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Women and Peace Talks in Africa

By Akin Iwilade

Abstract

This paper interrogates the role of women in peace talks in Africa. It addresses the exclusion of women and their peculiar interests from deliberations aimed at constructing a post conflict state framework that resolves the contradictions that incite violent conflict and provides safeguards against recurrence. The paper argues that the failure of peace talks to deliberately incorporate women interests detracts from their potential to effectively confront the questions of post conflict rebuilding. It notes the increasing inclusion of women but argues that this does not amount to gender representation. This is because at the heart of the inclusion is the requirement of female participants to represent non-gendered interests of class, ethnicity, religion as the case may be. In the light of this, it is contended that to the extent that their claim to power derives from their social navigation of the structures of power through relationships with men, their representation can only reinforce the very basis of women’s subordinate status. Going further, the paper challenges the argument for feminizing peace talks in Africa. It considers this as reverse chauvinism and calls instead for incorporation. In concluding, it is contended that peace talks need to be democratized and female representation placed within the broader context of social challenges. This approach will prevent the undue reification of gender-read women- interests with the consequence of heightening the ‘sex wars’ in ways that does not add value to democratic incorporation.

Keywords: Peace talks, Gender, Exclusion, Conflict

Introduction

There has been a rise in the use of peace talks as a tool for addressing protracted social conflict. Peace talks have typically attempted to link the cessation of hostilities to new political and legal structures through what is often essentially a constitutional framework (Ackerman, 1992; Bell, 2000) that sets out new or refurbished organs of government whose goal is to address the state’s internal and external legitimacy crisis. This approach to conflict resolution shows the increasing popularity of democratic social re-engineering as a tool for post conflict state rebuilding.

In spite of this however, critical parts of the population are often excluded from the peace talks. The very idea of constructing a political and legal order that promotes human rights and respects diversity is moored within the theoretical confines of democracy. Political exclusion of important but disempowered interests within the population during peace talks is therefore antithetical to this ideal and undermines the prospects for sustainability.

This paper addresses the exclusion of women from peace talks in Africa. It argues that the marginal involvement of women in peace talks in Africa has largely been in the context of their representation of non-gendered interests that merely entrench established patterns of gender inequality. The paper argues that women participation in peace talks cannot merely be considered an indulgence grudgingly accepted by a patriarchal society, but as an imperative for success. This is so because women, by virtue of their unique
(pre)conflict experience tend to have crucial insights into the character of
disempowerment and exclusion and are therefore much more inclined to bring
compromise and tolerance to the negotiating table. The analysis utilizes an
interdisciplinary approach. It draws insights from various social science disciplines
including international relations, psychology and conflict studies. As a result, the paper
establishes a linkage between internal contradictions and tensions that lead to violent
crime and the mediation efforts of third parties. It studies both the psychology of
identity systems that help solidify gendered prejudices during peace talks and the
undercurrents of class and resource accumulation that ultimately frame them. In the end,
this approach provides an important framework with which one may engage and
understand the critical interplay of social forces that frame peace talks in Africa.

In engaging the problematic of women participation, it is crucial to note that
women who get seats at peace talks by virtue of their sponsorship by dominant class
interests or as consorts of men, cannot be expected to confront the unique issues faced by
common women. To the extent that their claim to power derives from their social
navigation of the structures of power through relationships with men, their representation
can only reinforce the very basis of women’s subordinate status.

The paper is structured into six sections, the first of which is the introduction. In
the next section, we confront the problematique of post conflict peace building. This is
intended to establish a conceptual framework within which to engage the questions of
women participation. The section that follows addresses women participation in peace
talks. Should feminine voices be excluded or incorporated? Or should feminization be
actively sought for talks? In the fourth section, we examine the challenges that militate
against women participation. The next section examines the impact of women in peace
talks. When is the leap from politics to policy made? How much does women
participation, when it is accepted, actually impact on policies? Giving increasing
relevance of feminist voices, what prospects are there for increased inclusion? The last
section concludes. There, a case is made for the democratization of peace talks in Africa.

Problematizing the Challenge of Post Conflict Peace Building

Post conflict state reconstruction poses immense challenges to stake holders in
Africa. The challenge is not only in the direction that post conflict peace building efforts
should take or in understanding the dynamics that resulted in conflict in the first place,
but also in determining the extent of representation to be afforded social groups at the
negotiating table. Particularly disadvantaged are women groups whose interests are often
subsumed under national, ethnic and class interests of competing male dominated groups.
There is a tendency to deny the peculiar experience of women in conflict so much so that
peace building often results in reversals of the advances women might have made in class
mobility occasioned by desperate coping strategies they are obliged to adopt in conflict
situations. This section hopes to engage the problematique of the challenge of peace
building. It is intended to identify the broad thematic areas that present challenges for the
peace agenda and how the manner in which these questions are answered, in the context
of women participation, can impact on the sustainability of the peace.
Restoring security in conflict devastated regions

High on the priority list of negotiators who determine the parameters of post conflict peace is the issue of security. Contemporary security discourse has been torn between its roots in the state-centric realist tradition and the increasingly popular human security paradigm. There is a sense in which the former represents a non-gendered and military based conception of security that tends to deny the contributions of social conditions to insecurity. The military based security paradigm is anchored on the ideological conception of the world as essentially a product of relations between states. The state is therefore privileged in such a way that ignores social structures, population movements, marginalized groups and non state actors (Chenoy, 1998). Privileging the state implies viewing peace efforts from the perspective of armed groups struggling over the control of resources.

The problem with this perspective is that it does not allow for a comprehensive conceptualization of the dynamics that govern inter-group relations and that inevitably generate conflict. It excludes non military visions of security that may present a broader prospect for peace by promoting issues of resource distribution, social justice and political inclusion that are often at the heart of conflicts in Africa.

There is a relationship between social justice, material well being and peace. Resolving and/or preventing violent conflict therefore means engaging with the social, livelihood and human security concerns of the population. The democratization of the debate on security is also essential to redefining the concept and formulating policies aimed at achieving freedom from want and fear (Machanda, 2001).

The United Nations has been crucial to the post cold war popularization of a new concept of human security that relativises the military aspects of security and valorises the democratic perspective. In encouraging the paradigm shift towards democratizing the peace agenda, independent commissions from Bruntland, Brandt to Palme have focussed on development, environment and social justice as necessary components of the architecture of peace and security. They have been able to draw attention to the critical contributions of seemingly ‘mundane’ issues to the dynamics of conflict and how resolving the questions of social justice, environmental justice and political inclusion can be crucial to a sustainable peace settlement. Civil society has also been crucial to the popularization of this conception of security. Peace-building movements within Africa now increasingly focus on the human security dimension of post conflict settlements.

Implicit in the idea of social justice being important to security is the imperative of comprehensive political inclusion. This includes the inclusion of women as a unique social group unencumbered by the ties of class, ethnicity and religion. There are two key underlying hypotheses to the assertion that women’s participation in policy making or security matters would be conducive to the achievement of sustainable human security. In the first place, women’s experience of (in) security and violent conflict is different from that of men and secondly, their approach to internal and interstate conflict situations is more accepting of compromises and less likely than men to believe armed force is necessary or appropriate (Machanda, 2001: 4101). Challenging the notion of the centrality of men’s experiences in conflict and paying attention to the unique situation of women in conflict zones sheds more light not only on gendered aspects of politics and social life, but also provides insights into other forms of structural inequalities that are
often at the heart of conflict. In any case, it has been said that women, having been structurally excluded from having power, have particular insights into understanding structural inequalities and discrimination (Machanda, 2001:4102). Their preoccupation with maintaining family ties and protecting children tends to reflect on the negotiating table in pacifism and a human centred conception of security. The challenge is therefore to acknowledge this feminine perspective of security and incorporate it into peace talks.

Demilitarization of society and demobilization of armed groups

Closely related to the security challenge is that of demobilization and demilitarization. The need to remove weapons from post conflict society is crucial to the intervention efforts of third parties to conflicts (Tanner, 1998). Continued free flow of small and light arms often feeds low intensity conflict and promotes criminal activities. The return to civil war in Liberia may be partly attributed to the failure of the 1997 demobilization efforts to fully demilitarize Liberian society. A whole generation of youths, brought up on the culture of the gun, merely hovered on the fringes of society until conflict broke out again. They promptly joined in. While it is undeniable that men are often the central participants in armed conflicts, the blanket assumption of victimcy identity for women tends to ignore the crucial role that women play in the outbreak, sustenance and intensity of violent conflict. Ethnography of social tactics in conflict situations which sees women take up humanitarian aid and/or arms in their social navigation for survival, counters the reductionist portrayals of women as merely the passive victims of conflict. In the Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil wars, women acted as combatants and fought alongside men or even in special elite units like the Women’s Auxiliary Corps commanded by a woman, Colonel Black Diamond (Utas, 2005: 404). In the Eritrean conflict, for instance, it has been reported that women made up about thirty percent of the fighting force (Burgess, 1989). The implication of this is that demilitarization, rehabilitation and the social re-integration that should naturally flow from it, like all other aspects of peace talks, often focus disproportionately on men and their needs. Women combatants are considered misnomers, mere female exuberance in a war that was masculine. This can be said of Somalia where women, in spite of their significant mobilization at all levels of the conflict, were simply ignored during the peace talks (Machandas, 2001: 4106). Peace settlements often ignore or in fact out rightly deny these contributions and women are returned to their passive pawn position after the war.

The challenge before negotiators at peace talks is therefore to include women, both combatants and non combatants, in the demilitarization and demobilization agenda. The needs and sensibilities of this group of combatants could be crucial to the sustainability of the peace process.

Economic development and reconstruction

Economic recovery is critical to the peace. At the heart of conflicts in Africa is the struggle for the control of state resources by entrenched ethnic, religious and class interests. These competing interests are often further complicated by the divisive interference of multinational and transnational capital as in the case of Nigeria’s Niger Delta, Angola, Congo DR, Rwanda and Sudan. In the light of the high premium placed on political power by groups who see it as the easiest route to accumulation (Enemuo,
conflicts often take extremely brutal forms. What results is the destruction of nominal forms of economic interaction, the disruption of the economic reproduction process and the criminalization of exchange. This increases economic inequality and makes recovery almost impossible for the most vulnerable. Women are often the hardest hit as they bear the brunt of caring for fatherless children, at times amidst the challenge of post rape trauma and social ostracism.

In the context of economic distortions heightened by conflict, the demand for some form of modification of the distributive and extractive character of the state often intensifies. Post conflict talks therefore regard the establishment of viable patterns of economic exchange as central to the prospects for sustainability. To many of the common people, the restoration of their means of livelihood; land, buildings and assets, is often as important as the return to peace itself. Without the ability to rebuild their lives, peace means far less.

How then do peace talks confront this issue? Where neo-liberal interests are often at the centre of these talks, ably represented by the United Nations and donor agencies, how do participants toe the fine line? Do they redistribute resources, and satisfy the yearnings of the dispossessed population, or do they initiate neo-liberal reforms and satisfy the needs of capital? Or is there a middle point? How well does the ‘affirmative action’ line often canvassed in feminist literature agree with the ‘free enterprise’ paradigm?

Women are often the hardest hit in conflict. The harsh conditions of the developing world calls to question the tendency to concentrate on neo-liberal macro-economic policies that are often inadequate to provide the rapid recovery that post conflict African societies require. Perceived sluggish pace of economic recovery easily produces increased sense of frustration and alienation that undermines state legitimacy and the entire peace process. This is magnified where, as is often the case, the empowerment of women is not considered a priority.

**Democratization of the state**

Malwal (2004:1-3) counsels that ‘in order to reconstruct the state, the people need to do what the colonial powers did not do- give the people the say in politics and the right to self determination.’ This statement, made in an analysis of state reconstruction in Sudan, captures the importance of democratization to the emergence of a sustainable peace architecture. Peace talks must be evaluated by examining the extent to which they opt for models of participatory democracy. The conflict settings which peace agreements address tend to be characterized by grassroots mobilization. In spite of high public interest in the nature and outcome of peace talks however, dominant forces that privilege the statist conception of politics tend to gain primacy so much so that they succeed in excluding crucial but disempowered sections of society. These forces, in their manipulations to capture as much power as possible and consequently retain and/or expand acquired privileges, often succeed in entrenching the same patterns of dominance, exclusion and arbitrariness that precipitated conflict in the first place. Examples of how such pseudo democratic post conflict transitions have led, inevitably, to another outbreak of violence can be found in Tejan Kabbah’s Sierra Leone, Taylor’s Liberia and southern Sudan.
The challenge before post conflict negotiators, particularly the partisan parties to the conflict, is therefore to determine how much power they are prepared to share without loss of influence. The tensions that characterize political life in Zimbabwe have been traced, for instance, to the unanswered questions of land ownership and democratization from the independence settlements. The linkage between economic and political democracy is clear and unambiguous. In Zimbabwe, the economic realm was never democratized as a few whites retained control of much of the land while the black peasant majority remained landless. The political realm saw near immediate reversals of earlier democratic gains as the outcome of the power struggle between Mugabe and Nkomo effectively turned Zimbabwe into a one party dictatorship. The ensuing tensions in Zimbabwe’s political economy have resulted in near collapse (Meredith, 2005: 617-46). While the racial dimension of the Zimbabwe situation cannot be glossed over, it is clear that race is merely a tool in the hands of competing political interests. At the heart of the conflict and tensions is Mugabe’s authoritarian exercise of power.

Closely linked to the recalcitrance of partisan stakeholders to share power by fully democratizing the structures of the post conflict state is the refusal of male dominated class interests to allow the inclusion of marginalized groups like women. The exclusion of women cannot be explained only in terms of traditional patriarchal systems that devalue the contribution of women to matters of state. It can easily be located in the wider problem of authoritarianism. The continued exclusion of such a crucial percentage of the population, whose unique conflict experiences will enrich the process of social re-engineering, is a democratic deficit that has to be addressed.

The above is a statement of the problem presented by the nature of peace talks in Africa. How can the feminine deficit in post conflict peace talks in Africa be addressed? Feminizing, excluding or incorporating feminine voices? Contextualizing women participation in peace talks

There are three options. One, the exclusionary line may continue to be toed. Women and their special needs can be ignored out rightly; after all they do not often represent potent potentially explosive forces. Peace talks can also be feminized in such a way that women and their peculiar experiences take centre stage in talks; after all they are the resident source of social identity. The third option is to incorporate female voices. This will imply encouraging participation of rural women in peace building efforts without necessarily ignoring the centrality of other core issues like disarmament, power sharing and demilitarization.

The case against exclusion

The most powerful take against exclusion is perhaps in the failure, both explicit and implicit, of many peace talks in Africa that have consistently and so obviously excluded female voices. Liberia had a total of about fourteen peace talks between 1990 and 1997 (Tanner, 1998). They all excluded women groups and they all failed. In contrast, women representatives sat on the South African post apartheid peace talks and in the Arusha Negotiations for Burundi (as observers in this case). Both processes seem to have resulted in lasting peace. Is there a connection between the success of peace talks and the presence of the moderating voice of women?
Women are highly visible when it comes to street level peace building or promoting a culture of tolerance among the population but they are rarely to be found on the negotiating table especially at the national and international levels. At the negotiating table, civil society organizations mobilized around the peace agenda get marginalized, and within that, women’s peace activism, particularly, gets undervalued. An ungendered map of peace talks will show no women at all (Machanda, 2001: 4105).

Women should not be excluded from peace talks because this practice has resulted in agendas and ultimately resolutions that ignore many post conflict conditions. For instance, most peace talks have ignored the existence of what was appropriately referred to as ‘protest masculinities’. In the words of the author:

At the pragmatic level, when discussions take place in the peace process on the decommissioning of weapons, where is the gendered perspective to input that it has direct impact on levels of domestic violence? And that, given the militarized construction of masculinities, demobilized men, in the aftermath of protracted violent conflict, especially if there is high unemployment, are at risk of developing protest masculinities? Where is the space to put forward that children brutalized by war and even inducted into conflict have special rehabilitation and reintegration needs? Continuing to disregard the myriad of informal peace building processes at the grassroots level, will only result in a solution that may be technically viable but socially and culturally not feasible (Machanda, 2001: 4105)

The democratization of the political process has been a central plank of conflict resolution in Africa. The electoral platform has often been the ultimate test of the success or otherwise of peace talks. In Sierra Leone, Southern Sudan, Liberia, Cote d’Voir, Burundi and South Africa, multiparty elections were considered the bulwark of peace talks. Given the democratic value that underpins this reliance on elections as a tool for peace building (Sisk, 1996), it is ironic that these ‘democracy’ promoting talks are so blatantly undemocratic. By excluding key social stakeholders like women groups, the democratic credential of the peace process is in itself suspect. In that sense, it becomes incapable of instituting the kind of democratic reform that traumatized post conflict societies so urgently need. In the same way that military regimes are incapable of instituting genuinely democratic reform, peace talks that thrive on the exclusion of women and other marginalized groups run the risk of, in the best case, half heartedly engaging their challenges or, in the worst case, out rightly ignoring it. Both present tremendous risk for the sustainability of the entire peace agenda.

**Feminizing Peace Talks?**

If women should not be excluded from peace talks, should these talks be feminized? That is should the experience of women form the prism through which conflict is viewed and solutions ultimately constructed? The tendency in feminist literature is to argue for the feminization or ‘engendering’ of security, peace and development. This is a roundabout way of campaigning for a reverse domination of men in the development agenda. This perspective negates the spirit of the feminist campaign itself and further alienates dominant patriarchal forces, who, it must be admitted, hold the decisive end of the social stick.
This approach is not peculiar to peace talks but is indicative of the tenor of pro gender equality literature. Arguments for feminizing peace talks are premised on the assumption that women are inherently peace makers. This perspective reinforces the traditional notion of social roles in conflict situations that have been cultivated by propaganda, popular culture and the media. This role construction set men as the perpetual aggressors, the ‘doers’, and women as the perpetual victims, always innocent. Feminine peacemaking in Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia for instance (Selassie, 1994; El-Bushra, 2000), are often held up as examples that corroborate the social constructs of gender roles in conflict. This denies compelling evidence that establishes the role women play in conflict. These roles include direct involvement in violence and the incitement of their men to violence (El-Bushra, 2000; Mukta, 2000; Moser and Clark, 2001). Ironically, the same cultural roles that predispose women to seeking pacifism, may ignite virulent nationalism. Being responsible for passing on cultural identities to children in most societies, they at times take active part in promoting aggressive and exclusionary nationalism that stokes the embers of war. This dual identity is demonstrated in the possibility of women, indeed the same women, playing both peacemaking and war mongering roles in conflict.

In the context of this problematic, the case for feminizing peace talks becomes pretty brittle. The assumption on which this perspective is based does not bear generalization. Indeed, even if it were possible to feminize peace talks, what guarantees are there that women, or indeed all gendered interests, can withstand the pressures of capital, class, ethnicity and religion? The chances are that feminization will merely create the reverse side of the same coin. That is political exclusion, alienation and eventually, degeneration into violent conflict.

The case for incorporating female voices

Democracy thrives on the widest possible degree of political participation. The more the social interests accommodated and given a voice, the higher the likelihood of social cohesion and a sustainable peace.

The marginalization of women is not merely a political or tactical ploy by interests negotiating the post conflict arrangements. It must be noted that scholars of conflict resolution ‘discovered’ gender much later than development studies or international relations (Pankhurst and Pearce, 1997) As noted by many analysts, the process of taking gender more seriously as an analytical category within development studies seems to have responded to an efficiency imperative. In essence, many development policies, including those emanating out of peace talks, have failed precisely because they ignored gender issues and it became apparent, through the work of feminist intellectuals and theorists, that if gender were taken into account, a far greater degree of success could be achieved (Pankhurst, 2003). The continued failure of peace talks to take feminine voices into account has therefore flowed from such negligence in conflict resolution theory.

Growing realization of the merits of inclusion of as many voices as possible in peace talks has however induced campaigns for the incorporation of women. While this incorporation often merely brings women who will entrench the pre-conflict patterns of
gender relations, the very act of emphasising the presence of women provides immense possibilities.

But why should women’s voices be incorporated? For one, peace talks benefit from the expansion of the range of perspectives. This variety ensures that a comprehensive experiential world view that captures the different faces of conflict can be considered in constructing peace agendas. In the particular case of women, their pre-conflict experiences can be as important as conflict experiences.

Key components of the peace talk which must of necessity include the punishment of crimes committed as acts of war cannot go through comprehensively without a conscious process of incorporating women. Punishment and public condemnation of acts of impunity have proven very important to the reconciliation process as the South African Truth Commission and similar organizations in Rwanda, Kenya and Burundi have shown. But where talks are structured to exclude as ‘marginal social movements’ women’s groups and civil society organizations that were, in any case, active during the conflict, the result is often the festering of discontent and feelings of alienation. Women who face aggression that includes rape and forced sexual slavery often find it difficult to come forward. They are in fact unlikely to do so except they are encouraged and supported to do so (Machanda, 2001: 4105; United Nations, 1998). Lack of support prevents the punishment of offenders and of course precludes the possibility of such women benefiting from any social, psychological or health support that the peace talks may provide for. The very presence of female representation and the gender sensitivity of talks, including the use of anonymity when necessary, can be an important catalyst for women to come forward with their complaints. Denying this opportunity to traumatized sections of society, with the strong chains of resentment through children, husbands and relatives, makes a regress into violent conflict likely.

Incorporation also has a human rights implication. This is because participation of women’s groups in peace talks, as indeed that of as many social forces as possible, is a right and not merely some privilege granted grudgingly by dominant forces of social patriarchy and exclusion. It is no surprise that dominant forces within African society essentially reject the human rights perspective of political inclusion. This is because the contemporary conception of human rights presupposes a society which is atomized and individualistic, a society of endemic conflict and anarchy. Implicit in this perception is the refusal to acknowledge the inherent right of social formations to mobilize as a collective. Women groups have thus faced exclusion that denies their right to participation in peace talks essentially because their very claim to representation reflects a rejection of the dominant forces of patriarchy and the character of social relations it inevitably engenders. The compromise, usually under pressure from western donor states and civil society groups, is the inclusion of women who are not representative of the general and who will be pliable to the interests of capital, ethnicity, and religion. This sort of compromise denies the right of the common women to mobilize and air their views. The implication of this is that peace agreements rooted in the abuse of human rights, however subtle or traditional, cannot be expected to build enduring political systems committed to the end of disempowerment.

Women deserve to be involved in peace talks as active participants genuinely capable of affecting the outcome because they have unique (pre) conflict perceptions of
social discrimination, vulnerability and abuse. Because the socialization process puts women in positions of subservience, they seem to be able to relate to concepts of exploitation in unique ways. The disempowerment bred by the exploitative character of economic reproduction in Africa is enhanced for women by traditional practices that limit their ability to engage outside designated social roles. In the light of this unique position of disempowerment, women groups are capable of bringing strong social justice credentials to peace talks. Society will thus benefit from their inclusion. By the very fact of their exclusion from politics, women have less stake in the political positions on which conflict turns. It may therefore be less important for them to display ‘appropriate’ political postures that often make conflict protracted. In clearer terms, ‘if there is a female propensity for peace, it is perhaps because of the male propensity to exclude women from power’ (Smith, 1999).

Beyond the above is the sheer irrationality of denying representation to a unique social formation that represents at least half of the population. Disempowering women by excluding them from peace talks is tantamount to denying society the faculty of half its population. Civilization can, in that wise, only advance by halves. There is the tendency to consider the subordination of women as ‘natural’ and any attempt to change it as against natural order. JS Mill in his treatise on the subjection of women had made a brilliant attack on the very fact of its universality, a fact that seems to survive so strongly in Africa, when he noted that custom, however universal, affords no presumption and ought not to create prejudice in favour of the arrangements which place women in subjection to men (Mills, 1912). Going further, he says:

The course of history and the tendencies of progressive human society, afford not only no presumption in favour of this system of inequality of rights, but a strong one against it; and that, so far as the whole course of human improvement up to this time, the whole stream of modern tendencies, warrants any inference on the subject, it is, that this relic of the past is discordant with the future, and must necessarily disappear (Mills, 1912: 445)

African leaders should learn from the classic works of philosophers like Mills. They should realise that incorporating women’s voices is crucial to sustainable peace. Incorporating women’s voices rather than feminizing peace talks is a more practical way of ensuring that feminine perspectives get considered without unnecessarily alienating others. The challenge of building alliances that will endure is not to adopt a single world view but to institutionalize the culture of accommodating multiple view points, of seeing strength in diversity. There cannot be a zero-sum war of the sexes. The binary logic that assumes that it can only be either patriarchy or feminization is fundamentally flawed. It is possible, indeed desirable, that all interests are accommodated in equal and objective ways. To the extent that peace talks seek to equally accommodate and protect competing interests within society, they represent the best chance of building viable peace architectures.
Challenges of Women Participation in Peace Talks

African women still face tremendous challenges to their ability to effectively engage with conflict and its aftermath. What are these challenges that make it so difficult for women to engage conflict and its aftermath? Or that makes it so difficult for the established interests of male domination to accept the imperative of that engagement?

Whether conflict is ended by a military victory or a negotiated settlement, the capacity of women to effectively engage its aftermath is a major challenge. Even when women get invited to peace talks, like in South Africa, they are often incapable of articulating their views in the legalistic terms that peace talks are conducted or in fact understanding the very thrust of those talks. This incapacity is less a testimony of women intellectual weakness or complacency but of the generations of discrimination in education and politics that has deemphasised the contributions of women to social development. One peace activist put it in poignant perspective when she notes that:

There is very much technically women have to learn. In terms of the technical capability to discuss the issues, women are much less prepared because we have not had the luxury of all the education that men had when they go out for long years to discuss these issues....we are going to have to bring the women in and we are going to have to provide support to bring them in. It is not going to happen automatically. (Garcia, 1993)

Peace talks are by design very legalistic and complex. It requires expert knowledge of areas ranging from geography, ethnography, politics, economy, history, law and diplomacy to that of personalities, military capabilities, conflict impact and the like. This requires qualitative and quantitative skills that are often the products of long years of careful educational cultivation. Super imposed on this complex knowledge requirement is the very fact of the dearth of research and theoretical literature on the issues that are the primary concerns of women. Issues like post conflict ‘protest masculinities’ (Machanda, 2001: 4105), child depression, children of rape and so on are often ignored in conflict literature. This is because literature on conflict and security still remains largely tied to the statist ideology of realism that privileges military conceptions of war, peace and settlement.

Closely related to the above and at times deriving from it is the fact that women are disproportionately affected by economic crisis. The lack of economic power makes it difficult to mainstream their unique economic challenges in peace talks. It also makes them invisible stakeholders of peace talks. At the heart of most conflicts is usually the struggle for the control of scarce resources. This struggle eventually creates winners and losers. The winners, in this case those who have ‘earned’ the right to a chair at the negotiating table, often seek to consolidate their gains. In this zero-sum game, excluded social groups like women and minorities often have their losses consolidated too. In situations where economic disempowerment predates violent conflict, which is usually the case, the position of weakness is not only fossilized by exclusion, it also prevents any effective participation where it is allowed. Women face this problem quite powerfully in post conflict areas of Africa. This is more so because the devastation of conflict results in distortions to the economic reproduction process and widespread infrastructural damage.
The most vulnerable parts of the population are often the hardest hit by these distortions. In addition, where peace talks, as is often the case, are held in foreign countries, women usually find it difficult to raise money to cover costs of travel, accommodation, research and advocacy, further disempowering them.

The polarized and tense environment of conflict negotiations reinforces prevailing patriarchal social attitudes that exclude women from power. Women have to face not only pre conflict social attitudes and traditions that exclude them from power but also face intimidation from male dominated groups who consider them irrelevant or even distracting to peace talks. For instance, in the Kivu area of the Congo Democratic Republic, the rebel group Rassemblement Congolais pour la Democratie (RCD) sent overt threats to the Reseau des Femme pour la Defense des Droits et de la Paix who were mobilizing women for representation at the Sun City Talks. Its offices were also ransacked and its peaceful demonstrations were disrupted for ‘security’ reasons (Mpoumu, 2004). Such overt intimidation and other not so obvious ones like subtle sexual harassment from co-participants are a major hurdle for women participation in peace talks.

Another key challenge of women participation in peace talks is the possibility of violent backlash from husbands, the community and at times the state itself. Rather than be allowed to consolidate any new found freedom by virtue of participation in peace talks or even war time exigencies, they are forced back into the ‘kitchens and bedrooms’ away from public view and into more ‘acceptable’ social roles. They often experience a backlash in their relations with men that are reflective of resentment of women visibility that may be guaranteed by participation in state building activities. Many of the women who were active in the liberation struggles and conflicts in Mozambique, Eritrea, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Algeria for instance, experienced widespread instances of intimidation, violence and discrimination (Jacobs and Howard, 1987). This sort of backlash reflects the persistence of patriarchal tendencies that not only survive conflict but may even be reinforced by the very militarism of conflict. Interestingly, conflict itself has been described as armed patriarchy that magnifies the existing inequalities of peace time. This is because the culture of militarization, that is coercive structures and practices, hierarchies and discipline, relies on patriarchal patterns and patriarchy in turn relies on militarization (Ruddick, 1998).

If challenges such as this still persist in post conflict societies in Africa, what then are the prospects for building women capacity and eliminating the institutional and traditional barriers to effective participation?

**Making the leap from politics to policies: impact of women in peace talks**

It is one thing to be involved in peace talks; it is another to be able to decisively influence the outcome. Indeed, influencing the outcome may be easier than getting the outcome implemented. When does women participation leave the realm of participation and enter that of power and authority?

The advances so far made in post conflict societies like South Africa, Liberia and The Congo DR where women have had some measure of participation in peace talks are difficult to institutionalize across Africa. This is chiefly because patriarchy has, in practice, if no longer in theory, retained its general acceptability and boisterousness in
Africa. The mainstreaming of gender equality in all facets of social interaction is therefore difficult to achieve in this context.

The leap from politics to policy can only be made when the ideal of gender equality and inclusive social processes is mainstreamed and thus generally accepted by social formations in Africa. Merely being invited to talks is insufficient in itself. Women capacity to engage the legal and socio economic complexities of peace negotiations must be built. Without this capacity, it will be virtually impossible for women to transcend the realm of politics into that of policy.

There are growing efforts to increase the impact of women in peace talks. One of these is the work of the UN Security Council at a meeting on October 5, 2009 where the UN Resolution 1325 of 2000 was reaffirmed. Through the unanimous adoption of resolution 1889 (2009), the Council reaffirmed its landmark 2000 resolution 1325 on “women and peace and security”, and condemned continuing sexual violence against women in conflict and post-conflict situations. It urged Member States, United Nations bodies, donors and civil society to ensure that women’s protection and empowerment was taken into account during post-conflict needs assessment and planning, and factored into subsequent funding and programming. It also called on all those involved in the planning for disarmament, demobilization and integration programmes, in particular, to take into account the needs of women and girls associated with armed groups, as well as the needs of their children (United Nations, 2009). The importance of this action by the UN Security Council is that it gives added international backing to women’s groups the world over who can then leverage on the report to push for greater inclusion.

Civil society organizations are also increasingly recognizing the importance of incorporating women’s voices and in particular, building their capacities to effectively engage with the complex issues raised by peace negotiations. One of such organizations is the NPI that has done much work in this regard in Somalia under the auspices of Save Somali Women, in Congo in the Inter-Congolese Dialogue and in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea through the Mano River Union Women for Peace Network (MARWOPNET) and other such initiatives. Other organizations that have been active in this critical area of capacity building are the women’s wing of political organizations like the ANC in South Africa. The Women’s National Coalition launched in 1992 was crucial to the inclusion of women in the post apartheid negotiations and the commitment of the ANC and other parties in South Africa to some sort of affirmative action that saw the integration of women into all the different committees involved in the negotiations (Zulu, 1998). National governments like Uganda have also improved the role of women in the day to day activities of the state. The main institutional factors which have strengthened women's civil society presence and their engagement with politics have been the suspension of multi-party politics and the personal support of President Yoweri Museveni for women's rights. This has helped the women's movement grow from a negligible and politically co-opted social presence under the Obote regime, to 'one of the strongest mobilized societal forces in Uganda' (Aili Mari, Unpublished Manuscript). Museveni's personal support for women's equality and for their participation in politics reflects his appreciation of women's role in the civil war as supporters of his National Resistance Army (Aili Mari, 1994: 115), his awareness of their key role in agricultural development and family welfare, and also his recognition of the potential contribution of women's
organisations to consolidating the NRM’s political dominance in Uganda (Mugyenyi, 1994:1).

But beyond these efforts to bridge the gender gap, peace talks still largely remain the preserve of men and their nuanced conception of security. There is little to suggest that women play decisive roles in the actual outcome of peace talks or that they are able to effectively monitor the implementation of gender sensitive agreements. There is the tendency to valorise the mere cessation of widespread hostilities as evidence of a return to peace. Indeed some peace agreements are actually forced down the throat of parties to conflict as was the case in Liberia where Charles Taylor emerged out of a hurried election supervised by a weary international community (Tanner, 1998). This largely rules out the ‘luxury’ of constructing a gendered map of post conflict peace and condemns peace agreements to the entrenchment of pre conflict patterns of gender inequality and domination.

Much of the advances of women in peace talks have been superficial. They have been largely made up of symbolic gestures of nominal commitment to the principles of gender equality and the recognition of the unique roles women can play in resolving conflicts. What is required however is a clearer commitment by civil society to promoting capacity building in such a way that will guarantee the ability of women groups to actually influence policy.

Conclusion: democratizing the peace process

This paper has examined the exclusion of women from peace talks in Africa. It is clear that this exclusion has reduced the potential impacts of peace talks for war ravaged communities. Indeed, the exclusion of women robs society of unique opportunities for comprehensive social re-engineering that peace talks offer. The peace process, in the light of the above, must be democratized to ensure the inclusion, participation and incorporation of as many social groups as possible. This will ensure that a wide range of experiences, perspectives and faculty can be brought to bear on the peace process. The implications of such a comprehensively inclusive process cannot be over emphasised.

It is contended that at the very heart of the peace process must be the respect for the fundamental rights of social formations, particularly women as a distinct group, to mobilize and be heard. It is only in such an inclusive peace process that true and lasting peace can be located.

References


**Notes**

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ii Mats Utas, in his seminal interrogation of the manipulation of the identity of ‘victimcy’ in what he referred to as West African warscapes, demonstrated how the suspension of the usual patterns of political and economic interaction in conflict zones not only heighten the vulnerability of women but also presents unique opportunities which are often exploited by women to increase socio-economic visibility and, at the close of conflict, political visibility as well. These advances are however often lost on the return of peace as a consequence of the exclusion of women from the emerging political process.

iii Organizations like the Nairobi Peace Initiative-Africa (NPI-AFRICA), have done much work in this regard in Somalia under the auspices of Save Somali Women, in Congo in the Inter-Congolese Dialogue and in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea through the Mano River Union Women for Peace Network (MARWOPNET) and other such initiatives.