

THE IMPACT OF SMALL ARMS ON CHILDREN AND GIRLS IN ARMED CONFLICTS.

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The use of arms whether small, light, improvised or weapons of mass destruction in conflict, is not new; and this explains why the right of self-defence and self determination are part of the international law. What is rather new is that access to these weapons is easy and cheap. Records have it that you can exchange an AK47 for as little as a bag of grain, and studies have it that, there are more arms with the militias than in the National armies of most African countries. And what is most unacceptable is the indiscriminate use of these weapons, against those that the humanitarian laws are out to protect. The proliferation of these weapons in the hands of undisciplined actors has outpaced the efforts to ensure compliance with the basic rules of warfare. The aftermath is levels of wanton violence and streams of horrific images.

The end of the cold war and the collapse of Soviet Union led to the significant change in the dynamics of conflicts and international transfer of arms. These changes also have led to a very high level of civilian casualties and making delivery of humanitarian assistance extremely difficult. Although it is true that arms increase facilitated aggression against civilians, it is also important to know that there are other factors that contribute to the heavy toll paid by the civilians.

Small Arms and light Weapons are distinguished weapons of war that are very simple to use, small in size, and easy to carry, but have the capacity to do grave damage in especially intrastate conflicts. Small Arms, because of their simplicity and durability, their proliferation is made very easy. These weapons require very little upkeep and logistical support as they have very few moving parts. They are also very durable. Even uneducated combatants and children can easily manipulate them as they need very little training and can be easily effectively handled. The qualities of small arms include:

Portability and Conceal-ability

Small Arms and Light weapons can be moved about by individuals or small and light vehicles. Because of their size, concealing them is very easy. They can be hidden in legitimate goods and be smuggled across borders into conflict zones.

Military / Police and Civilian Uses

These weapons are used by the military and the police, and even can be acquired legally by individuals. Because they are not exclusively procured by the national military, it is then vulnerable to abuse by illegal users.

Low Cost and Wide Availability

For the fact that there are various legal users like the military, police and civilians, the number of manufacturers is large and this makes its availability very high. For example, in DRC, weapons could be purchased, as cheaply as buying a chicken, and in Mozambique and Angola, they are as cheap as 15 USD.

Lethality

These weapons are also as dangerous as the big weapons. Some of these small Arms have the capacity to fire up to 700 rounds a minute, and can cause great damage. So, having a small group of people armed with these arms, they can pose a real challenge to any military. So, the above reasons and more explains why Small Arms and Light Weapons proliferation will continue to be a challenge in managing intrastate/ethnic conflicts.

ECOWAS Conventions on Small Arms

Economic Communities of West African States (ECOWAS), in 1998, adopted a Moratorium on Small Arms and Light Weapons, which aimed to combat the proliferation of these weapons. It was a product of both the government and the civil society organizations. In 2002, there was a follow up meeting in Dakar Senegal, which aimed to strengthen the moratorium, so that it can become more effective. The West African region is a very volatile part of African because of the armed conflicts in this region coupled with cross border crime and destabilizing factor due to the heavy presence of illegal arms trafficking and usage.

GENDER AND PEACE BUILDING

INTRODUCTION

The UN Security Council on 31st Oct. 2000 adopted The Resolution 1325, which deals with women, peace and security. This Resolution highlighted the importance of bringing gender perspectives to the center of the UN conflict prevention and resolution, peace building, peacekeeping, rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts. This Resolution was initiated after the UN Secretary General was invited to do a study on the impact of conflicts on women, girls, the role of women in peace building and the gender dimensions of peace processes and conflict resolution.

The study revealed that there is an increase in the cases of armed conflicts in the world, but over the quarter of the 53 countries in Africa, was embroiled in intra-state armed conflicts in the late 1990s. The repercussions are both grave and sub-regional and most victims are civilians. An estimate of 3.2 million deaths occurred from 1990-1995, and there were mass displacement of people, and many of them are women and children. Records have it that “while entire communities suffer the consequences of armed conflicts and terrorism, women and girls are particularly affected because of their status in society and their sex” (Beijing Platform for Action).

Definitions and Understanding of Gender

Sex: The biological differences between males and females are defined as “sex”. Women, for example, can give birth and nurse babies because of their biology.

Gender: Boys and girls are encouraged by families, schools, religious organizations, and communities to be different. These differences between expectations of males and females are known as “gender”. Boys are socialized to have “masculine” gender characteristics. Girls are socialized to have “feminine” gender characteristics. Boys who have “feminine” characteristics and girls who have “masculine” characteristics are often punished or sanctioned by their community.

Gender Roles: The different behaviours, tasks, and beliefs a group considers appropriate for males and females.

Patriarchy: Many societies operate with a system of male authority that oppresses women through political, social, cultural, religious and economic institutions. Patriarchy denies women positions of decision making and power.

Matriarchy: A system of social organization in which descent and inheritance are traced through the female line.

Gender Gap: The gender gap is the difference in the level of participation, qualifications, economic status or other indicators between males and females.

Gender Discrimination: Gender discrimination is any pattern of preferential treatment of males in education, employment, and leadership roles, for example.

Gender Oppression: The discrimination of females in political, educational, economic, religious, cultural, and social systems.

Gender Analysis: An analysis of how policies and projects affect males and females differently.

Gender Sensitization: An effort to raise awareness about the different needs of males and females and to increase the capacity of organizations to address these needs.

Gender Equity and Equality: An approach to ensure that men and women are valued equally for the roles they play and benefit equally from policies and projects such as education and compensation for work according to their needs. Gender equity takes into consideration that women have been historically disadvantaged and may need special programs to overcome this discrimination.

Gender Mainstreaming: The inclusion of the goal of gender equity, the use of a gender lens, and the active inclusion of women and women’s groups into all institutional choices and practices.

Women’s Empowerment: The ability of women to have resources, access, skills, and self esteem to participate fully in the decisions that control and affect their lives.

Feminism: The global struggle to address the oppression of women and create gender equality. (Adopted from ‘Training manual for Women in Peace-building, by West Africa Network for Peace Building, WANEP’) ‘Gender’ is different from ‘sex’. Sex determines the male or female biology of a person but gender is culture – socio constructions. This is the values system as allowed by the structure. Gender is shaped by culture, which is dynamic and not permanent. Cultural norms for men and women define expectations of what is masculine or feminine. When men and women accept a particular physiology, and structure their beliefs based on these assumptions, they do nothing to change it, and with time, they begin to believe that it is natural, inevitable and therefore desirable sex is permanent, natural, but gender is changeable and man construed, therefore not permanent.

The world systems are structured to maintain man control. The gender hierarchy aims to value men and muscularly more than women and femininity; through direct violence like rape, domestic violence, psychological violence – sexist humor, internalization of oppression, structural violence – feminization of poverty, glass ceiling, unequal pay and social life like important, assigning different culture to men and women.

Gender Roles and Peace Building

This session aims to explore how gender (social expectations) affects man and woman’s role in peace building. Because of the different expectations, for example, men could be expected to use violence and women non-violence strategies.

Women are seen as life nurturers in the society, it is expected that they show more concern when children are used to perpetuate violence. It is easier for the women to intervene and seek peace with the opposite party because, they see themselves as mothers, not minding what sides the perpetrators came from.

It will be dangerously misleading to say that women are “naturally” peaceful. It is not so, both men and women have the ability to make peace. But women could be more creative and effective in waging peace, may be because of their emotional strength. It is traditionally believed that conflict is man dominated, but during inter-state wars, even women played noticeable roles. Also, in traditional homes, men are expected to provide for the family, while women take care of the home but during conflicts, there are roles reversals which put women in the position to provide for the family. The implications are many as studies show, but it also shows the sense that advocate for women involvement is peace building. Conflict encourage change of role, therefore, it is important that peace-building should allow role change and involvement of women in peace making.

Why Include Women In Peace Building

People for many years have frowned at the idea of having women in decision making and leadership position, but it is changing now, because women included have proven relevant and useful. Some of the reasons identified include:

1. Women make up 50% of the population of most communities and the task of peace building is so great that leaving out half of the population for no good reason is not helpful.
2. Women are the main focus in taking care of the family, before and during conflicts. If women are oppressed, victimized and excluded in the peace making process, the process will be incomplete as the central figure is absent.
3. For the fact that women have both the capacity to make violence and peace, it is important that they be included in the process, so that this peace gift could be exploited.
4. Both men and women experience conflict differently, it is important that all the experiences which will account for relevant intervention in peace building be included in the plan. Therefore, the women need to be included in the peace building process.
5. The UN Resolution 1325 specified women involvement and therefore women should be included.
6. Women have proven successful peace building ideas, basing their strategies on inclusion and collaboration, producing outcomes that are broad-based and sustainable, it is then important that their efforts be acknowledged and expanded.
7. Developing a gender sensitive peace building program require a deconstruction of a few assumptions that we have about the roles of men and women in conflict and post conflict situations, and women need to be part of this reconstruction..

Assumptions in Peace Building

The main assumption of peace building is that the society should return to the situation the communities were before the conflict. This assumption is not only impossible, it is misleading. The situation before conflict was an environment defined based on muscularity with strict divisions of labour that excluded women from public life and leadership position. But we know that the war period changed women's roles to assume men's roles as their men were not present to play their roles. Unfortunately, these experiences are not taken into account and considered as social gains for women in “redefinitions of gender roles that would be non-oppressive for women and girls in a post-conflict society”.

This is well captured in the report of Chinkin (2004) when she writes “Concepts of reconstructions and rehabilitation may be misnomers in the case of women. Both concepts assume an element of going back, restoring to a position or capacity that previously existed. But this, as not necessarily what women seeks.” So, to plan a viable peace building program in post conflict situation, it is important to understand the changes that have taken place in the socio-economic life of these women. It is important to see a gender analysis.

Another wrong assumption is that these changes are temporary and things will return to status quo. The truth is that women are pressurized into the pat system, and they will want to maintain the present status as their confidence will be increased after taking over men's responsibility. It is important to know that this plan to return to the traditional roles is not easy. Most times women are confused, not to sure to exact their new fond positions or do they return to the old tradition. It is important that post conflict reconstruction remember to see the women side of the intervention.

The other problem that must be considered is developing a post conflict intervention in the issue of women participations in the peace making process. The same male was lords, are also peace negotiation, same men just wearing different clothes. It is important to consider the role of women during the war, in order to determine their role in post conflict. For example, if women played the role as “heroic mothers” during the war, at the end of the war, they are expected to play the role of the productive agents to replenish the nation with sins who did in the war.

Also, if they were seen as “victims of war” they are not expected to have confidence to contribute to the pence process. They are seen as weak, vulnerable and unable to articulate their needs, and may not be able to notice the change in gender roles, and understand them as empower. This is captured by Meintyes, Pillay and Turshen write “It seems likely that many (women) do not consciously internalize or conceptualize the changes in their roles, without a conscious translation, there can be no concerted efforts to defend women's opportunities and gains in peace time”.

Finally, if women are seen as “trouble makers” during the conflict time because they organized themselves and mobilize for peace, they must be part of the peace time, although they will not be taken seriously as they will be seen as acting in their capacity as domestic agents. If their efforts will lead to change of status and role, the men will not take them seriously.

The last assumption is that, women who come to peace tables are not really part of the poor group, but a representative of the elite. This argument aims to marginalize the women and justify the men peacemakers to work without the men.

Self Assessment Exercise

Explain gender roles in peace building.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is important to know that peace building must be gender based to be able to do a good job of 50% of the people. The contribution of women to the peace building process is not important that they cannot be excluded and still a viable intervention will be planned. But the dangers that must be guided against is the understanding of who women are and what roles they played during conflict.

SUMMARY

So, to enhance the participation of women in the peace process, national and international actions must discontinue describing women as victims of war belonging to the vulnerable group. The danger associated with this definition is that, they are never considered unstructured to the war, and therefore too weak and confused to make relevant input or impact in the peace process. This makes it easy for the men to claim to be the voice of the women. This is not true and can never help improve on the security of women as they cannot understand the female experience. As long as only men’s experiences are expressed at the peace table, without the participation of women, there can’t be sustainable peace building in the society.

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