

Enhancing women participation in peacebuilding and decision making processes in Zimbabwean rural communities

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Abstract

This paper sought to explore ways of enhancing women participation in peacebuilding and decision-making processes in Zimbabwean rural communities. The study is a response to the growing recognition by the United Nations Agenda on the involvement of women in peacebuilding processes. It is informed by the liberal feminist theory's concept of inclusive peacebuilding which calls for the involvement of a wide spectrum of society, including women, in socio-political and economic activities. The paper analyzed data from empirical sources and archives from the Non-Governmental Organizations and women promotional groups through the use of qualitative data instruments. Research findings revealed that women in rural Zimbabwean communities play crucial roles in peacebuilding processes such as psychological healing, mediation, conflict resolution, child care and advocacy. However, women's participation is minimal, mainly due to challenges such as the patriarchal nature of the society, lack of support from the government and the local community. The paper argues that women play important roles in peacebuilding but these roles in Zimbabwe are not recognized or strengthened. If strengthened, more lasting peace is possible, otherwise, many peacebuilding efforts are superficial and don't last long, especially if women's contributions are ignored. There is also need for changing the attitudes of the local community towards full participation of women in peacebuilding processes through education and training. The government and civil society organizations can complement such efforts with gender sensitive policies designed to support women's rights and build capacity for women's meaningful participation in peacebuilding. Such initiatives will blend Zimbabwe's efforts with the United Nation's goals.

Key Words: Peacebuilding, Rural Community, Leadership Processes; gender equity, participation, feminism.

1. Introduction and Historical background

Debates around women's roles in conflict as victims and perpetrators of violence have attracted much attention from local to the international levels. During conflicts, men and women suffer but the impact is greater on women. Women struggle to ensure peace for themselves and their families in addition to venting for the families (Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002). This has led to several high-profile international mandates and platforms emphasizing the importance of integrating women in peacebuilding. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) 1979 and the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) recommend equal access and full participation of women in power structures and their full involvement in all spheres of life including peacebuilding efforts for the prevention and resolution of conflict. These are essential for the maintenance and promotion of global peace and security (Agosin 2001).

Supporting these arguments is the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 of 2000 which calls for equal representation of women in peace and security negotiations and policy making. These documents constitute a foundation for awareness and action, and are an assertion of public responsibility for the achievement of women's equality in political, economic, social and cultural arenas, complementing and extending the preceding in various societies. However, attempts to integrate more women in peacebuilding processes face the challenges of persistent gendered power inequality which has deep roots in traditions and culture (Chege 2012). The gendered power relations in most cases prevent women from participating in decision-making processes from local to national and even international levels (Björkdahl 2012; O'Rourke 2014). Attempts to overcome the challenges have been superficial in many nations like Zimbabwe. These challenges are partly linked to lack of a clear National Action Plan (NAP) to effectively implement and oversight mechanisms. Inadequate government support and lack of awareness by women of their rights continue to pose major challenges especially for those who reside in rural areas. Further, most approaches tend to marginalize women issues and in worse scenarios, gender analysis is less likely to be adopted. Most of the nations use women as an "add-on tool or a problem-solving tool", and as such, women issues remain everyone's business and no one's responsibility (Westendorf 2013; O'Rourke 2014).

A crucial point to note is that women play an incredible role in peace work but their role is least acknowledged. Women right from the family, engage in various roles to better the community by ending violence but they still face a backlash in real peace processes as is the case in Zimbabwe (Moore and Talarico 2015).

In Zimbabwe, patriarchy serves as a social construct and remains a key obstacle to women anticipation in peace arena. This practice bestows power to the dominant and in this case man, while relegating the less powerful (women). The patriarchal barrier in this country has always relegated women to the periphery since

time immemorial. Patriarchy excludes women from the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. This means real exclusion from public life and the gendered construction of public-private dichotomy (Björkdahl 2012). Excluding women from public life should be noted, is excluding them from participating in matters affecting their lives and negating the contribution of half the population the opportunity to positively realize sustainable peace. Peacebuilding is a public arena which limits women influence on the construction of peace even though their presence can help facilitate behavior and attitude change – a path towards peace.

Given this, the paper focuses on enhancing women's participation in peacebuilding in the Zimbabwean rural communities. The qualitative method of data collection is adopted and capitalizes on interviews. A feminist lens is adopted to help view women problems from a broader perspective and find an alternative that will enhance their increased substantial representation. The purpose is to find out the level to which rural Zimbabwean women participate at the peace tables. The findings reveal that although Zimbabwean rural women actively participate in the reconstruction and knitting together of the fractured societies, they remain absent at the peace tables. However, in this isolated society, women continue to work for peace from local to international levels even though they receive less recognition. The research concludes by giving way forward and some recommendations that will help improve the situations of women in Zimbabwe.

2. Statement of the problem

The purpose of this research is to explore possible ways in which women play a greater part in peacebuilding and leadership processes within rural communities in Zimbabwe. Studies carried out to identify women's involvement in peacebuilding have established that there has been scarce documentation that analyzes the participation of women in peacebuilding activities and leadership processes in these communities. One possible reason is that attention has focused mainly on the effects of war on women. Also, since they are presumed not to be fighters, there is scant literature documented about their contribution to peacebuilding and their potential leadership capacities. Consequently, the role that women play in peacebuilding in the rural Zimbabwean communities has not been clearly defined or generally accepted, hence no serious consideration has been taken in order to enhance their participation in the building of peace and taking up national leadership positions. The scale of discrimination and violence against women in each armed conflict and the impunity with which it continues to be committed remain the central obstacle to expanding the good work being done by women as peace builders. Therefore, this study sought to explore the ways that may facilitate the participation of women in peacebuilding among rural Zimbabwean communities.

3. Assumption

The assumption here is that women should play crucial and critical roles in peacebuilding mechanisms in the rural areas of Zimbabwe. It is also assumed that during armed conflict, women and children are the most affected and they represent the majority of the population but their participation in peacebuilding has not yet been fully recognized. Rukuni (2013) highlighted that women are under-represented in most leadership and decision-making processes and as such there should be a conscious effort to recognize their potential and take them on board in peace building and leadership processes within rural communities.

4. Research questions

The research intends to answer the following questions:

1. What roles are women playing in peacebuilding processes in rural Zimbabwe?
2. What challenges do women face in their attempts to participate in peacebuilding processes in Zimbabwean rural communities?
3. How can women's participation in peacebuilding in rural Zimbabwe be enhanced?

5. Significance of the study

The study adds to the existing literature in the field of gender and on the call by various international platforms to include women in peace, security and policy-making processes. The publication makes visible the potential role of rural women in peacebuilding and leadership processes. The study is important in that it will inform and guide policy-makers in coming up with programs that will enhance women to realize their potential and capacities in peacebuilding and leadership processes in the Zimbabwean rural communities. It is hoped that the research findings will influence a gendered perspective in peacebuilding as well as a rethinking about women's participation in the decision-making process at all levels in Zimbabwe and the region as a whole. Furthermore, the research findings may be useful to various organizations and groups that want to lobby for policy change on women empowerment and involvement in peacebuilding activities in rural communities.

6. Literature review and theoretical foundations of the study

This section examines literature related to women's participation in peacebuilding. It discusses theories that inform the need for promoting women's participation in peacebuilding and looks at some of the challenges women face in building peace in their communities. In particular, it explores peacebuilding from a gender perspective; factors that deny women's participation in peacebuilding and why women should be involved in peacebuilding processes. The literature review identifies the gap in literature since most of the previous studies done by other researchers in Zimbabwe focused on the impact of chimurenga [war of liberation] on women and not much has been done about women's participation in peacebuilding especially in the rural Zimbabwean communities.

6.1 Feminist perspective

Feminism is a worldview that aims at creating a socially just world particularly for women and other oppressed groups in the society (Hesse-Biber 2010). This worldview perceives patriarchy as a major obstacle in realizing the full potential of human being. They question the existing cultural values and norms that define men and women based on biology and gender in society, thus allowing for an alternative outlook to live. Feminism strongly believes in education and advocacy as the major empowerment tools for women advancement. Further, they distinguish the diversities and accomplishments of women in relation to men (Kirst-Ashman 2007).

This worldview was adopted in this paper because of its strong belief that men and women potentials are limited by gender (Abbott, Wallace & Taylor, 2005). Therefore, much emphasis is laid on equal participation of women at all levels of society including peacebuilding. An important point to note is that women are not a homogeneous group and therefore, making generalizations mean missing out on an important aspect. There are different strands of feminism but this study adopted liberal feminism in its quest to examine the situation of women and peacebuilding in Zimbabwe.

6.2 Liberal feminism

Liberal feminism focuses on equality. They view women submission as deeply rooted in customary and legal practices that deny them an opportunity to explore the public world (Leburu and Phetlho-Thekisho 2015). Women occupy the private sphere and are denied access to the world of knowledge – public realm where power and authority are exercised (Björkdahl 2012). Peacebuilding is a political contention for power relation which results in gender manipulation (Björkdahl 2012) and exclusion to ensure submissiveness to the dominant and powerful group. The view that women are physically and intellectually weaker is an argument with no basis except the social-cultural justifications. The fact that one is born human does not confer superiority to one sex over the other and therefore; liberalists notes that men and women have the same rational capacities and capabilities for the fact that they were born human beings. Equality in this respect should not be confused to mean uniformity. However, equality is about women being provided with the same opportunities as men to enable them realize their full potential and contribute positively to peacebuilding initiatives (Abbott *et al.*, 2005; Pierre and Martin 1995).

Furthermore, liberal feminism places a high premium on rationality, autonomy, and choice. Reason is a crucial aspect of moral and political autonomy. Therefore, women's exclusion from the public sphere inhibits their full capacity to develop and exercise their rationality (McLaren, 2002). This partly explains why peace has remained a dream in many African nations including Zimbabwe. Full participation and inclusion of women in peace processes promote women rights and legal equality for women which is mandatory under the international framework (Anderlini 2007).

When men and women work together, there are high chances of addressing affirmative as well as political issues without discrimination. Further, women by nature are good nurturers and therefore, they bring new perspectives and knowledge to peace processes which facilitate conflict prevention and focus on peacebuilding (Anderlini 2007). This promotes feelings of freedom, justice and peace in any nation. Moreover, Liberalists believe that biological differences should not be the determining factor for humanity but their capacity to reason (Leburu and Phetlho-Thekisho 2015). Therefore, the inclusion of women into peacebuilding initiatives should not be based on the differences but their ability to reason. Consequently, liberal feminism contends that relations between the two should not be gendered. The gendered power differences in public spheres should not be crucial in determining the levels of participation, access to resources, and opportunities (Abbott *et al.*, 2005), but experiences and capabilities of women with respect to the human right should be of critical importance.

Payne (2005) points out that liberalists efforts for equality between men and women should go beyond caring responsibilities to include workplaces, which until recently had been dominated by men across the world, especially in Zimbabwe. Anderlini (2007) adds that usual business will not change unless some force is used to allow active and substantial participation of women in peace processes. This is possible through eradicating the main source of inequality and injustices based on sex and gender roles. This will allow for the transformation of

the society and the existing gendered power hierarchies to provide equity and equal access to political, social, and economic power (Björkdahl 2012).

In Zimbabwe, the adoption of the international frameworks like the Beijing platform for women, the Millennium Development Goals (2000) currently sustainable Development Goals of 2015, the UNSCR 1325/2000 have seen an improvement in the status of women where they can now participate in politics including peacebuilding. However, it is not clear whether women participation is a genuine one or whether women are being used as a problem-solving tool or it is what Westendorf (2013) refers to as “add women and stir”. Even though Zimbabwe government supports gender equality, efforts to achieve women’s equal participation are yet to bear many fruits in lives of women especially in rural areas as evident from interview findings.

Given this, there is need for Zimbabwe government to adopt a clear National Action Plan (NAP) as regards implementation of UNSCR 1325 to aid in comprehensively coordinating policy coherence and consistency and ownership to allow for a re-think on the concept of gender (Westendorf 2013).

The conclusion is that equality on paper between men and women should be accompanied by structural changes and a commitment by all to ensuring the implementation of what is legally constituted on paper. It also follows that gender should be made an integral part of peacebuilding processes. This will facilitate gender to be everyone business and everyone responsibility.

6.3 Advances in International Standards: Women’s Equality and Peace

The women’s International League for Peace and Freedom [WILPF], along with various other women’s organizations, took a leading role in the activities surrounding the UN’s International Decade for Women from 1975-1985. General themes were formulated under equality, development and peace which were aimed at developing a concerted effort by the UN and associated NGOs to advance women’s legal equality, political participation and involvement at all levels of economic development and decision-making processes. It was in the arena of economic development that the negative consequences of gender inequality and gender-biased cultural practices became so evident. From that time onwards, issues of advancing the roles and participation of women in the UN system and setting standards to increase their participation in the politics and economies of the member states achieved wider public attention. An important development was earmarked by the adoption of the UNSCR 1325 in 2000 which emphasized on women, peace and security. This resolution gave much consideration to women in the field of peace knowledge and security (Reardon and Jenkins 2015). It was a defining moment for women as hope was instilled in their lives. However, a major challenge has remained since women continue to be targeted during and after conflicts. What then could be the problem? Why are we not emancipating women from conflicts and have their voices heard on peace tables? These are questions that warrant further research. Adoption of the UNSCR 1325 is a good move to answer the raised questions. It is also surprising that even those countries that are signatories to the UNSCR 1325 lack a clear National Action Plan (NAP) to comprehensively implement the resolution. In addition, we recognize the efforts of adopting a gendered language into the resolution. An important question to raise would be that does this solve the issue? Gender has not been fully mainstreamed into key areas and aspects of peace operations – a reason why women voices are still behind the bars. Furthermore, UNSCR 1325 emphasizes on women participation in the peace processes but what kind of participation remain an answered question (Westendorf 2013).

There is need for substantive and not descriptive representation of women if their needs are to be addressed. Adding women makes gender a usual business and allows them to be used as an ‘add-on tool’ or a problem-solving mechanism as Mazurana, Raven-Roberts and Parpart (2005) points out. It is from this background, therefore, where the discussion from this research was generated and illustrated now with special emphasis being employed on enhancing women participation in peacebuilding and leadership processes within rural communities in Zimbabwe.

6.4 Challenging the Patriarchal Paradigm: Gender Equality and power.

Throughout recorded history, in most human societies, some form of patriarchy has prevailed, reinforced by traditions and cultural values derived from systems of male dominance. It has been so commonly and continually practiced as to appear natural rather than a human-constructed social order that is both changing and changeable. In its present forms, patriarchy has become more of an ideology and belief system in the minds of many women and men. This ideology asserts the superiority of all males to all females and arranges this fundamental inequality in what Pratto, Stewart and Zeineddine (2013) refer to as a hierarchal order. This hierarchical order continues to privilege men at the expense of females and manifests in all spheres of life. Based on this hierarchy, power is vested in the hands of the dominant group and in this case man – a reason why women always play the role of second-class human beings. Although greater advances have been made to increasingly incorporate greater voices of women in peacebuilding (Ramnarain 2014), a gap still exists as women at the

grassroots level continue to be marginalized. Women perform greater roles in restoring the community but the patriarchal natures of the societies continue to relegate their work.

An important point to note is that women constitute majority of the population and therefore, negating them an opportunity to actively participate in building peace is denial of sustainable peace to the whole nation. Patriarchy has been cited as the ultimate cause of all abuses of women human rights including inadequate participation in peacebuilding processes (Anderlini 2007). Zimbabwe is a patriarchal nation and therefore, patriarchal attitudes are deeply entrenched in the society. This determines the existing gendered power relationships between men and women in relation to important aspects of life. Westendorf (2013) further posits that the walls of patriarchy are deeply entrenched right from the global levels and this poses a challenge since such walls cannot be easily destroyed. Bearing this in mind, this research challenged the patriarchal paradigm by formulating statues which can be used in enhancing women participation in peacebuilding and leadership processes in Zimbabwe.

Feminists' contributions were used and integrated into this research. Giddens (1990) uphold the view that women contribute important skills, perspectives, and insights into conflict resolution and peace building activities. Their insights stipulate that any peace process that ignores the needs and roles of women is unnatural and therefore inherently unstable. Further, Björkdahl (2012) adds that absence of women in peacebuilding creates a gap despite the international empowerment strategies. Their transformational power and potentials help to keep families together and call for an end to conflicts. Exclusion of women from peacebuilding processes – decision making, war making to peacemaking has far-reaching consequences for the nation as a whole. This is evident from a nation like Zimbabwe where the contributions of women to building peace remain behind the bars – a possible explanation as to why the nation still lags behind. It is from this background that the thrust of this research was formulated with the idea of enhancing women participation in peacebuilding and leadership processes within rural communities in Zimbabwe.

7. Discussion of major findings

The key argument of the findings was that women in rural communities are playing crucial roles in peacebuilding processes especially at the grassroots level through different activities such as providing basic needs for the community, child care, psychological healing, advocating and lobbying for human rights and genders issues. Although the endless efforts to build peace, their participation is not yet fully recognized due to patriarchal nature of society which has its roots in the traditions and culture of the society. Patriarchy results in unequal power asymmetries which create a conducive environment for unequal relationships between men and women in any society. Inadequate support from the government and community, as well as sexual violence that occurs during and after armed conflicts is also challenges that women are faced with i.e. the terror imposed on women during the rural by-elections in Bikita and Hurungwe in 2000 and 2015 respectively.

The main argument is that majority of women have been excluded in participating in peacebuilding processes in the Zimbabwean rural communities. Women's contribution in peacebuilding is not defined or generally accepted. With the UNSCR 1325 in place, Zimbabwe is yet to adopt effective measures to enhance women participation in peacebuilding processes. From the participants' responses, it is worthwhile to conclude that the National Action Plan (NAP) either remains superficial or it is yet to be drawn since; there are no clearly defined processes and measures that allows for the active participation of women in all the spheres and levels of society including peacebuilding. Women represent the majority of the population anywhere and especially in the rural areas, therefore; their contribution in peacebuilding would unlock ways of achieving sustainable peace and development. Women especially the elderly, actively involve themselves in the mediation and conflict resolution each time conflicts arise in their communities. However, even with their contribution not being noticed, women never cease to work for peace in the community.

In this study women's contribution to peacebuilding shows that they can perform even the work that is specifically given to men through socialization. The findings support the Feminists approach of equal participation which states that all the stakeholders should work together to address affirmative as well as political issues if real peace is to be achieved (Abbott, Wallace & Tailor, 2005). Therefore, women should be involved at all levels of the hierarchy for peacebuilding to be successful in the Zimbabwean rural communities. Participants pointed out the cultural factors and the patriarchal system as the major challenges for their active participation in peacebuilding. Under this system, women are viewed as inferior to men. Their work is confined to the private sphere where they engage in such activities like cooking and taking care of children. On the contrary, men are allowed to explore the public sphere where all the decision-making within the family and in socio-economic and political activities take place. The theory of liberal feminism states that patriarchal systems deny women an opportunity to participate in socio-economic and political affairs. Women have been socialized to believe that they are inferior to men - a view that they have internalized and continue to tolerate and accommodate (Damba, Lunga and Musarurwa 2013). This explains why women in the rural areas are being left out from peacebuilding processes.

8. Conclusion, and recommendations

In order to strengthen women's participation in peacebuilding, there is a need for the government together with civil society to come up with different programs that will capacitate women participation in peacebuilding processes. The government should put emphasis on the policies that support women's involvement in peacebuilding for them to be effective. In addition, there is a need to change the mind-sets of the community through education and training and making sure that women's rights are respected during and after armed conflict.

Transforming mind-sets: People tend to value their cultures and this has remained in their mind-sets and the practice is passed on from generation to generations. In order for people to change the way they view women in rural areas, there is a need to transform their mind-sets through intensive training and education. If people are still having the perceptions of considering women as inferior to men and confining them to the private sphere, women's participation in peacebuilding will always remain minimal, despite the major role which they have to play in peacebuilding processes. Therefore, there is a need for transformative peacebuilding changes.

Training and education: The study also showed the critical importance of civil society organizations in promoting gender-sensitive peacebuilding. Civil society organizations in rural communities need to remain independent and free from political influence. They need to continue lobbying and advocating for women's participation in peacebuilding and leadership processes through training and education. There is a need to train and educate both women and men that women have the right to participate in all levels of the society especially peacebuilding and leadership processes. Education will instil integration which helps rural communities to have a different perception of how they view women as equal partners.

Formulation of gender sensitive policies: The research findings also highlighted the importance of relevant gender sensitive policies. This means that the government and civil society organizations should come up with policies that protect and promote women's rights during and after armed conflict. This will empower women to be involved in politics and choose what they would want to work for in the political arena. As the research findings have shown, as long as women are still facing sexual violence in the community, they will fear to participate in peace building processes. Therefore, the issue of women's security in peacebuilding work becomes significant and paramount. This will be made a reality when the UNSCR 1325 is effectively implemented and closely monitored.

National Action Plan (NAP): Resolutions alone cannot achieve behavioural change, change in state-level policy and implementation system is important. Therefore, there is the need for the government to adopt and/or strengthen the National Action Plan on the implementation of the UNSCR 1325 of 2000. This will allow for comprehensive coordination of policy coherence and consistency, raise awareness and instil a sense of ownership, accountability and monitoring and evaluation of the resolutions implemented to allow the rethinking of the whole concept of gender.

Need for gender mainstreaming: Gender mainstreaming means moving from the known to the unknown to unravel the 'hidden' in the society. A clear understanding of gender as a concept is very crucial. This will help the society to understand the need for supporting women explore the public space. Also, setting up gender focal points, ministries, and departments of gender within various structures and organizations of society is key. This facilitates an understanding of why the 2/3 representation at all levels is important. Setting up gender focal points may not in itself realize the goal, but making gender everyone's business and everyone's responsibility will help to unravel the goal of sustainable peace.

Need to embrace the principle of good governance: Embracing good governance is the guiding principle and lays the foundation for sustainable peace. This will ensure respect for human dignity, rights, and the rule of law to strengthen democratization and promote transparency, and accountability by public administration. In addition, recognizing the role of women in peacebuilding and reconstruction processes and not to look at women as "homemakers" is necessary to challenge the deeply rooted masculine norm of culture in the society.

9. Areas for further research

Based on the major findings from this research the following areas have been identified and recommended for further research;

- The role of stereotyping in peacebuilding
- Governmental obligations in enhancing peacebuilding in rural communities
- The importance of education and training in peacebuilding.
- Gendered dimensions in peace studies

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