



GSJ: Volume 10, Issue 8, August 2022, Online: ISSN 2320-9186

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## **HARNESSING FEMINIST PROGRAMMING AND RESEARCH METHODS: A RESEARCHER'S REFLECTIONS**

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Key Words: Mediation, WPS, gender, peace processes, Zimbabwe, UNSCR1325

### ABSTRACT

Women's involvement in peace processes is a poorly realised component in implementation of the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Between 1990 and 2017, women represented 2 per cent of mediators, 8 per cent of negotiators and 5 per cent of witnesses and signatories to peace agreements (UNSG, 2018). 4.9 per cent of USD 19.5 billion bilateral aid for gender equality in conflict-affected contexts per-annum for 2016-2017 supported projects dedicated to improve gender equality and women's empowerment, while only 0.2 percent supported women's organizations (GENDERNET, 2020). Under-funded women's projects may not achieve much for women's empowerment when policy and decision making on women's participation are gender blind. Women's exclusion from critical decision-making forums where power, wealth-sharing patterns, social development priorities and approaches to justice are determined has devastating consequences for achieving the sustainable development goals. Based on a qualitative reflection of the author's experiences in facilitating a women-led peace and mediation community project, this article demonstrates how utilisation of gender sensitive process design and feminist research methodologies enhanced gender sensitive peace education programming in rural communities, further increasing women's participation in peace processes. The study provides a model of practical means for promoting implementation of UNSCR 1325 on WPS in peace, security and recovery processes.

**The first page should be used only for Title/ Keyword/ Abstract section. The main paper will start from second page.**

<sup>1</sup>The WPS agenda is provided in United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) (2000) and the subsequent resolutions on WP, including resolutions 1820 (2008), 1888 (2008), 1889 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), 2122 (2013), 2242 (2015) 2467 (2019) and 2493 (2019).

## Introduction and background

Conflict is inevitable, and is a reality in any given family, community and society. Furthermore, conflict and violence are experienced in gendered ways globally and worse in highly patriarchal societies where women's rights are not a priority for peace and security policy and practice. Women-led community peacebuilding and peacemaking programmes which many times go unrecognized help build meaningful community capacity which in turn transforms conflict dynamics and patterns. The practice of mediation for example provides a safe space to resolve conflicts outside of the adjudicative processes, at a lower cost, and sometimes at no monetary cost at all. A good example can be drawn from the Liberian Peace Huts, a women-led community mediation and peacebuilding initiative. The Liberian Peace Huts are modeled after the traditional *Palava* hut, a space where local male leaders resolved community disputes. Traditionally women were only allowed to give a yes or no answer from outside the hut, as the hut remained a secluded space for men. The women-led Peace Huts have now been transformed into safe community spaces where individual women leaders and women's groups come together and lead processes to resolve community conflicts or disputes, including those related to sexual and gender based violence (SGBV), try to find solutions to violence against women (VAW) as well as empower women economically. In the words of Leymah Gbowee, women in Liberia are deconstructing patriarchy and the violence it breeds through the inclusive manner on which they run their affairs.<sup>2</sup> Although the Peace Huts are run by women, men are welcome into the space, making it a democratic environment where all voices count. The Peace Hut model suits (Felstiner, 1974) postulation that the dispute processing practices in any society are a 'product of its values, its psychological imperatives, its history and its economic, political and social organization.'

Modern women's rights activism has added more value to the practice of traditional mediation by opening up spaces where both women and men can come together for conflict resolution, and in the process learn and share the importance of group rights in conflict resolution. Placing people together for conflict resolution is ordinarily good, but strategically placing women and men in one space with the single intention of working through the mediation process together has more potential to yield the most equitable and most transformative results possible. Community mediation processes can be egalitarian if gender sensitive due process is followed in designing them because they emphasise on individual self-determination, community self-reliance and equal community ownership of processes. Moreso, most women-led community mediation processes, like the Liberian Peace Hut model, also tackle many other issues such as women's economic empowerment and capacity building of women in peace and mediation processes, as part of mediation process design, and as tools to confront the root causes of conflict. Women's efforts successfully straddle the triple nexus approach<sup>3</sup>, an formula that seeks to close the silo gaps that often exist between humanitarian action, development work and peacebuilding. Women's efforts seek to close the silo gaps through engaging and enhancing women's leadership and participation in conflict prevention, economic recovery and peacebuilding, and also through collaboration and coordination with various actors, including CSOs, development partners and local communities.

There is greater need to train community women mediators to enhance their skills in various skills of peacebuilding and peacemaking. There is also need to along the way, enhance the skills of traditional leaders in the areas of gender and women's rights, basic

<sup>2</sup>Leymah Gbowee, see <https://justassociates.org/blog/womens-peace-liberia/>

<sup>3</sup>Triple nexus is a term used to capture the inter-linkages between the humanitarian, development and peace sectors." See for example: Nguya, Gloria. Siddiqui, Nadia. *The Triple Nexus (H-D-P) and Implications for Durable Solutions to Internal Displacement*. IDRP, University of London: 2020: [https://www.un.org/internal-displacement-panel/sites/www.un.org.internal-displacement-panel/files/idrp\\_hlp\\_submission\\_ws3\\_triple\\_nexus.pdf](https://www.un.org/internal-displacement-panel/sites/www.un.org.internal-displacement-panel/files/idrp_hlp_submission_ws3_triple_nexus.pdf). The approach refers to taking into account the inter-linkages and continuums between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding processes in policy and practice. See also: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ICVA\\_Nexus\\_briefing\\_paper%20%28Low%20Res%29.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ICVA_Nexus_briefing_paper%20%28Low%20Res%29.pdf)

human rights law, interpretation and application of formal laws and policies to the adjudication process and drafting of legally binding agreements may achieve a lot for gender, peace, security and women's rights. Time invested in outreach and community building programmes that include women, traditional leaders, men, boys and girls helps to increase trust, confidence, knowledge and willingness to participate in mediation, as well as to strengthen community relations, especially between women and men. When community relations are strengthened, violence against women decreases and a better peace is created. Such programming also aids a general understanding of the nation States as sites for women's non-violent struggles to foster the women's emancipation agenda, a strategy for equalizing gender relations and eliminating the consequences of unequal power relations that often manifest through incidents of SGBV, VAW and domestic violence (DV).

Pursuant to the goal of genderising peace processes, this article demonstrates how the utilisation of gender sensitive process design and feminist research methodologies to inform gender sensitive peace education in their communities has been a successful strategy to foster women's increased participation for transformative peace processes, despite the existing financial and policy set-backs. The study provides a model of practical means for promoting implementation of UNSCR 1325 and related WPS resolutions in peace, security and recovery processes. Conceptualised within the broader framework of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR1325), the report exhibits how two women mediation facilitators worked together cross-regionally between Zimbabwe and the Fiji Islands to support a research process for developing suitable community peacebuilding and mediation curricula that can be used by various organisations and professional peacebuilders in building the capacities of women community leaders, girls, traditional authorities, government practitioners and related stakeholders in mediation process design and practice. The report is based on findings that came directly from the six communities in which the two mediation facilitators conducted the work step by step to produce the data for the intended curricula. The stages involved working together online to plan the process design, working together online to produce the research tools, field work to undertake a conflict analysis and a needs assessment exercise, running training workshops for the women and traditional leaders in the research communities and working together online to analyse the data and draft the curricula.

The work was supported by the Women Mediators across the Commonwealth's (WMC), a network hosted by Conciliation Resources, which connects women with a broad range of mediation knowledge and experience through the Peer-to-peer learning initiative. Peer to peer learning is an internal network activity that supports members of the network to connect across nations and regions, sharing in-depth knowledge, experience and mediation skills.

### **Contextual background**

Zimbabwe has conceded to several local, regional and global instruments that promote women's active participation in peace processes, a true affirmation of the leadership's commitment towards the WPS agenda at all levels.

Zimbabwe is party to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). CEDAW's General Recommendation No. 30 on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations, which supports the women's organisations' aspirations to end impunity for gender crimes committed during and beyond political upheavals.

Zimbabwe has also ratified the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR1325). Set against the background of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, which strongly affirmed the need for a resolution on women, peace and security, UNSCR1325 was approved by the United Nations Security Council in October 2000, in response to active lobbying by global women's movements and other civil society organisations (CSOs). UNSCR1325 is founded on three pillars of protection, prevention and participation, and acknowledges the dual reality that despite the important roles that they play in conflict prevention and peace processes – including peacekeeping, negotiations and peacebuilding, women are disproportionately affected by violence during conflict. The Resolution emphasises the nexus between women, peace and security, further authorizing State parties to ensure the inclusion of women as key actors in all peace and security processes at national level. This call alone makes UNSCR1325 an advocacy tool for mainstreaming gender in peace processes, and for raising the profiles of women for engagement with peacebuilding processes. Zimbabwe is also in the process of developing a national action plan (NAP) to guide the implementation of UNSCR 1325.

At the African Union (AU) 38th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Governments held in Durban, South Africa (July 2002), the African Heads of State declared that policies on gender mainstreaming are binding and should be realised at all levels. The AU's normative framework on WPS is guided by the Protocol on Women's Rights in Africa and the AU Gender Policy, among other policy initiatives. Zimbabwe is also amongst the countries that have, through their regional economic commissions, adopted a number of instruments and protocols on gender mainstreaming; which include the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, adopted in 2003 during the Second Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the AU in Maputo and the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, which was adopted in 2008. Furthermore, the African Union and the SADC have both ratified and are implementing UNSCR1325.

At the national level, the Zimbabwe Constitution [Act: 2013 Chapter 12] has put in place a National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC), among other Independent Commissions. Section 9 of the NPRC Act [10:32] calls for mainstreaming gender considerations in all programming activities of the Commission, and is based on the tenets of UNSCR1325. Zimbabwe has a progressive constitution whose Bill of Rights makes men and women equal before the law. Likewise, country has progressive laws and policies that promote the gender equality agenda.

Women constitute 52% of Zimbabwe's population. In addition to a background of patriarchy and colonisation, harmful practices and traditions assign different roles and power identities to women and men, further contributing to these inequalities. Gender ascribed roles and gender discrimination which have become systemic and normalised in some spaces tilt power relations between women and men, giving men power over women, and leaving asymmetrical patterns of access and control over resources and decision-making processes between the male and female species, and also between the powerful and the less powerful in society. As a result women are lowly represented in economic and political leadership positions at the local and national level. The rate of gender-based violence in Zimbabwe remains a serious epidemic, with two in three women having experienced gender violence in their lifetime. In addition to being a serious human rights violation, violence against women and girls has negative ramifications for both the security of citizens and community, and state stability.

The country's Gender inequality Index is 0.535, putting the country in the low human development category at 156 out of 189 countries and territories (UN, 2019). The CEDAW recommendations following Zimbabwe's 2019 CEDAW Report flag Zimbabwe as facing challenges specifically related to violation of SGBV/HPs/SRHR, which have not been matched by efforts to address the said challenges. This has prompted a requirement for GoZ to present a second report to the CEDAW Committee, on issues largely related to SGBV/HPs/SRHR in two years, prior to the next reporting session for all countries scheduled to take place in four years' time (UN, 2019). The main observation and argument remains that without broadening the understanding of conflict, the experiences of marginalised citizens, especially women and children fall through the cracks and escape the attention of policy makers. Chinkin and Kaldor (2013) postulation on the distinction between "new wars" and "old wars" is ideal in buttressing the need for a shift from state-centricism towards a human security framework which is more embracing and more relevant to the needs of citizens in society.

Positively, despite the scourge of violence, initiatives that actively engage women in conflict resolution and decision-making practice at the community level have had far-reaching benefits for the community, successfully contributing to meaningful violence prevention and response, particularly in cases of gender-based violence. Civil society organizations (CSOs) in Zimbabwe have initiated programmes using a variety of methods to positively influence relational conflicts in several rural communities. Their work focuses on specific issues affecting women, young people, disadvantaged populations and other marginalized groups and was found to reduce gender-based violence. In addition to addressing relational conflicts in the communities, the initiatives of Zimbabwe NGOs have contributed to the participation, voice and power of women and their communities in decision-making regarding gender sensitive service delivery. These initiatives have been well received and contributed to a positive change within local communities, converging the interests of women activists, the youths, traditional elders, faith leaders and social welfare volunteers.

Village heads, faith leaders and district Chiefs have been recognized as community institutions that offer various forms of facilitated practice in conflict resolution at the community level. Their work enables non-crime related conflicts to be openly discussed, arbitrated and even adjudicated formally within their communities without taking issues to the formal courts. Working hand in hand with the police and the Department of Social Welfare, traditional leaders, faith leaders, voluntary community health care workers, voluntary case care workers, adolescent peer educators and community peacebuilders further assist in providing a referral pathway for crime related conflicts that affect women and girls in communities to be referred to the police, and finally to the formal courts.

Likewise, church leaders have mechanisms for addressing conflicts using various methods, depending on their beliefs and institutional organisation. Encouraging faith leaders and traditional leaders to work together with voluntary community health care workers, voluntary case care workers, the police, adolescent peer educators and women peacebuilders in partnership with the police and the Department of Social Welfare may catalyse the transformation of mindsets and bring a solution to end harmful practices that promote SGBV in the country. The project further increases spaces of dialogue for peace between civilians and the police, as well as intergenerational interaction between adolescent peer educators and the elderly. For this reason, implementation of UNSCR1325 remains an opportunity to influence increased participation of women and girls in peacebuilding processes. The assumption of this analysis is that massively engendering the UNSCR1325 agenda in a country like Zimbabwe has potential to transform the wider society's understanding of gender and women's rights, in the end reducing cases of VAW and SGBV, most of which emanate from a misunderstanding of the rights and roles of women in development in the social, environmental, economic and political spheres.

















### **Gender as a hindrance to women's leadership in peace and mediation processes**

Some conflicts arise when women get into positions of power such as becoming a village head or traditional chief. Some people still believe that women should not be leaders in those positions and as such women face various challenges and obstacles which prevent them from exercising their right to leadership. However, women do not take the challenge sitting down, but always stand up to challenge the processes to ensure that they retain their positions of power and influence. It was however established that sometimes the challenges women face rob them of their confidence, and may struggle to keep up with expectations, hence the need for interventions such as counseling and confidence building trainings for female traditional leaders.

Findings also established that in some parts of Zimbabwe there are many women peacebuilders who lead mediation processes on a daily basis in rural communities, but face enormous difficulty due to a lack of formal training in the mediation practice, lack of recognition because of patriarchy, and lack of visibility because of limited networks and required resources.

A further finding was that while a significant number of communities now realise the roles that women can play as part of the traditional court system, the conventional manner in which the adjudication of cases is done in some traditional leader' courts may present challenges with regards to the recognition of gender and women's rights. This is caused by the fact that most traditional leaders are not trained in the functions and application of formal laws and policies to conflict issues, and as such they will continue to use traditional laws which may run contrary to the tenets of human rights and women's rights, and of the rights of children as stipulated in the national, regional and global laws, policies treaties and protocols.

### **Needs of community peacebuilders**

The following were highlighted as the needs that the community peacebuilders and those that they work with such as the traditional leaders, faith leaders and government volunteers have. Fulfilling these needs could make the peacebuilding and mediation efforts achieve better results. Women peacebuilders, traditional leaders and other stakeholders in the communities need capacity building support in the following areas: SGBV/SRHR laws and policies, Gender and women's rights, Case assessment and case management, Active listening, The language of peacebuilding, Basic peacebuilding and peer mediation skills, Listening and storytelling skills and the skills for rafting binding agreements

### **Conclusions**

This article demonstrated how the utilisation of gender sensitive process design and feminist research methodologies can inform gender sensitive peace education in rural communities. The article further demonstrated how women-led peacebuilding engagements have been a successful strategy to foster women's increased participation for transformative peace processes in line with UNSCR 1325. The article also affirmed the various roles that women play in promoting peace processes in their communities, as facilitators, as agents of change and as team members to development programmes on peacebuilding and mediation processes. Time invested in outreach and community building programmes that include women, traditional leaders, men, boys and girls helps to increase trust, confidence, knowledge and willingness to participate in mediation, as well as to strengthen community relations, especially between women and men. When community relations are strengthened, violence against women decreases and a better peace is created. Such programming also aids a general understanding of the nation States as sites for women's non-violent strug-



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