

Challenges for Women in Peacebuilding in West Africa

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With the unanimous adoption of Resolution 1325 by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in October 2000, women's role in, and potentials for peacebuilding have gained global, regional and national attention. Consequently, the last six years have been characterised by the identification of key issues on women, peace and security, and the development of interventions to address them. The challenge now is on how to ensure that these policy instruments and other recommendations are implemented, and not in a 'token' manner, but in a way that demonstrates that women are really partners in the process.

Introduction

With the unanimous adoption of Resolution 1325 by the UNSC in October 2000, women's role in, and potentials for peacebuilding have gained global, regional and national attention. Consequently, the last six years have been characterised by the identification of key issues on women, peace and security, and the development of interventions to address them. The identification of issues and design of interventions on women, peace and security have been tailored around four main areas, namely early warning and conflict prevention; peacekeeping and peace support operations; peace processes such as mediation, peace talks, and signing of peace agreement/s; and post-conflict peacebuilding. In addition, there have also been some cross-cutting concerns. This includes the increasing requirement for the development and/or

domestication of policy frameworks that provide the legal and constitutional backing for women's active and visible involvement in peace and security; and the actual mobilisation of women for engagement in a field that has long been a male preserve.

The resolution of issues in each of these areas, the participation of women in policy and decision-making, and their access to power and other resources is critical to unleashing the potential of women to act as effective pillars and stakeholders in the process of building peace. This is also fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace as posited for in the Beijing Declaration of 1995. Globally and within Africa, violent conflict has raised women's awareness of the necessity to take initiative, and there is now a growing recognition of the significant roles that women can and do play in resolving conflicts

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and building peace. In West Africa, the role of women in peacebuilding has gained prominence over the last six years as women's groups across the sub-region organise themselves to participate in peacebuilding initiatives and processes. Their peace initiatives and efforts have ranged from the provision of survival necessities such as food, medical care, etc., to peacemaking by building bridges of reconciliation across the conflict divide; initiating intra- and inter-clan or community dialogue; intervening in national peace processes (for example, Liberian women and the barricading of the venue of the peace talks in Accra in 2003); advocating for women's human rights and access to decision-making and leadership; provision of psychosocial support to victims of rape and other violations; support in DDR processes; and assistance in the reintegration of ex-combatants.

As the lessons from Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea Bissau have shown, sustainable peace can only be achieved with the full participation of all sectors of the society, of which the contribution of women is central. Women bring an alternative, gendered view to peacebuilding that leads to transformation at both structural and practical levels. However, despite the considerable gains that have been made, women continue to be under-represented in peace and security processes, particularly at the formal and technical levels where women's roles tend to be largely invisible. Women's associations, groups, organisations and networks that are working for peace continue to face numerous challenges that diminish the impact of their work. As Judy El Bushra noted, challenges to women's peace activism arise at different levels – from the international community, the national political milieu, and the patriarchal nature of society. Other impediments are generated by women's lack of confidence, skills and resources. At another level, while there has been an upsurge in the number of policy instruments on women, peace and security at both continental and sub-regional levels following years of intense lobbying and advocacy by women's groups (for example, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Mechanism and Gender Policy)¹ there is still the challenge of translating policy into real and efficient tools to support women's peace work.

This paper examines the challenges women's groups have faced in peacebuilding in West Africa, predominantly using the experience of the Women Peace and Security Network –Africa

(WIPSEN-Africa). The paper will share experiences of women in peacebuilding in West Africa and in line with the conference theme on '*challenges of peacekeeping training in Africa*', will highlight the importance of women-only spaces and specialised capacity building training as pivotal to the empowerment of women and promotion of their peace activism. It will also look at some of the gender challenges faced by peacekeeping missions in Africa.

Background

Since the late 80s, West Africa has been a hotbed of violent conflict and wars, from Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea Bissau, Casamance in Senegal and Togo, to the Niger Delta in Nigeria. Most of these armed conflicts have been waged between rebel/militia groups and state governments and have taken unconventional forms, defying traditional 'fighting' zones by taking wars right into homes and having a high human cost. The nature of these conflicts and the fact that they originate from the *bush*, close to rural/grassroots communities, exposes and draws local populations into the violence conundrum, completely disregarding the provisions of both international humanitarian and human rights laws. Furthermore, West African conflicts have had cross-border implications, with a spill-over effect that has exerted severe strains on neighbouring countries. For example, the Liberian civil war resulted in mass displacement of refugees and movement of mercenaries, as well as arms, to Sierra Leone, Guinea Conakry, Cote d'Ivoire and even Ghana; the political upheaval in Togo affected Ghana, Benin and Nigeria; and the age-old Casamance conflict have all affected both Guinea Bissau and the Gambia. The intricate, multi-faceted and multi-party character of these conflicts which transcend borders has demanded a broad strategy of intervention that includes the active involvement of non-state actors and wider cooperation of diverse stakeholders across the sub regional level. As a result, there have been collaborative efforts at both governmental and non-governmental levels to intervene and respond to conflicts in West Africa.

This collaboration has taken three broadly defined approaches, namely peacemaking, peacekeeping (as pioneered by ECOWAS² with the establishment of economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG³)) and peacebuilding. In the first approach (peacemaking), conflicting parties are brought together to negotiate a peace agreement. The second

approach (peacekeeping) involves the presence of external actors (usually military personnel) that are brought in with the consent of all parties to the conflict to monitor and facilitate the implementation of the peace agreement; and the third (peacebuilding) is a comprehensive and inclusive approach that involves implementing initiatives aimed at empowering stakeholders to engage in conflict prevention, management, resolution and post conflict reconstruction.

The common underlying trait of all three approaches is their clear pattern of male dominance, which tends to cast men as 'doers' and women as either passive or innocent victims. The point being that men are usually the politicians, diplomats and soldiers who do the talking, strategising and fighting, while women suffer and struggle in the background.⁴ The questions here are: do women only constitute a vulnerable group? Or do they play other roles during situations of armed conflict? As recent armed conflicts have shown, women play varied roles, ranging from perpetrators to victims, custodians of culture and pillars of peace. However, because the lessons learned from most of women's painstaking peacebuilding work on the ground have not been institutionalised and rarely influence national and global policies on war and peace, their knowledge, ideas and experiences remain at best marginalised, and at worst invisible. Thus, in a context of a male dominated and highly patriarchal socio-cultural order as obtained in West Africa, wars and armed conflicts (as well as issues relating to security) continue to remain highly gendered activities that are treated as the preserve of men, and characterised by heightened inequalities and gender imbalances that perpetuate violence and discrimination against women.

Though it can be argued that conflicts have given women greater responsibilities, and with them the possibilities of exerting greater leverage in decision-making processes and of increasing their political participation, role reversals exhibited during conflicts have not been accompanied by an ideological shift or the institutional changes (as earlier indicated) which would provide women with decision-making power consistent with the new roles. In fact, ideologies of superiority and masculinity remain unaltered; the traditional exclusion of women from decision-making structures is still prevalent and for the most part, women's status remains subordinate to that of men. In some extreme situations, women actually tend to suffer a backlash against any new-found freedoms and are expected to return back to their traditional roles once peace is restored or face the enemy within – most often male relatives who return as alcoholics

and traumatised or depressed. El-Bushra argues that the outcome of the tension between the underlying gender relations and the new relations which conflict makes necessary have a spiral effect which, in turn, creates a wider social crisis. While men return home with violence, fear and domination, women are less likely to accept their subordination after they have experienced relative autonomy and respect, which results in increased violence against women during peace times.

The challenge for women's groups and organisations working for peace is how to make this connection between the kinds of violence against women during wars/armed conflicts and in 'peaceful' situations. This is particularly important because peacebuilding is a long term comprehensive process that spans the period before, during and after violent conflicts/wars. If this link is not made, the appropriate interventions to address issues affecting women's peace and security will most likely be overlooked during programme and project planning, as most peacebuilding organisations are themselves either gender unaware, patriarchal or merely pay lip service to the call for women's participation in peace and security. Right from the theoretical and academic level, the field of conflict and peace studies has, until recently, been mainly articulated by male academics and remains largely blind to gender issues. At the practical level, if one looks at the gendered composition of peace and security institutions, for instance, women are visibly absent or under-represented. For example, there are still no women in national armies in Senegal, Burkina Faso and Mali. Subsequently, women are barred from peacekeeping operations which involve national armies. Even in the area of peacebuilding, which involves civil society participation where women should be in large numbers, women were for a long time visibly absent, particularly at the formal level. Berewa Jommo, a feminist in Kenya, noted that this is mainly because peacebuilding institutions evolved as fraternities, becoming another way of keeping women out of decision-making processes. Even in cases where these institutions were more open to women and their issues, it was mainly because gender had become a 'buzz word,' and gender considerations a requirement in the field of peace and security, again as a result of women's lobbying and advocacy. Yes, while this is a necessary first-step, there is a worrying practice.

In most of these institutions women's issues have largely been compartmentalised. There are institutionalised focal points and programmes for women, for example, women's programme, gender (when what is actually meant is women) desk,

gender division, etc.; but these focal points and programmes are kind of isolated. Consequently, there is usually a 'disconnect' between these 'women's structures/programmes and the rest of the activities and programmes of the organisation, and this is particularly evident in organisations with a focus on peace and security. The traditional stereotypes are again played out here. Security issues are mainly male domains and there is little or no women's involvement in this area. For example, following the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, national gender machineries were established. Though given a broad mandate covering a myriad of areas, these machineries do not have any specific focus on peace and security, and there is rarely any collaboration between these gender machineries and peace and security machineries. In West Africa, this has become an issue of great concern for women's peace activists and, since the five year review of the UNSC Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in October 2005, has been the centrepiece of their advocacy work. Women in West Africa are demanding the full participation of women in peace and security processes at all levels – from policy to practice.

The discourse on the importance of and commitment to gender equality in peacebuilding, which has evolved out of women's campaign in West Africa, is a global one. The Beijing Declaration (1995) states that "women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society including participation in the decision-making process and access to power are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace." The Declaration also states that, "in accessing armed or other conflicts, an active and visible policy of mainstreaming gender perspective into all policies and programmes should be promoted so that before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of the effects on women and men, respectively." Beth Woroniuk, in discussing the issue stated that, "women, as well as men, have a fundamental stake in building peaceful communities. Thus, women's contributions to peacebuilding should be encouraged and supported, as given women's economic and political marginalisation, they are not always well placed to play an effective role."

The emphasis here is that women's involvement in peace and security should be encouraged at all levels, from the informal grassroots level to the formal policy and decision-making level. The kind of participation espoused here is not only in terms of the increase in the number of women participating in peace and security activities, projects or programmes (gender integration⁵), but one that

also integrates gender equality concerns into the analysis and formulation of all policies, projects and programmes, as well as enabling women's participation in decision-making (gender mainstreaming⁶). However, in West Africa, the enshrinement of patriarchy in society argues for gender equality to primarily focus on the empowerment of women, and this is principally at the level of ensuring an increase in the number of women participating in peacebuilding programmes. The fundamental questions one needs to ask here are: what kind of empowerment is really taking place? Who defines the nature and terms of this empowerment? Do institutions really have an agenda for why they are empowering women? After the empowerment, what next? These questions are particularly important because most empowerment programmes for women in West Africa have focused only on, and end with capacity-building trainings. While the importance of training for women in peace and security cannot be overemphasised, there is a need to examine whether or not women are truly given the space to apply the knowledge and skills gained from these empowerment initiatives. This question will be further addressed in the subsequent section on the case study of the WIPSEN-A.

Women's Contributions to Peace-building in West Africa

Women in West Africa have played significant roles in situations relating to peace and war for centuries, primarily as traditional peace-makers, as priestesses who confer with gods to determine whether it was right to go to war or not, as praise singers for men during battles as a boost to ensure their victory, or as custodians of culture. In each culture there are stories of women who have played some leadership roles as peace envoys or harbingers of peace in their communities. For example, the 'Queen Mothers' in Ghana and the Yoruba land in Nigeria, and the 'bondo' women in Sierra Leone, etc. These women were highly revered and protected. However, as the trend of wars and armed conflicts in West Africa changed, women became the victims of unimaginable forms of violence as a tactic of war. They were targeted for rape and other non-sexual assault, for example, maiming and atrocities such as the evisceration of pregnancies. The use of rape as a weapon of war indicates that there is a unique type of battle that women face during wars. They are the "violated during the violation, the victims of the victimisation, and the captured of the captives."⁷

With this change in the pattern of warfare the traditional roles women played began to diminish. The decisions to go to war are now made by militias and insurgent groups that are mostly constituted by men. Even in cases where women are associated with these fighting forces and seen as perpetrators, their role in the decision-making processes is uncertain. While it is true that there are fierce women commanders in rebel movements, ultimate leadership of these groups has been the preserve of men. Notwithstanding this shift in the treatment of women – from the protected to the targeted – women continue to play key roles. In fact, the impact of these conflicts has been both disempowering and empowering for women. It has served as a unifier, mobiliser and an impetus to women's groups (particularly at the grassroots level) to develop alternative strategies aimed at transforming violent structures, practices and relations at all levels, as well as improving gender relations, including women's access to decision-making and leadership.

In West Africa, as violent conflicts ravaged the sub-region from the late 80s and bringing in its wake severe consequences, women worked through local associations (such as market women's associations and age grades), faith-based groups and guilds to protect their families and communities. Given their lack of presence at the formal political realm, these grassroots community level engagements became the main outlets for women's peace activism. Also, given their lack of resources, knowledge and skills, they devised alternative strategies to facilitate their work. Most of these are still very relevant and now serve as models. For instance, women have established efficient information networks to spread information of attacks and safe routes, thus saving lives and reducing the direct impact of the violence. They have used their proximity as mothers, wives, sisters, etc., to members of the rebel forces to obtain information which they have used to protect their communities, for example, in the Senegalese Casamance conflict; they have also engaged in cross community coalition building using their market networks and inter-marriage links; as well as acted as intermediaries in their bid to get fighting forces to 'lay down arms' – the example here is the singular action taken by twelve Ivorian women in 2003 when they visited the stronghold of the rebel forces in Bouake, the northern region of Cote d'Ivoire, demanding that the rebels end the hostilities.

Following success stories derived from women's contributions at the grassroots level, civil society groups like the Liberian Women's Initiative (LWI)

in Liberia, the Campaign for Good Governance in Sierra Leone, the Inter-Faith Mediation Centre in Kaduna, Nigeria, etc., began advocating for more women's involvement at the formal level. These groups and others like them raised the awareness of women as credible actors in peacemaking and peacebuilding. This advocacy led to significant gains for women at both governmental and non-governmental levels. At the governmental process level, it led to the participation of women as observers in the Sierra Leonean peace talks in Lome and in the Ivorian peace talks; the nomination of Ruth Sando Perry as President of the transitional government in Liberia; and the establishment of a gender framework in ECOWAS. At the level of civil society, more interventions for women in peacebuilding were designed (mostly capacity building programmes), and women became inspired and more challenged to "see that the guns are laid down".⁸ This was demonstrated in the actions of groups like the Mano River Women's Peace network (MARWOPNET)⁹ in 2000, when their members combined forces and prevented the outbreak of hostilities between the three countries of the Mano River Union – Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea Conakry – by bringing their political leaders back to the negotiating table. Following the electoral protest in Guinea Bissau in 2004, in which the army was deployed to clamp down on protesters, women's groups launched an advocacy campaign that led to subsequent dialogue between the different stakeholders. The women of Liberia also embarked on a three-month long 'Mass Action for Peace' campaign that advocated for a ceasefire and held hostage parties at the Liberian peace talks in Akosombo, Ghana, by barricading the entrance to the venue of the talks with the aim of preventing parties from walking away when the talks got heated, thus delaying the attainment of negotiated settlement.

Though these initiatives were groundbreaking and very constructive, they were mostly reactionary, *ad hoc* and undocumented. Furthermore, these efforts by different women's groups were not effectively harmonised and structured, resulting in the loss of momentum and longer-term engagement. It thus became imperative to develop a more strategic and longer-term programme for women in peace-building, one that would be all encompassing, ranging from mobilisation to impact assessment; incorporate and address the needs, concerns, issues and priorities of women in peace and security relations processes and structures in the short, mid- to long-term; and that would specifically create a space for the involvement of women, particularly rural women, at all levels. The

goal here was to elevate women from their inconsequential status (for example, of observers and welfare officers) and position them for leadership in peace and security. This strategic 'directioning' was what gave birth to WIPSEN-A.

WIPSEN-A

Following the upsurge of violent conflicts in West Africa, WIPSEN-A (erstwhile called the Women in Peacebuilding Network) was established to provide a clearly defined thematic and institutional focus for women in the area of peacebuilding. The choice of a thematic area 'women in peacebuilding' was based on the realisation that 'gender and peacebuilding' would not adequately fill or respond to the vacuum which exists. Women were already largely absent from the scene, and if special measures were not taken to level out the uneven playing field the attainment of equal opportunities (in the area of peace and security) by women and men as espoused in the gender equality definition¹⁰ would be far-fetched. Therefore, with a goal similar but not identical to affirmative action, it was important to elevate women from their state of obscurity and bring them to the fore to enable them to play key roles alongside men in building peace. This is why WIPSEN-A's core focus and primary beneficiaries are women and girls.

The operations of WIPSEN-A commenced on the premise that the involvement of women in the promotion of peace would lead to more inclusive, representative, efficient and sustainable peacebuilding initiatives. In an effort to test this hypothesis, the following questions were addressed:

- How are women treated in times of peace (peace here is simply defined as the absence of violent conflict or war) that make them the target of atrocious violence during situations of wars and armed conflicts?
- Why are women not the primary actors in peace processes, given that they suffer disproportionately during violent conflicts and wars?
- Why are women minimally involved in peacebuilding and security related matters, particularly at the formal political/public level?
- What values can women bring to improve the practice, as well as the policy of peacebuilding and security governance in the sub-region?

Using the concept of Women Peace and Security Activism (WPSA), WIPSEN-A in its day-to-day operations seeks to address these concerns. For WIPSEN-A, women's peace activism goes beyond efforts that are taken by women during times of

armed/violent conflict and wars. Using the same concept, it makes a link between what happens to women in situations of wars and armed conflicts to what exists in everyday West African society. In this regard, the systematic and targeted engendered forms of violence against women during armed conflicts – such as rape, forced prostitution, mutilation, etc. – are expressions of a deeper systemic disregard for women which exists in West African societies (for example, the preference for a boy child as opposed to a girl child; the treatment of women as objects; etc.). Therefore, WIPSEN-A posits that women's peace activism should not only be about advocating a cessation of physical violence during armed conflicts and wars, but should also focus on the deconstruction of structural forms of violence which exist in everyday society. Furthermore, given that peacebuilding embodies a two-fold process requiring both deconstruction of the structures of violence and the construction of the structures of peace, WIPSEN-A opines that women's involvement in peacebuilding should be seen as a constructive platform for addressing systemic discriminatory practices and structures that perpetuate gender inequality, for fighting patriarchy and for promoting social justice.

At the core of this, WIPSEN-A's aim is to help women transform the negative images of helpless 'victimhood' and 'second class citizens' that are often ascribed to them in times of violent conflicts and peace respectively, to a positive and more assertive image of stakeholders. In recognition of the immense efforts that have been carried out at the grassroots levels by women's groups, WIPSEN-A anchors its work on community mobilisation of rural women, particularly, strengthening their capacities and giving them an opportunity to add their voice to international, regional and national debates on peace and security. The women-only space which the Network provides has been constructive in providing a safe space for women to discover themselves, build their self worth and confidence, and to engage in the male-dominated sector of peace and security. For instance, at the local level in some communities in Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Senegal, Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire, rural women's peace teams have been set up and they collaborate with traditional institutions and structures to resolve disputes and conflicts, as well as maintain peace.

Women-only Spaces: First Steps

Given a number of factors, such as high illiteracy, lack of exposure and cultural restraints, one of

the places where women's empowerment can and does occur is in women-only spaces. Though the ideal is for men and women to interact, discuss and strategise on issues as partners, years of marginalisation and disempowerment have left women ill-equipped. This gap must first be addressed. This is because initiatives which group 'unprepared'¹¹ women with men report that the women are usually less likely to contribute to the process, and when they do, are more likely to concede their viewpoints to those of men whilst assuming the traditional domestic-inclined roles society expects of them, such as preparing and serving food, cleaning and handling of logistics, etc.

WIPSEN-A's experience reveals that women's potential is more easily and effectively built in safe spaces where women feel free to express themselves, and share and bond with other women. This is especially true of women who have experienced physical violence in their personal lives, or are survivors of war/armed conflicts. The most significant aspect of this experience is that women who have passed through certain conditions identify strongly with other women in similar situations, and build their self worth and confidence as they realise that they have something to give. This results in the formation of strong ties and a commitment to explore alternatives in order to adequately guide and/or support others. One might ask if the discovery of self constitutes peacebuilding. Yes, it does! A definition of peace given by Noeleen Heyzer, the Executive Director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), aptly captures this. She describes peace as the "capacity to transcend past hurts, to break cycles of violence and forge new pathways." This is what occurs in women-only spaces. Women collectively transcend past hurts and forge new pathways for their lives. Furthermore, peacebuilding has three fundamental dimensions – personal, relational and structural – which together guarantee the attainment of sustainable peace. However, most often, the personal dimension is overlooked as initiatives tend to focus on the relational and structural dimensions. Women-only spaces are appropriate settings for the personal dimension to be addressed, as more than one woman may be going through a particular situation. Such spaces now serve as the first point of empowerment for women, becoming a training ground for women before they step out to engage on wider societal issues with other actors. Not only are alliances and support bases formed here, if well coordinated, such spaces set the agenda for women's

lobbying, as it is useful for identifying women's collective needs. Women, regardless of ethnicity, class, education and geographic location, benefit from the experiences and knowledge shared in women-only spaces.

In the area of peace and security, women-only spaces have been very useful for identifying and addressing what 'peace' and 'security' really mean for women. Issues of violence against women and girls (particularly sexual and domestic), gender inequalities in access to and control over resources (for example, family lands, etc.), gender inequalities in power and decision-making, women's human rights (particularly reproductive rights), etc., constitute grave concerns for women, particularly rural women, yet they rarely talk about this in open forums that involve men. However, once put on the agenda in their 'closets' and popular support garnered, they are energetic to bring about a transformation.

Making the Case for Specialised Training for Women in Peacebuilding

As with women-only spaces, there is also a need for specialised training for women in peacebuilding; again because of the inequalities that already exist. All across West Africa, it is widely acknowledged that women's participation in formal peace and security structures and processes is either nil or minimal. To cite but a few examples: at the level of the ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture, the ECOWARN system is mainly male dominated; and at present, all the military and civilian analysts at the Observation and Monitoring Centre, which serves as the repository for information on early warning in ECOWAS, are men. Though ECOWAS has a Gender Division, there is very little or no collaboration between these structures. It has been argued that the poor participation of women in these processes is due to their lack of skills and know-how. To address this, it is not enough to include women in training in this area. Training contents must also be reviewed and tailored to address women's concerns. This is crucial as most of the theories and methodologies in peacebuilding that already exist are genderless. It is only recently that efforts have been made to identify and address the differences that exist in men and women's experiences of peace and conflict.

Furthermore, most of the training methodologies that exist are in highly technical language and draw on sophisticated models that are foreign to women in developing countries. In West

Africa, given the high illiteracy rate of women – particularly at the grassroots level – it has been imperative to simplify training methodologies by adapting contents to suit the realities of women in order to ensure that such training can be applied and replicated. This is necessary for two reasons:

1. The provision of knowledge and practical skills that can be applied in women's day-to-day interactions allows for them to plan and strategise their own responses to issues – the crux of empowerment.
2. Women are not a homogeneous group, even though there is usually a tendency to treat them as one. The adaptation of training also helps in identifying the different needs of different groups of women, for example, women in decision-making and leadership, women refugees, girl-child, etc.

The development and delivery of specialised training for women has, in most cases, also entailed the translation into local (or first) languages of the beneficiaries. This has also helped in improving accessibility. Given the customised nature of such training it is much more affordable and available to women, who sometimes desire but are unable to participate in peace training due to the high cost. The challenges in translation are, however, not to water down or completely lose the meaning of key concepts.

Uneven and Fragile Gains: Key Challenges for Women in Peacebuilding

Over the last five years, governments, international organisations and civil society have increasingly recognised the importance of gender equality and the empowerment of women in the continuing struggle for peace, security and development. Women's groups have equally played significant roles in this process, from mobilising themselves at the grassroots level, to lobbying and advocating for their full inclusion. Although some significant progress has been made, it has been slow and uneven. The gains made also remain fragile.

If one were to use the UNSC Resolution 1325 as a matrix for assessing the gains made in the area of women, peace and security, the progress attained can be classified into six broad areas. As Ambassador Chowdhury (2005)¹² rightly noted, this includes:

1. Awareness of the importance of gender perspectives in peace support work.
2. Development of gender action work plans in disarmament and humanitarian affairs.
3. Training in gender sensitivity and deployment of gender advisors.
4. Prevention and response to violence against women.
5. Work on codes of conduct, including sexual harassment.
6. Support of greater participation of women in post-conflict reconstruction, post-conflict elections and governance.

Additionally, and with special reference to peacekeeping operations, some of the gains made include the appointment of women to senior leadership positions in peacekeeping missions, the systematic collection of sex-disaggregated data, and the production of a body of literature on the subject of gender mainstreaming in peacekeeping (for example, the study on mainstreaming gender perspective in multidimensional peace operations,¹³ gender resource package for peacekeeping operations).¹⁴ There have equally been a number of challenges, including:

1. 'Unlearning' the age-old norm that war and security are masculine issues.
2. Continued exclusion of women in decision-making processes in peace and security.
3. Lack of sufficient and sustainable resources to support women's peacebuilding work.
4. Absence of good communication networks, for example, Internet/emails which impedes the efficacy of women's numerical strength.
5. Discriminatory practices in traditions, cultures and policies, for example, the lack of progress in achieving gender balance in peacekeeping forces, in part due to the national policies of those governments' militaries which do encourage the recruitment of women.
6. The entrenched nature of patriarchy, which results in the tendency for men and male-dominated organisations to want to empower women on their own terms.
7. Lack of political will on the part of governments to commit to the implementation of the instruments and mechanisms, to which they have signed agreement.
8. Inadequate documentation of women's peace efforts, particularly those taken at the grassroots level.
9. Polarisation of conflict, for example, in Cote d'Ivoire, which is destructive for the mobilisation of women around a shared agenda.

10. Limited skills for women in peacebuilding, which makes it difficult for them to engage at the formal level.
11. Lack of awareness of the existence of structures and instruments for advancing women's rights in peace and security, for example, the UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (C-34), which was established by a General Assembly resolution 2006 (XIX) in 1965 to conduct a comprehensive review of all issues relating to peacekeeping, and which since 2001 has progressively mainstreamed a gender perspective in its report.
12. Absence of a monitoring plan/strategy for holding governments accountable to their commitments, as well as for ascertaining the impact of work done by civil society.

Conclusion

The experiences of women in West Africa have shown that the present challenge for women in peacebuilding is no longer how to get women to work together or how to garner support for women's peace work. Even if it is mere rhetoric, there is a growing political support for women's peace activism from international organisations, governments and civil society. The challenge now is on how to ensure that these policy instruments and other recommendations are implemented and not in a 'token' manner that will 'implement for women,' but in a way that demonstrates that women are really partners in the process. This involves promoting women's access to power, resources and decision-making in all sectors, including peace and security; mainstreaming peacebuilding in national, regional and international women's policy agendas and programmes; and the engendering of security sector reform processes.¹⁵

Notes and references

- 1 ECOWAS Mechanism, Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, 1999.
- 2 ECOWAS: Economic Community of West African States.
- 3 ECOMOG: Economic Community (that is ECOWAS) Monitoring Group.
- 4 M Thompson & D Eade, *Women and War: protection through empowerment in El Salvador*, published in *Social Development Issues* 24(3), 2002.
- 5 Gender integration is to include women on equal footing with men in all projects. It implies that all personnel in the project have to take women into consideration and start perceiving the target population as gendered.
- 6 Mainstreaming is a re-evaluation of current policies. It presupposes that any programme or project is initiated with the awareness that we live in a gendered world and that the concept of gender is relational; pointing at male – female relations in production and reproduction.
- 7 A quotation from a paper presented by Thelma Ekiyor, 'Women and Peacebuilding Course,' 2002.
- 8 Words of a Kakata woman in Liberia who was part of the Mass Action for Peace.
- 9 MARWOPNET is a joint peace initiative by the women from networks of women ministers and parliamentarians, journalists, lawyers, academics, researchers and individuals from the private sector of the Mano River Union countries of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea Conakry.
- 10 Gender equality refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys. It is a human rights issue and a precondition for and indicator of, sustainable people-centered development.
- 11 T Ekiyor, *Women's Empowerment in Peacebuilding: A Platform for Engagement in Decision-making*, 2001, unpublished paper.
- 12 'From Local to Global: Making Peace Work for Women,' a Publication of the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, Security Council Resolution 1325, Five Years on Report, 2005.
- 13 Prepared by the Department for Peacekeeping Operation's Lessons Learned Unit, 2000.
- 14 Produced by DPKO, 2004.
- 15 Engendering of SSR involves the review of emerging standard operating procedures (SOP) on recruitment, training and deployment of security personnel, as well as ensuring that gender perspective is mainstreamed in the new security structure and operations.



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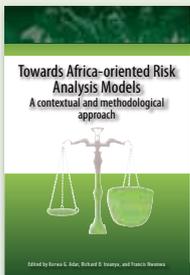
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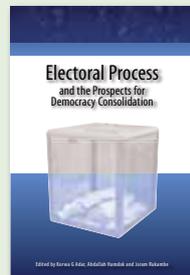
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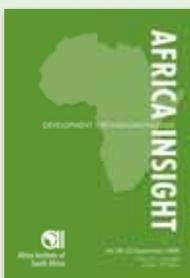
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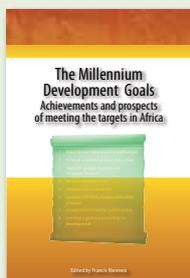
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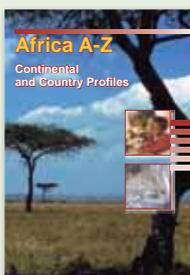
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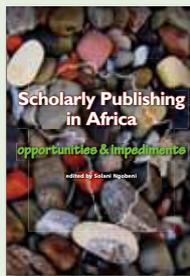
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