

## Civil Wars in Africa: A Gender Perspective of the Cost on Women

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**ABSTRACT** This paper analyses civil wars as the greatest threat to peace in Africa. It specifically looks at these wars/ conflicts from a gender perspective so as to examine its impact on women in relation to experiences such as sexual assaults (rape), plight as displaced/refugees, feminization of poverty e.t.c. Finally, the paper recommends that women and girls must become central to national security policies or deliberations to ensure an end to impunity for crimes committed against them in these civil wars and as a key to lasting peace.

### INTRODUCTION

Africa has seen a proliferation of armed conflicts more often than not within states rather than between them with regional and international dimensions as most of these wars are fuelled and financed by corporations and individuals with strategic interests. This was because “the comprador classes to whom the European colonialists and imperialists had transferred political power failed to design the modalities exigent for the transformation of the colonial state order” (George, 2002: 8).

Against this background, from the outset of the post – colonial era, a scatter plot of the African continent reveals a catalog of several states which degenerated into protracted civil war. By the end of the first decade of the post – independence era, more than thirty wars had been fought in Africa (Conflict Watch, 2001: 1). The 1980s saw Africa witnessing nine wars with numerous other instances of large – scale violent conflicts, and a kaleidoscope of coups and demonstrations (Raymond, 1991: 20). The belief was that “with the end of the cold war, and its attendant positive impact on some of the major civil wars in Africa - Mozambique and South Africa – there was hope that the decade of the 1990s and beyond would witness the emergence of peace in Africa” (George, 1996: 41). Yet this process was not a peaceful one, entailing as it did the eruption of new civil wars in Angola, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, Chad which was so bloody that the population actually went into decline. In the specific case of the West African sub – region, the situation was in no way different with the civil

war in the post - independent Nigeria which lasted for thirty months – July 1967 to January 1970 and subsequent dosages witnessed in Senegal, Mali, Niger, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d, Voire, Guinea and Guinea-Bissau. These conflictive situations invariably arises out of a quarrel about something – territory, borders, resources, legitimacy of rulers, political ideologies, ethnic differences based on race or religion, or whatever provides a set of reasons why men should risk their lives in combat even if their individual effort is not going to change the outcome of the battle (Lincoln and Allen, 1997: 99; Jeffrey, 2000: 283). At times me he Senegal, Guineaivil wars in Guinea, Guinea - Buissau, 1). ive impact on some of the major civil wars in Africa - Moozambiqost of these internal wars occur because an unelected government which is mostly unelected military elite has usurped power and maintains power by force of arms over a subject people.

This patriarchal military machine in executing these wars inflicts its terror on the civilian population through systematic torture, suffering, pain, degradation, dehumanization and rape. As a result of the gory inhumanity to fellow beings there is “an estimated 90% civilian victims of contemporary civil war and internal conflict of which women are amongst the most vulnerable and affected largely due to the fact that the internal conflicts are no longer fought in battle fields but the frontlines which are more likely to be villages and towns where women and children are left behind” (Sanam and Rita, 1999: 10).

Against the above, the paper will examine the unmitigated brutality by deadly cabals of misogynistic extremist soldiers who perpetrate gendered atrocities of the worst kinds against

women and girls not only during the armed conflicts but after as displaced/refugees. First, it will analyze the nature and impacts of these civil wars on women and girls. Second, it will assess the deteriorating fortunes of women and girls and invariably children dislocated by ongoing conflicts particularly internal conflict which oftentimes are not treated as newsworthy. Third, it will discuss/analyze the reconstructive roles of women in post civil war situations as peace-makers.

### **Analyzing the Concept of War and its Theory**

War destroys and kills though it constructs midwives and renews (Adigun, 2002: 26). Civil war on the other hand, is “an armed conflict that has caused more than one thousand deaths; challenged the sovereignty of an internationally recognized state; occurred within the recognized boundaries of the state; involved the state as one of the principal combatants; and included rebels with the ability to mount an organized opposition; and involved parties concerned with the prospect of living together in the same political unit after the end of the war” (Ibrahim and Nicholas, 2000:5). The central issue therefore, is that in a state of war the issue of construction, mid-wiving and renewal may be unrepresentative of the interest of women because “it implies combat, hostilities and confrontation that involve a destructive process, to both sides as it destroys not only life and property but civilization itself. More over, it is a foolish game, invented by men and played by men in an aggressive, uncompromising and destructive manner based on authoritarian principles held in place by coercive force which assumes unequal value among and between human beings (African woman, 1995: 6; Betty, 1996: 10, 11).

Obviously, civil war and violence is no doubt motivated by the theory of “realism - the hard core theory of international competition and conflict” (Vasquez, 1993). The general reflection of this theory by modern classical realists, like Morgenthau, Carr and Kaplan, implicitly or explicitly is on the three assumptions about power – maximizing actors: first, the centrality of the state in the international system as anarchy prevails in the absence of a world government. Secondly, the state as a rational unitary actor in the strife to maximize expected utility is assumed to have carefully ranked different alternatives and

calculated the costs and gains of each action. Thirdly, states seek power in order to expand or preserve their position in the international system. With this argument, actors generally become separated into two categories: status quo oriented (who posit that the goal of war is maximization of power and/or security and power as the means) and revisionist/imperialists powers (out to correct an imbalance with the general motivational assumption of maximizing power.

Specifically in the first edition of Morgenthau’s (1949/1967: 210) *Politics Among Nations* “all nations actively engaged in the struggle for power must actually aim not at a balance – that is, equality, - of power, but at a superiority of power in their own behalf” and until one nation gains or believes it has gained a decisive advantage over the other. Then either the weaker yields to the stronger or war decides the issue” (Morgenthau’s, 1973: 173). Accordingly, Kaplan (1957: 23) argues that maximization of power through war is paramount thus declaring that states should “fight rather than pass up an opportunity to increase capabilities. ....it implies that unless an essential national actor is capable of protecting its own interest, those interest are unlikely to prevail. Therefore capabilities are to be increased even at the price of war”. Implicitly too, neorealism or neorealists (Waltz, 1979; Gilpin, 1981) argue that the highest preference of state actors is security. In effect, a situation of anarchy which is the source of insecurity brings to focus the imperative that “only if survival is assured can states safely seek such other goals as tranquility, profit, or power (Waltz, 1979: 126).

However, (Bueno, 1980: 373) in his balance of power theories argues that the above assumptions are problematic because if the actor is imperialistic, the array of options will “implicitly allow for the possibility of waging war, regardless of the distribution of power”. More importantly too, the “exercise of power always appears to beget the appetite for more power (Carr, 1946: 112) hence in the ‘noble’ goals of both power and security which supposedly count as the motivation for state actors to embark on war seem not to consider the “ possibility of drawing a sharp line between the will – to – live and the will – to – power” (Niebuhr, 1932). Also, the escalation of casualties/victims of men and women with more burden borne by mainly the latter who are vulnerable does not count.

The pertinent question therefore is that “while

realists agree that states pursue their self – interest, is their goal best expressed as maximizing their own power, maximizing their chances for survival, or maneuvering to weaken dangerous opponents? (Cusack and Stoll, 1990: 38). This is in relation to the protracted domestic wars in the African region supposedly premised on the maximization of power but which appeared not to be rational in any way because of its execution at the whims of “men are motivated by honour, greed, and, above all, fear (Thucydides quoted in Gilpin, 1986: 306) such as in Liberia, Uganda, and Sierra Leone etc.

It is also lamentable that only 2% of the world’s military personnel are women (Smith, 1997a: 10). Expectedly, women are at a disadvantage because the implication is that it is the “men who decide when to start a war/conflict, who decide the allocation of military resources during a conflict, and when to end a conflict (Inger, 1997: 30). In effect, the society becomes militarized breeding new levels of violence as well as impunity for gender – based human rights violations, sexual and racial violence, forced evictions, custodial violence and lack of effective protection for women refugees and internally displaced people (Indai Sajor in Sanam and Rita, 1999: 10).

Consequent upon the above, the place of women in war was brought to the world’s attention during the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Since then, a global movement of women’s organizations and women leaders has continued to focus attention on the conditions and needs of women living under violence (Sanam and Rita, 1999: 9). To this end, some contentious issues which women experience as the victims of these wars will be examined.

## **ANALYSIS OF ISSUES IN CONTENTION**

### **Sexual Violence**

Though the circumstances may differ in different countries women as deliberate target groups of contemporary civil wars, face different threats and horrors of violence in civil wars which are similar in manifestations of different shades of rape: mass rape, military sexual slavery, abduction, enforced prostitution and genocidal rape (Indai, 1999: 21). The perpetrators range from the regular armed forces, militia-men, para – military units, rebel groups, war lords, ultra –

nationalist rebels, state security forces and armed opposition groups or terrorists, religious sects, fundamentalist armed groups and in some cases, peacekeeping forces. Rape often considered an integral part of warfare; is primarily targeted at women even though men can also be raped. However, though women of all ages may become victims of sexual violence and exploitation in conflict situations but adolescent girls are more vulnerable because they are physically and emotionally less capable of defending themselves (Graca, 2001: 55).

Added to this, are political, ethnic and racial overtones to the sexual violence experienced by women. For instance, in the Rwanda, Liberia and even the post Nigeria/Biafra war women were targeted for sexual violence because of their gender in addition to their race or ethnic identity (Indai, 1995: 21). In effect, government forces and right – wing militia’s systematically raped girls so as to send messages to the perceived “enemy” or as a way of terrorizing indigenous communities (UN, 1999). It is important to cite Jeff Koinange’s 2006 CNN news feature on the atrocities committed by soldiers against women of Congo especially the story of a 14 year old, who was raped by about 15 soldiers for about a period of eight months and eight days until she was rescued and brought to the hospital on a stretcher. This rape situation indeed is not accidental but rooted in beliefs about gender differences which shape the structured pattern” (Inger, 1997:41) of violence’s against women in war. Little wonder that, the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) has estimated that for every 100<sup>th</sup> pregnancy during conflict, rape has been committed (Scott, 1995).

Accordingly, in the Rwanda, Liberia and post Nigeria/Biafra war women were targeted for sexual violence because of their gender in addition to their race or ethnic identity (Indai, 1995: 21). This was evident during the Nigerian civil war with the record of indiscriminate gang rapes which happened routinely in the war zone among many more horrendous tales of mothers who were raped in full view of their children before being bludgeoned to death and stories of machete – wielding soldiers who split open the bellies of pregnant women at roadblocks, “to find hidden rebels” (Sylvia, 2001: 11). This occurred despite the issuance of operational Code of Conduct to the Federal Armed forces in line with that of the Geneva convention that “women will be protected

against any attacks on their person, honour and in particular, against rape or any form of assault (Gloria, 2002: 217). This treatment of women as sexual objects through all manners of rape confirms the fact that women are victims of the wars where sexual violence are used as one of the most extreme expressions of the masculine domination over women.

### **Unequal Distributions of Life-Chances between both Genders**

Though the exact number and gender proportions of killings in war are virtually impossible to determine however, it is a plausible fact that “when war reaches the civilian population, the proportion of female casualties also rises” (Smith, 1997a: 3). For example, during the Nigerian civil war there were records of indiscriminate bombings of hospitals, refugee camps market places and residential buildings which are all civilian target. As a result, there were records “of sights that scorch the mind and sicken the conscience – of children roasted alive, young girls torn to two by shrapnel, pregnant women eviscerated caused by high – flying Russian Ilyushin jets operated by Federal Nigeria, dropping bombs on civilian centres throughout Biafra” (William, 1968). The disregard of the Nigerian Code of Conduct to the Federal Armed forces in line with the Geneva Convention stipulations that (i) Under no circumstance must pregnant women be ill treated or killed; (ii) Children will not be molested or killed but to be protected and cared for... (iv) Hospitals, hospital staff and patients should not be tampered with or molested (Gloria, 2002: 217) highlights that civil wars create unequal distributions of life-chances between men and women.

### **Plights of Women as Refugees or Displaced Persons**

Refugees or displaced persons are out-crops of the routine tactics of armed political violence and civil unrest. Accordingly, the 1951 Geneva Convention on the status of Refugees, Article I.A (2) defines “a refugee as a person who, as a result of well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his (or her) nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear is unwilling, to avail herself or himself of the

protection of that country. On the other hand, the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement posits that “internally displaced persons are persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of, or in order to avoid the effects of, armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border” (Elizabeth and Ellen, 2002: 21).

In Liberia, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Rwanda, South Africa or else where in Africa thousands of civilian populations every year have been forcibly uprooted or displaced from their communities without food, shelter or health care. The displacement from African communities has led to its contribution in recent times of about one-third of the world’s 36 million refugees and displaced people from a figure of about one million in 1967, four million in 1979 and seven million in 1995 (The Guardian, Tuesday, July 11, 2006: 65) to the gory of situation of the combined effects of war and famine in Dafur which has been described by the United Nations as the world worst humanitarian crisis that has left some 300,000 people dead and displaced more than 2.4 million (The Guardian, Monday, May 22, 2006: 10). This pandemic has been succinctly described by the former UN Secretary – General Kofi Annan’s appearing to be a direct objective, rather than a by-product, of war (Elizabeth and Ellen, 2002: 21).

As with all aspects of war, displacement has specific gender dimensions because “as at 2001, out of the approximately 13.5 million people displaced internally in various nations in Africa out of the 40 million people, an estimated 80% are women and children who have fled their homes because of armed conflict and human rights violations especially in places like Liberia, Somalia, Sierra Leone-whose people constitute the longest – standing and largest refugee population” (Elizabeth and Ellen, 2002: 21, 22, 23). The plight of women who become caretakers of children orphaned to fratricidal war are worse especially the internally displaced who has no institutional or legal mechanism for receiving international assistance unlike refugees who are entitled to assistance and protection under international law (UNICEF, 1998). This makes women prone to

violent attack not only from soldiers but the humanitarian officers/workers. This is evidenced in the spate of sexual violence and discrimination against women from the humanitarian officers/workers of everything from food to soap to plastic sheeting and the inability to have access to aid – including cooking oil, wheat, medicine, transport, loans, educational courses or skills in training if a wife, sister or a daughter is not offered to the NGO workers (Elizabeth and Ellen, 2002: 25; UNHCR, 2002).

To this effect, there is an upsurge in the pregnancy rate in the camps estimated at about 50% coupled with the spread of sexually transmitted venereal diseases. This situation probably explain the HIV/ AIDS virus scourge which exploded in Rwanda after the genocide even though prior the genocide of 1994 about 35% of Rwandese soldiers were HIV – positive (Richter-Lyonette, 1995: 7; Sanam and Rita, 1999: 10). Also lamentable is the fact that these women have little or no hope of receiving proper preventive care as female – related diseases are often left untreated in situations of war, because male combatants are accorded priority (Richter-Lyonette, 1995: 7). This gory scenario justifies the argument that there is “a strong link between falling levels of assistance to refugees and the increasing vulnerability and exposure of women/girls to forced sex work and sexual exploitation” (UNHCR, 2002).

Consequently, there is need “to fill the gap between what needs to be done and what is actually being accomplished (Kari, 2002). So, African leaders need to realize that refugee management cannot be the responsibility of volunteers especially with “less than ten countries that make up the United Nations actually giving good contributions (The Guardian, Wednesday, July 5, 2006: 15). For instance, less than \$9 billion was realized between 1994 and 1999 out of the UN’s search for \$ 13.5 billion relief by donor countries to assist war – affected people globally out of whom each of the 12 million wars – affected people in Africa each received an equivalent of 13cents a day (OCHA, 1999). More so, the key legal document safeguarding refugee rights which is the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the status of refugees and its 1967 Protocol needs to be reviewed in relation to its mandate to states to cooperate with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). In this wise, many organizations like the United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA) that focuses on

reproductive health care and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) that provides services in the areas of health care, education, nutrition to provide protection and assistance in partnership with governments, regional organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) will be enjoined to perform better especially in relation to the basic and psychological needs of displaced women during and in post-conflict situations. Accordingly, African countries should make adequate resources available for the UNCHR and other organizations like African Refugee Foundation-ARF so as to address the African situation. In addition, they must re-visit resolutions at the OAU/UNHCR Commemorative Symposium on Refugees and Forced Population Displacement held at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in September 1994 which within the framework of NEPAD and other regional and international instruments urged African leaders to take energetic measures to salvage the African situation especially as regards self-reliance skills acquisition for the women.

### **The Scourge of Poverty /Impact on Children**

War/conflict is always expensive hence poverty is a common characteristic of post – war/ conflict countries. Evidently, most of the burden are borne by women as a group who are forced into assuming full responsibility, such as fending for their families especially the children, aged and the sick including maintaining livestock, building an income once the men are drafted into the army and some hidden from conscription officers. Added to this, studies indicate that in a vicious circle, malnourished girls grow up to become malnourished mothers who give birth to underweight babies (UNICEF, 2000: 3). So, the youngest (i.e. the children) become its most innocent and vulnerable victims of diarrhea, measles and other illnesses which commonly kills or undermines their physical, psychological and cognitive capacities.

More over, modern warfare kills, maims and exploits children more callously through their recruitment as child soldiers due to the armed forces, having exhausted their supplies of available adults coupled with the inevitability of schools being shut down. A child soldier is any child – boy or girl – under the age of 18, who is compulsorily, forcibly or voluntarily recruited or used in hostilities by armed forces, paramilitaries, civil defence units or other armed groups (Graca,

2001: 7). Current estimates put the number of child soldiers at about 300, 000 at any one time (Brett, 1998; Rachel, 2002). Majority of child soldiers are boys used as combatants exposed deliberately to horrific scenes to harden them and make it easier to sever links with the rest of society, or as messengers, porters but a significant proportion overall are girls who provide sexual services, and serve as cooks. For instance, in Sierra Leone, children have been forced to commit atrocities against their own families and communities, such as beating to mutilations and active participation in massacres (Graca, 2001: 16). These child soldiers are from the poorest families especially orphans or displaced and vulnerable who live and work on the streets while those from wealthier and better educated families are at less risk of being recruited because their parents can buy their freedom or challenge their recruitment through legal means or political influence.

In fact, amid the continued violence in Africa humanitarian workers are trying to offer some semblance of normal life to “some 20 million traumatized children currently uprooted from their homes, either as refugees or internally displaced (Graca, 2001: 1) However, for many poor women, seeing their children some times forcefully conscripted into the army by the government with the possibility of their perishing or coming back as handicapped invalids is frustrating especially as many lack the social status and political links necessary to obtain travel and identification papers. The after – effects of such violence are emotionally devastating so much so that years after being demobilized they still face/experience troubled psychological trauma.

The brutalities routinely committed against children in these African war prompted the past O.A.U. secretary – General Salim Ahmed Salim at a pan – African forum for children in May 2001 to posit that “the gap between the survival rates, the education and the development of Africa’s children and the children of other continents are increasing” (Micheal, 2002: 6). To this end, the relevance of international law and instruments that uphold human rights and the convention on the right of the child should be given legitimacy so as to ensure that the protection of children becomes central to actions geared towards promoting and implementing peace agreements and resolving conflicts. Accordingly, given that poverty remains the most important human rights challenge facing the world; it behooves on human

rights activists to transcend the level of mainly providing basic social services to the investment in children as the best guarantee of equitable and sustainable development.

### **The Silence of the Media**

The media of mass communication - newspaper, magazine, radio and television creates awareness through facts and invariably shapes attitudes and inspires actions. This function however, has been so glaringly inadequate as women’s horrendous experiences of despair in conflict zones and roles albeit ironically as having “actively supported violent, sectarian organizations on both sides of the divide either through the indirect financing of these wars from the endless labour of the female labour force who mostly contribute money, other basic essentials and the preparing of food for the soldiers (African Woman, 1995: 10; Carmel Roulston in Sanam and Rita, 1999: 10) are hardly covered/reported. This is as a result of the media’s preference objectifying women as “helpless, passive and powerless subjects” (Inger, 1997: 40) as well as the misrepresentation and sensationalization of interviews/reports of women’s stories in an insensitive manner that it can cause secondary trauma (IWFMF, 2000). This ‘subjective’ representation at times blamed on “the failure to disaggregate and analyze data by sex and age in surveys, reports and information on the humanitarian and human rights aspects of conflict” (Graca, 2001: 152) however, the display of innate gender bias and predictable slant in conflict coverage not only fails to highlight that civil wars affect women and girls differently from men and boys but questions the ‘positivism’ of media reporting.

The obvious shortage of women in conflict reporting prompts the need to put women into the picture – both as producers of media information and as subjects of it. This is because media in the hands of women often produces a different kind of intervention” (IMPACS, 1999). Also, women reporters in reporting tend to look at the impact of killing on the greatest number of people or sectors while men tend to concentrate on quotes from officials (IWFMF, 2001). To this end, the mass media in its strive to live up to one of its fundamental requirements of building peace in a just society by ensuring that women inform in their own voices about issues affecting them

so that the world may know and understand what they have suffered as well as their different roles during and in the post war situation.

### PEACE-BUILDING AND RECONSTRUCTION

With the war system “invariably pervading lives and every aspect of society from the structural to the interpersonal (Reardon, 1996: 11) it becomes impossible to talk about effective humanitarian responses or inclusive humanitarian responses or inclusive peace processes without understanding and taking into account gender dimensions” (Noeleen as cited in Elizabeth and Ellen, 2002). In effect, it becomes imperative to address the “protection of human rights, a fundamental element of peacemaking, peace building and humanitarian operations, which is still widely neglected” (Graca, 2001: 4). To this end, the judicial institutions which remain the most important mechanism for the defense and promotion of fundamental rights should ensure that the perpetrators of impunity for the various gendered atrocities perpetrated against women and girls, (especially the use of women’s bodies as weapons of war on a daily basis) during the armed conflicts and after as refugees” (Elizabeth and Ellen, 2002: 11) face the music by being answerable to national and international actions.

Interestingly, women who are the greatest victims of conflict/war having lost everything - husbands, children, lands and dignities as a result of abduction and gang rape still strive to transcend their sorrow and experiences of the horrific violence, loss and pervasive trauma to rebuild their lives and communities. This evidenced in their grassroots and community level reconciliation programmes like demobilization and disarmament, lobbying and advocacy which has been yielding results. For instance, in Mali, women were directly involved in building a national coalition to campaign against illicit arms and also initiated a regional meeting and signed a declaration to have an arms moratorium. Accordingly, using the network of church groups, women’s associations and other civil society organizations, public awareness is being raised in line with campaigns to collect and destroy small arms and illicit weapons (Elizabeth and Ellen, 2002: viii). Also worthy of mention is their cooperation in providing each other with emotional support as well as offering their strength through taking on menial jobs to feed their families.

### CONCLUSION

In as much as this paper fights shy of arguing that women are inherently more peaceful than men however, it is important to reiterate that it is only when “impunities for crimes against women in war are addressed can nations be built (Elizabeth and Ellen, 2002: xii). To effectively address appropriately their post-war/conflict compensation and sensitive rehabilitation women’s issues need to be humanized by addressing their livelihood, monitoring, reporting and addressing human/gendered abuses such as sexual assaults as war crimes.

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