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## The Role of the African Union in Fostering Women's Representation in Formal Peacebuilding: A Case Study of Sierra Leone

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### Abstract

Africa appears to have improved women's representation in political processes in the continent in the wake of feminization of public decision-making in the 1990s. However, women's representation in formal peacebuilding structures and processes remains low essentially because most of them are more involved in informal peacebuilding activities in their various communities which often do not get recognized. Although continental governance bodies such as the African Union (AU) have made some policy efforts to address this, the disconnect between formal and informal peacebuilding work remains both in policy and practice. This paper explores women's informal peacebuilding activities in Africa using the specific example of Sierra Leone. It concludes by suggesting how women's informal peace activities can be mainstreamed into formal peacebuilding processes within the continent by the African Union.

**Keywords:** *Africa, African Union, Peacebuilding, Sierra Leone, Women*

## **Introduction**

Women's political representation is one area of human development Africa appears to measure well, compared to other regions of the world. This is notable given its usual poor showing in other global measures of social, economic and political development. For example, Rwanda with 61% tops the chart on women's representation in national parliaments globally with Namibia (46%) and South Africa 42% occupying 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> positions respectively. Together, these three make up African states in the top 10 states with the highest number of women in national parliaments globally. In the top 20, there are 6 African states, and out of the 50 states globally that have met the 30% benchmark set by the UN Security Council, there are 13 African states. (IPU, 2019). However, this does not translate to commensurate representation in formal peacebuilding<sup>1</sup> in the continent as the figures compare poorly with those of women in other regions. According to UNIFEM (2010), women in Africa and elsewhere are the least represented at formal peace processes as signatories to peace agreements, delegates, witnesses, mediators or members of mediation teams, and members of technical committees. For example, between 1992 and 2011, 16 peace agreements were signed between warring factions within African states, and the average of women signatories to those peace agreements was 0.63%, as mediators 4.6%, as witnesses 5.5% and as negotiators 9.3%. Out of the 16 states, only the DRC had women as signatories to peace agreements and as mediators with the figures compared to men being 5% and 20% respectively. Kenya follows with women making up 33% of lead mediators, while Sierra Leone and Uganda had women making up 20% of witnesses. These figures illustrate that the number of women participating in peace negotiations in a variety of official roles is significantly low or non-existent. (African Union, 2016:20). Why is this

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<sup>1</sup> Women's low representation in formal peacebuilding processes in Africa is further compounded by poor quality representation also referred to as substantive representation. It goes beyond numbers to consider the quality of women's actual participation in politics by focusing on the outcomes of their participation and on the factors that impact on their performance rather than on descriptive aspects of women's representation (See Wiredu 1984; Child and Krook, 2009). Just as in women's political representation, substantive representation can also be applied to women's representation in formal peacebuilding to analyze the impact of their representation, whether low or high, on peacebuilding. However, the focus of this paper is on women's near absence from formal peacebuilding and less so on the quality of their participation if at all.

so? Does it suggest exclusion or that women in Africa are not active in peacebuilding work or that there is an under-reporting of their participation? If women are excluded, what factors account for their exclusion and if they are not, why are their peacebuilding work not reflecting in formal peacebuilding processes and structures in the continent? These questions have been the subject of studies such as those of Scanlon (2016), Shepherd (2016), Onyewere (2017) and Jones (1983) which have sought to provide answers that have in turn spurred further debates on the under-representation of women in peacebuilding in Africa.

According to a number of these studies, the common causal factors of women's low representation in formal peacebuilding in Africa include the patriarchal culture of most African societies, misconstrued agency of women during times of war and peace, and more importantly, the under-reporting of the work women are doing informally to foster peace. While the under-reporting of women's peacebuilding work at informal levels suggest that women are actively involved in peacebuilding in Africa, it also explains their low representation in peacebuilding better than the dominant focus on patriarchal culture and the misconstrued agency of women as victims of conflict only as seen in the works of Onyewere (2017), Garba (2016) and Selimonc et al (2012). It is for this reason this paper places emphasis on the under-reporting of the work women are doing to foster peace in their communities across the continent using Sierra Leone as case study given the significant roles women have played in post-conflict reconstruction in the country. The paper explores the nature of peacebuilding work women have engaged in at especially informal levels of society in rebuilding Sierra Leone after its civil war. The purpose is not only to highlight women's peacebuilding agency, but also make a case for mainstreaming their informal peace work into formal peacebuilding processes and structures in Africa. In this light, it is pertinent to operationally conceptualize and distinguish between formal and informal peacebuilding.

### **A conceptual distinction between formal and informal peacebuilding**

Isike (2009:30) define peacebuilding as the “processes and activities involved in normalising relations and reconciling the latent differences between the disputing sides in a conflict with a view to enabling sustainable peace”. He contends further that peacebuilding is an

overarching concept that includes conflict transformation, restorative justice, trauma healing, reconciliation, development, and good leadership, which all have implications for conflict prevention given that poor and bad governance are at the root of armed conflict in many African states. This understanding of peacebuilding is built on the notion that relationships are central to conflict and peacebuilding as seen in relational conceptions of conflict transformation such as those of Galtung (1996) who defined peacebuilding as the process of creating supporting structures that remove the causes of wars and offer alternatives to war in situations where war might occur. Similarly, Lederach (1997) sees peacebuilding as a comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates and sustains the full array of processes, approaches and stages needed to transform conflict towards more sustainable and peaceful relationships.

It is instructive that none of the definitions above preclude informal processes, activities and structures especially at the social level which also contribute to establishing and sustaining peace in any given conflict context. However, the formalised (recorded), structured (laws, rules, policies) and institutionalised (governmental bodies) aspects of these processes have become more recognised both in policy and practice circles at the detriment of the informal and sometimes unstructured aspects thus necessitating a distinction between the two. Formal peacebuilding then could be the formalised and structured aspects of the whole gamut of conflict transformation spanning peace-making, peacekeeping, peace agreement, post-conflict reconstruction and preventive diplomacy which are powered by institutional frameworks and policies. Scholars such as Cravo (2017) have even gone further to associate formal peacebuilding with liberalism by presenting it as a liberal idea of building peace through instruments adopted to propagate liberal ideas of conflict transformation. Pushing this argument further would imply an opposite view which critics of conflict resolution such as Waindim (2018) have referred as alternative or indigenous conflict resolution, and which recognises and incorporates the informal aspects of peacebuilding.

Informal peacebuilding could be the undocumented and unstructured aspects and activities of conflict transformation processes which are driven by social norms, values and everyday realities and relationships between people at all levels of society. These are usually not standardized because of their context-specific nature and given their rootedness in local and indigenous models of building peace and maintaining social cohesion. In many ways, this accounts for why

informal peacebuilding is not widely recognised. MacGinty in his work on hybrid peace which in many ways sought to converge formal and informal peacebuilding asserts that local forms of dispute resolution and reconciliation that draw on traditional indigenous or customary norms and practices exist in many societies (2010:404).

The distinction between formal and informal peacebuilding is on two levels; the nature of the process and the approach employed to achieve peace. Formal peace processes generally use the widely recognised methods such as peacekeeping, peace-making and Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR), it is usually top-down, male dominated and as such exclusionary, and rooted in liberal notions of justice. Informal peacebuilding on the other hand employs persuasion, arbitration, mediation, conciliation and reconciliation of conflicts at a micro and macro levels of society; is bottom-up and inclusive of women and youths. In terms of approach, informal peacebuilding in Africa is rooted in restorative justice. However, while the processes involved in peacebuilding could be both formal and informal, states, governmental and non-governmental organizations (both local and international) and other peacebuilding actors have tended to privilege formal peacebuilding which by its formalised, structured and institutionalised nature is less inclusive of all conflict and peace actors especially women. For example, Mazurana and McKay (1999) and Amisi (2008) argue that since conflict is motivated by the immediacy of hatred and prejudice, transforming it requires focusing on its socio-psychological and spiritual aspects which are largely ignored by international diplomacy. Like Galtung (1996) and Lederach (1997), they acknowledge that “relationships are central to peace building, and that when they are well managed, human relationships can prevent future conflict” (Isike (2009: 30). We can therefore argue that women, given their population and societal position in Africa are an integral part of these relationships, and that they play their peacebuilding roles whether such (roles) are recognised or not.

### **An overview of women’s low representation in formal peacebuilding in Africa**

In Africa, as well as globally, formal peacebuilding processes, structures and activities such as peace negotiations and agreements, mediations peacekeeping, peacemaking, preventive diplomacy have been dominated by men. This has produced negative effects for post-conflict reconstruction as the voices of vital stakeholders in conflict are

marginalized and excluded. A review of literature that explains women's low representation in formal peace processes in Africa suggest their exclusion is based on the incorrect notion that women are marginal actors of armed conflict and its effects. As war is said to be fought by mostly men, the roles (combatants, informants, caregivers e.t.c) and critical contributions of women during armed conflict are either neglected or erased. This skewed gendered narrative of war and armed conflict carry on into post conflict peacebuilding with the same argument usually tabled to justify women's exclusion from peace negotiations and dividends. As such Shepherd (2016) argue that while it is true that men fight war it is also true women fight wars too and participate in a plethora of other ways<sup>2</sup>. Thus, it is important to forego the myopic notion of 'only men fight war' as it has been used as an exclusionary phrase to leave women out of peacebuilding activities. This notion of women's marginality in armed conflict is rooted in a deep culture of post-colonial patriarchy<sup>3</sup> which informs the non-recognition of women's informal peacebuilding work and in turn leads to its underreporting.

Amplifying the patriarchal root of women's low representation in formal peacebuilding in Africa, Selimovic et al (2012) argue that cultural and social norms that narrowly define men's and women's roles in society in oppositional terms tend to become narrower in times of conflict and post-conflict processes. The gendered division of roles during this period often lead to the narrative of women as victims and weak beings needing protection while men are presented as soldiers and protectors (Jones 1983). More broadly, in Onyewere's (2017) view, normative systems are often used to limit the participation of women in public sphere and this needs to be factored into any agenda for change. Otherwise, these patriarchal stereotypes diffuse into the policymaking arena as policymakers consciously and unconsciously become influenced by them (stereotypes) with negative implications for women's participation in peacebuilding. For example, Selimovic et al (2012) argue that UN Resolution 1888 was largely informed by the skewed notion of women as victims of war, gender and sexual based violence thus officially blurring their active roles as combatants while legitimizing the false

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<sup>2</sup> Women play various traditional roles (caring for the wounded, performing domestic chores) and non-traditional roles (combatants, activists, perpetrators and advocates) during conflict situations. (Amedzrator, 2014). They also mobilize for peace across dividing lines, not casting any section of the society as the 'enemy' or the 'dehumanized other'. (Amedzrator 2014:8).

<sup>3</sup> Isike and Okeke-Uzodike (2008) make a useful distinction between pre-colonial African patriarchies and colonial patriarchies referred to old patriarchies and

notion of women as passive recipients of the effects of armed conflict. This has implications for transforming conflict and building peace because the underlying mindset of male dominance which tends to cast men as doers and women as either passive or innocent drives peacebuilding (Alaga 2010:3). This also explains why women's painstaking peacebuilding work on the ground have not been institutionalized and rarely influence national or global policies on war and peace. As Alaga contends, their knowledge, ideas and experiences remain at best marginalized and at worst invisible (Alaga 2010). He explains further that, in the context of a male dominated and highly patriarchal socio-cultural order which is prevalent in West Africa for example, wars and armed conflicts remain gendered activities that are treated as the preserve of men and characterized by heightened inequalities and gender imbalance that perpetuates violence and discrimination against women (Alaga 2010). Although as a response woman have exercised their agency by adopting a bottom-up approach within which they were largely involved in peacebuilding at the grass-root level (Adeogun and Muthiki 2018), their efforts are not factored into formal peacebuilding processes.

Another dimension of this normative system is the gender role dichotomy which thrives on the hierarchical and closed positions for men and women and is used to confirm and maintain the oppositional gender identity and roles between both genders. As argued earlier, the status ascribed to women as nurturers and men as protectors often become normalized by state laws, customary laws or institutions in the post-colonial African state. For example, in many parts of the continent, women continue to be discriminated against and abused on account of their gender in terms of inheritance rights, land and property ownership and reproductive rights. In instances where their human and woman rights have been recognized by the law, the moral confusion that arises from the clash between pre-colonial and colonial African patriarchies pose a threat to women's agency as active participants in public affairs (Kumalo 2015). This is commonplace in West Africa where cultural norms compete very strongly with the constitution. For example, in rural Sierra Leone, communities are characterized by a strong patriarchal culture where traditions, customs and religious beliefs significantly influence and regulate the behavior of women and men in all spheres of life (Womankind, 2011). This system not only relegates women's worldviews and life trajectories as inferior beings to men, it also impedes their participation in public decision making. This is still the situation

even after the passing of the UN resolution 1325 in 2000, women are still very much limited by culture, tradition, religion and all sorts of normative systems from fully participating societal affairs. A study by the UN women in 2010 shows that of the 24 major peace processes that have taken place since 1992, only 2.5 percent of signatories, 3.2 percent of mediators and 7.6 percent of negotiators were women (UN women, 2010). If the global figure can be this low, what will be that of Africa? Sierra Leone is one of the few African countries that has considerable participation of women in peacebuilding but when it comes to holding public offices and participating in formal peace processes, women are marginalized. This marginalization is based on the patriarchal traditions limiting women's access to positions of power and their involvement in formal decision making (Anderlini, 2007).

However, beyond the impact of patriarchy on women's low representation in formal peacebuilding in Africa is the under-reporting of women's work in informal peacebuilding, which is usually not covered in literature as well. It is not that women do not participate in peacebuilding; it is that most of their participation is at informal levels of peacebuilding work which is often undocumented and as such underreported or not reported at all. For example, in West Africa, women have always been active in peace processes and some of their activities during conflict situations include mobilizing families, communities and other women for the peaceful resolution of conflicts. The Women in Peace Network (WIPNET) in West Africa initiated the implementation of the Accra 2003 Comprehensive Peace agreement by organizing seminars and workshops to explain the clauses in the agreement. This contributed to the success of the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) process of the Liberia (Bekoe and Parajon 2007)

The impact of the group's activities was evident in the latter stages of the conflict where they organized demonstrations, mass rallies and sex strikes in order to call attention to the destructive nature of the war (Mahdi, 2007). However, these kinds of activities are usually undocumented and as such not recognised in mainstream peacebuilding and the divide between what is acceptable as part of peace process and what is not accounts for this. This dichotomy between formal and informal peace processes in peacebuilding is one of the reasons for the continued exclusion of women from the sphere (Scanlon, 2016). As aforementioned, unlike formal peace processes that are mostly reflected in mainstream peacebuilding, informal peace processes are often not



recognized and known as they are not based on standardized models and templates like the formal ones, but they are often based on indigenous/traditional practices (Waindim 2018).

Formal peace processes are not only universalistic and devoid of context they are mostly top-down which often does not trickle down to the grass-root thereby creating a gap. This is where the informal peace processes come into play, they are derived from traditional way of making peace and do not often get widespread recognition. Informal peace processes are most times context specific and not one size fits all like the formal processes, they are specifically made for the conflict affected communities with widespread input from the stakeholders. Many formal peacebuilding activities and policies suffer from an insufficient understanding or acknowledgement of the diversity of context. Another problem is the fact that men tend to dominate the formal roles in peacebuilding processes, as peace negotiators, male politician, male formal leader etc. With this sphere already dominated, women tend to involve themselves in the informal roles in the peacebuilding processes, like the relief workers for victims, re-integrating former child soldiers, mass action, etc. While these aid in fostering peace, they do not get the same recognition as the formal one as has been explained above (Shepherd 2016). With the bias towards formal peace processes, the work women tend to do which is mostly informal to engender peace often goes unrecognized. This affects their representation as participants in peacebuilding activities (Scanlon, 2016) The arguments above concede to the fact that women do participate in peacebuilding but an unconscious erasure of their contributions as well as normative systems constitutes a major hindrance to their agency as participant in peacebuilding.

### **Women's informal peacebuilding roles in Sierra Leone**

Sierra Leone is in the western hemisphere of Africa, bordered by Liberia to the Southeast and Guinea to the Northeast. It experienced a civil war from the year 1991 – 2002 which was a result of a combination of factors including the spill-over of conflict in neighboring Liberia, the struggle over the political leadership of the country and other factors. Alongside the 1991 civil war, there has also been low intensity armed conflicts between communities along border lines which have necessitated post-conflict peacebuilding. Overall, the civil war had several stakeholders such as the United Nations (UN), Organization of African Unity (OAU),

Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and other state and non-state actors who all played varying roles. The war ended officially in 2002 on the declaration of the then President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah following the signing of the Lome Peace Accord in 1999. As with the end of most conflicts elsewhere the world over, the end of the Sierra Leone civil war ushered in post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation following a number of peacebuilding activities and processes undertaken by different of stakeholders such as the ECOWAS and its military wing (the ECOMOG), UN forces (the UNAMSIL troops), .....and other such actors who facilitated the signing of the peace agreement (Mazurana and Carlson, 2004). However, while the efforts of these actors involved in the formal peacebuilding process are well known and documented, the role of women who were also significant actors in the conflict and the peacebuilding process remain largely unknown. This is mainly because women's peacebuilding activities and contributions occurred mostly at informal levels of society

What is the nature of the contribution's women made to facilitate peacebuilding in Sierra Leone? While there are many aspects of formal and informal peacebuilding which converge at some levels, this paper focuses on women's informal peacebuilding contributions in the areas of persuasion, conciliation, reconciliation and preventive diplomacy in Sierra Leone. These will be discussed under three overarching themes which are lobbying, mass action and re-integration. Although categorizing these informal activities under formal aspects of peacebuilding may be interpreted as contradicting the argument of distinguishing between formal and informal peacebuilding, this categorization is done to highlight the convergence of formal and informal peacebuilding. It is also to underscore the need to recognize and mainstream informal peacebuilding activities into formal aspects of peacebuilding. As the civil war in Sierra Leone waged on without an end in sight, claiming more lives and destroying scarce infrastructure, women started mobilizing themselves informally at community levels under the auspices of different groups to form a large network of women's groups. Examples of these groups include Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), Women for a Morally Enlightened Nation (WOMEN), Young Christian Women Association (YCWA), Sierra Leone Women Movement for Peace, Progressive Women Association

(PWA) and the Mano River Women Peace Network (MARWOPNET)<sup>4</sup>. Some prominent figures among the women who actively participated through personal and group lobby in the fight for peace are Jusu-Sheriff (former President of MARWOPNET) Zainab Hawa Bangura (Chairperson and co-founder of the Movement for Progress Party, Sierra Leone), Amy Smythe (former President of YCWA Sierra Leone) and Kadie Sesay (former chairperson of the Commission for Democracy and Human Rights) (Amedzrator, 2014). In broad terms, most of their activities include lobbying the rebel groups, pressurizing the military government, peaceful mass action and protests for peace and helping victims of the war to reintegrate into society.

### ***Lobbying***

WOMEN pressured the Bio's military government and the National Provisional Ruling Council to hold democratic elections, they were the first non-partisan women's group in Sierra Leone that promoted women's representation. Other women's groups educated civilians on the electoral proceedings, trained observers and pressured the military government to respect the outcome of the election (Carlson and Mazurana 2004:15). They also worked with the media to raise the awareness of the civil society about its responsibility to be involved in the promotion of peace in the sub-region. The women leaders mobilized their communities, especially women, to fight for an end to the war. At a point they met President Ahmed Tegjan Kabbah and implored him to arrange for them to speak to Foday Sankoh, the rebel leader who had refused to dialogue with the government (Brownell, 2011).

MARWOPNET was concerned about the hardship and the violations caused by the war in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia (George-Williams, 2006). They used their social capital to lobby the wife of the President of Guinea (Lansana Conteh) into scheduling a meeting with her husband. This meeting led to the further talks where the women enjoined him to negotiate with the other conflicting parties. One of the women during the meeting told the president if he refused to negotiate

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<sup>4</sup> The MARWOPNET is a regional organization that came into being as a result of the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the aim was to bring the influence and experience of women to ending wars and promoting peace. (Steady 2006)

with Charles Taylor, she would lock them both up in a room and release them only when they agree to settle the dispute. This, the President agreed to do which led to the talk between Mr. Taylor and Mr. Conteh meeting in Morocco in 2002 (Brownell, 2011 cited in Amdzrator, 2014:12)

### ***Mass action***

Jusu-Sheriff (2000) asserted that the first public action after series of meetings and consultations amongst these groups was a peace march in January 1995. It was a public demonstration which included female professionals dancing through central Freetown alongside petty traders, student nurses, female soldiers as a show of solidarity. The message of the marchers was “try peace to end this senseless war”. YCWA played a leading role in the negotiation that led to the signing of the Abidjan Peace Accord culminating in the first ceasefire (Jusu-Sheriff 2000:48). With the first ceasefire in January 1996, they mobilized a mass movement and coordinated a general strike that led to multiparty elections in 1996 (Jusu-Sheriff, 2004). In May 2000, women assembled on the streets chanting “not again”, “enough is enough” when rebel leader Sankoh’s intentions of flouting the Lome Accord by continuing the war become known. The slogan was a reaction to the under-representation of women in the political space after the 1996 election and the rebel leader’s tactic which the women understood to re-ignite the war. Their activism reached a high point when they ultimately played a catalytic role in bringing an end to the conflict. A group of elderly women came together demanding a meeting with the RUF leader Sankoh. On arriving at the RUF compound, they were mistreated and insulted, frustrated; these women tried a different tactic. They collectively hitched up their skirts, bent over and bared themselves to Sankoh and his troops. In Sierra Leone, such an action by women is the worst curse that can be brought upon anyone. This act triggered the widespread mass action that struck a final blow to the rebels leading to the official end of the war. May 8, 2000 was set as the date for mass peace protests and demonstration; this marked a crucial turning point in the conflict (Carlson and Mazurana, 2004)

### ***Re-integration program***

Apart from lobbying, mass action and protests, women are major participants in the re-integration of former child soldiers, combatants and generally people affected by the conflict. Women in Sierra Leone have been pivotal to the re-integration of former combatants, child soldiers particularly those excluded from the official DDR program. Some women whose children were killed opened their homes to former child soldiers, they provided guidance, shared their meager resources and helped facilitate the skills and training of those affected (Carlson and Mazurana 2004:24). FAWE and PWA were the main organizations active in the re-integration program. They developed a foster care program for young mothers, enabling them attend school while their children are tended to. Caritas Makeni offered counselling and programs on health and alternative income generation for those who have entered the sex trade. MARWOPNET visited women refugees in Guinea and Liberia to encourage them to become part of the peace processes to address problems such as sexual assaults in camps, food shortages, reuniting women with their family members and returning them to their homes in Sierra Leone. (Femme Africa Solidarite, 2002; Steady 2011, 42).

In the Bo district, a group of women decided to take back those children and youth from the fighting forces between age 6 and 25, they claimed that such move was their own contribution to upholding peace. In Makeni, Bambali district, women organized themselves to care for children coming out of the fighting forces. The women argued that if the child soldiers are left abandoned, they would have nothing positive to do or think and will prove a threat to the fragile peace (Womankind, 2011:8).

FAWE also operated skill training centers which include education for young women and girls in basic literacy. They offered a range of training programs to girls and young women ex-combatants which included tailoring, carpentry, tie dying and masonry. They have also rebuilt schools and community centers that were destroyed and, in some areas, have constructed and opened schools for girls. Some of its program centers catered for girl mothers and other vulnerable girl population with the aim of increasing literacy and education (Mazurana and Carlson 2004:24).

Although these re-integration activities were relatively small scale as they were carried out by individuals, NGO groups compared to the official DDR programs, they made considerable impact in preventing

conflict and thus sustaining the peace Sierra Leone enjoys today. Similarly, women's lobbying efforts and mass protests were pivotal in ending the war especially the one that culminated in women baring themselves naked to the rebel leader Foday Sankoh. Such random and sometimes unstructured peace intervention could be mainstreamed into peacemaking activities of formal peacebuilding and these could be given impetus by continental governmental bodies such as the African Union and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in Africa.

### **Appraising the AU's efforts in fostering women's participation in peace processes**

The rebranding of the African Union in 2000 coincided with the passing of the UN resolution 1325 which seeks increased women's participation in peace processes and a more gendered perspective in peace and security. These two events marked a turning point in the development of a more responsive peace and security system in Africa coupled with the efforts towards women's inclusion in peace processes. The African Union Peace and Security Architecture is primarily saddled with the task of ensuring peace and security in the continent along with other issues that fall under this sphere. The inclusion of women in peace and security, with focus on peace processes is a serious concern for APSA which has birthed agendas, workshops, panels etc. The AU and the APSA's first step towards ensuring women's representation/participation in peace building was the integration of the UN 1325 into AU's gender related frameworks (Hendricks, 2017). This was an adoption of the UN resolution that sought increased women's presence in peace and security, which was followed by the appointment of a special envoy on women in peace and security. The protocol to the African charter on human and people's rights and the rights of women (Maputo Protocol) in Africa was adopted in 2003. Article 10 of the protocol states that women have a right to a peaceful existence and the right to participate in the promotion of peace. It enjoins member states to take measures towards ensuring the participation of women in the structures and processes for conflict prevention, management at all levels (AU, 2003). Subsequent efforts taken by the AU are; the solemn declaration of gender equality in 2004, the AU gender policy in 2008. In 2014, the gender, peace and security programme was launched to serve as a continental framework for the AU, the RECs towards the implementation of UNSRC 1325 and its sister resolutions on women peace and security (Hendricks, 2017). The

2016-2020 African peace and security architecture roadmap made gender mainstreaming a priority (AU, 2016) with the AU Peace and Security Council organizing an open session on the role of women in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. In March 2017, the African Union Peace and Security Council (PSC) created the Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation (FemWise-Africa). FemWise-Africa is aimed at strengthening the role of women in conflict prevention and mediation efforts and enhancing the implementation of the commitments for women's inclusion in peace making in Africa.

All these efforts have been put into ensuring that women duly participate and are represented in peace processes across the continent, yet there is still low participation and representation of women in peacebuilding. Hendricks (2017) argues that despite advocacy, frameworks and the training of women mediators, progress has been slow in terms of women's participation in peacemaking. A study by the UN women argues that women's participation in peace processes remains one of the most unfulfilled aspects of the women, peace and security agenda. As this paper has argued, the low representation of women in formal peacebuilding such as facilitated by the AU's laudable efforts to include women, is not an indication of low or non-participation in peacebuilding. Women participate but their activities are mainly informal and as such not recognized. The AU would therefore need to undertake studies across the continent to understand and document women's various peacebuilding activities and mainstream these into its formal peacebuilding processes and then encourage member states to implement in their specific contexts.

## **Conclusion**

This paper set out to explore women's informal peacebuilding activities in Africa using the specific example of Sierra Leone to explain women's low representation in formal peacebuilding processes<sup>5</sup>. While it confirms that women are indeed excluded from formal peacebuilding due largely to patriarchal factors, this did not suggest that women were not participating in peacebuilding in the continent. On the contrary, as the

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<sup>5</sup> Focusing on the informal peacebuilding roles of women is not to brush aside their contributions in the formal sphere but to explore the sphere where they are prominent and as such more represented; the informal sphere.

example of Sierra Leone shows, women are usually actively involved in peacebuilding work albeit of an informal nature which is often undocumented, and as such underreported or not reported. The lack of recognition and under-reporting of women's informal peacebuilding work is enabled by the dichotomy between formal and informal peacebuilding which can be blurred by further research into women's informal peacebuilding work, documenting and then mainstreaming them into mainstream peacebuilding. This is where the African Union comes in.

Women's inclusion in peace processes is an important matter that needs to be adequately addressed by the African Union, while it is acknowledged that efforts have been made towards this course. The AU Agenda 2063 speaks to gender parity and inclusion in peace processes, yet it neither recognizes nor include informal peacebuilding activities often undertaken by women thereby hampering women's representation in formal peacebuilding in the continent.

The African Union being the apex organ responsible for the peace and security of the continent through its Peace and Security Architecture should look beyond the formal peacebuilding to start embracing the informal process. It is agreeable that formal peace processes are mostly large-scale, receive a lot of funding support and institutional buy-in from the international community. What is problematic is the assumption that it will always be inclusive, impactful, and effective. Different resolutions have been made by the UN and ratified by the AU and regional organizations to address women's participation in peace processes, yet their participation in formal peace processes remain low with implications for the quality of their representation. Rather than continuously passing resolutions, identifying the spaces where women feature the most and mainstreaming their informal peace activities into formal peace processes would be a better alternative. The fact that women are not significantly represented in the formal sphere of peacebuilding does not erase the reality of their existence in the informal sphere or the significance of the work they do there. This does not however mean women should be encouraged to remain stuck in the informal sphere of building peace, but rather to say that more awareness and recognition should be given to what they are already doing as it creates an easy path to their inclusion in formal peace processes. Therefore, from the case of women peacebuilding activities in Sierra Leone and other such cases which abound in the continent, we are putting forward a few policy goals and suggestions which the AU can



consider fostering increased women's participation in formal peacebuilding. There is a need to:

- Erase the bias towards informal peace activities as “local”, “traditional” and as such unimportant and negligible. Bringing the informal efforts women have made and continue to make to foster peace will help achieve this goal,
- Commission studies into the various ways’ women foster peace in their communities across the continent. This should be done in collaboration with the sub-regional organizations,
- Ensure community conversations with women at local levels should form an integral part of the feminist methodology to be adopted for these studies,
- Identify women groups that engage in aspects of formal peacebuilding work such as re-integration programs and engage them to serve as advisory bodies for the AU on DDR,
- Provide support for the work these women are doing through the various organizational and political channels in Africa,
- Enjoin its regional organization to replicate these efforts as it will work provide a bottom- up effect which is usually more effective,
- Work towards creating policy documents that formalize women’s informal peacebuilding activities that will be shared by the women and women groups interviewed, and
- Develop a comprehensive policy framework that incorporates women’s informal peacebuilding activities into already existing formal peace processes. This should also seek to decentralize the peacebuilding process in ways that will make it compulsory to include ordinary and local women in peace negotiations, mediations and workshops at all levels of governance in society from local to continental.

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