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# Post-Conflict Peace-Building in the Horn of Africa

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# The Role of Women in Post-Conflict Reconstruction: A Case Study of Sudan and Somalia

## Abstract

Armed conflicts in Sudan and Somalia have had a negative impact on development and political processes. In terms of human cost hundreds of thousands civilians have been reported dead and millions have become displaced, within their own countries or abroad, as the case in Darfur.

Women in both countries also have suffered trauma and been subject to violence. However, they have shown resourcefulness in opposing war and bringing peace at the grass roots level.

To sustain peace a gender perspective is needed in the post-conflict reconstruction era. This includes elimination of all forms of oppression and ratifying international legal instruments that advocate for women's rights, developing gender-sensitive constitutions and improving women's political participation.

## Introduction

Prolonged armed conflicts in Sudan and Somalia, as elsewhere, affect all levels of society. They destroy infrastructure and bring development efforts to a halt. They also limit the public sector's capacity to govern, disturb democratic processes and reduce women's and men's political participation (Moser 2001: 33).

Moreover, gender-stereotyping in both countries that views women as passive actors, has excluded women from decision-making processes, notably political decisions regarding war and peace. However, as this paper argues, women do participate and contribute to conflict-resolution and peace-building from the very outset. They campaign, lobby and advocate for peace using different methods.

When peace is achieved, women face huge constraints that prevent them from being active actors in post-conflict reconstruction era. These constraints include lack of gender awareness or political will that perpetuates patriarchy and old negative traditions. However, despite these constraints women are able to find a place for themselves in a male-dominated sphere and to be able to play dynamic roles in the re-construction process of their countries.

# Armed conflict: a history of destruction

In both countries armed conflicts are now longer and more destructive. They become more chronic with fewer clear battle lines. Relief convoys, feeding centres and displaced persons' camps are seen as military targets. In this sense, more civilians are suffering.

In Darfur where the Sudanese government continued its war by proxy: allying, supporting and arming the *Janjaweed* militia, 300,000 people have died and 2.5 million have become displaced. Ironically, this bloody internal conflict emerged while negotiations were going on to end the war in the South.

The civilian population from ethnic groups such as Fur, Masalit and Zaghawa have been subject to "ethnic cleansing" committed by the Government of Sudan and the *Janjaweed* militias it backs (Human Rights Watch 2004, www.hrw.org). Strong evidence, including victims' testimonies, shows that the government-backed *Janjaweed* militia used rape as a systematic weapon of ethnic cleansing (Washington Post 2007).

A 35-year-old woman from Sudan narrates: "We had to flee because our village was attacked and our farm was burned by the government troops. Children were screaming and the elderly were trying to flee as well. When we left our village we had no idea where to go. All we wanted was a safe place for our children. So we hid in the bush for two weeks, surviving on wild food. After a long and tiring journey we managed to arrive at this camp".[1]

In Somalia war has led to state disintegration as its control over resources disappeared. By contrast, warlords, crime masters took over the shattered shells of the state. Ronnas (2005: 44) argues that about 50 different Somali militia groups were active when peace negotiations started in 2003.

Another problem for Somalia is that many people have become leaders through gun power as no election has taken place since the 1960s. Therefore, the question of who is a legitimate representative of different parts of society is still a matter of concern (Ronnas 2005: 43).

"Women have suffered a lot during the war. They have been subject to violence and forced to flee from their homes. Nevertheless, they have worked hard for peace

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1   The interview was conducted in Al-Salam displaced persons' camp in Khartoum, 2002

to come and to make Somalia a peaceful place for everybody. In other words, women were visible in the peace movement. However, when it comes to political representation, political leaders, representing the male dominant culture, want them to be invisible" (Personal communication with a 40-year-old Somali woman, London 2005).

It has been argued that in times of armed conflict, men are engaged in war and fighting, disappear or take refuge far from home. By contrast, women are left with the burden of ensuring the survival of their families. They struggle for the safety and health of their children and elderly, a task which depends on their ability to cope creatively with change and uncertainty (Rensen 1998).

Nevertheless, in both counties conflict offers women windows of opportunity for their emancipation and for the establishment of women's groups. It gives them the opportunity to be more involved in the political arena, which they traditionally had limited access to.

# Women and peace efforts

Although, as explained above, armed conflict is still ravaging both countries, there are some efforts to bring peace, democracy and stability.

It has been argued that women are the main victims of armed conflicts. However, they are excluded from conflict transformation and peace negotiations at local, national and international levels. Therefore, their legitimate interests and needs are overlooked (Moser 2001: 48).

Moreover,

> Women and young people are rarely consulted during the political process of peace negotiation, yet they are often the ones who keep their communities alive – emotionally and physically - during the times of war (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children 1995: 3).

Traditions that stereotype/portray women as non-decision-makers could also be seen a constraint. It has been argued that the Somali social structure generally prevents women from participating directly in decision-making processes. For example, when it was recommended that all regional representations to the Transitional National Council (TNC) should include at least one woman, no clan was happy to be represented by a woman (Jama 1996).

Moreover, in both countries, Islamic extremists and traditional leaders have managed to introduce and maintain a conservative and politicised interpretation of *Sharia* in order to tie women to the domestic sphere and to restrict their participation in political life, thus freeing men for politics. The political system is also a male-dominated and characterised by a power dynamic that excludes women form decision-making processes and stereotypes them as only mothers and carers.

In spite of the continuing prevalence of male-dominated polices that tend to exclude women from decision-making levels including decisions on war and peace, women are playing an increasing role in stopping war and bringing peace.

A recent report by the UN indicates that "Women make an important but often unrecognised contribution as peace educators both in their families and in their societies" (UN 1996).

Women are often among the first to call and lobby for an end to conflict and to work for order and rebuilding of their societies. In post-conflict eras, whether in groups or individually, formally or informally, women probably contribute more than government officials or aid agencies to reconciliation and peace-building (Rensen 1998). Therefore, they are being more active in a non-stereotypically female gender role.

In upper Nile, Southern Sudan in 1994, village women were very active in the People-to-People peace initiative that successfully managed to stop inter-ethnic violence in the region. Women used their talent, experience and influence within their families and communities to work for peace (South Sudan Friends 2004).

Furthermore, women continue to play a vital role through their work in grass-roots organisations, disseminating a new culture for peace, mobilising large numbers of women and organising peace education and training. For example, in May 2003, Somali women attending the Peace Conference in Nairobi tried to influence the formal peace process by lobbying and advocating for women's rights to be included in the peace process. They met with the peace mediator to urge his support and for women's inclusion in the peace process. They also agreed to advocate for at least 25% representation in the parliament (Irin News 2004). Thus, developing a new gender role, which used to be an exclusively male.

Moreover, the Voice of Somali Women for Peace as a grass roots organisation has managed to implement peace education programmes which targeted mainly school children in Mogadishu as well as programmes for families affected by war in Borama (Personal communication, London 2006). In this sense, women are becoming active agents for peace.

# Women's role in post-conflict reconstruction era

It has been argued that conflict, conflict resolution and building peace are engendered. Moser (2001: 30-31) points out that a gender perspective should be developed to deal with post-conflict reconstruction issues. This is mainly because women and men, as social actors, often have different roles, relations, interests, needs and identity in post-conflict efforts.

For example, new constitutions and laws developed during the post-conflict era tend to be gender-blind and do not recognise women's role in post-conflict reconstruction. Therefore, new constitutions and laws need to address many gender issues,

such as gender discrimination in public and private life. Furthermore, inclusion of women in the constitution making process holds the potential for achieving sustainable peace.

Another important issue in the post-conflict era is elimination of all forms of oppression and discrimination. Human rights and democracy are crucial for any conflict resolution and peace-building processes. Therefore, women's organisations as well as peace-building activists should encourage and lobby for governments (in Somalia and Sudan) to ratify international legal instruments promoting the rights of women including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Regarding political reconstruction a quota system needs to be adopted to guarantee women's political participation in post-war transitions. In decision-making positions following war, experience shows that women are leading efforts to promote good governance by fighting corruption, demanding accountability, and maintaining transparency in activities at national and local levels.

Economic reconstruction is also crucial in post-conflict era. In Northern Somalia, for example, and while the war was still on, nomadic women have developed a new trading role. They sell livestock and milk and buy other essential items. The main cause of taking this new role was the prevailing security situation. Women had an advantage over men because they had a double clan identity that helped them to be more mobile than men. This skill could be developed further and used in post-reconstruction era (Rensen 1998).

In Sudan, displaced women were able to develop new legal survival strategies such as street trading, domestic work and laundry as well as illegal survival strategies such as the selling and making of alcohol. These new survival strategies have helped women to earn income and to gain economic power (Osman 2006).

Resources including financial resources are also essential in the transition or post-conflict reconstruction. For example, funding is needed for women's organisations to maximize their efforts and to re-build their countries. Simple equipment such as computers and cell phones would have huge benefits (Rehn and Sirlesf 2002).

A gender-sensitive budget of humanitarian assistance and post-conflict reconstruction is also required to ensure that women benefit directly from resources mobilized through multilateral and bilateral donors.

Social reconstruction is also vital during the post-conflict era. It touches some painful aspects of war, heals the psychological wounds and generates a social environment where respect, trust, confidence and solidarity will be rooted (Rensen 1998).

In Somalia women from different ethnic groups established associations to deal with psycho-social issues that affect their communities and opposed fighting between clans as well as working for reconciliation (Rensen 1998).

In Sudan displaced women in Khartoum tend to gather, without men, in groups *(tajamoat)* in front of their houses/huts to do some domestic activities such as cooking, sharing meals or playing with their children. Through these *tajamoat* women were able to provide support and help to each other (Osman 2006).

One of the most significant impacts of these *tajamaot* lies in their potential and capability to reunite displaced women who belong to different ethnic groups, have different experiences in terms of displacement, needs, and aspirations. In this regard, and in the wider context of conflict resolution, it could be argued that these *tajamoat* have helped women from different tribes to work together and to empower each other, thus scaling down possible tensions over scarce resources, impoverishment and marginalisation (Osman 2006).

For healing the pain of women victims of war, drought and famine the *tajamoat* have developed psycho-social mechanisms. This is done in an informal, supportive and friendly way without help from NGOs or state institutions. This kind of help is offered to all displaced women irrespective of their place of origin or tribe. Women trust each other and talk about their traumatic experiences, their experiences of rape, and sexual and domestic violence. They tell each other what they could not tell their husbands (Osman 2006).

Finally, a gender-sensitive version of truth and reconciliation committees is also required as it could provide a forum for victims to air their grievances and to seek reconciliation. The truth and reconciliation approach developed in South Africa is a land mark in the African conflict and could provide a platform for Sudan and Somalia. However, a more gender-sensitive truth and reconciliation approach that deals with gender issues, addresses women's need and allows women to speak out should be developed.

# Conclusion

Although women are traditionally perceived as less active in political life they have managed to made positive contributions to peace-building and post-conflict construction.

In Somalia, for example, women have become active in peace education. They understood the benefits of education and its role in sustaining peace. Therefore, they developed educational programmes that targeted children and families.

To heal the wounds of trauma, women managed to develop their own organisations in order to provide psycho-social support and services for victims of conflict-related violence. This could be illustrated by the work of women's groups or *tajamoat* in Sudan.

To promote the role of women in post-conflict reconstruction, many obstacles need to be addressed. These include, for example, ratification of international legal instruments promoting the rights of women including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

In terms of political representation, a quota system needs to be implemented to ensure that women's skills, talents and experiences are used in post-conflict recon-

struction. Moreover, old constitutions that view women as weak and powerless should be replaced by new constitutions that recognise the agency of women.

# Recommendations

1. Peace negotiations and agreements should have a gender perspective through the integration of women's concerns and their full participation in peace processes.

2. Women should be involved as active actors in post-conflict reconstruction.

3. More training for women's leaders in conflict resolution, negotiations and reconciliations should be conducted.

4. Training on different gender issues related to war and peace should be conducted for government officials, political leaders, clan leaders, aid agencies and civil society organisations.

5. Further research on the role of women in post-conflict reconstruction is needed.

6. Gender budget analysis is required to ensure that women benefit from post-conflict reconstruction funding.

7. New constitutions and laws developed for post-conflict reconstruction should be gender sensitive.

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