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Review on Roles of Women in Conflict and Peace

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Introduction

The aim of this term paper entitled “The Roles of Women in Conflict and Peace” is to explore the role of women in conflict and peace building. In cases of interstate and intrastate conflicts, women often engage in peace activism, such as protests, silent vigils, public speeches, and political and economic boycotts. Women play various roles in conflicts and the resolution of conflicts. However, these various roles have not been reflected in mainstream approaches to peace and conflict. This view of women’s roles in peace and conflict has lately been contested by both academics and activists throughout the world. Women’s group played a major role in working for peace and reconciliation at local and national levels.

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Definition of the Concept Conflict

Conflict is a situation with at least two identifiable groups in conscious opposition to each other as they pursue incompatible goals. These groups may be tribal, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious, socio-economic, or political (Dougherty and Pflitzgraft 1990:187). Every conflict involves a struggle over values and claims to scarce resources, power, and status. The aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure, or eliminate their rivals.

Conflict is defined as disagreement or dissonance within or between social entities (Assefa: 2001). According to Coser (1968), conflict is a struggle over values or claims to status and scarce resources in which the aim of the conflicting parties is not only the desired values but also neutralizes, injures or eliminates their rivals. Conflict is an expression of the heterogeneity on interest between two or more individuals/groups (Abel: 1974). Generally, conflict is a broad term and that is widely employed in scientific literature to indicate a state of disagreement or opposition (Kriesberg: 1996).

Conflict can be defined as a perceived divergence of interests or a belief that current aspirations of different individuals or groups cannot be achieved simultaneously. Because diverging interests among individuals or among groups are a natural consequence of living together, conflict is an inevitable feature of social life and often a positive force for change (Scheper, 2002:2).

Conceptualizing Peacebuilding

The concept of peacebuilding has been defined different by several departments, institutions, schools, agencies, scholars, etc. For instance, according to Call and Cousens (2007), peacebuilding refers to those actions undertaken by international or national actors to institutionalize peace, understood as the absence of armed conflict (negative peace) and a modicum of participatory politics (as a component of positive peace) that can be

sustained in the absence of an international peace operation.

Peacebuilding also means, to preserve and to ensure enduring peace in the society, removing the root causes of the conflict and genuinely reconciling the conflicting parties (Nwolise, 2005). Additionally, Lederach (1997) defines peacebuilding as the term that involves a wide range of activities and functions that precede and follow formal peace accords.

Similarly, Porter (2007) defined peacebuilding to involve all processes that build positive relationships, heal wounds, reconcile antagonistic differences, restore esteem, respect rights, meet basic needs, enhance equality, instill feelings of security, empower moral agency and are democratic, inclusive and just. As a follow up, peace psychologists have described peacebuilding in terms of prevention, being proactive, problem solving, meeting human needs, and ending oppression and inequality (Christie, 1997; Wessells, 1992; Abu-Saba, 1999). It is against these diverse definitions that is why Smoljan (2003) have argued that, at present, there is no definitive definition of peacebuilding.

Women in Conflict

Women have always played key roles in armed conflict, be it as nurses, caregivers, combatants or workers. Women's and girls' empowerment and gender equality are critical to efforts to maintain international peace and security. In contemporary conflicts, the vast majority of casualties are civilians, and most of these are women and children. Women and girls disproportionately suffer the effects of displacement from stable communities and societies (NZNAP, 2013:6).

At the same time, women also serve as combatants, participating in state-sanctioned violence (as members of militaries) as well as non-state sanctioned violence (members of rebel groups, paramilitary organizations, and militias, and as suicide bombers). This form of political activism—as combatants rather than as

peacemakers—challenges gender norms about women’s “proper” roles and behavior (Kaufman and Williams, 2013:1).

Portrayals of conflict in the developing world commonly represent women and girls as victims suffering at the hands of violent men (Coulter et al., 2008). It is true that conflict often disproportionately victimizes women and girls; they are at increased risk of sexual violence, are more likely to be pulled out of school, bear increased care burdens, and face decreased access to resources (Buscher, 2009).

Throughout the world accounts of war tend to portray men as the conflict resolvers and women as passive innocent victims. In conflict situations, women are much more disadvantaged compared to men. Women tend to be the most vulnerable victims of various forms of violence, from domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, to sexual torture and other types of sexual violence. They also suffer disproportionately from displacement and deprivation (Benardatte and Poipoi, 2015:39).

Women in Peace

Key terms:

Peace: means either the absence of violence (negative peace) or the presence of cooperation, freedom from fear, equality and integration (positive peace) (Galtung, 1967, p. 14).

“For generations, women have served as peace educators, both in their families and in their societies. They have proved instrumental in building bridges rather than walls.”¹

Peace happens when ‘people are anticipating and managing conflicts without violence, and are engaging in inclusive social change processes that improve the quality of life, and

peacebuilding is a ‘range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict... to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development’ (El-Bushra, 2017:11).

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 (Lisa & Manjrika, 2005).

The international community should better involve women in peace processes to help achieve sustainable peace and more effectively build amicable relationships between entities in conflict. Peace agreements and reconstruction are more sustainable and effective when women are involved in the peace-building process.³ Bringing women to the peace table improves the quality of agreements reached and enhances the likelihood of implementation because of the unique skill sets and experiences that women possess (Shepherd,2015:53).

UNSCR 1325 affirms the important role of women in preventing conflict and sustaining peace. Women’s full participation in political and economic systems helps to address the root causes of conflict. Women’s perspectives and experiences are important for early warning that can prevent conflict and its resurgence (WILPF, 2006:1).

As survivors, perpetrators, victims, combatants, activists and advocates, women play active and multiple roles in peace processes. However, their roles in conflicts are not highlighted and their long involvement in mediation and peace processes is barely discussed in the literature. Their mediatory roles at the informal levels have served as blueprints for negotiations. This is because the competence of women in dealing with rebel groups and other conflict parties has set the pace for official negotiations

¹ Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, Open Session of the UN Security Council Debate on Women, Peace and Security, New York, 24 October 2000.

that were organized by ECOWAS and other regional bodies. Increasingly, women's emerging roles at national and international levels are widening the scope of their participation in mediation teams (Amedzrator, 2014:3).

The role of women is critical to the achievement of peace and democracy. To create a peace and national reform process that is effective and truly inclusive, women need to participate in all levels of decision-making to prevent, manage and resolve conflict. International experience shows that failure to incorporate women's gendered needs and priorities in peace agreements will greatly undermine the potential for sustainable peace. As a result of advocacy from the global women's movement, many international agreements are now in place providing an imperative for governments to guarantee women's rights to equitable participation in decision-making on national issues of peace and governance (TNI, 2016:1).

The women, peace, and security agenda, first articulated in United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in 2000, seeks to elevate the role of women in conflict management, conflict resolution, and sustainable peace. The agenda can be promoted in various ways, including National Action Plans (NAPs) on women, peace, and security (Warren et al, 2018:5).

UNSCR 1325 asserted, among other things, the leading roles women play in the maintenance of international peace and security and in the resolution of conflicts. It affirmed:

“the important role of women in peace-building and stress[ed] the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision making with regards to conflict prevention and resolution” (United Nations 2000).

At the same time, women have an important role to play as leaders and decision-makers in the prevention and durable resolution of conflict. This role is recognized, but still not consistently respected and embedded within international peace-building practice. Addressing these issues is crucial to sustainable peace, economic recovery, social cohesion and political legitimacy, and the impact on operational effectiveness in fragile, conflict and post-conflict situations (NZNAP, 2013:6).

There is a severe lack of focus on women and peace building in the literature, which is mirrored by the limited role women, has played in institutionalized peace building. This term highlights a variety of ways that women, specifically, have experienced conflict and peace building, and offers new insights and provides important lessons for international and national agencies promoting democracy reform and peace building (Folarin, 2016:7-9). Women also contribute to peace in a multitude of ways. In most African societies women still occupy inferior positions both in the family and society as there is discrimination against them in terms of participation in decision making (Benardatte and Poipoi, 2015:38).

“Evidence from around the world and across cultures shows that integrating women and gender considerations into peace building processes helps promote democratic governance and long-term stability. In order to achieve these goals, women need to be able to play a role in building and participating in the full range of decision-making institutions in their countries. These institutions, from civil society to the judicial and security sectors, must also be responsive to and informed by women's demands”.

United States National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (2013).

Women have been involved in the informal peace process as long as war has been a feature of human experience, with these

informal processes taking many forms from small group acts to

Systematic organized events. Women have been advocates outside the formal structure to prevent war before it begins and heal wounds after the war has ended. This form of grassroots advocacy has been instrumental in building relationships and finding mutual understanding across cultures (McGuinness, 2007).

Focusing on women only as victims of conflicts ignores the fact that women play significant roles during and after the conflicts, and reinforces existing traditional gender values and practices that women are only “passive” and “subservient” in peace and politics. This has negative consequences in overlooking women’s potential as key actors in conflict management processes and activities and yet women themselves are active participants in conflict situations.

“We can no longer afford to minimize or ignore the contributions of women and girls to all stages of conflict resolution, peacemaking, peace-building, peacekeeping and reconstruction processes. Sustainable peace will not be achieved without the full and equal participation of women and men.”²

Kofi Annan

Women are thus caught in a vicious paradox: while they are the main civilian victims of conflicts, they are often powerless to prevent the conflict, and are excluded from decision making positions, and negotiations. When it comes to women participation in conflict resolution, they are usually confined to a marginal role in the post-conflict reconstruction

² UN (2002). Report of the Secretary-General of women, peace and security. Available at <http://www.iccnw.org/documents/S-2002-1154-E.pdf>

and reconciliation and when they contribute their effort is usually ignored (Goldsten, 2001). Women are viewed as peaceful because they are less likely than men to initiate or participate in violence because of the maternal instincts to have a peaceful environment for the children. However, they do often fill supporting roles that prolong or shorten intractable conflict. Goldstein (2001) argues that, “masculine war roles depend on feminine roles in the war system, including mothers, wives, and sweethearts (ibid).

Women play active and multiple roles in peace processes. However, their roles in conflicts are not highlighted and their long involvement in mediation and peace processes is barely discussed in the literature. Their mediatory roles at the informal levels have served as blueprints for negotiations (Amedzator, 2014:3). Women’s full participation in political and economic systems helps to address the root causes of conflict (WILPF, 2016:1). They can play active roles in the events that lead to fighting and instability, and even in combat itself. Women have also served as the forerunners of peace movements that have ended conflicts. However, the determined effort of women to bring an end to fighting is usually not recognized by many (Mwangi, 2015:1). As Kofi Annan mentioned in his speech (2004);

“In war torn societies, women often keep societies going... We must ensure that women are enabled to play a full part in peace negotiations, in peace processes, in peace missions.”

The Role of Women Organizations in Violent Conflict Resolution and Peace building

The responses of local women’s groups in dealing with conflict, rehabilitation and peace appear to be remarkably similar around the world too. The women NGOs are mostly active in trauma counseling, micro-credit, voter education, gender awareness, law reform and political advocacy. The main strategy they choose to prevent conflicts from re-emerging has been to work on fundamental economic

and social change. They advocate to pay greater attention to civilian security, e.g. through security sector reforms and greater participation of women in police forces, judiciary system and in peace committees. They stress the need for cost-effective indigenous approaches to provide long-term treatment to traumatized women and children, and ask the international community to make concerted efforts to acknowledge and prevent sexual abuse of women and girls. And finally, they are active in promoting female candidates to run in post conflict elections and in increasing the overall women's political participation (Scheper, 2002:8).

Women in Conflict Management Process

Women play important roles in the process of peace building, first as activists and advocates for peace. Moreover, women wage conflict nonviolently by pursuing democracy and human rights. Women also contribute to reducing direct violence as peacekeepers and relief aid workers. Additionally, women work to 'transform relationships as mediators, trauma healing counselors, and policymakers. Lastly, women contribute to building the capacity of their communities and nations to prevent violent conflict by acting as educators and participants in the development process (Mwangi, 2015:12).

Women can play an important role in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, and appreciate the positive contribution women can make in post-conflict reconstruction and peace consolidation. Empowering women in conflict situations would help prevent gender-based violence such as the abominable crime of rape, forced pregnancy, sexual slavery and others (Ajemasu et al, 2016:4).

Reasons why women should be involved in peace building is because they have unique understanding of community needs. For instance, Women in their homes have the political will to stop their husbands and sons in participating in conflicts (ibid, pp.: 3).

Women in indigenous societies have traditional peace making and peace building roles as they are involved in mediating and preventing conflicts within and between societies. Women's peace agency in these societies are reinforced by perceptions which stereotype women as natural peace makers, as being more specific than men and often symbolized as paragons of morality, sacredness, goodness and tenderness. Thus in most indigenous societies, virtues of patience, tolerance, humility and subtle persuasiveness were seen as essentially female attributes which were reinforced through socialization patterns that promote women primarily as child-bearers good wives, care givers, arbitrators of conflict and peace promoters in the family and community (UNESCO 2003).

Women and Conflict Management Policies

The 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing was a watershed for thrusting women to the forefront of peace activities. This conference provided a platform for deliberations on the role of women at two levels. First, it followed up on concerns about increasing decision-making roles of women in conflict resolution at decision-making levels. The conference specifically called for including a gender perspective in the resolution of armed and other conflicts: to ensure that bodies are able to address gender issues properly. More significantly, this conference provided a rationale for looking beyond high politics to the grassroots level (Mwangi, 2015:8).

Participants turned their attention to women's roles in preventing and resolving conflicts around the world. This conference aimed to involve women in crushing the prevailing logic of war and moving toward a culture of peace. It was a major step in recognizing and legitimating the role of women in conflict resolution and peacemaking at the grassroots level. Since Beijing, women and their participation have received special attention because, it is argued, they represent a vital

resource for sustaining peace efforts at all levels. The UNESCO Programme is expanding to include participation at the lowest levels in areas afflicted by conflicts. Over the past decade, the importance of women's engagement in peace processes has been recognized through numerous international institutions, resolutions and Member State commitments. In October 2000, the UN Security Council through SCR 1325 formally recognized the relationship between women, peace and security and the critical importance of women's participation as reflected in leadership, empowerment and decision-making (Mwangi, 2015:8-9).

According to the UN Security Council Resolution of 1325 of 2000, the contribution of women in a conflict situation has been undervalued and under-utilized yet women contribute in conflict prevention, peace-keeping, conflict resolution and peace-building. The resolution 1325 (2000) also stressed the importance of women's equal and full participation as active agents in peace and security. The UNSCR 1325 recognized that women are relevant to international peace and security hence the need for their inclusion in conflict. The resolution therefore emphasized on increased participation and representation of women in all levels of decision making in the post conflict processes (Mwangi, 2015:1).

In the African context, women have played a major role in the peace building processes in post conflict situations. For example; after the Rwandan genocide of 1994, Eloise Inyumba, the social affairs minister, led women into burying the dead, finding homes for the orphaned and resettling refugees. She also served as the executive secretary of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission which organized public debates promoting reconciliation between the Hutus and Tutsis (ibid).

Women's Role in Peace Making in Context of Ethiopia

To explain the role of women in peace making in context of Ethiopia, Siinqee institution among Oromo women is one example. This role of the siinqee institution is very exclusive and makes the role of Oromo women very special in the society. According to traditional Oromo, if there a conflict or war between two groups in a clan or between two clans, and if the women come and stand between the wars together holding their siinqee, they fighting has to stop automatically for the respect of siinqee. Thus they will bring peace between the fighting groups. In other hands, if a foreigner comes to fight the people to take their land or their property, the women will raise their siinqee and bless their soldiers before they go to defend the enemy. They bless them so that they will overcome their enemies and come back peacefully. They pray to Waaqa until they come back that he will help and protect them in the war. So men will not go to war to fight enemy before they receive blessings and prayers from women holding siinqee.

Women and Participation in Conflict Situations

Women clearly play a crucial role in conflict prevention, management resolution and post conflict reconstruction. But their marginality in high level decision-making, including those decisions regarding war and peace, constrain their ability to decisively influence or impact on conflict prevention and attainment of sustainable peace. Women themselves must seek to organize and become active players at all levels of decision making in their societies, including in the management of conflict. They need to develop mobilization strategies for dealing with conflict situations and to strengthen sub-regional networking with other women groups around key issues relating to peace and training in conflict management (Mwangi, 2015:5).

Women's Participation in conflict management refers to the role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building, and their equal participation and full

involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution. There is also growing recognition of women as 'agents of change' skillfully reshaping and rebuilding communities affected by conflict. Women worldwide who act as government representatives, activists, leaders of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), women's networks and concerned citizens have persevered through threats and conditions of violence to initiate transformative processes within conflict and post conflict societies (ibid).

According to the UN Security Council Resolution of 1325 of 2000, the contribution of women in a conflict situation has been undervalued and under-utilized yet women contribute in conflict prevention, peace-keeping, conflict resolution and peace-building. The resolution 1325 (2000) also stressed the importance of women's equal and full participation as active agents in peace and security (ibid).

The Role of Women in the Three Conflict Phases

Women and men play different roles as social actors and also have different needs and interests. In the three phases of conflict (before, during and after) women can play different roles and work proactively to secure peace. The various conflict phases often overlap, which makes peacemaking measures very complex. Very often too, the activities of women span various phases. Conflicts and wars do not proceed in a clear linear direction.

Pre-conflict Phase

In the pre-conflict phase the latent and structural causes of conflicts already exist: they include lack of participation in political life, suppression, discrimination and exclusion of all kinds, violation of human rights, little access to land and resources, and the absence of security.

Women can encourage societies and political groups to take early preventive measures:

- By strengthening and promoting activities, local women's organizations and initiatives and by supporting the formation of networks (peace alliances) women can promote cooperation and trust.
- By strengthening women (empowerment) they can work actively toward off conflicts by undertaking measures to prevent exclusion and discrimination and can draw attention to other preventive measures through peace building awareness campaigns (particularly among endangered groups such as potential women soldiers).
- Through their various individual contacts and observations women can be important informers to provide early warning of conflict potential.
- By encouraging advanced training in public life and by providing access to knowledge, e.g. on human and women's rights, women can play an important role in local politics and government and hence also in conflict prevention.

During Conflict

During conflict the threat of violence is extremely high: fear and insecurity, the destruction of livelihoods, expulsion, loss of family and death are just some examples of the problems to be confronted. The proactive role of women to ensure survival and settlement of the conflict could not be more challenging:

- ✓ Women take the responsibility and strain of keeping the family together during conflict. As female heads of households, they often face great difficulties in patriarchal societies
- ✓ Look women's peacekeeping organizations can step up their role as negotiators and mediators between the warring parties and encourage dialogue between them.

Post-conflict Phase

Women play a particularly important role both during the peace process and also in the rehabilitation and reintegration phase. Of particular significance here is that pre-conflict and post-conflict phases above all share marked parallels. The prerequisite measures are often similar, since peace building and conflict prevention are essential before and after a conflict.

- ❖ Women can play a significant role in decision-making functions through their full participation in conflict settlement and peace processes. Women can also act in this phase as negotiators and mediators to encourage dialogue between the parties.
- ❖ During the reconstruction of the justice and administrative systems qualified women can help in the formulation of laws and regulations to ensure gender equality in public life and fair access to economic resources (e.g. land and property rights).

(Austrian Development Cooperation, 2009:2-3)

Conclusion

Women play various traditional roles (caring for the wounded, performing domestic chores) and non-traditional roles (combatants, activists, perpetrators and advocates) during conflict situations.

Mediation and peace processes are perceived as a male-dominated enterprise. This is because men are often credited with competencies and tendencies that 'qualify' them for such roles while women are virtually perceived as the only vulnerable group in war situations. The responsibilities of participation in peace processes may be tough for both men and women but cannot be used as a pretext for excluding capable women. Women's role as active players in conflict prevention, conflict resolution, reconciliation and post-conflict reconstruction processes is of paramount importance for the development of society. Therefore, increasing the number of women in decision-making at all levels of society remains a major task.

Women and men play different roles as social actors before, during and after. During armed conflict, for instance, women may find themselves in the position of becoming economic providers for the family when the men are away fighting. This role may be one that they are unaccustomed to or do not get credit for during peacetime. When men return from war, however, they may expect the women in their family to return to traditional roles as home makers. As men and women struggle to redefine their roles when wars are over, the result may be an increase in tension and domestic violence.

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