Towards a Feminist Understanding of Peace and Conflict in Africa

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Introduction

Though women are the major victims of war in times of conflict, they have been portrayed and presented, in the literature, as better peace makers and peace builders than men. Such contributions of the women folk to the cause of peace have gained widespread recognition in the past years and, most especially, in the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, which recognised as a matter of international peace and security the urgent need to address women's participation in peace processes and peace building. In addition to this is, is that of protecting women and girls from intense violations of their rights during and after violent conflict. Due to this recognition, the resolution has, as its central idea, the promotion of equal participation and full involvement of women in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in the decision making process with regard to conflict prevention and resolution (Onslow et al, 2014).

The concern of this chapter is to explicate certain mode of appropriation of feminism in connection to issues on peace and conflict in Africa. Feminists in the 1970s and the 1980s were of the view that women, by nature, upbringing and/or virtue of being mothers and caretakers are morally superior to and more peaceful than men (Burke, 1987). The universal subordination of women in the search for origins of male dominance can be traced to the history of slavery, imperialism, the creation of patriarchy through denial of female power, colonisation and racial discrimination of African people and emergence of the western hegemony worldwide.

Though, universally, the womenfolk experienced marginalisation and oppression, it is largely questionable in making assumptions about the universality of female experience, interests and even objectives. Thus, apart from the distinction of class, occupation or even environment, the position of women differ nationally, and even more significantly, from third world where Africa belongs as compared to developed countries. The Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan.

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problem of women, therefore, has to be examined within many contexts and with an awareness of differences. The chapter therefore, would examine issues on feminism, gender identities, Peace and Conflict in Africa.

**Conceptualising Gender**

Gender refers to the array of socially constructed roles and relationships, personality traits, behaviours, attitudes, values and influence that society ascribes to the two sexes on a differential basis. Gender is an acquired identity that is learned, changes over time and varies widely within and across cultures. Gender is relational and refers not simply to women or men but to the relationship between them. Scoff (1986) in defining gender, is of the view that it composes of two interdependent components. That is, gender is a constructive element of social relations based on perceived differences between the sexes. It is also a primary way of signifying relationship of power.

Gender can also be referred to as the economic, social, political and psychological attributes and opportunities associated with being male or female at a particular point in time (Corrin, 2000). Vickers (1993) defines gender as a social institution based on three structural principles: the division of people into two social groups, 'men' and 'women'; the social construction of perceptible differences between them; and their differential treatment, legitimated by socially produced differences.

El-Bushra (2000) in defining gender, pointed out that it is a relational category and its differentiation is a relational process such that, it cannot be understood without 'male' as black cannot be differentiated without white. He further explained that there is a differentiation between men and women and also differentiation within each group which he called 'homo social axis of difference', that is in terms of class or ethnic, racial differences and hetero-social axis of difference, which describes the differences between men and women.

From the intersectional viewpoint, gender is referred to as a power relation in which masculinities and femininities have ascribed shifting meanings rather than essential qualities. It helps us to analyse the durability and stability of unjust gender and social orders, including the use of violence by men against other men, women and children, without taking the connection between "violence" and "masculinity" peace and femininity as something natural or unchangeable. It allows one to raise questions on gendered stereotypes and to inquire about the possible functions of related structures (Byrne, 1995).

Masculinities in many cultures, and especially Africa, are linked to the "power of violation", whereas femininities are "open to vulnerability". Thus, gender relations are latent relations of violence as they systematically reproduce the "vulnerability" of women. From the above discussions, one can say that though gender is a socially constructed category, it does not exist without sex, which is the biological category (Connell, 2005).

In short, one can summarise that gender as a socially constructed dichotomy is built upon biological and sex differences which are a relation of power and, as such, according to feminists, it shapes, regulates, rationalises, and justifies other social relations of power which
in turn are gendered. Gaitung (2010) in his theory concludes that whether by biology or socialisation, men tend to be more violent and women tend to be more peaceful (Man; Woman - War: Peace).

**The Female Gender Characteristics**

To Rice (2006), the new concept in masculinity and femininity research which came to limelight in the 1970s known as Androgyny was used to bring to light the idea that women and men who are healthy are likely to possess similar and different characteristics. Androgyny emerged as a framework for interpreting similarities and differences among individuals according to the degree to which they described themselves in terms of characteristics traditionally associated with men (masculine), and those associated with women (feminine) (Cook, 1989). The term androgyny has its roots in classical mythology and literature, andro for male, and gyne for female.

In his work Rice (2006) identifies certain basic characteristics bringing out the similarities and differences between the male and female gender. These are, according to him, the female gender, is under normal circumstances more affectionate, compassionate, cooperative, peaceful eager to soothe hurt feelings, gentle, sensitive to the needs of others and sympathetic. The potentials of the African woman in peacemaking can in no way be emphasised for they do show a greater capacity for empathy, forgiveness and objectivity. Thus, since these women are "naturally" more peaceful than men, they largely contribute to the 'femmisation of peace' which, in turn, reinforces the masculinity of war. As Enloe (2000: 39) stresses it, "militarised masculinity is a model of masculinity that is especially likely to be imagined as requiring a feminine complement that excludes women from full and assertive participation in postwar public life". The male gender on the other hand is more aggressive, assertive, willing to take risks, independent, forceful and dominant. Thus, a female has the power to engender peace.

**The Problem**

In spite of the recognition of the 'natural' female disposition, the female gender, throughout the world, continue to experience domination, marginalisation and oppressions in all spheres of life. They were (and still are) denied equal opportunities as men to achieve their full potentials. In addition to this, the patriarchal structure of the societies were to a large extent working against them such that they had no rights of access, ownership and control over resources and even their bodies. In short the problems these women experienced were oppression in all manifestations. These problems spurred the women to come together to form feminist movements to fight their course.

Feminism is the belief that women should have economic, political and social equality with men. Feminism according to Johnson (2005), is a way of thinking, observing the world, asking questions and looking for answers that may lead to particular options. Feminism is intertwined with the question of woman. It is a term that emerged long after the word feminism was coined. Thus, any attempt to provide a baseline definition of a common basis of all feminisms may start with
the assertion that feminists concern themselves with women's inferior position in society and with discrimination encountered by women because of their sex. All feminists call for changes in the social, economic, political or cultural order, to reduce and eventually overcome this discrimination against women. Feminism posits gender, or the differential social construction of the behavior of the sexes, based on their physiological differences, as the primary category of analysis (Bryson, 1992). Feminism therefore raises issues that concern personal autonomy or freedom-with constant reference to basic issues of societal organisation, which centre, in Western societies, on the long-standing debate over the family and its relationship to the state, and on the historically inequitable distribution of political, social, and economic power between the sexes.

Feminism opposes women's subordination to men in the family and society, along with men's claims to define what is best for women without consulting them; it thereby offers a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organisation, and control mechanisms. It seeks to destroy masculine's hierarchy but not sexual dualism. Feminism is necessarily pro-woman. However, it does not follow that it must be anti-man; indeed, in time past, some of the most important advocates of women's cause have been men (Millet, 1970). Feminism makes claims for a rebalancing between women and men of the social, economic, and political power within a given society, on behalf of both sexes in the name of their common humanity, but with respect (Harding, 1991).

Its growth began in Europe and America in the 19th Century as a social movement that promoted equality between sexes and a system of thought that challenged mainstream science (Offen, 1988). This movement provided the historical context in which feminist discourse was produced and proliferated into the discipline of women's studies which has been characterised as an academic arm of the feminist movement (Farnham, 1987). This was when women became conscious of their oppression and marginalisation and took steps to redress this oppression. It is a historically diverse and culturally varied international movement probing the question of women. Feminism therefore is a socio-political movement which focuses on women's issues (Rosaldo and Louise, 1974).

To Rowbothan (1980) feminism may be a perspective, a worldview, a political theory or a kind of activism. For Smith (2000) feminism is an attempt to describe and interpret women's experiences as depicted in various kinds of life. She further explains that it is a sort of belief in sexual equality combined with a commitment to transform society. Feminism therefore is concerned about females not just as a biological category but the female gender as a social category. Feminism is the means that promotes gender consciousness and gender categories largely at the expense of local categories such as ethnicity, race, seniority, which may be more locally salient. Thus, we cannot deny the growing presence of gender consciousness and the ongoing establishment of male superiority. These are, roughly speaking: women's legal and political rights; violence, reproductive rights and abortion, sexual liberty, employment and discrimination, political participation and representation (Freedman, 2003).
While the first wave was positioned in the period from the 1860s to 1920s, the second wave was positioned in the late 1960s and extended to the present. It sought women's equality on both a political and personal level (Friedan, 2007). What both movements had in common was the production of feminist knowledge. However, since western feminist intellectuals had not gained much access to universities and other public institutions during the first wave movement, the production and dissemination of feminist knowledge was much more tied to the second wave movement than it was to the first. This was particularly the case with feminist theory.

Feminist theory deals with the investigations into ways that sex determines existence and became power relations in the society. It is the theorisation of women's oppression and gender studies. Women, over the years in the western nation, state and cultures, dramatically increased their access to the public sphere and centers of knowledge production and dissemination. Thereby they participated in considerable numbers in the re-organisation of knowledge production in general, as well as in the production of specifically feminist knowledge (Hay and Stitcher, 1995). Hence the current accumulation of feminist theory is not separable from women's unprecedented access to public spheres and institutions. In short western feminists consisted of the middle class women who focused their attention on dismantling workplace inequality such as denial of access to better jobs and salary inequity.

Feminism to African feminist on the other hand, was fixed within the context of patriarchal social relations, structures, systems and sexual oppression which were embedded in other oppressive and exploitative structures. It has been argued that African feminism is quite distinct from western feminism due to the peculiar characteristics of the African woman (Gwendolyn, 1997). It was a struggle mainly about the struggle for social justice and they sought to dismantle pervasive patriarchal social system relations both within and outside the movements. To a large extent it was the social context and dialectical existence of the African woman that made the difference (Steady, 1975). In spite of the Beijing declaration on affirmative action, women in Africa are not yet in the mainstream in the political, social, economic as well as peace and conflict related issues.

The African women's movements were strongly influenced and shaped by the activism against colonial rule and racist ideologies. African women's activism cannot be seen separately from the larger context of repression and exploitation of both men and women. This has given rise to a feminism and activism primarily aimed at changing social and humanitarian conditions. African feminists have, to a lesser extent, aimed their arrows at personal and sexist conditions which is quite contrary to Western feminists (Kolawole, 1997).

African women had different starting point. African women's roles grew from a long tradition of female integration in collective structures. This is completely different from the West, where feminism grew from middle class individualism and the patriarchal structure in a (post-)industrial society. In short African feminist struggle can be linked to the past as a continent with diverse pre-colonial contexts, slavery, colonialism and even
globalisation. It is mainly about the struggle for social justice and to seek to dismantle pervasive patriarchal social system relations (Kolawole, 1997). African women held important positions in the pre-colonial period be it political, economic, religious and were involved in maintaining peace in their domain. The specific ideas of feminism vary depending on time, culture and place amongst others. Many feminists challenge traditional gender roles and demand increased educational, and employment opportunities. Thus they called for greater involvement of women in politics, focused on issues related to sex and reproductive rights, the prevention of violence against women and the well being of women throughout the world. In short, feminism emerged as a concept that encompass both an ideology and a movement for sociopolitical change based on a critical analysis of male privilege and women's subordination within any given society.

Despite a lot of efforts that the women put in place to bring about changes in the lives of the women, they faced many challenges. These included:

1. Multiple oppression which was based on race, class, sexuality and gender.
2. Inequality between men and women and discrimination.
3. Cultural norms that prescribe the roles of women as being subservient to men and under men's authority.
4. Also, the feminist movement to the wider world was viewed as too radical and seen as challenging men from the domestic to the public arena.

In spite of the challenges, the various movements successfully brought about certain changes to such issues as mobilising all women's groups at all levels, be it religious, classes and social statuses. As a result of their agitations numerous provisions were made for the evolvement legislations that addresses issues of both gender; men and women equity in conflict and peacebuilding which amongst others has been the United Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985), the fourth UN "World Conference on Women in Beijing, here, gender mainstreaming and gender analysis were emphasised as crucial processes of the peace process. Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2006) and 1860 (2008) which brought to light the institutional visibility of feminist issues in peace and conflict. These instruments recognised that women worldwide can play active and positive roles in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. It acknowledged that peace cannot be sustained unless women have an equal and active role in formulating policies and with women's full participation in peace processes.

Conceptualising Conflict and Peace

Conflict is a universal, multi dimensional and natural feature or phenomenon of human society in that it takes place amongst and between human beings as a result of economic differences (due to scarce resources), cultural formation, social change, psychological development and even political organisations. It is a social fact which is inherent to all
societies. Depending on their intensity, conflicts are expressed sometimes in violent or nonviolent ways. Conflicts are extremely dynamic due to the fact that they escalate and desescalate and are constituted by a complex interplay of all attitudes and behavior that can become a reality of its own. In addition to this, the trends and causes might differ overtime (Frances, 2008). Conflict can develop and change at a very fast space.

Conflict is not inherently a negative feature of society. Rather, it is a natural expression of social difference and of humanity's perpetual struggle for justice and self. Conflict arises for a multitude of reasons and, invariably, in all cultures, and is effectively controlled by the conflict management systems in place (Hewitt, 2012). Different scholars have given different definitions of the concept from their own perspectives but there seems to be a sort of working definition which summarises the different explanations and definitions of conflict.

Conflict can be said to be a disagreement through which the parties involved perceive a threat to their needs, interest or concerns. From this assertion one can say that there are four main elements in the occurrence of conflict.

1. Disagreement
2. Parties Involved
3. Perceived Threats
4. Needs, Interests or Concerns

Conflict can also be defined as a struggle or contest between people with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values or goals. It can be referred to as an overt and coercive behaviour initiated by one contending party against another party or group. Coser (1956) defined conflict as a struggle over values, status, class and scarce power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralise, injure or eliminate their rivals. He argues that conflict is instinctual, so we find it everywhere in human society. There is the conflict of war, but there is also the conflict that we find in our daily lives and relationships. Deutch (2006) refers to Conflict as a situation which manifests itself whenever incompatible activities occur.

Mack and Snyder (1987) try to identify four major empirical conditions for the existence of conflict which may exist within and among individuals, groups or nation. The conditions include:

(i) The existence of two or more parties.
(ii) A situation of resource or position scarcity.
(iii) The presence of behavior that is designed to hurt or injure the other.
(iv) Mutually opposed goals.

To Galtung (1969) conflict is a dynamic process in which structure, attitudes and behavior are constantly changing and influencing one another. In defining conflict, he designed a model of conflict that includes the symmetric and asymmetric conflict and could be viewed as a triangle.

1. Contradiction (the underlying conflict situation which includes the actual or perceived incompatible goals between conflicting parties).
2. Attitude - This includes the conflicting parties perceptions and misperceptions of each other and of themselves
3. Behaviour - this involves coopera-
tion or coercion, gestures signifying conciliation or hostility. Violent conflict behaviour is characterised by threats, coercion and destructive attacks.

Conflict is therefore a sort of contradiction between goals. It becomes dangerous when it leads to violence in behaviour and hateful attitudes. In short conflict may be viewed as occurring along cognitive (perception), emotional (feeling), and behavioural (action) dimensions. This three-dimensional perspective can help in understanding the complexities of conflict and why a conflict sometimes seems to proceed in contradictory directions. It takes its origins in economic differentiation, social change, cultural formation, psychological development and political organisation - all of which are inherently conflicting - and becomes overt through the formation of conflict parties (Bowd and Chikwanha, 2010).

Conflict exists in all countries and at every level of society. Conflict per se is by no means a negative force; it is a natural expression of social differences and of humanity’s perpetual struggle for justice and self. Conflict resolution is directed at understanding conflict processes and alternative non-violent methods to help disputing parties reach mutually acceptable positions that resolve their differences. It is the process of attempting to resolve a dispute or a conflict.

Peacebuilding is a relatively new field and there has been widespread adoption of the term since it was introduced by Boutros Boutros Ghali in An Agenda for Peace. Peacebuilding is generally associated with the promotion of positive peace. The way in which the male and female gender is integral to peace and violent conflict makes it clear that a feminist analysis of peacebuilding is essential in preventing and mitigating new violent eruptions in postconflict societies while helping them recover from current conflicts. Peacebuilding is the effort to strengthen the prospects for internal peace and decrease the likelihood of violent conflict. The overarching goal of peace building is to enhance the indigenous capacity of a society to manage conflict without violence. Ultimately, peacebuilding aims at building human security, a concept which includes democratic governance, human rights, rule of law, sustainable development, equitable access to resources, and environmental security. Peacebuilding may involve conflict prevention, conflict resolution, as well as various kinds of postconflict activities. It focuses on the political and socio-economic context or humanitarian aspects. It seeks to institutionalise the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Women often play unacknowledged but vital roles in sustaining security and, despite their common image as victims, they are very active on their own in terms of self-preservation: Women are often the stabilising force in the societies in which they exist. This is certainly true in postconflict settings where women represent essentially the backbone of reconstruction and rehabilitation and the re-integration of former combatants and the re-emergence of basic economic activity in a society, in a war-torn society, once a peace have been achieved (Rodriguez and Natukunda, 2005).

Characteristics of Conflict
Conflict is a gendered activity. Thus, gender
is a relevant dimension in peacebuilding. In times of conflict while the entire communities suffer the consequences of conflict and any form of terrorism, women and girls are particularly affected because of their status in the society and at the same time their sex. In short in an attempt to have a better understanding of the feminist dimension of a society, it is important to have a better understanding of the total situation. Feminists have argued that gender is essential to understand the origins of violence and the means through which it works.

A Feminist Understanding of Conflict and Peace

Though a lot of works have been done to really delve into the occurrences and strategies of resolving conflicts, there seems to be little happening in terms of applying a feminist lens in these conflicts and looking at how a feminist perspective into the situation of peace and conflict can be instrumental in bringing about new ideas and changing attitudes of people. Women and men experience conflicts differently and face different challenges in the postconflict peacebuilding processes (Anderlini, 2001). They (women), together with the children, always bear the brunt of conflict. It is a fact that women show the human face of a conflict, that is, they bear the highest burden in the form of destroyed homes, trauma and broken relationships. This then points to the importance of synergising these experiences into a rich blend for conflict transformation and peacebuilding as opposed to what has been happening where importance is only given to one gender during the process of reconstruction.

Anderlini (2003) further explains that women and girls are often viewed as helpless victims of conflict. They are often seen as caregivers and as having a high risk of sexual vulnerability. However, in many conflicts, women and girls have taken roles as combatants, spies and cooks while others have engaged in activities that do not promote peace building. It has been argued that women are more effective and more efficient than men in negotiations and that there is a need for "peace promoters, not just warriors at the table." Social research has demonstrated that women tend to be more cooperative and less aggressive (Marshall, 2000).

Elshtan in her work brought to light, two opposite features of the female habitues; the "beautiful soul" and the "Spartan mother". To her, the Spartan mother encourages men to fight and even wishes to get involved. The beautiful soul, on the other hand, is brought out as a better human being distanced from the dirt and brutality of the world (Elshtan, 1987). This kind of notion is what has played a role in subjugating women to the private sphere and properly out of the peace and conflict field. The study of peace and conflict has metamorphosed over the years and, perhaps, this is because of its multidisciplinary nature.

Over the years, some of the terms that have been commonly used range from conflict resolution, conflict settlement, conflict management, conflict prevention, and conflict transformation, to peace alliances, peace keeping and peacebuilding, just to name a few (Hewitt, 2012). Now the focus seems to be on integrating Gender into the study. Riemann (2004) says that in addressing violent conflicts,
two basic perspectives need to be distinguished: an operational and a transformative way of seeking conflict resolution. Conflict transformation seeks to address the social root causes of collective violence by creating human security, catering to basic human needs and supporting justice and reconciliation (Riemann, 2004). In fact, Lederach (2003) puts it much better by saying that conflict transformation provides a clear vision because it brings into focus the horizon of our journey and the building of healthy relationships and communities both locally and globally. He further says that conflicts are not bad because they have a transformational capacity (Lederach, 2003). The discourse on conflict transformation can therefore not be complete without asking questions such as where are the men. Where are the women, and what roles have they both played in the conflict? It is only when these questions are asked that the building of healthy relationships can begin. The experience of men and women in structures of conflict are largely determined by their existing roles in society. Though women are victims of conflicts, they are also known to play prominent roles in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Conclusion

Perhaps the greatest threat to societal instability is the neglect of opposing views in conflict resolutions. Indeed, of paramount importance is the further neglect of the characteristics of possible opposing and seeming contradictory positions. Where these are taken into consideration, the violent nature of conflict and indeed its dynamic character may be reduced. As identified above, the female characteristics of affection, compassion, cooperation, peace loving, eagerness to soothe hurt feelings and sensitivity to the need of others among others are, to a very a large extent, essential ingredients to the inherent violent conflicting needs, interests and concerns, opposed goals to scarcity and perceived threats leading to disagreement and negative characteristics of conflict.

As the saying goes 'a bird does not fly with one wing'. The continued neglect of the female characteristics adumbrated above is a call to the perpetuation of societal conflict. Unfortunately, the untold hardship consequential upon conflict escalation on the female gender constitutes double jeopardy to the female gender! It is disturbing where one knows the solution to an event yet, such hands are tied in the face of humiliation and immense sufferings.

This is an urgent call to action for patriarchal oriented male gender to not only attempt to acquire some of these female characteristics but also for them to realise their limitations in matters of peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Taken together, even where conflict is inevitable, its resolution becomes the interest of conflict perpetuating parties.

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