

Are women a missing link in Africa's peace process? Interrogating women's involvement in peacebuilding and conflict resolution in precolonial, colonial and postcolonial Africa

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Abstract

This paper locates peacebuilding within the context of selected African countries with a focus on Zimbabwe; highlighting the intersection between gender and peacebuilding. The central argument in this paper is that gender relations and its relationship to peacebuilding in Africa must be understood within the context of the disruptions brought by European colonialism, struggles for self-determination and independence and post-independence struggles to construct new nation-states. The paper provides a sociohistorical analysis of gender relations in pre-colonial and colonial Africa and attempts to draw parallels with the postcolonial African state. It argues that a complex combination of these processes gave rise to exclusive, androcentric and elite driven peace processes in the postcolonial state. In examining women's struggles for equality and social justice in the postcolonial state, the paper highlights how civic society and the civic space has come to be synonymous with women and women's struggles to influence the peace process. Building on indigenous models of conflict resolution, the paper critically engages the concept of Ubuntu and appraises how it can be appropriated to re-insert women's peace agency in postcolonial Africa. The paper concludes by examining options for increasing women's involvement in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in postcolonial Africa.

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Key Words:

Peacebuilding; Conflict Resolution; Gender; Politics; Ubuntu; Africa.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide a sociohistorical critique of gender relations in selected African countries in order to locate contemporary gender relations and its implications on peacebuilding. It attempts to unpack and highlight the role of women in light of systemic and entrenched patriarchal, androcentric systems of practice that undermine and marginalize women vis-à-vis conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The paper is constituted as follows; the first section provides an overview of gender relations in Africa across three historical periods (i.e precolonial, colonial and postcolonial). The second part engages peacebuilding in the context of Africa more broadly and Zimbabwe in particular. It advances the position that shrinking political spaces in countries like Zimbabwe, Liberia and Burundi necessitated institutional shifts that saw women turn to civic spaces to influence decision making on peace, conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The third section constitutes a discussion of unfolding political developments on the continent. Using indigenous models of conflict resolution and peacebuilding; the paper reflects on how women can transform politics and conflict in postcolonial Africa. It engages the question of how indigenous models of conflict resolution rooted in Ubuntu philosophy can be appropriated to influence politics and peace processes on the continent. It concludes by way of possible future options to strengthen women's involvement in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Gender, Colonialism and Peacebuilding in Africa

Although pre-colonial women have always been at the centre of peace processes, with their roles extending beyond localized conflict resolution (Amadiume, 1997; Nyongo-Mbede, 2003; Isike & Okeke-Uzondike, 2011; Isike, 2017), peacebuilding literature until recently presented peacebuilding as a gendered process. This is in part because precolonial African women's history is very scant and often comes across as generalised. This tends to obscure important gender considerations across cultural, ethnic and geographic contexts. Consequently, most accounts of precolonial Africa portray societies in which women had limited or no political power (Muingi, 2016). However, a careful re-examination of history over the years by scholars such as Isike & Uzondike (2011) and Isike (2016, 2017) contest this narrative.

Bauer in Muingi (2016) contends that precolonial African women yielded considerable power that permeated economic, political and social spheres. Indigenous models of conflict resolution and peacebuilding rooted in the philosophy of Ubuntu² accorded women and men differentiated

² The concept of Ubuntu, like many other African concepts do not lend itself to easy interpretation particularly so in a foreign language. It is first and foremost an African traditional worldview based on respect, compassion and associated values. John Mbiti sees Ubuntu as based on the premise that an individual becomes conscious of his own existence (rights, duties, and obligations) through others, society, and the environment. To Murithi (2006:29) Ubuntu borders on principles of reciprocity, inclusivity and a shared destiny. Philosophically grounded in enduring values of tolerance, humanism, non-discrimination, peace and nonviolence and participatory decision making, Ubuntu shapes how individuals and communities respond to both conflict and peace.

but equal recognition in society (Murithi, 2006; Isike & Okeke-Uzondike, 2011; Gudhlanga, 2013). For example, Ntahobari & Ndayiziga (2003) note that Burundian women were traditionally considered 'bridge builders' and symbols of unity across families, communities, ethnic groups and clans through the institution of marriage. The institution of marriage was thus highly regarded and respected in traditional societies as it strategically positioned women, especially elderly women as peace envoys and peace makers who facilitated peace negotiations (Mohammed, 2003; Lihanba, 2003). Clarke & Nyathi (2010) document how Queen Lozikeyi, wife to King Lobengula facilitated peace processes in the famous Matopo mountains between Cecil Rhodes' forces and the Ndebele army following the Ndebeles' defeat.

In *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, Amadiume (1989) demonstrates the power and influence precolonial African women exercised. She cites an example of the Nnobi, an Igbo community in south-Eastern Nigeria, where women could technically become 'sons' through lineage and could control property. Married and widowed women occupied the economic and social positions of husbands by marrying other women. This practice was a display of power and influence. Hoppe (2016), like others before her, argues that colonialism served to disempower rather than empower African women. Isike & Okeke-Uzondike (2011) argue that women in postcolonial Africa seem to have lost their peace agency³. This loss is due to socio-economic and political marginalization of women but increasingly also erosion of traditional communitarian values (Isike & Okeke-Uzondike, 2008; Hoppe, 2016; Isike, 2017).

Colonialism had a distinct impact on gender relations in Africa because it not only transformed traditional values but fundamentally transformed precolonial gender relations. Gudhlanga (2013) notes that due to cultural imperialism⁴, conventional interpretation of precolonial African society is biased against African culture. Women in many precolonial African societies had different roles and concerns to women of colonial times. For example; they considered themselves as people carrying out their duties; both in the domestic and public sphere. In the domestic sphere, women were responsible for the house and home-based tasks that included, among others tasks, food processing, cooking and cleaning. Together with men, they also helped till the land (Bhatasara & Chiweshe, 2017; Gudhlanga, 2013). In many traditional societies, men were responsible for clearing the land and ploughing the fields while women were responsible for sowing and weeding. Harvesting of yields was done collectively. In societies where land was collectively owned, women were also given pieces of land to grow what they deemed necessary for the family (Mfecane, 2018; Guy, 1990; Higson, 1986). This practice was common in many precolonial African societies. However, colonialism greatly disrupted this practice through the introduction of wage labour that necessitated changes in gender relations (Gudhlanga, 2013; Mfecane, 2018).

Martens (2009) argues that because western notions of femininity and masculinity differed from African gender systems, colonial administrators perceived women's intense involvement in labour

³ 'Peace agency' is a phrase used by Isike & Okeke-Uzondike (2011) to refer to a range of peace activities that historically positioned women as peace envoys, conflict mediators and negotiators. These activities were rooted in women's cultural and socio-political roles.

⁴ The Dictionary of Sociology defines 'Cultural Imperialism' as the imposition of dominant cultures on other cultures rendering them insignificant and invisible.

as a sign of gender oppression thus sought ways to 'liberate' African women from their oppressive men. Unbeknown to colonial administrators, women's labour involvement had positioned them as key decision makers, conflict mediators and peacebuilders. Colonial administrators were equally appalled by cultural practices such as payment of bride wealth and polygamy which they perceived as an ultimate mark of 'African barbarism' (Martens, 2009, p. 128). Consequently, beginning in the early 1830s, colonial administrators across Southern Africa introduced a number of policies and legislation that aimed to 'liberate' African women while simultaneously aiming to 'civilise' African men (Walker, 1990, p. 180).

Publicly, women played important and crucial roles as chiefs, arbitrators in traditional courts, village elders and leaders in war through providing spiritual guidance (Gudhlanga, 2013). Because there was no clear distinction between religious and political domains in precolonial Africa, spirit mediums such as Mbuya Nehanda of the Shona community in present day Zimbabwe, played key political and religious roles (Gudhlanga, 2013). Clarke & Nyathi (2010) note that Queen Lozikeyi stepped in to provide leadership after the 'disappearance' of the Ndebele King – Lobengula. After the Anglo/Matebele War of 1893 the Ndebele kingdom was severely weakened and had lost a significant portion of its population. Lozikeyi temporarily assumed leadership of the Ndebele kingdom and fought tirelessly to resist further land dispossessions. In fact, her anti-colonial stance is believed to have sown seeds of what later became the First Chimurenga (Clarke & Nyathi, 2010). Women assumed key roles as spirit mediums, mediators in local disputes but were also consulted on other matters of societal importance, for example calamities such as droughts or outbreak of diseases (Gudhlanga, 2013).

Women's involvement in important societal issues made them significant political actors. Gudhlanga (2013) argues that some of the best combat regiments during the Munomutapa period were comprised of women only; mainly young and unmarried. She notes that being afforded the opportunity to lead was a manifestation and confirmation of women's capabilities and a clear indication that they were not marginalised but worked together with men for the betterment of society. This confirms Diop's (1989) argument that precolonial African societies were a manifestation of what he refers to as 'harmonious dualism' where patriarchy and matriarchy coexisted in a stable manner. Amadiume (1997, p. 92) describes precolonial African societies as exhibiting 'fluid demarcation'; a situation where two contrasting systems existed and the balance of forces was constantly tilting and changing. Isike & Uzondike (2011) argue that gender relations in precolonial Africa were fluid as they were not only a means of dividing roles and responsibilities between men and women but also a means of integrating and coexisting in dynamic ways that enabled stability and order based on justice, fairness and equity. Within such arrangements, women's power became closely associated with their economic power in relation to men while men's general belief in the sacredness of the female body accorded them respect (Isike & Uzondike, 2011).

However, Hoppe (2016) warns against romanticization of precolonial Africa. She argues that 'the idea of female husbands bewilders biological determinism, but not patriarchy or hierarchical gendered institutions' (Hoppe 2016:5). Similarly, Siedman (1984) argues that although men

and women in precolonial society may have had equal access and ownership of resources such as land; using resource access as a yardstick for equality ignores non-economic forms of male domination embedded in powerful social and cultural structures. Scholars like Guy (1987) and Mkhize & Cele (2017) have argued that vertical control of power by men, in precolonial times, denied women access to important economic assets such as cattle and land which formed the primary source of wealth in many societies. They further argue that with these power and gender dynamics at play, it was easy for colonialism to tap into these localised gender relations to entrench patriarchy and colonial interests.

In spite of disagreements among historians, there is no denying that the impact of colonialism is such that it left indelible marks everywhere it permeated local systems (Walker, 1990). By removing black African women from positions of power and influence and eroding traditional values; colonialism inadvertently marginalised women's active participation in public life. Martens (2009) argues that because colonialism in Southern Africa was conceived ideologically as a 'civilizing mission', it transformed existing social systems to align with Western notions of 'societal progress.' For example, during colonialism, women's participation in politics and public life in general diminished (Gudhlanga, 2013). Colonialism was followed by introduction of pieces of legislation that saw women lose not only their political power but increasingly also their social and economic power (Gudhlanga, 2013). The loss of political and economic power further removed women from previous roles as chief negotiators, arbitrators and peace envoys. Customary law effectively reduced women to perpetual minors transforming fluid and flexible gender relations that had existed in precolonial Africa into hard and fast rules. These pieces of legislation engraved with Victorian values of patriarchy and male authority marginalised and excluded women from public spaces. As a result, colonial and postcolonial African societies became poor imitations of a deeply classed and gendered Anglo imperialist society (Gudhlanga, 2013). In many parts of Southern Africa, chiefs and rural men formed curious alliances with colonialists to control and disempower women (Walker, 1990).

Changes in gender relations under colonialism diminished the power and influence African women had enjoyed for centuries. For example, under colonialism; small scale commercial farms were designed to cater for the small group of black male elites who could afford to buy land from the state. In Rhodesia, this was facilitated through the Land Apportionment Act of 1930 and the Native Land Husbandry Act of 1951 which set aside Purchase Areas (PAs) where blacks could purchase freehold land (Bhatasara & Chiweshe, 2017). In both the colonial and postcolonial state, women's access to land was negotiated and mediated through their relationship with men (Gudhlanga, 2013; Gaidzanwa, 1993). Muvingi (2016) argues that some extremely important and influential African public roles; such as the role of spirit mediums had no equivalence in the European model. Furthermore, competing interests between spirit mediums and missionaries meant that women's public roles among them peacebuilding and conflict mediation were also diminished and silenced. Weir's (2007) study among the Zulu nation in South Africa confirms the centrality of women in Shaka Zulu's kingdom. They played significant public roles as traditional healers and wielded great influence in matters to do with statecraft (Weir, 2007).

Mushonga & Seloma (2018) note that throughout history, women across cultures have worked alongside men to resist and dismantle oppression. For example, during the Algerian war of independence from France between 1954 and 1962, thousands of women actively participated in the struggle for self-determination as combatants, spies, fundraisers, couriers, nurses, launderers and cooks. Similarly, in Zimbabwe and South Africa, women and women's groups played instrumental roles in the struggle for political freedom (Muvingi, 2016; ANC, 2009; Sadomba & Dzinesa, 2004). In spite of having played active roles in the liberation of their countries, many women faced similar challenges of political, economic and social exclusion and marginalization upon cessation of conflict. In Algeria, for example; many women including former combatants faced challenges reintegrating into a society they had helped liberate (Turshen, 2002). In post-colonial Zimbabwe, women ex-combatants faced challenges of political exclusion, economic and social marginalization (Muvingi, 2016; Dzinesa, 2007; Sadomba & Dzinesa, 2004).

Sandole & Starotse (2015) argue that the post-colonial African experience has been that spaces created by women during war and conflict shrink with the cessation of conflict as calls for a return to the status quo reverberate louder. Gughlanga (2013) argues that male dominance is not only a sexual and social problem but also a political problem directed at maintaining existing power relations which privilege men. In post-genocide Rwanda, for instance, women's demands to legalise abortion due to rape-induced pregnancies were disregarded (Sandole & Starotse, 2015). Gaidzanwa (1993) notes that in the post independent phase, a number of nationalist governments across Southern Africa adopted models of society couched in Western culture. In Zimbabwe, the state assumed patrilinearity and this was reflected in a number of legislation around inheritance laws and ownership of resources such land and property (Gaidzanwa, 1993). Bhatasara & Chiweshe (2017) and Chiweshe et al (2015) argue that Zimbabwe's land reform in the early 1980s was a reflection of deep seated patriarchy which further marginalised divorced and married women. Registration of property and title deeds was always in the name of a male spouse.

Making an Impact from the 'Margins:' Women, Civic Society & Peacebuilding in Zimbabwe: 1980-2018

Women have been instrumental in shaping Zimbabwean society. For example, female combatants played crucial roles in the country's armed liberation struggle between 1962 – 1979 (Siedman, 1984; Sadomba & Dzinesa, 2004). However, the political space⁵ for their participation contracted sharply after independence (Muvingi, 2016). With a narrowing political space, and determined to make their concerns heard, women increasingly became active in civic society (Gudhlanga, 2013). The growing and expanding civic space offered women an opportunity to re-enter public life, although this time pressing for a recognition of women's rights and the erasure of oppressive practices. For example, in June 1999, a group of women activists, researchers, academics with the support of more than 30 women's rights organizations came together to launch the Women's Coalition, a broad based women's movement born out of the realisation that a proposed draft constitution in 1999 was silent on issues of women's rights and empowerment (Gudhlanga, 2013). The group set out to invite women from all walks of life to participate in the constitutional reform process.

⁵ Cheeseman (2006) defines 'political spaces' as constituting arenas within which political actors engage in political activities through mobilisation of political concerns, legitimisation of political claims and representation. They can also be spaces of inclusion and exclusion.

Women's Coalition became synonymous with women's struggles for self-determination in an increasingly patriarchal and authoritarian state. Chiweshe et al (2015) note that in spite of women's involvement in Zimbabwe's chaotic and violent Fast Track Land Reform (FTLR), women were increasingly side lined and marginalised in the distribution of the spoils. A land audit commission in 2003 revealed that only 18% of the beneficiaries were women (Utete Report, 2003). The 20% quota advocated by the Women's Land Lobby Group (WLLG) was not achieved. In the late 1990s, women's groups and other Civil Society Organizations were active in attracting international attention on the declining economic, political and social situation in the country. Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA), a civic society organization (CSO) in Bulawayo staged numerous demonstrations in the country between 2003 and 2008, calling for an end to gross human rights violations (Ndlovu, 2009; Freedom House, 2011; Peace Work, 2007). They also strongly condemned the government's heavy handedness in dealing with dissent.

In spite of their involvement in the liberation war, women and women's groups were conspicuous by their absence in peace negotiations on many occasions as male decision-making took centre stage. During the Lancaster House Agreement (London) in 1979, women were underrepresented in both the Patriotic Front and Rhodesian delegations. There were two women present compared to 64 men (Lyons, 2004; Sadomba & Dzinesi, 2004). In the negotiations that led to the GNU in Zimbabwe, only one woman from the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-N) was present (Mbwadzawo & Ngwazi, 2013). During negotiations for independence in London, Sadomba & Dzinesi (2004) note that questions that arose concerning women had to do with women and their relationship to men. For example, discussions around what happens to the citizenship of women married to foreign men or foreign women married to Zimbabwean men.

Under pressure from various lobby groups to give attention to gender issues, in 1981, the government created a Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development which raised hopes that the government was prepared to match political rhetoric with practical action. Mabeza-Chimedza (1995) argues that this resulted in women and women's issues being removed from mainstream politics. At about the same time, male leaders of the liberation struggle called on women who had participated in the struggle to 'return to the domestic space' since independence had been won (Campbell cited in Muvingi, 2016). Siedman (1984) contends that political movements elicit the support of women in times of crisis and then ask them to return to their 'rightful places' when the crisis has ended. To Muvingi (2016), party loyalty effectively replaced liberation ideals; among them gender equality, further peripherizing women's issues and concerns. To Geisler (1995), the ruling party's women's wing (Women's League) visibly served to advance the party's (male) agenda. Thus, one of its core functions became that of working in opposition with other women's groups, particularly independent women's groups. Similarly, Kwinjeh (2010) contends that women's leagues have been used by male politicians to advance their political interests at the expense of women.

However, the few female parliamentarians, working with Civil Society Organizations and independent women's groups succeeded in removing some of the prohibitive and discriminatory legal provisions such as: (i) the Sex Discrimination Act (1980), which allowed women to hold

public office; (ii) the Employment Act (1980) which legislated equal pay for equal work; (iii) the Labour Relations Act II (1985) which ended gender based discrimination in employment and benefits; (iv) Legal Age of Majority Act (1982) recognised women and girls as equal before the law; and (v) Matrimonial Causes Act (1985) and the Labour Relations Act (1985) which made workplace discrimination based on sex illegal and also provided for maternity leave (Muvingi, 2016). While these progressive pieces of legislation were being implemented, a counter narrative that portrayed women and girls as irresponsible in need of 'male support' continued to characterize national debate about gender equality. In 1983, the government launched an operation crackdown code named; 'clean up operations' to arrest and harass women who were unaccompanied by men after sunset as a campaign against 'prostitution' (Muvingi, 2016, Gaidzanwa, 1993; Siedman, 1984). Siedman (1984) notes that these practices were an extension of pre-independence vagrancy laws which disproportionately targeted women and girls. Prior to independence, women were indiscriminately picked up on the streets, hotels and cinemas and held in 'concentration camps' until they could produce proof of marriage or employment. Failure to do so resulted in them being remanded to rural settlement camps (Siedman, 1984). The continuation of these harsh laws, post-independence, incensed women and women's groups and provoked them into action. In 1983, a group of women came together to form Women's Action Group (WAG) to resist government's 'Operation Clean Up' which indiscriminately targeted women and girls accused of loitering and prostitution (Gudhlanga, 2013).

The formation of the women's group heralded a period of intense women's lobbying and confrontation with the state. Women took this opportunity to challenge the state on a number of unfair and discriminatory practices; among them issues to do with citizenship. For example, foreign female spouses were granted citizenship while foreign husbands were not (Muvingi, 2016; Gaidzanwa, 1993). The state response was rather disappointing, for example instead of acceding to women's demands, the state simply shut out all foreign spouses. Win (2004) argues that in the context of a predominantly hostile state, women's organizations had to carefully manoeuvre a perilous political terrain by deciding whether to cooperate with the state and risk co-optation or simply challenge it and risk being labelled neo-colonial puppets. It must be appreciated that in post-colonial Zimbabwe; 'labelling' became an effective tool to delegitimize and 'otherise' dissenting voices. In the aftermath of independence, ZANU-PF's main political challenger and rivalry; PF-ZAPU were labelled 'dissidents' and 'traitors' to justify the government's security crackdown in Matabeleland (Doran 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2008; 2009)

Women's advocacy and activism work expanded and continued into the turn of the millennium when the country faced a multifaceted economic, social and political crisis. In the lead up to the 2000 constitutional referendum, the Women's Coalition was formed to ensure the formation of a gender-sensitive constitution (Muvingi, 2016; Gudhlanga, 2013). The Women's Coalition embarked on nationwide civic education programmes and mobilisation of women culminating in the launch of a Women's Charter. The Charter became a platform for women to articulate their issues and concerns in view of defining what constitutes 'women's consciousness' (Women Coalition, 2001). At the same time, the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), led by one of Zimbabwe's notable feminists Thoko Matshe, challenged the government on the process

and substance of the nation's constitution. The NCA constituted a task force with 30% being representatives of various women's groups and organizations. Mavingi (2016) argues that women have used the political space intelligently to advance both their interests and more broadly, national issues. Riding on their successful campaign to reject a constitutional referendum, the coalition of women's groups organised and supported a selected group of women to contest parliamentary elections scheduled for June 2000. Demonstrating their resolve to build bridges across party lines, the women advanced and endorsed by the coalition group refused to toe party lines choosing instead to create inclusive spaces for dialogue, problem solving and conversation (Gudhlanga, 2013). With the rejection of a ZANU-PF led constitutional referendum, violence, state repression, political intolerance and violent problem solving came to define ZANU-PF's approach to statecraft in Zimbabwe (Makachanja, 2010).

Although the negotiations leading to the Government of National Unity (GNU) remained a private affair between political parties largely represented by men (Abey, 2016) women's groups continued to put pressure on the process through their networks in both civic society and formal politics. Only one woman representing her political party was invited to the negotiating table (Mbwadzawo & Ngwazi, 2013). The exclusion of women and minority groups from the peace process in Zimbabwe was worrying given that many women suffered serious trauma due to physical assault, murder, sexual abuse and rape (Hodzi, 2012; Shaba 2011; Doran 2017). Shaba (2011) notes that women were disproportionately affected in the 2008 post-election violence.

Women groups also criticised the Organ for National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration (ONHRI) for its gender bias. Established as part of the Global Political Agreement (GPA), ONHRI was meant to advise the state on addressing past injustices and human rights violations to ensure healing, reconciliation and integration (Hozdi, 2012). ONHRI proved incapable of responding to historically gendered processes of violence or challenging the patriarchal status quo which often promotes hyper masculinities that perpetuate the abuse of women in conflict situations. Women's representatives argued that because traditionally women are bearers and protectors of communities' culture and future generations, they were often targeted in ways directly linked to their gender and sexuality. Hodzi (2012) notes that in the context of Zimbabwe's political crises, sexual violence targeting women became a means of undermining the strength and support of other political parties, but increasingly also to demoralise and vanquish communities opposed to ZANU-PF rule. Chiweshe (2016) raises three important gender considerations that ONHRI was found wanting on. First; ONHRI failed to provide a gendered analysis of violence and past human rights violations in Zimbabwe. These would have spelt out how different social groups experienced and were impacted by violence. Second, the Commission did not seek to understand how perpetrators, victims and survivors are all gendered and in such contexts, gender becomes a central issue in understanding the historical process of violence. Lastly, both victims and perpetrators were lumped together as a homogenous entity without further interrogation and analysis. These issues continue to be contentious points as Zimbabwe embarks on a long overdue national healing and reconciliation process.

Africa's Future Peacebuilding Prospects: A Discussion

Since the turn of the millennium, Africa has witnessed an increase in women's political and civic participation (Tshuma, 2018; Tripp, 2013). For example, in 2005, Liberia elected Africa's first female president – Ms. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and seven years later Joyce Banda was elected President of Malawi. More recently Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed appointed Ms. Sahle-Work Zewde as state President. Since 1975, 12 women have served as vice presidents across Africa including Wandira Speciosa Kazibwe in Uganda and Joyce Mujuru in Zimbabwe (Tripp 2013). Women are also being seconded to key ministerial appointments in defence, finance and foreign affairs – traditionally a preserve for men. Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa have female defence ministers. Women are similarly visible in regional bodies, holding more than half of the African Union parliamentary seats (African Union Parliament, 2012). Women like Gertrude Mongella and Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma have served the continent at the highest level. In countries like Lesotho and Seychelles, women occupy approximately 60% of all local government positions; 43% of municipal assemblies in Namibia and over a third of local government seats in Mauritania, Mozambique, Tanzania, and Uganda (Tripp, 2013). In 2018, Ethiopia's Prime Minister allocated 50% of cabinet seats to women (The Economist, 2018). In light of these developments, the paper reflects on the following questions; do women have the potential to transform politics and conflict in postcolonial Africa? If so and given unfolding political developments on the continent, how can indigenous models of conflict resolution and peacebuilding be appropriated to influence politics and peace?

It is not a secret that some African countries today have the world's highest rates of female parliamentary representation (Tripp, 2013; The Economist, 2018). Examples include Rwanda, Seychelles, South Africa and Senegal. In 2018, Rwanda had the highest female parliamentary representation in the world (The Economist, 2018). In Senegal, the Seychelles and South Africa, women hold more than 40% of parliamentary seats while in Mozambique, Angola, Tanzania and Uganda female representation stands over 35% (Tripp, 2013; ANC, 2009; Maina, 2016; The Economist, 2018). This compares favourably to between 18% and 20% in the US House and Senate (Tripp, 2013).

We agree with Tripp (2013) that these changes are a result of a decline in African conflicts, expansion of civil liberties and progressive international and regional instruments on women empowerment. To sustain these gains, it is important to seek ways of building on the progress recorded this far through infusing traditional and modern ways of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. This is particularly important in Africa where conflict is largely driven by perceptions of exclusion and economic marginalization, poverty and inequality.

An African Model of Empowerment?

For a long time, the 'Nordic model' was used as a reference point and model for countries aspiring for 'gender parity' in decision making. Previously Scandinavian countries like Sweden and Denmark enjoyed the highest rates of female representation in government and public

institutions (Tripp, 2013; The Economist, 2018). The 'Nordic model' has now been replaced by what Danish political scientist Dahlerup calls the 'fast track' model seen in a number of African countries that have experienced dramatic jumps in female parliamentary representation through adoption of electoral quotas (Tripp, 2013). Studies show that women who take up leadership positions put the interests of society ahead of personal interests. For example the election of Ms. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as Liberia's first president not only put a stop to a civil war that had gone on for years but also saw an increase in government expenditure on key areas of education, health and strengthening of legal mechanisms (Jennings, 2016). This unique model of African empowerment has implications on peacebuilding given that most conflicts on the continent are triggered by perceptions of economic marginalization, political exclusion and inequality. Investment in public service becomes an important step in consolidating peace and managing conflict.

To support women's active participation in politics and decision making, a number of African countries have adopted mechanisms to boost women's visibility and enhance their participation in state building. For example, while only six countries in sub-Saharan Africa had adopted quotas in 1995, today more than half of all sub-Saharan African countries have adopted gender quotas (Tripp, 2013). Quotas are measures and mechanisms used in politics as a means of addressing women's macro and micro needs in society (Tshuma, 2018). The UN Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995 helped spur these trends by adopting a Platform of Action that encouraged countries to advance women's political leadership (UN Women, 2015). Basically three types of quotas have been adopted to influence female legislative representation. First, reserved seats – these are seats set aside for which only women can compete. This guarantees from the outset a predetermined percentage of seats to be given to women. These provisions are usually mandated by constitutions or legislation. Second; voluntary quotas – these are usually adopted by parties, regardless of whether there is a legal mandate. Zimbabwe uses a mix of both (Tshuma, 2018). Third; compulsory quotas – these are quotas which legally require all parties to include a certain percentage of women on their candidate lists. They generally do not mandate where they should be placed on the list, which is crucial to the success of such a provision. However, Tripp (2013) notes that the last has been largely unsuccessful because it is viewed as an imposition.

Africa's Democratization Wave?

While third wave of democratization⁶ had mixed results in Latin America and Eastern Europe, in Africa it was accompanied by an expansion of women's rights, civic and political participation (Tripp, 2013). Although democratic and non-democratic countries tend to have similar levels of women's political representation in Africa, Tripp (2013) argues that it is democratization (the process of democratizing) rather than levels of democracy (measured in absolute terms) that may be more important in explaining the relationship between democracy and women's political representation. This understanding is particularly poignant for Africa where the big shift in the 1990s was not towards democracy, but rather from authoritarian regimes to hybrid regimes that

⁶ Third wave of democratisation refers to changes in international norms regarding women's political representation and women's rights more generally. This period influenced not only domestic women's movements through the increase in donor funding for women NGOs, but also influenced the activities of multilateral agencies such as the UN and the World Bank, and of donors more generally.

are neither fully democratic nor authoritarian. Examples include Zimbabwe, Rwanda and Uganda. In Zimbabwe, the emergence of democratic multipartism in the early 1990s coincided with a period of intense lobbying by women's groups which often took a confrontational approach. They challenged the state on a number of unfair and discriminatory practices such as inheritance laws and processes around property ownership.

Post-Conflict Impacts

Conflict has also stirred some African countries towards democracy and democratization. For example; Rwanda and South Africa has twice as many women in legislatures than non-post conflict countries on the continent (Tripp, 2013). Post conflict countries in Africa have also passed twice as much woman-friendly legislation when compared with non-post-conflict countries, and they have made significant constitutional reforms in women's rights. For example, Zimbabwe pushed for legislative quotas for women, passed laws around violence against women and have challenged customary laws on inheritance, land and property rights that previously worked to the disadvantage of women (Gudhlanga, 2013; Gaidzanwa, 2011). In Liberia, the Women in Peacebuilding Network (Wipnet) was instrumental in the election of the country's first female President H.E. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf (Mutisi, 2016).

The decline of conflict often creates opportunity structures like peace negotiations and constitution-making exercises that allow women activists to press for a women's right's agenda and increased representation. For example; international and regional condemnation of Zimbabwe's violent and bloody June 2008 presidential run-off resulted in a GNU whose immediate task was to come up with new constitution among other reforms (Machakanja, 2010; Ford and Du Pleiss, 2009; Abey, 2016; Tendi and Cheeseman 2010). In Zimbabwe, women and women's organizations used the civic and political space to advance the adoption of legislative quotas and demands for equal representation in government and public institutions. The adoption of a quota system in 2013 was ground breaking because for the first time in the history of the country, women's representation in both the National Assembly (NA) and Senate catapulted from 16% and 25% in 2008 to 35% and 48% respectively (Tshuma, 2018). Zimbabwe's experience contrasts sharply with Angola where conflict simply ended with the decimation of a rival force, denying civic society and women's groups the much needed space for dialogue; national reconciliation and a platform to assert their interests. When National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) leader Jonas Savimbi was killed in 2002, the Movement for the Popular Liberation of Angola (MPLA) led government threatened to decimate the rebel movement, but later buckled under pressure from the peace movement (The Guardian, 2002). Although Angola did adopt a quota system following Savimbi's death, there was less mobilization around other women's rights demands in ways that were evident in Zimbabwe and South Africa.

Last, interventions to end conflict in countries like Liberia and Sierra Leone created incentives for women to demand greater rights and representation. The presence of women combatants in Liberia and Sierra Leone challenged existing gender norms as did women's roles in peace movements. The gender disruptions were evident both in countries where women were active in

battle and in peace movements, but these changes were less visible where women played neither role in the conflict for example in Chad (Tripp 2013). During war in Burundi, Liberia and Zimbabwe after the electoral dispute in 2008, women's organizations attempted to influence formal peace talks (Tripp, 2013; Muvingi, 2016). After cessation of conflicts women's groups continued to influence women's political leadership, constitution-making and legislative reforms through extensive informal mobilization. In Liberia, they organized rallies and boycotts, promoted small arms confiscation and reconciliation ceremonies, and negotiated with small groups of rebel leaders to disarm (Tripp, 2013; Jennings, 2016). Other strategies during war included media work through the radio, and organizing workshops to promote peace with warlords and rebel leaders. In northern Uganda, women's organizations negotiated for the release of child soldiers (Maina, 2016; Natukunda-Togboa, 2016).

Conclusion

This paper has provided a sociohistorical analysis of gender relations and peacebuilding in Africa. It highlighted the devastating impact of colonialism on gender relations, particularly how colonialism undermined women's active participation in public life. Colonial transformation of gender roles eroded traditional mechanisms that previously positioned African women as peace envoys, conflict mediators and peacebuilders. Institutional shifts that saw women actively deploy their agency through civic involvement in countries like Zimbabwe, Liberia and Sierra Leone ought to be seen as attempts by women to revive their peace agency. These initiatives must not only be encouraged but ought to be supported through specialized skills training programmes and workshops on conflict negotiation, mediation support and conflict resolution. The African Union and the United Nations in partnership with regional think tanks like the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS, Ethiopia) and the African Centre for Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD, South Africa) have previously hosted such trainings and workshops.

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