

AFRICAN WOMEN IN POST-CONFLICT NATION BUILDING IN AFRICA SINCE INDEPENDENCE

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Abstract

Conflict has the potential to completely upend and destabilize a nation. In recent years, post-conflict nation building in Africa has become increasingly important as more and more nations experienced conflict within the continent. During such times, the relevance of women, most especially in national reconciliation, reconstruction, and rehabilitation amongst others, becomes crucial. This research examines the role of women in post conflict nation building in African nations since independence. There appears to be scarcity of literature on these women's efforts in post-conflict nation building in Africa, as well as low representation in the decision-making processes, especially after periods of conflict. Why so? Have African women played roles towards post-conflict Nation Building in Africa? If yes, what were these roles? If no, what were the reasons? What efforts have been put in place to ensure their inclusivity in the nation building processes of post conflict African States? Records show that some African women have actively participated in building societies following periods of strife. However, historical findings show that the low representation of these African women in literature and decision making processes is in part due to poor educational background, trauma from gender based violence, and gendered divisions of labour that relegates women to the private sphere of activities, amongst others. The paper recognizes the aforementioned points as part of the problem that limit women's roles in post-conflict reconstruction processes in Africa. It adopts mostly the descriptive method of historical research in its approach to data analysis and strongly believes that for more representation of women in Africa's post-conflict nation building to be achieved, both national and international organizations, governmental and non-governmental institutions, must join hands to enact, enforce, and implement strict policy measures, backed with actions to encourage the visibility of these women in the reconstruction efforts.

Key words: Women, role, nation building, post-conflict, Africa, independence

Introduction

Nation-building is a complex and multi-faceted process which involves rebuilding of a country's institutions, infrastructure, and social fabric, in some cases, after a period of conflict. Women's participation in post-conflict nation-building is critical since their roles contribute significantly to the establishment of sustainable peace and development. The role of women in national development was acknowledged in the UN resolution 1325¹ which recognized the importance of women's involvement in conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding necessary for sustainable growth in a society.

Before addressing the role of women in post-conflict nation-building, it is essential to understand the historical context of their exclusion from decision-making processes. This exclusion stretches back to the colonial era owing to the fact that the colonialists preferred direct dealings with the men; and, even after African nations gained their independence from their respective colonial masters, women's marginalized status remained.² Moreover, the militarization of African societies during the conflicts further perpetuated women's exclusion and led to gender-based violence, keeping women further secluded from their societies out of fear. Women became particularly vulnerable, and this reality made them reluctant to participate in national development, fearing for their safety.³ Thus, situations where they were found participating in reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction processes were quite few.

African countries have experienced several conflicts and wars over the years, including conflicts within countries, inter-state wars, civil wars, and communal clashes. The destructive effects of these conflicts include loss of lives, displacement of people, destruction of infrastructure, and a setback in economic progress. Post-conflict nation-building is critical to restore peace, stability, and growth to society. Women occupy a crucial role in this process due to their unique experiences, perspectives, and values they bring to the post-conflict reconstruction efforts. Thus, the objective of this paper is to establish the relevance of African women in post-conflict nation building since independence. The study will also make attempt to identify the various militating factors against African women's role in post-conflict nation building, as well as the efforts so far, to increase these women's participation in post-conflict nation building in Africa.

The Relevance of Women in Post conflict Nation Building Process

In many African countries, women are at the forefront of efforts to ensure the success of nation building, especially after a period of conflict. They play important roles as peace negotiators, truth seekers and activists for social justice, security reforms, human rights, and gender equality, amongst others. More often than not, African women are often disproportionately affected by the impacts of war, and their participation in post-conflict nation-building is paramount for a fledgling democracy to prosper.⁴ They have unique strengths such as nurturing skills, economic management, and conflict resolution skills which have been valuable tools in post-conflict reconstruction efforts⁵ as will be seen in this subsection. Nation-building is a challenging process and requires the involvement of a wide range of actors, including women. The admirable role of women in post-conflict nation-building in Africa has been recognized by the international community, including the United Nations Security Council and the African Union. Women have played important roles in post-conflict nation-building in Africa, and these roles include the following.

Peace negotiations/building: Women's participation in post-conflict nation-building efforts significantly impacts the success of the reconstruction process. Their unique experiences and perspectives contribute to conflict transformation and sustainable peacebuilding. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) women's active participation in peace processes contributes to more inclusive equitable and sustainable peace and development.⁶ Records show that African women's involvement in peacebuilding and reconciliation processes in Africa has increased in the past decades. In most cases, women's civil society organizations are at the forefront, playing crucial roles in advocating for their participation in peace building processes. The UN Security Council in its 1325 resolution⁷ recognizes these vital roles they advance in peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and resolution. The resolutions highlight the need for gender-sensitive approaches in peace negotiations, disarmament demobilization and reintegration (DDR) processes, and the protection of women's rights.

In Rwanda, for instance, women played a critical role in the post-genocide reconciliation process. Sundaratnam⁸ as well as Call & Cousins⁹, argued that Rwanda women's organizations and civic groups mobilized their networks to promote inter-ethnic dialogue and foster reconciliation between Tutsi and Hutu communities. In Liberia, Hassan¹⁰ affirmed that a grassroots women's movement called the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace played a crucial role in ending the war by staging protests and engaging in nonviolent action. This movement led to the election of Ellen Sirleaf Johnson, the first female president in Africa, in 2006. Under the Johnson administration, women's inclusion in decision-making structures increased, and policies on gender equity and women's rights were implemented.¹¹ In Sudan, Women played a crucial role in peacebuilding in the country by participating in formal and informal peace negotiations. Women's groups, such as the Sudanese Women's Union, played a critical role in advocating for the participation of women in peace negotiations. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 mandated that women be included in all levels of decision-making structures.¹² This was a great achievement in gender history because by their involvement in these structures, women were seen contributing their quota in national development. These examples further buttress the role of women in post conflict peace building for a successful nation building course.

Participation in governance/parliament: Effective post-conflict reconstruction requires the participation of women at all levels of society including government civil society and the private sector. Involving women in governance structures can facilitate democratic reform promote gender-equality and enhance accountability. Women's participation in politics has been a crucial aspect of building a post-conflict nation. Women, especially in Africa, have been underrepresented in politics positions/seats, and this has to an extent challenged their role in decision-making processes. However, studies have shown that women's participation in politics can enhance democracy and promote development. Gumbo¹³ argued that women can provide a unique perspective on governance, which can lead to better policies and programs that meet the needs of all citizens. Women's political participation has been instrumental in post-conflict nation-building in Africa. For instance, in Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Sudan respectively, African women have contributed to the establishment of stable polity in their various countries through their representation in politics.

The Liberian civil war which lasted from 1989 to 2003¹⁴ significantly affected the country's infrastructure and social fabric with women and children amongst others, bearing the brunt.

However, women's representation in politics has increased in the post-conflict period with the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as the first African female president in 2006.¹⁵ Women's enrollment in schools has also increased, contributing to their enhanced participation in decision-making at all levels of society.¹⁶ Rwanda on the other hand, is one of the African countries with the highest levels of women's political representation. Rwanda's 2003 Constitution guarantees women's rights to participate in all spheres of public life. The post-1994 genocide reconstruction process was inclusive of women and the government enacted policies promoting gender-equality and women's empowerment.¹⁷ Women's representation in the Rwandan parliament is currently at 61, the highest globally.¹⁸ Their participation in politics and decision-making has been critical in the country's progress towards reconciliation and stability.¹⁹ Furthermore, women's participation in post conflict nation building efforts extended beyond politics with women playing significant roles in rebuilding infrastructure and creating economic opportunities²⁰ in Rwanda. In the case of Sierra Leone, the civil war which ended in 2002 severely affected the country's political process. The country's post-conflict reconstruction efforts were inclusive of women's participation in decision-making processes. Female representation in the Sierra Leonean Parliament increased from 9% in 2002 to 22.5% in 2012.²¹ Women's participation in structures of governance has brought about diversity in views and perceptions, especially in ideas that pushed the country forward. It has also brought about improved protection of women's rights and increased intervention in the provision of social-political services. The government also launched a national program for the empowerment of women and girls which aims to address poverty reduction and inequality.²² In 2019 Sudan, African women constituted 40% of the transitional government of Sudan, indicating a significant shift in women's political participation in the post-conflict era.²³ In South Africa, women played significant roles in the anti-apartheid movement and helped build democratic institutions after apartheid. Meghan MacKenzie opined that because women tend to vehemently oppose policies made against their personal and family concerns, they consistently refuted the 'gendered project' of apartheid. The women seized every opportunity to flout apartheid laws constraining their movement, and organized themselves beyond ethnic and racial distinctions to demand for a better life and future for their families.²⁴ Women's rights were after the apartheid regime enshrined in the country's constitution, and have achieved a significant political representation in elected positions.²⁵ The argument is that African women's involvement in governance of different African countries as evidently captured above has brought about inclusiveness and diversity in perceptions or views in the decision making processes of nation building. This unarguable has led to the development of African nations after a period of conflict.

Social welfare: African women's role in post conflict social reconstruction cannot be over emphasized. Boulding²⁶ used the concept of Breeder-Feeder-Producer, to describe the contributions of women generally to the development process. For example, in Uganda, Ochen²⁷ argued that women have been actively involved in the post-conflict reconstruction efforts in the northern part of the country, which was affected by a two-decade conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). He strongly argued that Women's organizations such as the Women's Peace Coalition played crucial roles in social welfare at the time providing support to survivors of sexual violence, displacement, and abduction by the LRA. Women's groups have also been involved in advocacy for the rights of children affected by the conflict. Their roles in the aforementioned regard have inspired the younger generation in the various society they find

themselves; which indeed contribute to national development in post-conflict Africa on the long run.

Security: The security sector is an integral facet of post-conflict nation building. This is because the police, military, and other security agencies, as well as non-state security actors such as armed rebel groups, have often been the most serious perpetrators of human-rights violations on the continent²⁸ in some African nation-states. The UN, for instance posited that in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), government security forces including the armed forces (FARDC), the national police, and members of the national intelligence agency, were responsible for 32 percent of conflict-related sexual violence in 2016.²⁹ One of the key strategies adopted in Security Sector Reform (SSR) initiatives in post-conflict settings in Africa has been increasing the representation of women in the police and the military.

In South Africa, Lindy Heineken³⁰ argued that post-apartheid South Africa actively recruited black women and has one of the highest percentages of women in the armed forces globally. Thirty-four percent of the South African National Defense Force ranks are women and, perhaps most significantly, women are also engaged in combat operations. Women were eligible for all ranks and positions in the newly formed South African National Defense Force (SANDF) through a liberal equal rights initiative following the adoption of South Africa's 1996 Constitution.³¹ Their roles in these security forces while discharging their duties as security personnels have brought about protection of lives and properties. This has contributed to post-conflict nation building in no small measure, across different African countries such as Nigeria, Uganda, Rwanda, amongst others; where these black women are members of security forces.

Economic empowerment: Women's involvement in the post-conflict economy is essential to promote economic growth, including the rehabilitation of local markets, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and entrepreneurship. African women entrepreneurs have played a major role in restoring the economy of post-conflict countries by creating employment opportunities for the locals. In post-conflict Liberia, for instance, a group of women started the Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) to address the economic and social challenges faced by women during the war and carry out income-generating activities.³² Women entrepreneurs have been at the forefront of creating new businesses and generating employment opportunities. The Liberian Women's Business Association has been instrumental in providing training and support for women entrepreneurs. In Rwanda, women leaders helped rebuild the country's socio-economic networks through formations of village savings and loans associations, which contributed to the regeneration of village economies and the sustainability of returns to post-conflict rebuilding efforts.³³ The examples drawn from Liberia and Rwanda highlight the roles played by women in post conflict nation building, to enhance economic development.

Judiciary responsibilities: Suffice to say that the manner in which any country emerges from conflict can create the foundation upon which its future is built. Scanlon³⁴ argued that since the early 1990s, different models of transitional justice (TJ) have developed throughout Africa to try to address the mass human-rights abuses that have occurred during conflicts. These mechanisms, both judicial and non-judicial, have tried to ameliorate the situation on gender-based human-rights violations that have been widespread on the African continent. Women have been at the forefront of these judicial activities. A good example can be seen after the civil war in Rwanda.

Women took a range of responsibilities in judicial proceedings, from Gacaca Court System – at least 30% by quota – to the Highest Court - 44%.³⁵ Gacaca meaning – those sitting in the grass, ‘the elders’ – was established by the government to prosecute some 100,000 suspects, imprisoned for many years while awaiting trial at the national courts and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda.³⁶ The Gacaca in Sovu Province had a majority of female judges, where more cases were prosecuted than at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and the national courts combined. Overall, the Gacaca courts convicted 1.6 million out of 1.9 million suspects, although this is not without controversy.³⁷ The recognition of rape as a crime against humanity and, for the first time, as evidence of genocide was considered one of the successes of the ICTR. This is a breakthrough in the nation building process especially in respect to the prosecution of war criminals and a step forward in the promotion of worldwide gender equality in criminal justice. These efforts made by female judges in the prosecution of outlaws attest to the roles they’ve played in the development of post-conflict nation building in Africa, especially to reduce crime rate in the society.

Women’s activism: African women’s advocacy and community mobilization skills have been vital in post-conflict nation building in Africa. They have been at the forefront, advocating for peace, inclusiveness, and promoting human rights courses, amongst other important issues that will ensure development during and after conflicts. By organizing themselves into groups, these women have used their collective voices to demand justice and equity and inclusivity in Africa’s socio-political cum economic development by all and sundry. Women’s engagement in the community is invaluable since it creates a sense of social cohesion and promotes gender equality. In post-conflict Liberia, women’s groups affiliated with the Ellen Johnson Sirleaf government, such as the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, played an instrumental role in bringing about peace. It has been argued that these women’s activism played a crucial role in ending the civil war in the country. They organized themselves across ethnic and religious groups, denounced violence, and demanded that the warring parties end the conflict.³⁸ Women’s activism resulted in the participation of women in peace talks, the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the appointment of a female Vice President in post-conflict Liberia.³⁹ There are some transnational women activist organizations on the continent working towards women’s, peace, and security. Amongst such are the Women and Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) and the Mano River Women’s Peace Network in West Africa, Isis–Women’s International Cross-Cultural Exchange (Isis-Wicce), and Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS). For instance, FAS, has played critical roles in placing pressure on the African Union (AU) to take the issue of women in conflict seriously through the documentation of these women’s experiences, training, and advocacy. They were also pivotal in advocating the creation of an AU Envoy on Women, Peace, and Security in 2014.⁴⁰ These various women groups have brought about the inclusive roles women played in advancing nation building in African nation states.

Education: Education is an essential tool for a sustainable development in post-conflict African nations. Women’s education is crucial as it contributes to the empowerment of women, enabling them to contribute to post-conflict reconstruction efforts. Studies have shown that educating girls promotes long-term socio-economic progress and stability in post-conflict settings. For instance, in post-conflict Rwanda, the government has implemented policies to promote girls’ education, and this has contributed to building sustainable peace and development in the country by

producing a more enlightened and inspired population.⁴¹ The role of educated African women in advancing the post-conflict nation building course cannot be overemphasized, because their views towards development mirrors diversity in perception and approach.

Truth finding: Since the creation of the International Criminal Court (ICC) there has been a concomitant visibility of gender-based crimes in other transitional justice processes including truth commissions, reparation programs, and security sector reform. Early processes such as South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission have been widely critiqued for their failure to confront the way apartheid crimes impacted women in unique ways. However, Nesiah⁴² has argued that as opposed to what was obtainable in South Africa, subsequent truth commissions such as those in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Kenya consulted women's organizations, sought to identify patterns of gender-based human-rights violations, and in all, included some form of quota to ensure women's participation in these commissions. Furthermore, he shared that in all of these processes gender sensitivity was employed in the training of statement takers and in devising reparation programs. Of particular significance was the fact that the Sierra Leonean, Liberian, and Kenyan Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) in which African women were members, identified patterns of sexual violence that predated the conflicts, and, as a result, identified the need for reforms to promote changes in gender relations. With each commission has come new innovations and greater commitment to supporting more involvement of women. For example, during the proceedings of the Liberian truth commission, UNIFEM (the precursor of UN Women) organized alternative forums where women who were unwilling or unable to be part of the formal process could share their experiences. Kenya's Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission facilitated thirty-nine separate hearings exclusively for women and provided women with transport and childcare when necessary.⁴³ The study argues that this is a new development that buttresses diversity in approach, brought about by the membership of these African women in the country's truth commissions. It goes a long way to highlight the innovations introduced by women in order to capture a more inclusive accounts and experiences of these women in the course of truth finding.

Militating Factors against Women in Post Conflict Nation Building

Despite their critical role in post-conflict nation-building, women face significant challenges in participating in the process. These challenges include social and cultural barriers, limited access to education and resources, and lack of representation in political and governance structures.

Social and cultural barriers pose challenges to women's participation in post-conflict nation-building.

In many African societies, gender roles are defined strictly, limiting women's access to economic opportunities and participation in decision-making processes. Women also face discrimination and repression in their attempt to participate in public life. In most African countries descriptions of the structures of everyday life reveals the family as an institution that enacts gendered divisions of labour as it relegates most women to the private sphere and most men to the public sphere. A study of the implication of this normativity of the public/private distinctions between men and women indicates that, as long as women's roles are restricted to the private sphere – family, motherhood, and marriage – their access to the public sphere of work, decision making, law making, knowledge production, culture production and politics will remain minimal.⁴⁴ In post-conflict contexts, women's traditional roles as caretakers and providers for

their households may limit their ability to engage in community activities and contribute to nation-building activities.

Limited access to education and resources is another significant challenge women face in participating in post-conflict nation-building. Women may lack the skills and training needed to engage in the formal political processes and contribute to governance structures. Women may also lack access to financial resources, making it difficult for them to start and sustain economic activities.

Lack of adequate representation in political and governance structures in order to be able to effect change where necessary, is another significant challenge that women face in participating in post-conflict nation-building. Women are often underrepresented in political and governance structures, and their perspectives and experiences are not taken into account in policy-making processes. In some cases, women may face discrimination and exclusion based on gender, making it difficult for them to participate in decision-making processes.

Gender-Based Violence: This is prevalent in post-conflict societies, and women are particularly vulnerable. Sexual and gender-based violence, including rape and sexual exploitation, is often used as a weapon of war. Women who have experienced gender-based violence may find it challenging to participate fully in the rebuilding process, and this can have long-term effects on their physical and mental health.

Efforts to Increase Women's Participation in Post-Conflict Nation Building in Africa

Several efforts to increase women's participation in post-conflict nation-building have been made at the national, regional, and international levels. At the national level, some African nations have developed national action plans and frameworks that address gender inequality in post-conflict nation building, with several countries adopting gender quotas in political positions.

Regionally, the African Union has launched several initiatives aimed at addressing gender inequality in the development processes in African nation states since independence. In 2010, the African Union adopted the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa, which focuses on promoting women's rights and increasing their participation in decision-making processes.⁴⁵ Additionally, the African Union's Women, Peace and Security Framework emphasizes the importance of women's active participation in peacebuilding and security reforms, to ensure a successful nation building process. At the international level, several UN resolutions have been adopted to promote gender equality in the developmental processes of African states. The UN Security Council⁴⁶ adopted Resolution 1325, which recognizes the importance of women's participation in post-conflict nation building and calls for gender perspectives to be incorporated into development efforts. Moreover, the UN has set up several gender-based programs that help improve women's access to education, leadership training, and resources to promote gender equality.⁴⁷ Although these efforts have been applaudable, it leaves a lot more to be desired.

Conclusion

Women have played significant role in post-conflict nation-building, since independence in various African states. Their contribution has often been overlooked and undervalued, yet their contributions to the progress of their societies cannot be ignored. African women have played significant roles towards post-conflict nation building through their participation in governance,

economic activities, education, and peace negotiations, security reforms, etcetera. Their unique perspectives and contributions are vital to the socio-economic cum political development/stability, and sustainable peace of Africa. In other words, they have fostered peace and advancement necessary for successful nation building. Despite the challenges they face, some of these women have graced leadership roles, and their efforts in these positions have created positive change in the various communities they find themselves. To achieve sustainable development in post-conflict societies, it is essential to recognize women's contribution and address the challenges they face, in other to experience more of their developmental efforts, to achieve a more inclusive society.

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