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The Role of African Women in Peace Building and Conflict Resolution: The Case of Burundi

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Abstract

African nations have been ravaged by conflict, resulting in destabilization, displacement, and infrastructural destruction, all of which have gender-specific consequences. The impact of conflict on African women has been severe. In Burundi, for example, an estimated 70% of Burundi refugees are women and children. This paper examines conflict and conflict resolution in Africa, with particular focus on Burundi. It addresses how Burundi women have performed important roles as peace negotiators and peace educators in both families and society. In particular, women were essential during the transitional period and the implementation of the 2000 Arusha peace agreement. The paper identifies women's needs that must be met to stimulate post-conflict resolution and peace building and to enact well-informed planning, policymaking, and action to build a culture of peace in Africa. Finally, the paper suggests ideas to integrate a gender

perspective into conflict resolution and peace building efforts so that Burundian women's voices can be heard.

Keywords: Burundi, Africa, women, war, conflict resolution, peace building

Introduction

In the recent past, countries in Africa have had numerous conflicts and presently the problem is far from being abated. This has caused untold suffering on the people and also taken a huge toll on the development of the continent. The horn of Africa, particularly the Great Lakes regions, have become locations for some of the deadliest and most protracted of these conflicts.

In 2006 alone, there were 17 conflicts in Africa, which were at varying degrees of forms and intensity. Of all the countries in the Greater Horn of Africa only two (Djibouti and Tanzania) can be said to be relatively stable, although each has its fair share of internal skirmishes (Mpangala, 2004). Kenya was also stable until the post-election crisis erupted.

In Sudan, where conflict has existed since 1956, almost two million people have lost their lives since the early 1980's (Harermans, 2000). In Somalia, the decade-long civil war has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives while there were over 800,000 refugees and over one million internally displaced persons. The ethnic conflict in Rwanda resulted in genocide in 1994 with the killing of over half a million persons from one ethnic group. Since 1960, Burundi has also faced internal conflict resulting in the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives and also rendered as refugees over half a million persons.

The consequences of this conflict vary in scope, intensity, and nature. Conflict has taken immeasurable toll on human lives, leaving people dead, maimed, and displaced either internally or in other nations. In such calamitous situations, women and girls are often exposed to acts of violence which seriously undermine their human rights and deny them opportunities arising from gender inequality. Studies have shown that women are worst hit in situations of violent conflict and are also affected differently from men during these crises. It is becoming increasingly obvious that women have unique opportunities for conflict resolution and peace building due to the unique role they play in society.

This paper examines the role of African women in peace building and conflict resolution with special emphasis to the role of Burundian women. The paper looks at the root causes of conflict in Burundi at different levels and those institutions and practices that propagate these conflicts.

Background to the Burundi conflict

Until World War I, Burundi was a German colony after which time it was transferred to a Belgian-controlled UN mandate. Belgian colonial administration, governed through indirect rule, reinforced the power of the elite. In contrast to Rwanda, the major social cleavages in Burundi before independence were between different clans, as well as between the more affluent elite and the poorer peasantry. However, this relative harmony crumbled around the time of independence in 1962 (Bunting, Mwansasu, & Bugoya, 1999).

Burundi's ethnic makeup is similar to neighboring Rwanda with two main ethnic groups, the majority Hutus accounting for about 85% of the population, and the minority Tutsis accounting for 14%, alongside the Twa that account for just 1% of the total population. The history of the country has been marked by ethnic violence and the reinforcement of mutual fears between the ethnic groups (Kagame, 2002).

The principal problem in Burundi has been the 'ethnic' conflict between the majority Hutus and the minority Tutsis, who have historically held power and still control the military. Tutsis also dominate educated society and their position is sometimes vehemently defended by militant elements among them. During massive clashes in the 1970s for instance, militant Tutsi targeted educated Hutus. The ethnic clashes are fuelled by a continuing power struggle between Hutus and Tutsi political elites who are trying to secure access to scarce economic resources through control of state power. Major massacres took place in 1965, 1972 (when 100,000-200,000 people were killed), 1988, and 1993 (Bunting, Mwansasu, & Bugoya, 1999).

The violent ethnic confrontation of 1993 is known as the starting point of the current phase in Burundi's civil war. In response to the installation of a Hutu majority government, brought to power by the first democratic election, elements in the Tutsi-led army staged an attempted coup in October 1993. Their attempt failed, but they killed the democratically elected Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, and many other senior Hutu members of government. This event triggered ethnic massacres of Tutsi by Hutus in revenge while the Tutsi army killed many Hutus in retaliation. At least 100,000 people were killed, among them many children and elderly, often slaughtered in an extremely brutal fashion (Mpangala, 2004).

A decade of civil war followed, as Hutu militias were formed in the refugee camps in northern Tanzania. An estimated 300,000 people were killed in the ensuing clashes and reprisals against the local population (Karame, 2001). Under international pressure, in 2000 the warring factions negotiated a peace agreement in the northern Tanzanian city of Arusha, which called for ethnically balanced military and government and democratic elections. Two powerful Hutu rebel groups refused to sign the peace agreement and fighting continued in the countryside.

Finally, one of the more powerful rebel groups, the CNDD-FDD of Pierre Nkurunziza, agreed to sign a peace deal in November 2003 and joined the transitional government. The last remaining rebel group, the FNL, continued to reject the peace process and committed sporadic violence in 2003 and 2004. During this period, the general security situation improved and some Burundian refugees in Tanzania began to return home.

In 2005, Burundian voters approved a power-sharing constitution and elected a new parliament. In August 2006, former President Domitien Ndayizeye and Vice-President Alphonse-Marie Kadege were arrested with several other officials for an alleged coup-plot. Recent years have brought about significant changes on the political scene. First, the Hutus have come back to power through a landslide electoral victory. Secondly among the Hutu community, political space has opened to new members. Thirdly, the regime power balance is now also shifting as more and more contemporary leaders come from the centre of the north of the country bringing an end to southern domination. The last remaining rebel group, the FNL, signed a formal ceasefire with the government on September 7, 2006 as a result of talks mediated by officials from South Africa.

Root cause of conflict in Burundi

Before the arrival of the European colonial powers, Burundi had been an independent kingdom comprised of three primary groups – Tuts, Hutus, and Twa. A fourth group, called the Ganwa, was made up of members of the royal family and was perceived to be separate and above the others (United Nations, 2002). Although the society was not completely free of internal disputes for power, the four groups got along, sharing a common culture, religion, language, and set of values and taboos.

In Burundi, discrimination and unequal access to scarce resources led to violence, as the discrimination took place along ethnic lines, and the violence and counter violence became ethnic. There were superimpositions of social cleavages with

fault lines in political power, economic wealth, and ethnicity reinforcing each other. This conflict started before 1970 and has continued until today.

The happenings during the conflict periods are a clear demonstration of the dynamics and changeable nature of gender roles. The challenges, however, remain on how to seize opportunities, sustain, and build on positive gender roles. Changes are necessary, not only for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, but also tackling the colossal reintegration and reconstruction task in the aftermath of conflict.

The following factors are causes of the Burundian conflict:

- **Past discrimination:** Since independence in 1962, Tutsi dominated regimes have discriminated against Hutus.
- **Weight of a violent history:** Burundi's post independence history is strewn with recurrent coups or attempted coups and inter-communal violence. Clashes that took place in 1965, 1966, 1972, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1991, 1993, and 1996. This sequence of massacres has created a culture of violence which is hard to dissolve.
- **State monopoly of resources:** The population is preponderantly rural and engaged in subsistence agriculture. The country's small industrial sector is confined largely to local production or uncompetitive exports such as coffee and tea, produced until recently by state industries. Control of state power almost coincides with control of economic resources.
- **Divisive leadership:** The leaders of the country's political camps have engaged in demagogic rhetoric which has sometimes incited violence.

Conceptualizing conflict resolution and peace building

Conflict exists in all countries and in every level of society. Conflict per se is not necessarily a negative force; rather it is a natural expression of social difference and of humanity's perpetual struggle for justice and self. Conflict resolution is directed at understanding conflict processes and alternative non-violent methods that help disputing parties reach mutually acceptable positions that resolve their differences.

Conflict resolution is seen by Miller (2003) as "a variety of approaches aimed at terminating conflicts through the constructive solving of problems, distinct from management or transformation of conflicts." Miall et al. (1999) indicate that by conflict resolution, it is expected that the deep rooted sources of conflict are addressed and resolved, and behavior is no longer violent, nor are attitudes hostile any longer, while the structure of the conflict has been changed. Mitchel and Banks (1998) refer to conflict resolution as:

- i. An outcome in which the issue in an existing conflict are satisfactorily dealt with through a solution that is mutually acceptable to the parties, self-sustaining in the long run and productive of a new, positive relationship between parties that were previously hostile adversaries; and
- ii. Any process or procedure by which such an outcome is achieved.

Boutros-Ghali (1992) defines the term peace building as ranging from specific tasks that might derive from a comprehensive peace agreement – such as helping to disarm the parties, canton troops, and hold or destroy weapons; monitoring elections; fielding civilian police; and repatriating refugees – through far broader and less tangible objectives such as the restoration of order, advancing efforts to protect human rights, reforming or strengthening governmental institutions, and promoting formal and informal processes of political participation. Kofi Anan (1997) defines peace building as "the various concurrent and integrated actions undertaken at the end of a conflict to consolidate and prevent a recurrence of armed confrontation" (p. 35).

The objective of peace building is to strike a balance between 'negative' peace and 'positive' peace. Because conflicts usually leave their mark on the post-settlement process in form of broken lives, shattered and divided communities, distrust, and hatred, the task of constructing a self-sustaining peace is never an easy one. The post-settlement peace building in such circumstances becomes what Grenier and Daudelin (1995) call the "peace building market-place" (the cessation of violence) is traded for other commodities, such as political opportunity (election) and economic advantage (land). They argue that, "exchanging resources of violence against other resources is arguably the pivotal type of 'trade' in peace building" (p. 350).

The way in which gender is integral to peace, and violent conflict makes clear that a gendered analysis of peacebuilding is essential to preventing and mitigating new violent conflict in societies while helping them recover from current conflicts.

This paper adopts the definition of peace building announced in the "Peacebuilding Initiative Strategic Framework" by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) (2002). The CIDA describes peace building as follows:

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. Ultimately, peace building aims at building human security, a concept which includes democratic governance, human rights, rule of law, sustainable development, equitable access to resources, and environmental security...Peace building may involve conflict prevention, conflict resolution, as well as various kinds of post-conflict activities. It focuses on the political and

socio-economic context or humanitarian aspects. It seeks to...institutionalize the peaceful resolution of conflicts. (p. 2)

Peace building and resolution are here considered to constitute simultaneous and reinforcing sets of activities with an intricate and organic relationship much as human rights principles relate to broad development goals. One cannot be done without the other. It is therefore important that all sectors of society, which are present in one way or another in all aspects of an ongoing conflict, are represented in negotiations and actions that seek to lay the foundation for peace and post-conflict resolution.

Women and post-conflict peace building

During the past few years, there has been an increasing recognition by government, international organizations, and civil society of the importance of gender equality and empowerment of women in the continuing struggle for equality, democracy and human rights, as well as for poverty eradication and development (El-Bushra, 2000).

In nearly every country and region of the world, there has been progress on achieving gender equality and women's empowerment, although this progress has been uneven and the gains remain fragile. A great challenge facing the world today is the growing violence against women and girls in armed conflict. In today's conflict, they are not only the victims of hardship, displacement and warfare, they are directly targeted with rape, forced pregnancies, and assault as deliberate instruments of war. Women are deeply affected by conflicts, which they have had no role in creating.

Armed conflict and its aftermath affect women's lives in ways that differ from the impact on men. Men in communities under attack tend to abandon public spaces to avoid being conscripted, attacked, or taken hostage. This increases the burden placed on women to hold communities together in the absence of men at war. On the other hand, women as symbols of community and/or ethnic identity

may become the targets of extensive sexual violence. Conflict in some places has highlighted the use of rape as a tool of warfare. In Rwanda, women were raped as a means of ethnic cleansing, serving not only to terrorize individual victims but also to inflict collective terror on an ethnic group.

An intensive literature explores the interconnections between the roles of women and men in conflict situations and the politics of identity and agency. Literature on Rwanda, Mozambique, Palestine, and Sri Lanka shows that women may be victims, but they also often participate actively as soldiers, informants, couriers, sympathizers, and supporters.

Conflict brings with it terrible human rights consequences for all involved – children, women and men. The impact of conflict on the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of women, in particular, is often devastating. In spite of the fact that conflict has a high level of impact on the lives of women, it is disheartening to note that they are not fully involved in the peace building process because of its gendered nature. Women's interests have been neglected by the peace process, which has resulted in male-centered approaches to peace and security. The intrinsic role of women in global peace and security has remained unrecognized since the creation of the United Nations.

In the past decade, many countries have embarked upon the difficult transition from armed conflict towards resolution and peace building. The international community's role in this transition has shifted from narrow humanitarian and relief activities to more comprehensive efforts to foster sustainable peace. At the same time, the community has shifted from a stepped approach from relief to development to one that combines a broader package of concurrent steps. Development organizations have become increasingly engaged in activities during post-conflict, devoting time and resources to supporting this transition.

Building a lasting peace that sustains post-war economic, political, and social development requires the full participation of all citizens. Yet it is increasingly

recognized that the role of women in post-conflict settings has received inadequate policy attention. According to Theo Ben Gurirab, Namibian Minister of Foreign Affairs (cited in Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2005), attempts to address the human rights consequences of conflict, including the particular impact on women, can only be comprehensive and long-lasting if women play active part in all the relevant processes and mechanisms given the gender-differentiated impact of war on women.

It is important to know that preventing a war is entirely different than resolving one once it has begun. In order to prevent conditions that give rise to violent conflict from coalescing, capable societies must be created. These societies are characterized by three components: 1) security, 2) well-being, and 3) justice for all of its citizens, including its women. According to Lute (2002), women's roles in promoting these three causes provide examples of their activities towards preventing the emergence, spread, or renewal of mass violence.

The belief that women should be at the center of peace building and resolution processes is not based on essentialist definitions of gender (Lisa & Manjrika, 2005). The field of sociology makes a distinction between sex, and gender. Human beings are not born 'men' or 'women'. Masculinity and femininity is learned, rehearsed, and performed daily (Butler, 1999).

It would be naïve to assert that all women respond in a similar manner in a given situation or that women are 'natural peace builders' (Lisa & Manjrika, 2005). Gender identity is performed differently in different cultural contexts. Gender identity must always be viewed in relationship with an individual's other identities such as his or her ethnicity, class, age, nation, region, education, and religion. It is important to note that there are different expectations for men and women in various sector of the society and gender roles shift with social upheaval. In conflict situation, men and women face new roles and changing gender expectations. Their biological and sociological differences affect conflicts and

peace building. In all, most societies value men and masculinity more than women and femininity (Lisa & Manjrika, 2005).

Despite this existence of 'sexism' or 'patriarchy', there are some widely accepted reasons why women are important to all peace building processes. Women are important because they constitute half of every community, and the task of peace building, a task which is so great, must be done in partnership with both women and men. Secondly, women are the central caretakers of families in most cultures, and everyone is affected when women are oppressed and excluded from peace building. Therefore, it is essential that women be included in the peace building process.

Women play important roles in the process of peace building, first as activists and advocates for peace, women wage conflict nonviolently by pursuing democracy and human rights. Secondly, as peacekeepers and relief aid workers, women contribute to reducing direct violence. Thirdly, as mediators, trauma healing counselors, and policymakers, women work to 'transform relationships' and address the root of violence. Lastly, as educators and participants in the development process, women contribute to building the capacity of their communities and nations to prevent violent conflict. This is made possible as a result of socialization processes and the historical experience of unequal relations and values that women bring to the process of peace building (Lisa & Manjrika, 2005).

Role of women in Burundi's conflict resolution

Women's participation in the Burundi's conflict resolution helped to integrate gender equality into democratic governance and the peace building framework. This was as a result of the quotas in the peace agreement and Burundi's new constitution. Pressure from women's organization contributed to a culture of negotiation for national peace. The participation of women was initially

inconsistent due to lack of political will by all sides and in some cases strong resistance by political parties.

The Arusha peace process began with 17 different political parties meeting for the first round of talks in July 1998. When no civic organizations were authorized to participate, Hutu and Tutsi women decided to join force to protest against this exclusion and to call for a place at the peace table. Their initiative led to the creation of numerous women's NGOs, among them the Group of Associations and Feminine NGOs of Burundi, Women's Network for Peace and Non-Violence, and the Women's Association for Peace. These groups organized a wide range of activities, including workshops on non-violent conflict resolution, a forum gathering women from different ethnic backgrounds, uniting women from the Diaspora and women living in the country to discuss strategies for national reconstruction. The *Dushirahamwe* [Let us reconcile] network succeeded in bringing together displaced and refugee women, with the aim of identifying obstacles to peaceful cohabitation within the country.

The various activities carried out in the name of peace have slowly helped reconstruct networks of committed women, networks that were shattered during the conflict. According to Alice Ntwarante and Marie-Goretti Ndacayisaba (2000):

“The mobilization for peace has brought together women from all walks of life; intellectuals and farmers, young and old, rich and poor women. The relations between them improve thanks to the atmosphere of harmony and transparency that prevailed during the different meetings.” (p. 9)

A breakthrough was reached when UNIFEM and the Mwalimu Nyerere Foundation sponsored the All-Party Burundi's women peace conference held July 17-20, 2000 in Arusha, Tanzania. As requested, each of the 19 Burundi organizations represented at the peace negotiation sent two women delegates. More than 50 Burundi women and observer participated in the event. The

women's proposals were presented at a meeting with former South African President Nelson Mandela, who was designated to replace the late Mwalimu Nyerere, one of the patriarchs of the national liberation movements, as the facilitator for the Burundi peace negotiations. Among the steps of action requested were the following:

- A women's charter to be included in the constitution and the elimination of all laws discriminatory to women;
- Special measures for women's security;
- Women's right to land and inheritance;
- Equal access to education for women and girls; and
- An end to impunity for gender-based war crimes, including domestic violence.

All the women's recommendations were accepted by the 19 parties and were integrated into the final document of the peace accord – with the exception of a clause requesting a 30% quota to promote women's representation at all decision making levels (UNIFEM, 2001).

It took almost four years of persistence for the Burundi women to get their voice heard on the peace process. In the first round of the negotiations, women were absent. Burundian women felt this should not be so, and found way to join in the negotiations, angering the male delegates. Eventually women were allowed in as observers but with no right to take part in the talks. Further, when the negotiation began, women were prevented from entering the negotiating room. Determined to make their voices heard, they had to adopt a different tactic and decided to intercept representation of political parties in the corridors of government buildings after meetings, urging representatives to integrate women's perspectives into the peace process. Their efforts were finally acknowledged.

The mobilization of women in the peace process led to the creation of structures that helped women assert their right and come to terms with the consequences of the civil war.

The women of Burundi are still struggling to be integrated into the formal setting of the peace process, trapped in their traditional role that does not allow them to be visible in the public sphere. Despite the mobilization of women, the country is still divided along ethnic lines, impeding any attempt to bring peace and reconciliation.

Obstacles to the involvement of women in the peace process

As seen in the example of Burundi peace building and conflict resolution process, provisions in peace accords fail to make reference to women as actors and agents of change for peace. The language of the agreement was weak, and deprived women of a political space where they could contribute to the building of peace as recognized partners, not only as mothers or dependants on a male relative. Women are generally defined as members of vulnerable groups, together with the elderly and the handicapped, as part of the category “women-and-children”. They are first and foremost considered as hopeless victims unable to take charge of the lives, and this approach deprives them of the agency as responsible.

The following are challenges faced by women in the quest to participate in the Burundi experiences:

- **Lack of political strength and political vision:** Women suffer from “political illiteracy”. They lack an ideological framework that could give teeth to a strong position adopted by a collective women’s. Peace building as a political activity and therefore requires political strategy for engagement (Rono, 2000).

- **Lack of experience, exposure and skills in negotiation, advocacy and lobbying techniques:** Women have always been kept secluded from the political arena and sphere of decision-making; therefore, in many situations they are unable to participate.
- **Lack of a political platform:** Without a political platform, women are on the margins of action and lack confidence in participating in the peace building process.
- **Lack of visibility:** Women's conflict-resolution activities are confined to the informal sector, very often at the periphery of official peace negotiation. In addition, even if women contribute to the promotion of peace, they are not invited to participate in formal negotiations.
- **Lack of resources (material and financial):** Most of the time women's groups lack the means to back up their actions. In some instances, they are unable to get across to the media network to enhance their peace campaign because they do not have a budget for multi-dimensional activities. Further, they are not part of main fund raising channels and networks. They work on a voluntary basis at the grassroots levels, pooling their own resources together to get an office, desk, and phone line.
- **Lack of sustainability in political participation:** Representation does not necessarily mean meaningful and recognized participation that has an impact on substantial inputs in peace agreement. In addition, once a peace process is over, women often return to more traditional activities, losing their gains and public presence. These losses make it very difficult for women to return to the public stage later when resolution begins.

Recommendations

There is a need to overcome the obstacles that hinder women from participating in peace building and post-conflict resolution process. Women need to take

advantage of the transformative experiences of war and the resulting weakened patriarchal order to build up a strong women's movement before it is too late -- before traditions that oppress women return to take over the space that had opened momentarily. Women need to build up a strong movement before war starts and to sustain it through the war and after the ceasefire.

The movement should help to build bridges between different groups in civil society, thus bolstering the continued struggle for respect for women's rights without waiting for the end of the hostility to be implemented. For Burundian woman to be effective in the peace building role, they must organize themselves, strive for institutional, political and legal representation, and create solidarity and support through local, regional, and international networks.

The international community must also continue to facilitate the involvement of local women in peace negotiations. The community should also help to promote more gender awareness, and to review the content of laws that perpetuate discrimination against women, constitutional reforms, judicial reforms, election participation, as well as access to and control over economic resources, education, and training. This is because despite the ground breaking contributions made by women's groups, gender equity mechanisms created during peace negotiations still remain weak.

Peace operations in Burundi need to support women's group and local initiatives building in their own capacities, by seeing women as untapped resources and dynamic elements of post-conflict societies in Burundi, Africa, and beyond. Therefore, there is a need to have a discussion with women's groups and movements that would convey more details on how conflict or waging conflict affects people on the ground. There is also a need to provide information about the concerns that women have, thus empowering women as major and serious actors who should be included in conflict resolution and peace building.

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