civil society. A gendered approach to the conflict discourse not only focuses on the roles of women during and after violent conflict, but expands the debate to include the power issues in the relationships between men and women.

The aim of this article is to explore the gendered approaches to post-conflict reconstruction and how they impact on African women who are rebuilding their communities in the aftermath of war. This article will be structured as follows: The first section will discuss a gendered approach to the theoretical underpinnings of peace, conflict and violence within the peace and conflict discourses. In the second part attention will be paid to the gendered considerations of post-conflict reconstruction and peace building in Africa. The third section will discuss gender mainstreaming in terms of United Nations Resolution 1325 and the debates concerning the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming in highlighting the gendered aspects of violent conflict and its role in peace building.

## **A Gendered Perspective on Peace, Conflict and Violence**

Gender refers to women's or men's roles that are socially constructed and internalised through socialization processes. It also involves the attributes and opportunities associated with being female or male and the socio-cultural relationships between men and women. "Gender is thus a major organizing principle for every aspect of life, shaping everyday routines, relationships, and institutions as well as capacities and vulnerabilities".<sup>3</sup> The concept of gender is relatively new on the African continent especially in comparison to the West but gender considerations are extremely important to the African continent. The struggles of African women for emancipation from patriarchal social systems with cultures and traditions which enforce male dominance are not dissimilar to the struggles of their counterparts in the West.<sup>4</sup> The dominance system of patriarchy, which is one of the strongest ideologies in cultures worldwide, is the underlying cause of peacelessness in the individual, the community, the nation, the region and the world. "Patriarchy is the central concept that determines virtually all human enterprises while illustrating the historical and social dimensions of women's exploitation and oppression".<sup>5</sup> Patriarchy is embodied in the military and it can be argued that patriarchy is not only a system of violence but a system of war. Moolakkattu quotes Reardon and explains that militarism is rooted in sexism. It is "the distilled embodiment of patriarchy", "an extension of the machismo... So unless this base is pulled down, attempts to contain militarism can have only a marginal effect".<sup>6</sup>

The distinction between negative peace as the absence of war, versus positive peace as structural justice and equality, has been widely debated. Peace is not only concerned with the overt control or elimination of violence but also involves the hierarchical relationships between human beings that are caused by vertical social developments.<sup>7</sup> To quote Brock-Utne, "the meaning of peace for women thus cannot be separated from the broader question of relationships between women and men in all spheres of life and family".<sup>8</sup> Both men and women are victims of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and suffer from human rights abuses, and poverty, but the various forms of conflict and violence affect women more than men. Structural violence which is deeply rooted in the structures and institutions of societies is caused by the suppression of the feminine values of caring, compassion and nurturing and is perpetuated by the elevation of patriarchal practices to a position of hegemony in society.<sup>9</sup> A gendered perspective broadens our understanding of violence so that we are not only concerned with physical (direct) violence but also the structural (indirect) violence implicit, for example, in institutionalised sexism and human rights abuses.

Direct violence, which includes all forms of emotional, sexual, physical abuse and assault, is especially prominent in times of violent conflict. In numerous parts of Africa including Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, amongst others, women and children experienced extreme brutalities. They were the victims of ethnic cleansing in Rwanda in 1994 and more recently in the Darfur crisis in Sudan.<sup>10</sup> The instruments of war which are directed at women involve brutal rape, sexual violence, abduction, sexual slavery, mutilation and the amputation of limbs, especially hands. Systematic violence and rape have been perpetrated against women in the Democratic Republic of Congo and in the Darfur crisis in the Sudan. Even UN peacekeepers, who are seen as protectors, have been accused of rape and other forms of sexual violence against women.<sup>11</sup> The post-conflict context, more so than the formal conflict, may thus present a much larger threat for women than for men. Domestic violence tends to

increase when male combatants return home, women may be forced through economic necessity into prostitution and the trafficking in women is often established and consolidated.<sup>12</sup>

The Global Report compiled by Elizabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf on women and war states, “[h]ow little prepared we were for the enormity of it all: the staggering numbers of women in war who survive the brutality of rape, sexual exploitation, mutilation, torture and displacement. The unconscionable acts of depravity...”.<sup>13</sup> The gendered effects of these conflicts are evident not only in terms of gender-based violence where rampant rape and sexual assault are recognised as instruments of genocide and torture but also in terms of the increased participation of women who are not only victims but perpetrators of atrocities.<sup>14</sup> Handrahan observes that women are victims and perpetrators in all systems of male violence and conflict and post-conflict settings are no exceptions. She cites various scholars who explain that women are complicit in the violence of men, enforcing and committing atrocities because they have no inherent value in the dominating patriarchal system and therefore these are the only identities available to them.<sup>15</sup> Gendered approaches to war and post-war contexts broaden the view of women as victims to include a focus on women’s agency in armed conflict and the ways women’s subordinate roles are transformed in non-obvious ways.<sup>16</sup>

An important debate concerning women in post-conflict reconstruction is the notion that women are natural peacemakers because of their special experiences and perspectives which is grounded in mothering and care-giving. The underlying assumption is that women, in this case African women, are a homogeneous group whose common characteristics lend themselves to peace processes.<sup>17</sup> Moolakkattu argues that women’s supposed innate pacifism needs to be questioned as a product of a gender system that serves to reinforce the stereotypes of men as strong warriors and women as weak and passive peacemakers. He postulates that this leads to the perpetuation of war because “[j]ust as the idea of mothering can serve as a source of peace, it can also motivate men to fight”.<sup>18</sup> These stereotypical perspectives about women and peace which ‘ghettoise’ women as having special qualities and capacities which make them nonviolent in orientation and therefore naturally suited to peacemaking, need to be challenged and a gendered approach is recommended to correct these assumptions.<sup>19</sup> Without entering the “nature-nurture” debate on whether women are biologically predisposed and genetically wired for mothering and therefore natural peace makers, or whether they are socialised into societal expectations of gender roles, it is also obvious that women have a pivotal role to play in conflict prevention and resolution in their communities. The roles of women, which cut across ethnic, religious or geographic cleavages, such as those of mothers or care-givers, means that women have a vested interest in ensuring safe environments for their children and their communities.<sup>20</sup>

### **A Gendered Perspective on Post-Conflict Reconstruction**

Post-conflict reconstruction involves the rebuilding of the physical infrastructure of nations torn apart by violent conflict and the re-establishment of the intangible social, economic and political institutions that make civilized society possible.<sup>21</sup> Post-conflict peace building commences when hostilities end and is usually marked by a ceasefire or peace negotiations. In post-conflict societies peace building manifests itself through the establishment of institutions of governance and the return of the rule of law.<sup>22</sup> Also involved is capacity building through conflict transformation, social and economic transformation, peace education, community empowerment and sensitization.<sup>23</sup> Peace building programmes collectively and cumulatively address the deep-

rooted causes of violent conflict and prepare the groundwork for social justice and the observance of human rights. It is through peace building that peacekeeping is strengthened and threats to peace prevented.<sup>24</sup>

The focus of past research has been mainly on the negative impact of violent conflict on African women and very little on how war may open up new spaces for women's agency and leadership within changing family and community structures in post-conflict contexts. Research shows that women's actions in any conflict situation rarely fit the traditional gender stereotypes and that war has a differential impact on men and women.<sup>25</sup> There are unintended consequences for women because war tends to break down patriarchal structures. Conflicts in Africa have allowed women to take on more powerful and productive roles as workers, farmers, traders, community leaders and also as combatants when men go off to war. The shift in women's roles means that armed conflict in Africa has opened up opportunities for women's empowerment in terms of freedom, responsibility and worth.<sup>26</sup> Shifting the research focus from victimhood to questions of empowerment may uncover information which may enable us to understand gender and peace building capacities more fully.<sup>27</sup>

Scholars point out, however, that this gender liberation seems short-lived and these gains made by women in times of war are transitory. There is a reversal to their pre-conflict status when the men return and force their dominance. The gains made or that were promised are not maintained and there is an urgent return to pre-existing patriarchal social structures which are enforced by men. Women's needs are overlooked in the rehabilitation packages for ex-combatants which are often part of reintegration processes and the title deeds for land always remain in the man's name.<sup>28</sup> There is often an assumption in the post-conflict environment that 'normal' gender relations will resume and many female ex-combatants who had positions of power and authority are marginalised and have to return to traditional roles as mothers and care-givers. Returning female ex-combatants are often viewed with suspicion and mistrust and those who hold leadership positions are seen as threatening to male power and solidarity.<sup>29</sup> Men and women both struggle with consolidating new identities and with status issues which are exacerbated by scarce resources and power struggles. Gender relations are impacted by conflict and post-conflict situations, and a gendered analysis then, needs to look at the political, economic and social spheres in order to understand how they perpetuate patterns of discrimination against women and inequality.<sup>30</sup>

Post-conflict restructuring of social, political, and economic institutions provides a unique opportunity for women to be represented at all levels of decision-making. Many post-conflict African countries have made progress in this regard. In Liberia where women's peace groups mobilised during the civil war, history was made by electing Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as the first woman president on the African continent with the rallying cry, "All the men have failed Liberia; let's try a women this time".<sup>31</sup> Women have been included at the highest levels of government in South Africa, Rwanda, Burundi and Zimbabwe. In Rwanda after the genocide, a new space was created for women to demand equality before the law and justice for human rights abuses against women. The new Rwandan constitution approved in 2002 has included provisions relating to gender equality which includes a 30 percent quota for women's representation in decision-making.<sup>32</sup> In Rwanda, women now comprise 48 percent of parliament, the highest proportion of women anywhere in the world. Quota systems have been

effective in ensuring that women are present in representative numbers in post-conflict governments. In post apartheid South Africa this was very effective because women lobbied for 50 percent and received 25 percent representation.<sup>33</sup>

Despite these achievements scholars observe that the way women are marginalised and excluded from peace processes in Africa and other parts of the world, suggests their gendered nature. When they initiate post-conflict development plans and decisions both international and national male leaders ignore women, even though these women may have played a pivotal role during the war in holding their communities together. It is also generally acknowledged that women play major roles at grassroots level in Africa in bringing an end to hostilities between warring factions. It is usually pressure from women which leads to local peace agreements through traditional peace promotion activities such as holding prayer meetings and singing anti-war songs.<sup>34</sup> Their voices, however, are never heard in the official peace negotiations teams and in the higher level decision-making processes even when they have been combatants. Women cannot be taken seriously as peace negotiators if they are only defined as victims of war or as care-givers, belonging to vulnerable groups and always associated with children.<sup>35</sup>

Scholars agree that the absence of women in the important official post-conflict negotiations is a gender concern. Women's grassroots movements for peace have made significant contributions in bringing warring factions to a ceasefire in conflict areas, such as Burundi, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Sudan. They have organised across regions and internationally, instrumental in all aspects of civil organizing, advocacy and social mobilization. Women, however, are sidelined when the formal peace processes begin.<sup>36</sup> In Liberia women were excluded from the peace processes but the mobilization of women's advocacy groups enabled women to make declarations to the United Nations, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). After five and a half years of civil war in Sierra Leone the peace accord of 1996 contained no mention of women's rights and interests despite the fact that there were high levels of violence against women in that war.<sup>37</sup> After three decades of violence in Burundi peace negotiations began in 1998. Women were totally excluded and were not allowed to enter the room where the leaders were meeting. They had to lobby political parties before and after the peace talks in the corridors, using all forms of informal tactics to exert pressure to be heard. Their continuous demands resulted in the 19 political parties finally agreeing to include women in the negotiations and they participated in 2000 and pushed forward recommendations which were used in the final report.<sup>38</sup>

The fact that men, who are the instigators of war, are also mandated to be the sole promoters of peace processes is ironical. There is the belief that men alone have the right to negotiate peace because of their dominance in the power structures and machinery of war. Puechguirbal observes that women participating in negotiations are often accused of being unrepresentative of women and the poor in their communities. They are viewed as elites and therefore no different from the men.<sup>39</sup> The same argument may be equally true for the men but it is never used as a rationale for their exclusion. She maintains that society is confronted with a double-standard in the peace and conflict discourses which marginalise and exclude women, and on the other hand, legitimise men as the so-called peace-makers. The experience in Africa has been that even when women are accepted at the peace negotiations, as was the case in Burundi, it is with observer status only and they had no voice or vote. The reconstruction of these post-conflict societies which involves the

establishment of structural justice and equality should benefit from the differential experiences of both sexes. If only men's perspectives are represented at negotiations we may not have inclusive and sustainable peace processes which involve far more than a cessation of hostilities and violence. Peace talks should thus include not only the former combatants but also the victims and displaced survivors, who are mainly women.

### **Gender Mainstreaming and Peace building**

Gender mainstreaming is a strategy which involves “ensuring that gender perspectives and attention to the goal of gender equity are central to all activities – policy development, research, advocacy /dialogue, legislation, resource allocation, and planning, implementation, and monitoring of programmes and projects”.<sup>40</sup> Gender mainstreaming is premised on the fact that gender relations are an essential part of any conflict situation and that conflict, especially violent conflict, changes gender relations in non-obvious ways.<sup>41</sup> Gender relations are often ignored in post-conflict situations in Africa where women are marginalised and excluded. The strategy of gender mainstreaming brings these issues to the fore and exposes the differential impact of conflict on women's and men's lives. It is argued that gender mainstreaming ought to be an essential part of designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating conflict resolution, peace building and policy making processes at all levels.<sup>42</sup>

The main goal of gender mainstreaming is to address gender equalities among men and women. Any public project, including peace building, needs to be evaluated and monitored in terms of its impact on gender. Gender issues come to the fore in post-conflict contexts because social structures collapse and the status quo of gender relations are undermined. Gender mainstreaming is thus a powerful and indispensable tool for highlighting the gendered aspects of violent conflict, for eliminating the conditions that foster a climate of conflict, and for building a cooperative community.<sup>43</sup> Gender mainstreaming gained prominence when the UN Resolution 1325 recognised that in order to promote and establish peace within any society, the participation of males and females irrespective of their race, age, class, status and ethnicity is required. Gender mainstreaming is premised on the involvement and equality of both sexes. It is also argued that if the goal is to ensure equality of outcome for both men and women then it must be realized, “that women and men have different needs and priorities, and that women and men should experience equal conditions for realizing their full human rights, and the opportunity to contribute and benefit from national, political, economic, social and cultural development.”<sup>44</sup>

The UN Security Council passed Resolution 1325 on 31 October 2000 on Women, Peace and Security. It was a landmark in terms of efforts by the international community in making women relevant to negotiated peace agreements at local, regional and international levels. It was the first internationally recognised document to acknowledge the disproportionate impact of conflict on non-combatants and the fact that women and children constitute more than 80 percent of the 40 million refugees and internally displaced persons worldwide.<sup>45</sup> The resolution urges member states to mainstream a gendered perspective into peacekeeping operations and calls for specialised training for all peacekeeping personnel on the special needs and human rights of women and children in conflict situations. The resolution recognises that specialised gender training is critical for peacekeeping forces. Broadly, Resolution 1325 calls on the international community to take action in four key areas:<sup>46</sup>

- to promote the participation of women in decision making and peace processes,
- to integrate gender perspectives and training into peacekeeping operations,
- to protect women from gender-based violence in conflict zones, and
- maintain gender issues in UN reporting systems and programme implementation mechanisms.

The resolution seeks to address the negative impact of armed conflict on women and children which include human rights abuses and humanitarian law as well as the need to create gender parity at all levels of decision-making within the UN Security Council-mandated missions. It also is there as a reminder to governments and development agencies when they do not achieve the goals of gender equality which have been agreed upon by the international community.<sup>47</sup> The Resolution calls for governments and international bodies to meet the special needs of women and girls in refugee camps and informal settlements where they are vulnerable. Another critical aspect of the Resolution is its emphasis on the responsibility of UN member states to prosecute those responsible for large-scale violations of human rights.<sup>48</sup> Critics of the Resolution state that the UN itself has structural weaknesses and biases with regards to gender issues, noting the lack of women in senior positions and the weak implementation of women's rights instruments. Gender issues are often marginalised within the UN system and there is inadequate resourcing for women's issues.<sup>49</sup>

The success of the resolution will depend on how governments and international bodies consistently implement its goals of gender equality, particularly in those violent conflict and post-conflict zones such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Sudan. The intention of gender mainstreaming is to mandate that national and international bodies incorporate gender relations into all their decision-making and policy processes and that they pay due consideration to how these policies impact both men and women differently. Adherence and implementation of the resolution depends on the commitment of member states and international agencies to take action. Gender mainstreaming is thus a top-down process and its implementation and effectiveness will depend on political will and top-level leadership. Strong visionary leadership will be needed to support gender integration and to reinforce the commitment to gender equality and the resources needed to support policies and procedures of accountability.<sup>50</sup>

Kabonesa states that mainstreaming gender requires efficient and effective resource allocation, distribution and accountability and should start at the policy level and feed into all programmes. She comments that the groundwork for mainstreaming gender in peace building exists and can be tailored to fit particular contexts in Africa. These activities which follow a particular pattern involve the following:<sup>51</sup>

- Mainstreaming gender sensitive policies and strategies for peacekeeping operations and peace building
- The creation of gender responsive institutional environments where gender aware leadership is made a priority
- Training in gender analytical skills for all military and civilian peacekeepers and all employees who are implementing peace programmes and interventions

- Capacity building for ex-combatants and returnees in skills which can assist them with re-integration into their communities
- Increased representation of women in decision-making processes as well as building their capacity in leadership
- The creation of a Gender Unit to monitor the process of gender mainstreaming and to support implementation
- Gender budgeting strategies which supports proper planning and budget allocations for the processes
- Monitoring and evaluation of programmes which involves developing gender sensitive indicators at the very beginning of the mainstreaming process

Puechguirbal states that international observers acknowledge the work done by African women in peace building but none of them focus on the structural obstacles that women face. She sheds some light on these obstacles by analysing the language in peace agreements and the UN resolutions which set the tone for the rehabilitation of post-conflict societies.<sup>52</sup> Citing examples from UN Resolutions 1470, 1509 and 1328 adopted in Sierra Leone in March 2003, Liberia in September 2003 and Cote d'Ivoire February 2004 respectively, she states that we can see a pattern in the language which defines the mandate of peacekeeping and peace building missions in all documents. "Women are defined as victims or as 'women-and-children' thus limiting their capacity to be seen as actors and independent individuals in the peace process." Language in official documents which primarily defines women in their reproductive role disempowers them by stereotyping them as passive human beings in need of protection and without any control over their lives.

Handrahan asserts that there is an aggressive refusal by the international development community to seriously consider gender issues in post-conflict reconstruction. The absence of gender mainstreaming in many projects does not result from a lack of awareness on the part of the international community but rather suggests "its inability to consider its own patriarchy and the damage this does within international development paradigms". The male international development community needs to confront its "patriarchal blinders" which disadvantages and marginalises women in post-conflict reconstruction.<sup>53</sup> In addition the lack of funding made available for operational costs and research into peace building means that the international development community may not have the skills or capacity to prevent conflict or promote peace. An extensive survey of all the development agencies involved in post-conflict reconstruction was conducted and discovered that not a "single transition plan" met the most basic gender mainstreaming requirements.<sup>54</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Gender relations are an essential part of any conflict situation and it has been strongly documented in Africa that violent conflict changes and alters gender relations in profound and un-obvious ways. Politicians, scholars and other professionals involved in peace building programmes must take into consideration how stereotypical interpretations of gender in various contexts affect the understanding of the diverse roles and needs of women during conflict. Stereotypical perspectives of African women 'ghettoise' them as 'natural' mothers therefore naturally suited to peacemaking and reinforces the assumption that they are a homogeneous group. The diversity of their roles both during war and post-war phases and the popular concepts

of women's peacemaking abilities need to be analysed. Women cannot be taken seriously in peace building processes and in negotiations if they are considered second class citizens belonging to vulnerable groups and defined as victims of war or as care-givers. A gendered approach is recommended to correct and challenge these assumptions.

A gendered approach looks at the relationships between men and women which include the issues around patriarchy and dominance in both the pre-and post-conflict phases. The reconstruction of post-conflict societies should benefit from the experience of not only the combatants who are mainly men but also the victims and displaced survivors, who are mainly women. African women have been marginalised and excluded in peace processes and even when they are accepted at the 'peace table', they often only have the status of observers without a voice and a vote. The absence of African women in the important post-conflict negotiations is a gender concern.

Armed conflict in Africa has opened up opportunities for women to grow and develop. The gains, however, for women are transitory, and there is often an urgent return to the pre-conflict status-quo which is fostered by men who enforce the patriarchal social structures. The strategy of gender mainstreaming is widely regarded as important for peace building in that it ensures that gender perspectives and gender equity are central to all peace building activities such as policy development, research, advocacy /dialogue, legislation, resource allocation, and planning, implementation, and monitoring of programmes and projects.

International observers recognise the work done by African women in peace building especially at the grassroots level but none of them focus on the structural obstacles that women face. There are structural obstacles to gender mainstreaming because it is a top-down strategy and its implementation and effectiveness will depend on political will and top-level leadership from governments and development agencies. The male international development community needs to confront its own patriarchy which disadvantages and marginalises women in post-conflict reconstruction processes. Language patterns in peace agreements and UN resolutions reveal that women are defined as victims thus limiting their capacity to be seen as actors and independent agents in peace processes. Gender-insensitive language disempowers women by anchoring them as weak human beings in need of protection and without any control over their lives.

A gendered peace process is necessary for effective peace building. Top-level leadership will be needed to support gender mainstreaming and to reinforce the commitment to gender equality and to allocate the resources needed to support policies and procedures of accountability. If African governments and international development agencies are not committed to gender mainstreaming and do not have the visionary leadership needed to implement these processes, then all the policies and resolutions will have no effect in bringing women into all levels of decision-making in post-conflict reconstruction. There is a need to emphasise the concerns and priorities expressed by women in conflict contexts and to increase funding and resources for gender mainstreaming which can provide equal opportunities for women and men.

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>53</sup> Handrahan 2004 p 445.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* p 441.