

Role of Women in Peacebuilding and Post-Conflict Transformation Africa: A Catholic Church Perspective.



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Abstract

Women world over play important role in preservation of culture and nurturing of peace. However it has been observed that in times of conflict women are not represented in peace negotiation and in planning and execution of post-conflict reconstruction efforts. This paper examines the place of women in the Catholic Church and the opportunities they have to engage in conflict resolution and peace building in the African context. The paper argues that in many areas of conflict women play a major role in keeping the communities from disintegrating even in the breakdown of the social fabric. It further argues that the Catholic Church as a leading advocate for empowerment of women has a major role to ensure that they are allowed to play a more significant role in conflict resolution and peace building.

Key words: Peace negotiation; Conflict resolution; Africa; Women; Gender issues.

Paper type: Literature review

Introduction

Women in the African continent, and perhaps world over are the custodians of culture and nurturers of families, yet in times of conflict they are not represented at the peace negotiation table or in community post conflict reconstruction efforts (Puechguirbal, 2005). In other words, there has been very little uptake of women when peace is being negotiated and when communities are being reconstructed after violent conflicts. This is true in Africa and world over. According to UN Women (2002), women constitute fewer than 10% of peace negotiators globally and are only 3% of signatories to peace agreements. These figures tell of a grim tale for women because in the face of conflicts they bear the brunt of violent through rape, abduction, and enslavement. This paper argues that despite all the brunt, women have to take their right place in the context of conflicts.

The indirect and indirect deaths of millions of deaths of people in Sub Saharan Africa can be attributed to the violent conflicts that have plagued the region. These countries of the Sub Saharan region are characterized by abject poverty, inadequate service provision, political instability and retarded economic growth among others. All these directly affect women. This is because despite



the fact that these conflicts have disproportionate effects on their lives, women continue to be viewed as the glue that holds their communities together in the face of the weak social fabric created by these conflicts (Puechguirbal, 2005). This then becomes the reason that women have to actively play a role in conflict transformation and peace building (Vincent, 2001).

The Catholic church, known to be a champion for justice and peace has to step up efforts in ensuring that her women are not merely passive in the wake of conflicts but take up their roles in the transformation of societies and in turning around the war and conflict narratives that plague the world but specifically the African continent. This paper will look at the place of women in the Catholic Church and the opportunities the women have to engage in post conflict transformation and Peace building.

The Changing Role of the Woman in the Church and Society

A review of the history of the Catholic Church's, reveals that women are held in esteem within the church. It is evident that laywomen as well as women in religious institutes have made immeasurable contributions in various fields that have occasioned transformation as well as affected societal attitudes to women throughout the world in significant ways. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is presented as a model to women who seek to change the world. Mary is the archetype that reveals how, on a path of faith, grace, and fullness of life, the strength of a woman is of utmost importance in the life of society as a whole regardless of race, nationality, or social status. In her is to be found the feminine sensibility a new and unique manner of facing the needs of mankind in this present millennium (Saint John Paul II, Pope (n.d.).

The Old Testament is replete with illustrious examples of women such as Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, Rachel, Miriam, Deborah, Abigail, Ruth, Esther, and other noble women who made remarkable contribution to social transformation in their time. The Church offers these women of faith as examples of women to be emulated in the struggles of contemporary world. The women found in the New Testament are not less illustrious. It is also important to note that there is reference to prominent women in its history who have been theologians, abbesses, monarchs, missionaries, mystics, martyrs, scientists, nurses, hospital administrators, educationalists and religious sisters. Lay Catholic and religious women have most recently also variously played important roles as mediators and decision makers and their experience in building trust and encouraging dialogue cannot be overemphasized.

Chiara Lubich is one such woman that the Church offers to the women in contemporary world who have made great contribution to transforming the society (*Chiara Lubich on the new evangelization*, 2001). She was defined by Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone in his homily given at her funeral, as one of the "bright stars" of the 20th Century. She is renowned and best associated with the Focolare Movement which was founded in 1943, the year she made private vows. "It all began during the Second World War, when the city of Trent was bombed and her family was forced to leave their home. Her experience of suffering and destruction led her to work for those in need, through an intense living out of the Gospel. Pope John XXIII issued the first approval of the Focolare Movement. However the statutes were approved in 1990 by John Paul II, who granted the



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Movement permission to always have a woman at the head of the Movement.

Another initiative of Chiara was the “Gen” Movement for youth and the establishment of various communities where spirituality and unity are lived in every aspect of daily life. Chiara Lubich also dedicated her life to trying to open doors in the dialogue with other religions, meeting with Buddhist monks in Thailand, Muslims in Harlem, and Jews in Buenos Aires.” (Fides Dossier, *n.d.*). All these just goes to show that in deed the Catholic Church has embraced the important role of the woman in the life of the church.

In the past, the place of the woman was predominantly that of a housewife. In fact, if the dichotomy of public and private is to be used, the woman was for a long time subjected to the private sphere where she had a little to show and affirm her role in society. The man on the other hand was in the public sphere where he could take leadership and make decisions. The good news however, is that women and men have progressively been able to be appreciated as having equal dignity (Moser & McIwaine, 2001). Viewed from this perspective women have considerably more power, more freedom and actually have a voice in what they do or what they want to do. They have the right to get a job, vote their ability for society without only staying home, cooking cleaning and raising children albeit the little money they are paid (Simonovic, 2009).

The historical period following the Second Vatican Council witnessed a great explosion of the feminist culture. A renewed consideration of the role and characteristics of the woman brought about great changes in society and in the family, although the victories in the fight for woman’s rights (e.g. the right to vote in 1945, family rights in 1975, education, access to professional training, equal opportunity, entrance in the workplace) would take longer in becoming a reality for women. Education certainly played a key role in a greater emancipation for women, as it opened the doors to work opportunities outside the home and access to the world of culture.

The Second Vatican Council’s reflections on the female condition came at a time when the role of the woman was still eclipsed by that of the man — the father, the brother, the husband. In his *Magisterium*, St. Pope John Paul II urged the church to move from the mere recognition of the dignity of the woman to her involvement in civil and social life. In the final document of the Council, we find among other affirmations, the following:

“The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling” (John Paul II, 1988).

This came as the first important acknowledgement of the positive role of women in the church and society, more or less a summary of what had been articulated in the other documents of the council. It is this document that calls on the women in the Catholic Church to take up their rightful position in the transformation of society. In this document, St. John Paul II already is aware of the challenges that contemporary society is faced with and acknowledges that women have a pivotal role to play.

In the Second Synod of African Bishops, St. Pope John Paul II again



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acknowledged the vital role of women in the Church and in African society. The Synod reiterated its commitment to giving women a greater say in Church governance (John Paul II, 1995). Its final message acknowledged “the specific contribution of women, not only in the house as wife and mother but also in the social sphere” and recommended that the local Churches in Africa “put in place concrete structures to ensure real participation of women at appropriate levels” (John Paul II, 1995). Proposition 47 commits the Church to “greater integration of women into Church structures and decision making process”. *Africae Munus* repeats the admirable but limited affirmations of *Ecclesia in Africa*: the affirmation of “women’s dignity and rights as well as their essential contribution to the family and to society”; the condemnation of “practices that debase and degrade women in the name of ancestral tradition,...the reiteration of the fundamental equality of men and women and the duty of the Church to “contribute to the recognition and liberation of women” (Benedict IX, 2011).



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Role of women Today in Justice, Peace and Reconciliation.

The past two decades saw an increase in conversations on including women in decision making structures of peace and security. Two major milestones that can be recalled are the *Beijing declaration and platform for action* (1995) and *United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security* (United Nations, 2000) these two documents emphasized the importance of women’s equal participation in maintaining and promoting peace and security. From the aforesaid, women have been increasingly called to play important roles in the Catholic Church. It is increasingly evident that the vast majority of Catholics that participate in lay ministry are women. The importance of women to the “life and mission of the Church” was emphasized by St. John Paul II who wrote:

“The presence and the role of women in the life and mission of the Church, although not linked to the ministerial priesthood, remain absolutely necessary and irreplaceable.” (John Paul II, MM, No. 10).

In the Post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Africae Munus*, Benedict XVI (2011) calls on the African church to discern aspects of the African culture that promote the gospel values. This immediately calls to mind the participation of women in reconciliation, justice and peace. In the African culture, the value of life is synonymous to women since it is they who give forth life and it is therefore incumbent on them to protect and preserve this life.

The *United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security* (United Nations, 2000) as a landmark legal and political framework that acknowledged the impact of conflict on women, and the importance of the participation of women and inclusion of gender perspectives in decision-making, conflict resolution and peace processes, humanitarian planning, peacekeeping and post-conflict peacebuilding. It is important to note that the Beijing platform and the UNSCR 1325 happened at a time when Liberia and other countries like Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) were in the middle of civil and armed conflicts. These conflicts brought to the realization of peace actors the acceptance that men and women are affected by and respond to conflict differently. It also contributed to understanding that gender relations change substantially as a result of conflict. Even, with this, it is unfortunate that many



countries have not honored the commitments of the resolution.

Rop (2012) argues that because of this special responsibility that women have in Africa, they have a reserved special role of stopping a war or cleansing warriors after war. They are assured to be accorded this honour because they are protectors and defenders of life and since they do not take part in battlefields nor are they contaminated by the sin associated with war. In Africa, taking away human life whether accidentally or deliberately is considered a sin that requires cleansing and purification of the offender, the clan and sometimes the entire community. During these ceremonies, women play a significant role by way of specific rituals, gestures and special prayers. Amongst the Kalenjins of Kenya, this cleansing role is taken very seriously such that it is considered a taboo for men to continue with war after women's intervention (Chebet, 2011)

It is this important role that women play that made the *United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security* (United Nations, 2000) to call on states to respect women's rights and to support their participation in peace negotiations and post conflict reconstruction. This UN resolution provokes some questions that need to be addressed when we want to involve women in peace, negotiation and post conflict reconstruction including reconciliation such as:

- i) On what account are the women to be engaged in peace negotiation and reconciliation?
- ii) Do women accept to get into these processes as passive participants because they are looked at as passive victims?
- iii) Do women participate in peace negotiations and post conflict reconstruction processes because they understand the stakes they hold in the conflicts?

If recognition is granted to the role of women in war, the view that war remains the exclusive domain of men becomes fallacious. The truth is that women have always participated and been affected by war. It then is no wonder that Benedict XVI (2011) in *Africae Munus*, called on all to collectively play a role in ensuring a just, more peaceful and reconciled Africa. This call was timely in the context of exclusion of women from peace processes on the continent. It is here then that women have to ask, themselves what roles they can play in ensuring they take their rightful place in justice, peace and reconciliation. Getting women to participate in justice, peace and reconciliation processes not only promotes their dignity but also promotes the principle of the common good as provided for in the church's social teaching. This allows them to live their commitment to making the reign of God of peace a reality in the church in Africa (Orabator, 2011).

The Role of Women in Post-Conflict Transformation

Although Africa seems to have achieved considerable progress in representation of women in political processes in the wake of feminization of public decision making in the 1990's, women's representation in formal peace-building and peace processes remains low. This is highly attributable to their involvement in informal peace-building activities in their various communities which often do not get recognized.

The African Union has made policy efforts to address this disconnect



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between formal and informal peace building works both in policy and practice. According to UNIFEM (2010) women in Africa and elsewhere are the least represented at formal peace processes as signatories to peace agreements, delegates, witnesses, mediators or members of mediation teams, and members of technical committees. In the period between 1992 and 2011 16 peace agreements were signed between the warring factions within African states and the average of women signatories to those peace agreements was 0.63%. Out of the 16 states, only the DRC had women signatories to peace agreements and as mediators with the figures compared to men being 5% and 20% respectively. Kenya follows with women making up 33% of lead mediators during the 2007/2008 post conflict violence, Sierra Leone and Uganda had women making up 20% of witnesses. These figures show that the number of women participating in peace processes in a variety of official roles is significantly low or non-existent (African Union, 2016).

A number of studies have questioned the common causal factors of women's low representation in formal peace processes (Moser & McIlwaine, 2000) Those scholars contend that the factors range from the patriarchal culture of most African societies, misconstrued agency of women during times of war and peace to the under reporting of women's peace-building work at informal levels. Negotiations for peace in many African traditions was taken to be the preserve of men. Women continue to shy away from offering themselves in peace negotiations but also, there are the larger questions of the capacity to meaningfully engage. It is imperative that women are given the negotiation skills to be able to participate meaningfully in the negotiation process.

In discussing women in formal peace processes and in this case peace-building, the argument is that there needs to be more women in these formal processes as part of building a greater gender balanced and more inclusive peace. Sheckler (2002) has argued that by so doing a basis for engendering post conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation is laid. This is because most political institutions in both conflict and non-conflict situations tend to exclude women. Scholarly works index that the role of women therein, remains obfuscated by their limited engagement in initial conflict strategies, and society's persistent and bias portrayal of them as the vulnerable victims of war (Puechguirbal, 2005).

Porter (2003) has argued that peace accords lay foundation of emergent society and therefore they should capture gender perspectives so that the future is grounded on sound gender considerations. Anderlini (2000) observes that increase in women participation enhances chances that major gender issues are discussed during peace talks and peace accords. Anderlini further shows that in addition to placing gender issues more frequently on the peace agenda than men, women often introduce other conflict experiences and set different priorities for peace building. Women often are the sole voices speaking out of women's rights and concerns, forging coalitions based on their shared interests that transcend political, ethnic and religious differences and bringing a better understanding inequality to peace negotiations. This explains why Women for Women International (2010; 4) assert that:

"In times of war a woman's burdens only get heavier, her vulnerabilities more pronounced. ... despite these grim realities, she brings enormous energy, leadership and resilience to protecting families and rebuilding



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fractured communities. Yet, her essential voice remains absent from formal peace negotiations and her needs remain on the margins of reconstruction, development and poverty reduction programmes.”



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In Liberia for example, members of the Liberian Women Initiatives which was open to all women regardless of ethnic, social or religious background became informants during the regional peace talks and acted as monitors of the commitments made during the negotiations (Anderlini, 2002). Also the UN (2002) notes that in Burundi as a result of the extensive advocacy, women in Burundi united across ethnic, political and class backgrounds and developed a clear agenda and joint recommendations, many of which were included in the Burundi peace agreement.

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In times of conflict, women's roles in public and social life generally expand. El-Bushra, (2007) attributes this to the decrease in the stereotypical gender divisions of labour. This must be arguable, however, it just of might also be that during the early phases of conflict, women experienced too many barriers that it makes it hard to participate in politics. The World Bank (2005) has noted that in many conflict situations, there is hardly a functioning representative organ, government or parliament, where women become politically active. It also notes that even when political systems continue to function, the women's role often remains marginal or is co-opted by political players (World Bank, 2005). However during conflict, women's latent leadership is activated as they start to organize themselves to maintain a social fabric threatened by war and conflict.

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Lederach (1997) has also argued that despite the rights won during conflict, women's loss of opportunities to exercise political and social leadership immediately after conflict is among the most extreme and long lasting of their losses. Similarly, El-bushra (2003) observes that women managed to play political roles at the community and national levels during conflict in countries such as Uganda, but that such gender changes at the micro-level are often not accompanied by corresponding changes in political influence, and do not alter patriarchal ideologies. The church has an opportunity to prepare and enlighten women to fill the gap that politics creates to ensure that communities are not just reconstructed but also reconciled.

Although it is true that women are almost never the initiators of conflicts, are never the leaders, they have participated in all wars as actors. This is through the active role they have played in combat, either by inciting men to fight or more frequently by undertaking multiple tasks to support war (Anderlini, 2000). To become part of the army means that one has to belong to a dominant group. This sense of power that comes with belonging to a dominant group is what has led women fighters to transform their perception of themselves. It has contributed to the change of the traditional identity of women as wives and mothers to that of fighters and liberators of their countries. The acceptance of this new identity, whether and how long it will last after peace returns and its place during the process of national reconstruction, all represent a particularly difficult challenge for women and for society to handle in the post conflict period (Anderlini, 2000).

Drawing on developments during the war in Uganda, Mukiibi (2000) confirms the possibility offered by the wars of liberation of creating and accepting new roles for women and men when she notes that through active involvement



in combat situations as spies or fighters, women's perception of themselves as strong people has had an impact of liberation in the socio-economic spheres. Becker, (2006) observes that the involvement of women in Namibian national affairs and the recent changes in women's participation in structures of traditional authority are inextricably intertwined with the political changes that Namibia has experienced since the end of South Africans colonialism war. She also notes that through this changed milieu Namibian women have made important advances in decision making organs. At the local level women have sought to strengthen solidarity among them. Associations bringing together women of varied ethnic groups, and enemies of yesterday, have come into being, similarly, women have formed prayer groups in drop in centers. In these associations the women jointly undertake income generating activities, or seek to heal the physical, moral and physiological wounds of war (Anderlini, 2000).

At the national level, women have developed survival strategies and reconstruction plans for communities destroyed by war. They have engaged in lobbying belligerents to lay down arms and they organize consciousness raising campaigns to help women become more fully integrated into the decision making structures of the peace processes in which they invest more and more energy. In the face of the painful abuse of which they are victims, particularly the assaults on their bodily integrity, women have learnt to unite and organize in order to bring about a collective solution to their problems and ask for assistance or request for protection of their rights by appealing to international authority (Anderlini, 2000).

The story of the sixth clan of Somali is an intriguing tale of the power women possess when they can self-organize. The special adviser to the UN secretary General, in his foreword in the book notes that Somali women refused to be helpless victims of the war due to the clan system of Somalia. They organized themselves across the clan system to exchange experiences. They now are able to articulate their interests and interest of their community. Their determination and mobilization compelled men to allow women to the negotiation table (Timmons, 2004). It shows the strength is harnessing the hidden powers that women have within their cultural set ups to bring about lasting peace. The women in Somali did not directly cause conflict but they realized they had a role in bringing lasting peace.

Women's peace building activities refers to any action that seeks to build a culture of peace (Sheila and Meredith, 2001). A comprehensive approach towards peace building that involves both men and women would then define peace building as a process that includes gender awareness and women-empowering political, social, economic and human rights. It involves personal and group accountability and reconciliation processes which contribute to the reduction or prevention of violence. It fosters the ability of women, men, girls and boys in their own cultures to promote conditions of nonviolence, equality, justice, and human rights of all people, to build democratic institutions, and to sustain the environment. On this issue, El- Bushra (2003: 131-147) observed that:

A 'women's view of peace and peace building' is a world in which rights and democracy are respected and in which people can be content in their own identity ... women view their most important role in peace building as



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working to transform attitudes and practices, structures and competencies, to lay the groundwork for the local and global changes that permanent peace requires. Women's organizations put this commitment into effect at local, national, regional and international levels, and respond to both local conflicts and globalized wars.

According to the Rehn and Sirleaf (2002) peace agreements and reconstruction work better when women are involved in the building process and that bringing women to the peace table improves the quality of agreements reached and enhances the chances that they are implemented. A critical mass of women, and not merely token representation, however, is needed for this to work. The report recommends a minimum of 30 percent of women in peace negotiations and agreements. This is in tandem with the *United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security* (United Nations, 2000) which calls on increased women participation in peace processes.

Women are often at the epicenter of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), popular protests, electoral referendums and other citizen empowering movements whose influence has grown with the global spread of democracy. Because women, frequently outnumber men after conflict, they often drive the on the ground implementation of any peace agreement, they therefore have a responsibility to be an integral part of peace processes. The fact that women live and work close to the roots of conflict, they are well positioned to provide essential information about activities leading upto armed conflict and to record events during war, including gathering evidence at scenes of atrocities. Women can thus play a critical role in mobilizing their communities to begin the process of reconciliation and rebuilding once hostilities end.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Arising from the above discussions a number of conclusions can be made. In the first place, in all that women do, they must offer their time to promote peace, justice and reconciliation in their families, larger communities, countries and continent. For one, catholic women organizations can organize fasting and prayers for justice, peace and reconciliation for their countries as Catholic women. Secondly, it is important for women and mothers to offer an alternative education that fosters cohesion, and a culture of peace and reconciliation. As nurturers, women are responsible for most of the formative education. They have the responsibility to teach their communities that forgiveness is important, that people were created in the image and likeness of God and as such should love neighbors and that it is better to resolve conflicts peacefully. Fourth, there is need to blend in values and motives that come from the gospel and social teachings of the church. These include practice of virtue and value of human dignity and practice of solidarity.

Fifthly, there is need for greater women participation in decision making processes by providing ethical leadership that takes into consideration social justice realities of our countries. Women should be part of sanitizing our politics and bringing about the much needed political good will for creation of a culture of peace and reconciliation. Women need to support fellow women in politics given our numbers so that there can be women leaders who not only understand women issues but who can defend the church social teachings of the church.



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From the above discussion, it can be recommended that first,, there is need for deliberate efforts at addressing and combating Gender Based Violence (GBV). Secondly, there is need to coordinate and focus on mechanisms of preventing full scale violent conflicts by watching and reading the signs of conflicts closely. Women have the numbers and networks as well as the capacity to stop violent conflicts even before they happen, start peace building before violence erupts and use their numbers to transform situations of conflict. Thirdly, it is important to pay particular attention and involving young people and women in issues of social justice and especially conflict resolution mechanisms. To this end, it is important to equip women with the necessary skills to get involved in conflict resolution mechanisms such as negotiation, mediation and arbitration. By so doing it will be possible to prepare the people and especially women in the continent in addressing injustices and bringing about reconciliation, justice and peace. Finally, there is need to form well-coordinated and mutually enriching networks within the women organizations of the continent and strengthen the regional movement and make our contributions to the global network of women, making our mark in reconciliation, justice and peace.



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