

# CULTURE AND WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN PEACEBUILDING IN AFRICA: PERSPECTIVE OF NATIONAL CULTURE AND SOCIAL ROLE THEORIES

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## ABSTRACT

*This study explored the relationship between culture, gender and peacebuilding in Africa. To achieve its aim, the study draws on the theoretical lenses of the cultural and social role theories, and extant literature. It utilizes experiences within the continent to exemplify the topic. The study found that while women in some countries in Africa have been vocal and instrumental in the resolution of conflicts and wars, they are still neglected and marginalized in efforts to find lasting solutions to conflicts and wars. Furthermore, and relatedly, it showed that the low representation and participation of women in peacebuilding in the continent is due to the harmful cultural norms particularly, masculine and power distance values which discourage women from playing active roles and having their voices heard in peacebuilding processes. However, the evidence suggests that cultural factors tend to be considered as trivial in promoting sustainable peacebuilding because peace research and practices often ignore the role of traditions and values among parties to a conflict although cultural differences have the tendency to reinforce or delegitimize peacebuilding. Thus, to ensure sustainable peacebuilding, it is important to create equal avenues for full and adequate representation and participation of women through the institutionalization of gender inclusive composition of peacebuilding teams and empowerment of women against limiting influences of societal culture. This is because evidence indicates that when women are afforded the necessary recognition with relatively higher status in societies, it increases the prospects for sustainable and gender inclusive peacebuilding. By this, the study makes theoretical and practical contributions by integrating and applying the Hofstede' national cultural theory and social role theory to highlight and enhance understanding of the mechanisms through which cultural values can affect women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict construction in warring countries.*

**Keywords:** Peacebuilding, Gender, Societal Culture, Women Participation, Africa.

## INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

The adequate representation and participation of diverse stakeholders particularly women is deemed to be key in ensuring sustainable peace (Buranajaroenkij, 2020; Lederach, 2005). However, women have and continue to be relegated to the background or marginalised in peacebuilding processes and platforms (Datzberger & Mat, 2018; Moser & Clark, 2001). This is evident in the low rate of inclusion of women in peacebuilding efforts over the years. From 1992 to 2011, only 9% of the negotiators, 2.4% of the chief mediators, 3.7% of the witnesses, and 4% of the signatories on peacebuilding efforts were only women (Diaz & Tordjman, 2012). Besides,

out of the 585 peace agreements that were signed between 1990 and 2010, only 16% made direct reference to gender or women (Diaz & Tordjman, 2012).

The African context is no exception with respect to the low representation of women in peacebuilding processes because out of the 16 peace agreements that were signed between 1992 and 2011 in various countries in Africa with conflicts, women as signatories, mediators, witnesses and negotiators constituted were just about 0.63%, 4.6%, 5.5% and 9.3% respectively (African Union, 2016). The barriers accounting for the low participation of women in peacebuilding despite the resolution 1325 of the United Nations Security Council that has called for women to be given equal opportunity at peacebuilding table (Chitando, 2019; Erzurum & Eren, 2014) requires further exploration. Culture as one of the potential limiting factors to women participation in peacebuilding is the interest and main focus of this study. According to Hofstede (2001), culture is *“a collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the member of one group or category of people from another”*. Cultural issues may provide fertile grounds for gender inequality in peacebuilding as countries in Africa are highly patriarchal and male-dominated (Alaga, 2010) but it is scarcely examined in peace research (Bargués-Pedreny & Mathieu, 2018; Datzberger & Mat, 2018).

While prior studies have investigated the role of factors such as intercultural and interreligious training (Abu-Nimer, 2001), intercultural communication (Broome & Collier, 2012), civil society education (Datzberger & Mat, 2018) in peacebuilding, research on role of cultural dimensions on peacebuilding generally and specifically in Africa is limited. Consequently, some peace researchers have drawn attention to this lack of sufficient recognition of cultural roles in peacebuilding (Bargués-Pedreny & Mathieu, 2018; Datzberger & Mat, 2018). In particular, Avruch (1998) has criticised peacebuilding research for treating culture as a trivial factor. This was re-echoed by Bargués-Pedreny & Mathieu (2018) recently as they argued that recognising cultural differences in peacebuilding is necessary because it can promote and hinder sustainable peacebuilding.

As a result, this study critically explored the relationship between culture and peacebuilding in Africa by drawing on experiences within the continent and the theoretical propositions of the national culture and social role theories. It further uses examples particularly from Sierra Leone to exemplify the topic for two main reasons: first, the country has experienced a civil war between 1991- 2002 due to struggles for political power among the warring factions including other armed conflicts between communities along the border lines. This has necessitated efforts for post-conflict peacebuilding. Secondly, despite the patriarchal nature of culture of Sierra Leone, women were generally hailed for playing crucial roles in the post-conflict reconstruction in the country (Anderlini, 2007; Olaitan & Isike, 2019). It is among the few nations in the continent that has seen a significant involvement and participation of women in peacebuilding efforts, although they remain marginalized in formal peacebuilding activities and processes (Anderlini, 2007).

The study makes a theoretical contribution by integrating and applying the Hofstede' national cultural theory and social role theory to highlight and enhance understanding of the mechanisms through which cultural values can affect women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict construction in warring countries. Furthermore, it contributes to peace research by offering avenues for future empirical research. Moreover, it makes a practical contribution by bringing to the attention of peace and security practitioners and policy makers that treating cultural factors as trivial in peacebuilding can undermine efforts to facilitate speedy and effective post-conflict construction in warring countries. The next sections highlight the theoretical

frameworks, peacebuilding, research context - the Sierra Leone civil war, culture and women's participation in peacebuilding, implications and conclusion.

## Theoretical Foundations

The study uses the social role theory and national culture theory to discuss the link between culture and inclusive peacebuilding through women participation in peacebuilding processes. The social role theory posits that men and women perform roles that the societal norms have prescribed. This often leads to shared gender stereotypes because it creates a division with respect to the qualities and roles that each gender can perform better. Social roles are formed through societal processes, including observations, socialisation and the broader expectations of members of the general society. These in turn, make people to conform to prescribed societal gender roles. From the perspectives of the social role theory, it is can be argued that gender roles in most countries in African are normally viewed along traditional homemaker– breadwinner divisions. More specifically, women are considered as homemakers while men are breadwinners (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Furthermore, and related to the social role theory, is Lonner's et al. (1980) national culture theory. As noted, culture consists of the *“derivatives of experience, more or less organized, learned or created by the individuals of a population, including those images or encodement and their interpretations (meanings) transmitted from past generations, from contemporaries, or formed by individuals themselves”* (Avruch, 1998). Lonner et al. (1980) argued that the national cultural values that influence how members of a particular country behave can be grouped into: individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, power distance, long-term orientation, and uncertainty avoidance. This article focuses only on masculinity/femininity (also known as gender egalitarianism), and power distance. Power distance culture can be defined as the extent to power is unequally distributed among societal members and institutions. Similarly, masculinity/femininity highlights the extent to which the societal roles and attributes of men and women are different (Hofstede, 2001).

The above two theories are relevant to this study because the appropriation of normative societal beliefs about roles relevant to both gender roles as well as the extent of gender inequality in societies have implications for sustainable peacebuilding. The link between culture and women's participation in peacebuilding from the perspectives of the aforementioned theories is discussed later.

## Peacebuilding

The concept of peacebuilding was popularized in the contemporary world by Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who was the former UN Secretary General. Dag Hammarskjöld used the term *“preventive diplomacy”* which was revived by Boutros-Ghali in the 1990s. He viewed the concept as *“an action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict”* (Keating & Knight, 2004). He used the concept in 1992 to refer to the civilian and military post-conflict support for forestalling future eruptions by strengthening structures for promoting sustainable peace and post-war reconstruction (Keating & Knight, 2004). Peace-building requires economic equity and sufficiency (development), popular political participation (democracy), respect for the rights of and integrity of others (human rights), healthy environment (environmental rights), strict limits

on means of destruction, along with the development of peaceful means of resolving disputes (demilitarization) and peace and security.

According to Crocker (1998), the post-cold war era has proven to be the world's most deadly period since World War II. A central reality of the shift from the bipolar politics was the beginning of intra-state conflict as a threat to international peace and security. Conservatives' estimates indicates that there were 93 armed conflicts around the world, and of which 5.5 million people were killed, 25 percent of all deaths were as a result of armed conflicts since 1945, of which, 75 percent were civilians. That same period, the UN launched more peacekeeping missions than it had in the previous 45 years.

In responding to the new problems posed by inter-state conflict, options beyond the traditional notion of peace-keeping were needed. Boutros Boutros-Ghali introduced "peacebuilding" to the range of strategies of international conflict resolution in his report of 17 June 1992, *An Agenda for Peace*.

Peace-building became recognized as a lengthy process of complex transformation of society, culture, politics, education and economics that helps to overcome conflicts in any society. Given its complexity, peace-building involves the need for partnerships with recipient states to address the multitude of tasks of rebuilding and sustaining development in conflict torn states.

### **Research Context - The Sierra Leone Civil War**

Sierra Leone civil war which started in March 1991 and engulfed the whole country was seen as the most brutal and destructive civil war of modern times, fought between the government and the insurgent group - Revolutionary United Front (RUF) (Okumu & Balleza, 2014; Higgins, 2018). By the time its cessation was negotiated in Lome, Togo on July 7, 1999 and declared officially ended in January 2002, the war had resulted in the wanton destruction of lives, infrastructure, and extensive internal and external displacement of larger part of the country's population (Okumu & Balleza, 2014; Higgins, 2018). It has been reported that an estimated two million people were displaced: 49 percent male and 51 percent female, out of a population of near four million people (Hayner, 2004). The number of lives lost exceeded 50,000 (STRC, 2004). The bodies of women and girls became the war's battlefield with over 250,000 women and girls raped and several hundreds of women and men mutilated (United Nation Children's Fund, 2005).

On the basis of the findings by the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission and other studies revealed that the causes of the armed conflict in Sierra Leone were primarily linked to several decades of bad governance including over-centralization of political power and a political system based on patronage that excluded women from participation in governmental affairs based on cultural barriers (Abdullah, 2002; Gberie, 2005). This situation encouraged corruption, non-accountability and weakened state institutions to the extent that public services delivery declined and the needs of the people were hardly responded to. In addition, these conditions contributed to aggravating land disputes, inequality, discrimination on the basis of gender, in particular against women and girls, as well as the problem of high youth unemployment in the country (Abdullah, 2002; Gberie, 2005).

Central to the policies of reconciliation is usually some sort of truth process. Peace accords such as the Lomé Accord usually contain the establishment of TRCs, however the extent of their jurisdiction is problematic. The Lomé Peace Accord in Article 26 establishes TRC, which was one of the structures of the Commission for the Consolidation of Peace (CCP) that

was to ensure that all the structures of national reconciliation and consolidation of peace were operational and given the necessary resources for realizing their respective mandate. Article 26 states that the TRC is responsible to address impunity, break the cycle of violence, provide a forum for both the victims and perpetrators of human rights violations and get a clear picture of the past in order to facilitate genuine healing and reconciliation. In the spirit of national reconciliation, the commission dealt with the question of human rights violations dated back to 1991 in Sierra Leone's conflicts.

The negative effects of the eleven years of civil war continue to plague the people of Sierra Leone. Children, who had dropped out of school and missed parental care, that were exposed to drugs, have grown up to swell the pool of uneducated youths (Pratt et al., 2014). Schools, health and economic infrastructure were destroyed. Most young men and women, particularly between the ages of 15 and 35, could not be educated due to the civil and hence possess limited marketable skills, leading to youth unemployment, which is seen as a critical factor for human insecurity in the society (Pratt et al., 2014).

### **The Link between Culture and Women's Participation in Peacebuilding in Africa**

Peacebuilding theories and practices have treated cultural factors as trivial in promoting sustainable peacebuilding (Avruch, 1998) by ignoring the role of traditions and values among parties to a conflict although cultural differences have the tendency to reinforce or delegitimize peacebuilding (Avruch, 2003). The following critically examined the relationship between cultural values, specifically, power distance and masculinity and femininity or gender egalitarianism on the participation of women in peacebuilding in Africa.

Some scholars Alaga (2010); Erzurum & Eren (2014) and Strickland & Duvvury (2003) have argued that the low representation and participation of women in peacebuilding is due to the harmful cultural and social norms of power distance values. Power distance culture is defined as the extent to which societal members endorse inequality and unequal distribution of power. Power distance values discourage women from playing active roles (Hofstede, 2001). Most African countries are characterized by power distance cultural values. Power distance is linked with social inequality and lack of tolerance for change (Anlesinya et al., 2019; Lonner et al., 1980). This suggests that the power distance cultural values of African countries have the tendency to facilitate inequality in gender representation in peacebuilding efforts as males, who by traditional norms, are more powerful may be unwilling to offer equal opportunity for women to play various roles in peacebuilding including serving as negotiators, whiteness, and signatories, among others. Reducing gender inclusive and equality will encourage more participation of women who in some cases have the capacity to outperform their male counterparts. In their meta-analytic review of 185 studies found that women have outperformed men in negotiations in low assertive or power distance cultures.

Moreover, Lonner et al. (1980) relatedly argued that societies tend to differ in terms of roles that women and men are expected to perform. This is termed as masculinity and femininity or gender egalitarianism. It refers to "*beliefs about whether members' biological sex should determine the roles that they play in their homes, business organizations, and communities*" (Emrich et al., 2004). In most societies, women are traditionally treated as subordinates whereas their male counterparts are seen from a position of authority (Friedl, 1978). This is typical of patriarchal societies like African countries, where men are placed in a position of power and authority with women assuming subordinate positions (Chitando, 2019).

Although these gender roles imposed by societies have increasingly been closing over the years, the existence of a gap between the functions of men and women is still dominated by men (Erzurum & Eren, 2014). In a highly gender egalitarian culture, the differences are less apparent because members have less tendency to comply with traditional gender roles (Bolzendahl & Myers 2004; Emrich et al., 2004). As a result, there is an increased overlap in gender roles that both sexes play or are expected to play. However, in low gender egalitarian cultures, men are considered as breadwinners while women are seen as caretakers and mothers (McDaniel, 2008).

In African contexts, patriarchal norms are of the major factors that limit the participation of African women in peacebuilding processes as it promotes more men to be involved in peacebuilding efforts while discouraging and relegating women to less important roles (Machakanja, 2016; Chitando, 2019). This is very unfortunate because it reinforces the harmful traditional stereotypical role as mothers and caretakers simply based on their femininity and their ability and not what they can offer to ensure sustainable peace (De Alwis et al., 2013). Moreover, culture of the African societies has fewer tendencies to accommodate women voicing out their opinions, especially during conflict resolution because it relegates the woman gender to performing duties only in the home such as caring for their spouses and the general well-being of their children.

Consequently, various scholars De Alwis et al. (2013) and O'Reilly et al. (2015) have argued that the rights of women to be active participants in peacebuilding are non-negotiable and should not be influenced by their traditional role of motherhood. This is because the processes of peacebuilding is not limited only to efforts to bring violence to an end but also involves the building of a society that is gender inclusive and diversity tolerance (O'Reilly et al., 2015). Thus, harmful patriarchal cultural norms should not serve as an impediment to making peacebuilding processes more diverse and gender inclusive. This is important since gender inclusive processes have the potential to generate useful ideas and inputs from diverse perspectives to find sustainable resolutions of wars and conflicts. Besides, it has been shown that the higher the gender inequality in societies, the greater the tendency of conflict to occur or protract (Hudson et al., 2012; Selimovic et al., 2012).

However, in face of the pervasive patriarchal cultural barriers in most African societies, women have contributed significantly towards peacebuilding. Indeed, globally, women have challenged and gone beyond subordinate status that patriarchal norms imposed on them by breaking the persistent dominance of men in politics and peace activities, with significant evidence of women emerging as active agents of peacebuilding in Africa and in many other non-African societies (Chitando, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

Although various previous studies have examined peacebuilding and its limiting and promoting factors, research on the role of cultural dimensions on peacebuilding generally and specifically in Africa is limited. Consequently, this study explored the relationship between culture and peacebuilding in Africa by drawing on the theoretical lenses of the cultural and social role theories, and extant literature as well as practical experiences within the continent.

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