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GENDER, DEMOCRACY, PEACE AND CONFLICT: AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

Africa has been plagued by a vicious cycle of disease, poverty and wars, which has largely destabilised many of its countries' economies and so made this the poorest continent in the world. These conflicts are characteristically intra-rather than inter state wars evolving as a result of corruption, nepotism, bad governance, ethnic and religious conflicts, injustices, inequalities and in some cases, failure to hold democratic free and fair elections and observe the rule of law. They are largely fought not between professional armies but between Government forces and disgruntled non-state actor elements within those societies who want to take over political power, through the use of violence — violence which ultimately targets the most vulnerable civilian elements of the society — women and children.

2. Africa's treatment of women has often come under scrutiny and criticism with women in many countries not being accorded equal opportunity to access, education and to effectively participate in decision making processes; not being able to own land or access credit without the support of a husband; being battered, treated as minors to be seen rather than heard, as property to be owned or disowned by a husband; and generally, being marginalised politically and socio-economically. The nature of the wars in Africa (intra-state with undisciplined non-state actors using violence to achieve political goals) and the low status generally accorded women and the unequal treatment meted out to them in many of these societies, have wider gender implications and are reflected in the way women are treated in conflict situations and consequently lead to differential impact of conflicts on men and women.

3. This paper will attempt to look at the differential impacts of conflicts, the roles and contributions of women to peace negotiations, agreements, conflict resolution and post conflict reconstruction. The paper will further look at the gaps, the challenges that confront women in participating in these processes, the justification and rationale for women's

involvement and make recommendations. The conflict situation in Sierra Leone and how it has impacted on women will be used as a typical case that amply exemplifies an African perspective

THE DIFFERENTIAL IMPACTS OF CONFLICT IN SIERRA LEONE

4. Sierra Leone is emerging from the end of a brutal war that began in 1991, lasted for more than a decade and left a trail of human tragedy and extensive destruction of the country's social, economic and physical infrastructure. During this protracted war, more than two million people, the majority of who were women and children — (nearly half of the population) were internally or externally displaced. Virtually all major economic activity was disrupted leading to the collapse of agriculture, manufacturing, mining production and related services. The provision of key social services outside the capital virtually stopped owing to the large scale destruction of educational and health infrastructure.

5. So clearly, in common with other countries in Africa that have experienced civil conflict, there has been widespread damage to the social and economic infrastructure in terms not only of loss of physical establishments, but also of human resource. Whilst it is true that all civilians suffered immensely during the war, it is also widely accepted that women and children were specifically targeted and were the biggest victims of this war. Women and children could not be protected during the Sierra Leone war. Women and young girls and boys were routinely abducted from schools, villages and town, enslaved, drugged, and made to destroy their own villages and kill members of their own communities.

6. The need for the protection of women and all civilians is provided for in various treaties. However such conventions expected battles to be fought within identifiable and known parameters and fighters are expected to comply with international humanitarian law provisions. Allegations of torture and other forms of degrading treatment of Iraqis by US and British forces that form the current occupying coalition forces in Iraqi clearly demonstrate that though indeed the Hague and Geneva Conventions are often violated in wars, but the British and US Governments' condemnation and expression of determination to punish soldiers found guilty of such acts demonstrate that in principle, Governments and their forces are held accountable for war crimes. There is therefore a recognised universal culture with imposed codes of conduct on military forces.

7. In Africa, however, contemporary conflicts seem to be fought differently from conventional wars between states. Unprofessional, undisciplined African warring factions have no knowledge of international protocols for war and violate international laws of warfare with blatant impunity. The focus of these armed factions fighting for political power is on civilians as the main targets, particularly women.

8. In Sierra Leone, rebel fighters were unpaid fighters who fed on the local population by dispossessing them of their food and property, maimed and killed many, abducted boys and girls and systemically raped women. Instead of targeting Government soldiers; the rebels instilled unspeakable fear on the civilian population through their public acts of brutality, murder, rape and mutilation. The strategy of raping and forcibly abducting women has been reported in other wars in Mozambique, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Liberia and many others. Rape in the Sierra Leone war, like in others, has inflicted long term physical and psychological damage on women, exposing many to STDs, HIV/A1DS and other diseases.

9. Rape was used by rebel commandos in the Sierra Leone war to boost the fighter's morale and as a reward for committing intolerable acts of violence. Young boys who had

been forcibly abducted and drugged were reportedly directed by senior fighters to publicly have sex with women old enough to be their mothers as a reaffirmation of the boys' manhood and masculinity and as part of the war booty. This war saw the utter degradation of women in Sierra Leone. Rape was so rampant during the Sierra Leone war that to many it seemed as if the general sense of superiority which men generally hold of themselves over women was translated into a sense of entitlement to use rape as a war weapon and an instrument to terrorise, humiliate and bring a community to its knees.

10. As the then Chairperson of the National Commission for Democracy and Human Rights, I had the painful duty of listening to and helping a young lady who in 1999 was getting prepared to enter University to study for a French Degree when the rebels in January of that year invaded Freetown and forcibly abducted her together with hundreds of other young women. She was held for nearly a year, raped, claimed by one of the senior fighters as his wife and was released in 2001 seven months pregnant. This young lady who had been forced to keep the pregnancy, hated herself for it and pleaded with me to get her out of the country as the rebel leader who had forcibly impregnated her pursued her in Freetown where she was hiding following her release and claimed a right to the unborn child she was carrying. The young lady, begged to be taken out of the country as she said: "I could not bear the thought of my child knowing who its father is".

11. As already indicated, over two million Sierra Leoneans (mostly women and children) were internally or externally displaced during the war, They tried to flee from the physical, psychological, social and economic effects of the war but many suffered immensely in displaced or refugee camps as they also faced violence and rape in some of the camps. Even UNHCR workers were alleged to have demanded sexual favours for food rations and other entitlements in refugee camps.

12. Clearly the war has had devastating effects on the whole Sierra Leonean population. Available statistics however indicate that the war impacted more negatively on women and children, who constituted up to 80% of the displaced and refugee population. Women and girls suffered more from the breakdown of civil society, social services and infrastructure as well as population displacement. Women were victims of sexual assaults and stress, enormous trauma from losing husbands, children and other family members and assumed additional responsibilities of providing for family members single handedly as heads of households with limited or no access to resources.

13. The resulting decrease in self confidence, well-being and self- esteem as well as increased vulnerability to assault, oppression and abuse, further complicated the situation of those fleeing to become displaced and refugee women. Many young girls were exposed to prostitution and other shameful acts. For example, whilst most women were victims, others were perpetrators, who took an active part in battle as combatants and others openly collaborated with the rebels.

14. In addition to the negative impacts of the war on women already highlighted, there is no doubt that the war also opened up new roles and spaces for women. The war has created, in a subtle way, an opportunity for positive change in gender roles and relations in Sierra Leone. As they suffered, women were also able to step into new roles or functions, which they never occupied before. Uprooted from their rural communities into displaced camps in urban towns, women benefited from workshops, seminars, income generating skills training programmes and this brought about changes in gender relations and gave the women increased economic roles and hence power within the home. Many held leadership positions in their respective camps and acted as spokespersons in workshops and meetings. In Sierra Leone, as in other countries, the role of women in the democratisation process and

their powerful agitation for the end of the war and the restoration of democracy has recorded women breaking new grounds in the political arena.

THE ROLE AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF WOMEN IN PEACE NEGOTIATIONS AND AGREEMENTS

15. Women's determination and steadfastness in their fight to contribute in bringing sustainable peace in Sierra Leone and the sub region is seen by many as a strengthening force that helped move the sub-region from war to peace. The women effectively participated, some would say, took the lead, in the democratisation process and the management and resolution of the war. The war was seen as 'man-made' and women as natural peace makers, who utilised their unique feminine peace making skills in the resolution of the conflict. The Sierra Leone Association of University Women, the Sierra Leone Women's Movement for Peace, the Women's Forum and several other women's organisations saw the crisis of military rule and a rebel war in Sierra Leone as situations needing their direct intervention; so they led campaigns appealing to the Military Government, the rebels and the international community for a negotiated settlement of the war. They organised marches, prayers, rallies and meetings for the end of the war. Their strategy was to be non confrontational and non partisan and they were spurred on by every one's recognition that the young military soldiers in power were more tolerant towards the women's challenging voices than the men's.

16. Women rejected military rule by voting for democratic elections and the restoration of democratic civilian rule during the 1995-96 National Consultative Conferences dubbed Bintumani I and II. As the NPRC Military Government was forced into holding multi-party elections in March 1996, ushering in the Government of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, the women's contribution was publicly commended and the new President agreed to establish a Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, a position which was offered to a Member of the Women's Forum - the umbrella organisation for women, in recognition of the women's contribution to the peace and democratisation processes.

17. The fact that the National Commission for Democracy, which later became the National Commission for Democracy and Human Rights (NCDHR) was headed by a woman, in some way gave women a public voice on democratic and human rights issues. And as the mood of the country swung towards the holding of peace negotiations, the NCDHR was directed by President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah following persistent calls for dialogue as a means of achieving peace after the January 6, 1999 rebel invasion of Freetown, to hold a National Consultative Conference on the Peace Process on 7 April 1999. The Consensus decisions of that Conference published in 'The Road to Peace', defined and guided the peace negotiations in Lomé

18. The NCDHR held further consultations with Civil Society groups and two (2) historical decisions were taken:

- (1) A woman was selected to represent Civil Society as part of the Government Peace Negotiating Team, joining the female Chairperson of the NCDHR who represented Human Rights organisations in the negotiations, so there were two women in the Government negotiating team.
- (2) Secondly, over 10 members of the Civil Society Groups were funded to attend the peace talks as observers - many of whom were women.

19. Sierra Leonean women therefore participated effectively in the negotiations and the drafting of the peace agreement and thus women and children's issues and concerns were reflected in the Lome Peace agreement.

20. But at the most critical moments of the conflicts in the Mano River basin, it became clear to the women of Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea that for sustainable peace to exist in any of the three countries, there was a need for the women's peace activities to transcend national borders.

21. The women of the Mano River countries – Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea – therefore worked together and launched a Joint Peace Initiative: The Mano River Women's Peace Network, in May 2000 with a sub-regional peace-building programme:

- A Women's delegation of the Mano River Women's Peace Network attended the Mano River Summit in Conakry, Guinea and made a presentation to the Heads of State emphasising the importance of involving women in the attainment of durable peace in the region.
- The Women's Forum in Sierra Leone organised a Peace March on 6 May 2000 and delivered a protest statement to the Leader of the RUF rebels for holding hostage UN Peace Keepers and children. This Women's march preceded and led on to the Civil Society March of May 8, 2000 during which innocent citizens were killed by the rebels which led to the eventual capture and detention of the RUF Rebel Leader, Foday Sankoh.

22. As the crisis in Sierra Leone deepened in May 2000, the women of Liberia wrote to their Head of State requesting his intervention to bring about the release of hostages including the UN Peace Keepers taken by the RUF rebels. Even more dramatically, in July 2001, the Mano River Women's Network for peace held a bilateral meeting with the three Heads of State to lower the tension and the seeming rise in hostilities between President Conte of Guinea and President Taylor of Liberia. Even though President Lansana Conte had vowed not to sit under the same roof or talk to President Taylor of Liberia, following the Mano River Women's Network for Peace Meeting with President Conte, he agreed to meet and talk to President Taylor. This remarkable break-through, led to the Mano River Union Foreign Ministers Meeting in August 2001 as a prelude to a Summit of the three Heads of State of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

23. Clearly, the untiring efforts of the women, religious and other groups within civil society, contributed significantly to sub-regional, regional and UN Peace initiatives together with the support of multi-lateral and bi-lateral agencies — all of which made the peace possible.

24. The efforts of Sierra Leonean women were publicly acclaimed by all. Women became a more visible political force taken more seriously. Subsequently, a woman Minister for Gender and Children's Affairs was appointed, so was a woman Minister of Development and Economic Planning. In fact, though only for a short period, a woman held the portfolio of Foreign Affairs Minister. The Vice President of the Mano River Women's Network for Peace was appointed Minister of Health and Sanitation. The democratic seed, having been planted, continues to grow. On May 22 this year, Local Government elections were held and about 30% of the nominated candidates by political parties are women — the highest in the history of the country. However, women's representations in Cabinet and Parliament, remains below 15%. The consensus is that women are entitled to more and that public affirmation and recognition of women's contribution needs to be translated into more public positions for women.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION

25. Wars in Africa and elsewhere have exacerbated victimisation of women. Women have been subjected to physical and sexual violence in some cases by all factions of the conflict. Evidence has shown that the consequences of armed conflict affect women and girls particularly because of their low status in society and their sex. The dislocation of communities the destruction of social infrastructure etc. impact more negatively on women. Women therefore need to take an active role in post conflict reconstruction.

26. Following the end of the war in January 2002, there are daunting problems confronting Sierra Leone: consolidation of the peace, rehabilitation of infrastructure and reintegration of the ex-combatants, resettling the displaced (external and internal), post conflict reconciliation and consolidation of advances in democratic governance. These are key challenges which are now being addressed in order to transform the country and the women are playing a meaningful role in the furtherance of all of them.

27. Women's involvement in the consolidation of the peace has been especially important because women are the widows and carers left behind to rebuild their families and the nation after the war. Just as the women played a key role in the democratisation and peace making process so are they as part of the post war efforts, building the bridges to restore confidence. Through Non Governmental Organisations, women have taken steps to involve themselves in peace and reconstruction processes.

28. Women NGOs have assisted in the construction of shelter, the distribution of seeds and farming tools, and the implementation of trauma healing and reconciliation programmes for the refugees and displaced to enable them to resettle in their communities. Micro-credit programmes are being put in place for income generation activities especially for women. The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) has led the way in getting young girls to go back to school, provided vocational training, counselling and shelter for girls who were abducted, abused and raped.

29. FAWE's institutional objective is to educate women and girls but the extent of the gender crimes during the war caused the organisation to slightly modify its focus. FAWE has been forced into addressing more and more rape cases following the end of the war with 25 branches now established in the country. Physicians for Human Rights — an international NGO conducted a study on 'The Incidence of Rape during the Sierra Leone War'. Through interviews with witnesses, victims, NGOs, doctors and others, quantitative data demonstrated that hundreds of women were raped. The Film *ration Fine Girl* — as a Weapon of war produced by WITNESS confirmed through testimonies of rape victims that thousands of women were raped. These were all projects carried out by women and for women.

30. Government's post war rehabilitation and recovery programme under the chairmanship of the Vice President, conducted needs assessments in regions, districts and chiefdoms and established chiefdom, district, regional and national recovery committees. Women were represented in each of these structures.

31. These committees oversee the rehabilitation programme of each locality and safeguard the interests of the communities. District recovery committee meetings are held regularly to review the progress of rehabilitation and reconstruction work and discuss problems. Members of the national recovery committee including key Ministers and international agencies and NGOs, under the chairmanship of the Vice President, attend District Recovery committee Meetings during which schools, hospitals, prisons, police stations, local administration structures being rehabilitated are inspected and work

evaluated. Women participate effectively in all these processes and women's needs and concerns are addressed at DRC Meetings.

32. Women were marginalised in the administrations that led the country to a brutal war and yet they bore the brunt of the suffering of the war. They now wish to embrace the political process and ensure that their voices are heard. Their participation in all the processes is critical for the consolidation of the peace and democratic governance. Their message is for forgiveness and reconciliation but they now see themselves as watch dogs for the sustainability of the country's democracy.

33. Democracy is about representation and the distribution of resources; women now believe that as they make up over 52% of the Sierra Leone population, they must be adequately represented in political decision making, otherwise they will not benefit equally from the country's economic and social resources. They therefore want to change the political history of unequal opportunity for women believing that unless they are among those making and influencing national laws and policies, the reforms they are seeking and their concerns could continue to fall on deaf ears.

34. As a result, the NGO 50/50 group was born, its main objective being to address these concerns and politically empower women. The move is for a 50/50 equal representation of women and men in the political and decision-making institutions of Sierra Leone. This group encourages women to come forward for political office and organises training programmes for female candidates. A special fund for women candidates has been launched to provide financial support to all female candidates irrespective of their political party affiliations. With the work of this group and the increasing determination of the women, the political landscape of the country will definitely be transformed in the near future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Gender based abuses during the rebel war in Sierra Leone were not accidental; they were systematically carried out against the women. It is therefore a welcome development that the Special Court trying War Crimes perpetrated by all sides during the Sierra Leone war has rape and sexual violence as one of the charges against the indictees. The proceedings and results of the trials must be given wide publicity in Africa to serve as a deterrent for future warring factions
2. There is a need for long term medical and psycho-social care for women and girls who have been exposed to terminal diseases like HIV/Aids. The problem of lack of free medical care for war victims needs to be addressed. Presently many of these victims suffer silently with no access to regular free medical care. Affordable health care should be made accessible to all.
3. The low status accorded women in many African countries and the inequality of opportunities have been reflected in the way women are treated in conflict situations. There is therefore a need for continuous gender equality and empowerment programmes in political and public decision-making, education, training and employment and in human rights and legal reform. More effort should be directed toward reducing the high illiteracy rate among the population especially among women. Government's current policy of free primary education for all and free education for the first 3 years of secondary schooling for girls in the North and East is a step in the right direction, but the target should be free and compulsory Basic Education for all.

4. Cultural traditions that accord low status to women and are embedded in gender inequality must be reviewed and special programmes should be put in place (including within the educational system) to correct such inequality, and bring about behavioural change. Advocacy material should be developed for better treatment of women in society.
5. The Ministry of Gender should be strengthened and empowered to develop national comprehensive statistics to account for what happened to women and girls during the war. Presently all the data collected was done by NGOs and so there is no comprehensive national statistics on the impact of the war on women.
6. The Judicial system needs strengthening so as to be able to administer justice in a timely and fair manner that will build the confidence of women victims of sexual violence to report cases.
7. Violence against women and children has been widespread but became more widespread and systematic during the war. Special focus must be on the creation of attitudinal and behavioural change through different programmes targeting all groups in society. The media, both print and electronic, has a key role to play, so are educational, youth, religious and cultural institutions so as to influence behavioural change and create a non-violent society.
8. Law enforcement agencies must be adequately trained in the handling of cases of sexual and other forms of violence against women and children.

CONCLUSION

35. The rebel conflict in Sierra Leone inflicted immense physical and psychological damage on women. Sierra Leonean women are determined to ensure that this madness never happens again. Women have played very important roles - sometimes as perpetrators, but mostly as victims, restorers of social order in the midst of the conflict, and as active agents of peace. The women of Sierra Leone have several roles to play in the post war reconstruction of their country. To perform these roles effectively, assistance is required to empower women and girls to enable them together with men, to create the necessary post war transformation that the Sierra Leone society so badly needs.

36. The lessons of the Sierra Leone war are clear: conflicts, instability and social disintegration are directly a result of poverty, inequity, marginalisation and exclusion, poor governance, violation of human rights and the rule of law. The devastating effects of this war and others should teach us the lesson that investing in improving the living conditions of a country's population, men, women and youth, is far less expensive than managing a conflict resulting from failure to do so.