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Gender and power: Women's leadership in the prevention and management of conflicts in Africa

ABSTRACT. This paper describes the role and the place of the woman in African society, with particular focus on the issues of leadership, peace and security. Although women in Africa are more numerous than men, their position is not an enviable one. Thus this work will attempt to describe the causes which prevent the female kind from coming to the fore and being truly equal to men. In order to achieve that aim, one should consider the place of the woman, not only in the traditional society but also in what one sees as the contemporary realities of Africa. The author demonstrates that in most African countries, women had long been excluded from enjoying political rights, and that they have gained such entitlement only recently. Among the reasons which would account for this absence of women in the realm of leadership, one should draw attention to the patriarchal model of authority one acquires as a child and the burden of ancestral tradition which hinges upon the primacy of the male. There are also the additional burdens imposed over time by religions, which had always relegated the woman to the background. The woman has always been associated with the weaker sex, while being the one who gave life. The scope of this paper is limited to the presence of women in the public sphere, that is to say to their leadership in the affairs of peace and security, where women have or may have a certain influence. Certain difficulties encountered by African women with respect to leadership are also experienced by women in other parts of the world. With a few exceptions, all societies have been and continue to be governed by the same principles of exclusion. In Africa, just as everywhere else, there is no need for profound studies to conclude that feminist literature is not particularly abundant. This paper represents an exploration of a subject of no minor importance, namely the leadership of women in preventing and management of conflicts in Africa. Nevertheless, it is limited to a general view and does not analyse specific cases in each of the African countries.

KEYWORDS: leadership, gender, man, woman, power, peace, security, conflicts, Africa

1. Introduction: Women's leadership in the African context

The position of the African woman has been the object of numerous and long debates in our so-called modern society, and a notion which involves numerous prejudices. Prejudices which in fact are invalid due to the lack of knowledge of the African tradition and its values. Consequently, it is often though that the African woman represents no value

outside her household; hence she is not considered otherwise than a simple domestic. And yet the position of the woman within the traditional systems of Africa depends in general on the societies, regions, ethnic and religious customs, and on the individual traits of the women themselves. For this reason, they play such a considerable role that no man, regardless of his rank in the society, could deprive them of their rights. Therefore traditionally, in the domain of economy, they possessed more power than men, insofar as they had their own fields which permitted them to produce and amass: assets fell to them directly. They also exercised rational and operational control of everyday life as the head of the family entrusted them with the amount of grain which was supposed to serve as daily nourishment. In terms of structure, such an organisation was characteristic of the African tradition. Women could also own personal possessions which enabled them to enjoy a certain autonomy. In addition, they held magisterial powers and, within a society, controlled purely female organisations of professional and religious nature, in a more or less discreet fashion. Also, they were in charge of seeds and sowing, being traditionally considered a symbol of fecundity; by virtue of this there existed a permanence and continuity in the production, which necessarily resulted in a fruitful season. Thus contrary to the prejudices of which traditional African society was the object, it should be noted that African society represented a framework in which the woman played a very eminent role despite a status which presupposed her submissiveness, ready to respond to the demands of the family, which were her primary concern. Although considered as the one whose main function was to procreate, the African woman enjoyed a privileged position within the society and was perceived as a model. Also, history teaches us that with regard to politics "women played a great role, being the mother or wife to the king".[1] For this purpose "whole detachments of men were assigned to guard the queen-mother" which betokened the regard in which men held women. This is also why in certain African kingdoms "the queen-mother, the mainstay of tradition, had its royal court just as her son, with men as courtiers". This demonstrates the importance that the tradition afforded to women and shows clearly that men were also in the service of women.

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[1] Which confirms the adage saying that behind every great man (leader) there stands a woman. Although women are rarely in the foreground, they direct the piece, hidden behind the curtain.

Nonetheless, as in all social structures, flaws remain in evidence in many respects. They should be taken into account in order to shed light on what may have constituted an obstacle in the exercise of the functions of women in the traditional African society. At a certain point in history, women realised that the privileges that have been accorded to them by tradition were in fact just a minute portion of those they should have exercised. Consequently, with the rise of African states to independence, African women seek to make substantial gains on an individual basis, understanding that the privileges of traditions are actually veiled forms of alienation of their liberty, which will lead to the awakening of their awareness in all areas of socio-economical and cultural life (see Bourdieu, 1998). They will realise that in fact they were not as advantaged as it seemed to them in the traditional organisation, in which, all things considered, they were still remarkably empowered. As a result, they have quickly come to see the phenomenon of forced marriage as a system in which they had no right to decide, as they were coerced to wed someone for whom love was never the ultimate sentiment (see Mianda, 1995). The conclusion was therefore clear: they were married without their consent, which enormously reduced their freedom of expression, the ideal form of which would have allowed them to give their assent, just as men did. The women thus saw what could have been their most fundamental right, to leave as if nothing happened. In these conditions, they demanded the freedom to choose their spouses in order to live in true and sincere love. Women thus relied on the universal principles of human rights so that may attain success in the struggle for their cause. As a by-product, female leadership will emerge in time. Still, when this leadership begins to become a reality in our societies, there is yet a long way to go before the woman will genuinely flourish.

2. The involvement of women in the prevention and management of conflicts in Africa

If one sets out from the observation that women and children represent more than 75% of the total number of persons displaced following crises or violent conflicts on the African continent, it is also evident that African women have a particular role to play in the management of conflicts, especially with respect to issues addressed after conclusion of a conflict. It is necessary that they should be a part of the processes of

negotiating and reconstructing peace. A number of initiatives of African women shows that they constitute a positive force which is often ignored or neglected.[2] So a range of actions is still possible in which the potential of African women would be capable of playing a positive and a significant role in the consolidation of peace. Women, just as men, have a great interest in re-establishing peace in their communities. Unfortunately, in view of their economic and political marginalisation in the African society, women are rarely in the position to play the effective role they should play (see Bourdieu, 1998). It is therefore crucial to recall the position women occupied with respect to preventing conflicts or their peaceful resolution in traditional Africa, to show the difficult situation of women during conflicts, to study the role that African woman can play today in seeking a peaceful solution to the conflicts in progress across the African continent, so as to advance recommendations which would permit the African woman to make their contribution to the consolidation of peace and peaceful resolution of conflicts (Giesing, 2006). Although the traditional society had been organised and structured in a way that favoured cohesion and peaceful coexistence, it suffered from time to time from conflicts, just as every human society: conflicts between individuals, within one family, between different families or inhabitants of different territories. In order to address such situations, communities had a number of well-structured mechanisms at their disposal in which women generally played a major role. The system assigned the woman the role of a privy counsellors to her husband and an active role in the consolidation of solidarity and social harmony in general. Education in the spirit of traditional values was a priority, and children learned it from the members of their family. Through story-telling, proverbs and at various suitable occasions, they were taught the virtues of peaceful cohabitation (see Ekiyort, 2008). Notably, such virtues included temperance, solidarity, respect for the truth, the significance of work and effort, respect for the hierarchy, the meaning of honesty, decency and modesty, tolerance, the meaning of goodness and kindness,

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[2] "The Women, Peace and Security Agenda is now recognized internationally, but there are still challenges. To realize its transformative potential, it is time to move from commitments to accomplishments. Governments, the United Nations, civil society, the private sector, and other actors must implement commitments across all thematic areas. Ensuring a gender perspective and women's participation, protection, and rights is critical, including in prevention and disarmament, protection in displacement settings, peacekeeping, policy-making, and reconstruction."

love of one's neighbour, respect for life, etc. The education of children was a task reserved for the woman, therefore it was she who played a major role in the communication of those values to the new generations. Severe sanctions were inflicted on those whose ill conduct disturbed the peace and harmony of a community. Those sanctions may have ranged from payment of a fine to expulsion of the individual from the community or, in exceptional cases, to capital punishment. Men were those who chiefly took up arms and fought. And though women rarely were at the roots of armed conflict, many of those saw a substantial number of women take part in the combat. Certain women also played a highly negative role, participating directly in a conflict, or seeking to prove that they were equal to men. Women and girls often fell victim to sexual violence through rape and humiliation: they were forced into prostitution or had to carry unwanted children, not to mention infections with sexually transmitted diseases. The violence pursued them into the refugee camps as well, in which they were often made into sexual slaves of the militia or other armed factions. Unfortunately, in an increasing number of cases, even the peacekeeping forces happened to commit rapes or coerce women into prostitution.[3] On June 19th, 2008, the Security Council of the United Nations was compelled to adopt a new resolution which stipulates "immediate and complete cessation by all parties to armed conflict of all acts of sexual violence against civilians." In the case of war or violent conflict, unequal redistribution of resources, unlawful actions and disregard of international humanitarian rights lay a heavy burden on women. In addition, they are particularly affected in a number of war-ravaged African countries where human rights count for nothing. Gender violence is the order of the day, while any commitment to promoting economic and social welfare of disadvantaged groups is virtually absent. Violent conflicts, with the accompanying destabilisation, the displacement of populations and destruction of infrastructure exert an effect on the affected communities, which nevertheless varies

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[3] For example, United Nations peacekeeping missions face significant challenges, especially in view of increasing number of conflicts with the participation of non-state actors and complex mandates adopted by the Security Council. At present, peace operations are not only ensure the safety of civilians, but also monitor and enforce human rights. The situation becomes complicated when the peacekeepers and international civilian staff also happen to commit war crimes and acts of misconduct against the people they were mandated to protect. Those which are probably the most widely covered in the media are exploitation and sexual violence.

depending on the sex. Moreover, forced exile and the ensuing drain of people of skill and competence hamper social and economic development of the African continent. The exact scale and the nature of injustices and crimes against humanity, as well as the loss of human resources require to be precisely assessed and evaluated. There is no need to dwell upon the vulnerability of African women who are faced with armed conflicts. The crimes to which women are constantly subject are well known, even though they do not make the headlines (see Diallo, 1978). These hate crimes are a reflection of the negation of the woman as a political subject. War brutally reveals the aftermath of the tyranny and discrimination which women experience within their families and communities during the times of peace. Peace and development are inherently linked; there is no development without peace and no peace will prove durable if it is not supported by development (see Poulton & Youssouf, 1999). It is impossible to build lasting peace while forgetting about a major part of the population. If war is often the affair of men, peace is the domain of women. Perhaps this is not an automatic association, but the experience shows that discussion and mediation allow women belonging to rival groups to find a common ground of understanding. Thus they are a force for peace and reconciliation, and have to be more integrated in the peace process. Preventing armed conflict is the best parameter of peace and security in Africa. And building peace means preventing war. The women have a decisive role in promoting tolerance and non-violence, as they provide the first lessons in life. They are capable of manifesting their influence on their spouses by introducing integrity and respectability in their households. Women can also engage their brothers and sisters into the movement for peace by organising educational courses, seminars and awareness campaigns. In all African countries, women constitute a substantial majority, and in certain regions there are but women left after the wars. It would be perfectly natural to say that women give life and that they are best placed to appreciate its value and know how to preserve it better.

3. Female leadership in the governance of undertakings aimed at maintaining peace in Africa

Positive examples demonstrate that in general women take active part in movements for peace, both in domestic and foreign organisations

gathering women. African women enjoy moral authority in view of their role as mothers. In 2008, the violence which broke out during a political meeting in Conakry showed Guineans that peace is not something naturally granted but a value simultaneously political and cultural, which needs to be striven for and consolidated every day. From the first manifestations of violence, women became the principal target, although they were merely participants in a political action seeking peaceful solution to the socio-economical crisis in the country. Every time social harmony and human life was threatened, African women were the last line of defence against the deadly madness of men, being a living proof to the spontaneous hospitality and solidarity which went beyond any ethnic or even religious considerations (see Monod, 2012). Obviously, this does not eliminate hatreds which still persist, but those few positive actions showed that it is possible to live together and build a future. Everywhere in Africa, women have played a very active role during peace negotiations. On an international level, they launched the initiative "Partners in peace" to demand the implementation of the Lusaka Agreements and thus to create the opportunity of their incorporation in the peace process.[4] The Platform for Action of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995), states as follows: "while entire communities suffer the consequences of armed conflict and terrorism, women and girls are particularly affected because of their status in society and their sex". In October 2000, Security Council of the United Nations adopted an innovative resolution (1325),[5] which recognized that maintaining and promoting peace and security necessarily requires the participation of women in decision-making, and called upon all actors to adopt a perspective which would take that element into account. Additionally, the resolution required from the UN that it raised the number of women

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[4] The Lusaka Agreement between the countries of Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Namibia, Uganda, Rwanda and Zimbabwe, seeks to bring an end to the hostilities within the territory of the DRC.

[5] Resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security adopted by The Security Council at its 4213th meeting, on October 31st, 2000. The resolution reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. Resolution 1325 urges all actors to increase the participation of women and incorporate gender perspectives in all United Nations peace and security efforts.

among its special envoys around the world. The international community thus recognizes that it should increase the participation of women in settling conflicts and to take into account the male-female issue in all analyses, policies and programmes devised with a view to overcoming conflicts and establishing peace. However, at an individual level, various state entities do not always know how to translate that international consensus into specific measures. The nature and the causes of African political crises, the persistence of structures which sustain subordinated position of the African women as well as the failure of the world as an entirety to subscribe to actual equality between men and women have made it impossible to bring about a lasting peace. Among other things, African crises reflect the departure from the rural world once based on subsistence agriculture in favour of a concept of development geared towards commerce and services. It should never be forgotten that Africa is a profoundly rural continent. It is in this agricultural world, in which women have been doing almost all of the work, that one finds most of the victims of war. Preventing war means going back to rurally oriented policies by increasing the financing of agriculture, supporting women living in such areas and enhancing production capacity. Peace begins of its own, and in general one does not give more that one has, therefore if a woman does not have peace in her heart, there is no peace she could offer to others. Still, experience has shown that women find inner peace much faster than men, as research has clearly demonstrated that conflicts affect women and men differently. Women need to be helped to find that inner peace, because they are capable of giving it to others. In order to do that, one should more effectively include women in peace processes by advocating their participation in official peace negotiations, in view of the fact that women encounter much opposition when it comes to participation in such proceedings. Increasing female participation in conflict settlement and formulating decisions, in particular by granting them decision-making capacities with respect to peace negotiations and national reconciliation is a matter of utmost importance. Naturally, this entails better training of women in the techniques of negotiations, by means of a fairer and better education for girls. Hence strengthening the competences of girls through education is a necessity. One should introduce policies which would enable them to attend secondary education in greater numbers and pursue academic studies until completion. Furthermore, one should supplement it with programmes

which would give them the means and the confidence required to allow them to spread the culture of peace. Another aspect is endorsing development of social, political and cultural environments which support peace-oriented efforts of women, and ensure permanence of achievements in terms of the equality of sexes (see Dauphin & Senac, 2012). One should also strive to boost the economic power of women by expanding their access to funding and loans, as well as management of public affairs and information. On top of that, one should raise the awareness of female military personnel and the spouses of officers, by encouraging them to play an active role in preventing conflicts and put them in touch with specific initiatives undertaken with a view to building peace. Particular emphasis should be placed on disarmament and reduction of military spending by the governments, so that the financial resources thus released may be channelled to education in general and education in culture of peace in particular. All media should become fully involved in favour of development and promotion of women, encouraging artists and media professionals to make their contribution in advocating the culture of peace. Also, by implementing initiatives aimed at reinforcing the capacities and the power of the civil society, a situation needs to be created where women fully participate in its bodies, as enhancing such capacities, coupled with appropriate education and establishment of women's forums are essential if they are to partake in the reconstruction after a conflict (see Ekiyor, 2008). Civil society has therefore a superior role to play in building democracy and fostering respect for human rights. Albeit limited, women's organisations proved themselves to be privileged bodies, which offer the possibilities and opportunities to acquire and develop competences, knowledge and resources. These organisations mobilize themselves, taking action in conjunction with public authorities and running anti-violence campaigns, unjust or oppressive laws, poverty and domestic violence. Such activities contribute considerably to peace. Thanks to them, women firmly assert their readiness to take up the struggle against wars and violence of all kinds as well as come forward with solutions. Nowadays, the international community recognizes the tremendous contribution of women in peace-building processes, and one notices that the international community designs to include women, in systematic and significant fashion, in preventing and resolving conflicts, in post-conflict reconstruction efforts and consider them as fully-fledged partners in the formal and unofficial processes of

resolving conflicts and peace negotiations. Studies confirm the crucial and decisive role that African women have played and can play with respect to preventing and resolving conflicts as well as in promoting the culture of peace while relying on traditional methods. Sub-Saharan Africa is not only a geographical region that has been most severely affected by extreme poverty, it is also an area that greatly suffers from the ravages of war (see also Diallo, 1978). Feminisation of poverty and the violence following in the wake of armed conflicts should induce the international community as well as African countries to rethink peace and security from the feminine perspective. The parameters of peace should be redefined, in that they should be geared towards preventing rather than resolving conflicts, by demonstrating better international will and commitment, by enabling genuine partnership with the civil society, building durable peace in which justice is respected, by adopting an approach to peace and security which is based on female leadership. The latter should in itself be reconsidered by taking into account that women living in a rural environment constitute the largest part of the African population.

The position of women in Africa in all areas of life depends on the economic and social development of particular countries, as well as on beliefs and cultural traditions. The deterioration of social and economic welfare of women in Africa is also due to the countless political and armed conflicts. Yet another factor is the shortage of sufficient educational infrastructure, which in its turn leads to the situation where the priority in the matters of education is given exclusively to boys, who are called to play the most important roles in the African society. The Constitutive Act of the African Union, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action of 1995 all contributed to the adoption of the Maputo Protocol.[6] The Maputo Protocol, which becomes the first official document devoted to women's right in international law of Africa underlines the important role of women in preserving African values. The document commits all African countries to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and harmful practices directed against

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[6] The protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples` Rights of Women in Africa, known as the Maputo Protocol was adopted by the African Union in Maputo, 2003. The instrument guarantees comprehensive rights to women, including the right to take part in the political life on a par with men, to be in charge of their reproductive health, and stipulates an end to female genital mutilation.

them[7]. According to the protocol, any action that has a negative impact on the fundamental rights and liberties of woman at any given level is deemed a harmful practice.

Conclusions

There are numerous definitions of leadership and each represents a viewpoint which is defended or prioritised by its adherents. The notion of leadership may be defined as having the ability of directing and permanently mobilising a group of individuals towards attainment of a specific goal. This paper is concerned with the analysis of female leadership in preventing and managing conflicts in Africa, a leadership which means the ability of women to influence effectively their social environment. This influence may originate in the official prerogative, if the executive function within an organisation is hierarchical in nature, but it may also be informal, if the essence of the influence is not associated with the formal structures of social organisation. Modern theories of distributed leadership see it as a collective phenomenon, seeing that it has ceased to be a quality of one single individual. In reality, leadership has never been an individual phenomenon, because even in the past the leader was always surrounded by counsellors, secret or official ones. Despite that evolution, African men find it extremely difficult to let themselves be influenced by the female charisma while African women themselves experience great difficulty in surrendering to the leadership of a woman. Still, the leadership that they do not exercise the public sphere is manifested elsewhere. Moreover, this is not leadership in the sense of a chain of command or coercive authority but rather a synergy of action expressed in the respect for human dignity and in being "female" Contrary to the usual misconception, female leadership is mobiliz-

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[7] In this case, The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, is often described as an international bill of rights for women. Consisting of a preamble and 30 articles, it defines what constitutes discrimination against women and establishes an agenda for national action to end such discrimination. The Convention defines discrimination against women as "any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field."

ing its forces. There are no privileged categories involved; they are all categories of women who have to identify themselves with common issues which are often linked to discrimination and their marginalisation. From this standpoint, empowering women with autonomy would make them collectively efficacious and thus capable of taking charge with respect to their everyday initiatives relating to self-protection, pursuing their demands or pleading their causes. The dependence of women is a systemic problem. The dominance over women is something that takes place at the familial, local, national and international level at the same time. Once women have gained autonomy, they would find themselves in the position of force in all domains.

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