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WOMEN IN CONFLICT SITUATION :

GENDER ISSUES IN TRANSITION FROM WAR TO DEMOCRACY IN NAMIBIA AND MOZAMBIQUE

MARNI PIGOTT

The title refers to three complex areas – conflict, gender and transition politics. Each of these areas could provide a focus for a lengthy paper. This brief exposé attempts to explore some of the interrelationships between the three areas in the light of the overall thematic concern “women in dramatic change”.

In order to better understand these relationships, it is necessary to make some broad observations around conflict and gender. From the perspective of gender, conflicts can be identified at two different levels, on one hand at the individual or individual household level, in the so-called private sphere, and on the other hand at the level of the community, in the public sphere. Conflicts in the public sphere can involve neighbourhoods, clans, ethnic groups, communities. They can assume local, national or even international dimensions as the crisis in former Yugoslavia illustrates. It is almost a truism to say that the impact of conflict at community level can be very dramatic at the household and individual level. It is certainly true to state that there is a *gendered* experience of conflict at community level. “Ethnic cleansing” for instance involved the large scale and systematic use of rape as an explicit strategy in country contexts as different as former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

Apart from these extreme cases of gendered conflict, other conflicts are resulting from the impact of global processes such as economic restructuring, political transformation, market integration, rising demographic imbalances between rich and poor countries, unemployment, diminishing resources and environmental degradation among others. Increasing disparities and social differentiation along the lines of race or gender are contributing to the enormous stresses being experienced by particular groups of women and men in many different contexts, either at the level of the individual or individual household, or at the community level, or both.

The reference to women *and* men is deliberate. To speak in terms of gender is not only useful – it is necessary. Gender as a social relation embraces both women and men. Women and men are involved in conflict situations, both as actors and as victims. And women and men are involved in transitional periods following conflicts. In the process of transition from war to democracy, for instance, women and men are actors – both contributing to social transformation. Conceptually speaking, gender as a social relation expresses the socially constructed roles of women and men in the private and public spheres. The particular gender roles of women and men are not restricted

to production and reproduction of the household but also encompass decision-making and political activities in the wider community. The gender division of labour is in turn influenced or reinforced by the relations of access to and control over different resources, which women and men may have in a specific society or community. For instance, women farmers may have access to land for food production, but do they have control over any surplus or access to cash from the sale of surplus? A similar question can be posed concerning access to urban land. Is it only through relationships to men that women as wives of “dependents” can get titles to land? In this sense, structures of access or exclusion may be seen to operate through customary or legislative practice, creating and sustaining gender differentials, and not infrequently giving rise to “gendered” social conflicts.

It is therefore important to recognise four points concerning gender relations:

Gender intersects with other social relations or social identities such as class, ethnicity, religion, rural and urban, age, etc. It is not therefore a question of all women or all men, but multiple and sometimes contradictory identities. This means in conceptual and practical terms that women cannot be seen as a unitary category. Women are not a homogeneous group. Neither are men.

Gender relations are context specific. Even within the same country there may be significant differences in gender relations. In Mozambique, a matrilineal society in the north of the country contrasts with different gender relations in the south.

Gender relations can and do change. Under the impact of colonialism, for instance, gender roles have clearly changed in many countries in Africa. An example is the case of Mozambican men being recruited for work on the mines in South Africa and the impact of this exodus on rural production relations with the increasing role for women in agriculture. But in addition, change is a response – often a pragmatic response – to conditions of scarcity, of part of a survival strategy in situations of conflict. And these changes can and do take place both at the level of the household and the community.

Like other social relations, which find expression in socio-economic and political institutions as well as in societal processes, gender relations also resist change. This resistance is frequently expressed in attitudes, for example, towards women in politics and leadership positions; or in assumptions about “the family” and stereotype perceptions of men and women’s work. Extreme resistance expresses itself as conflict of violence, either domestic or communal violence, and often directed against women.

These four related observations together provide a kind of lens or perspective through which issues in conflict situations and transition processes can be examined. The cases of Mozambique and Namibia can illustrate some of the implications for gender relations which are suggested in the process of democratisation.

Democratisation is clearly a global political theme, and throughout the world democratic forms of political constituents of societies are under discussion. Women and men are actors in the process, but it appears that their roles in shaping social transformation differ in some significant respects. In some cases, political observers refer to gendered perceptions of democracy and to the gendered impact of the outcome of democratic transition processes. Moreover, and this needs to

be restated, the experiences and impacts of wars or conflicts which precede transition processes are themselves gendered in several ways.

In Mozambique, for example, there is no question about the devastating impact of the 15 year war during which more than one million people were killed and more than four million people were made refugees inside and outside the country. Women made up the bulk of the adult population of the refugee camps, often up to 70 per cent. Within Mozambique, women in communities of displaced population lost many of the social support mechanisms, which had previously provided a minimum of security. Widows and women abandoned by or separated from husbands were particularly disadvantaged in their ongoing struggle for their own and their children's survival. The experience of Mozambican women, often very young, who were seized by RENAMO soldiers to provide domestic, agricultural and sexual services is another specifically gendered aspect of the war.

Tracing the process from this devastating war to the peace accords, which were signed in Rome in October 1992, and the process from a single party state to the holding of multi-party presidential and parliamentary elections in October 1994 is extremely complex. The accords committed FRELIMO and RENAMO¹ to the demobilisation of their soldiers, to assisting the process of reintegration and resettlement of millions of people, the registration of over eight million of Mozambican women and men for elections, and the transformation of RENAMO from an armed organisation to a political party. It is important to note, however, as pointed out by Jacobson that the "principal dynamic behind the decision to hold multiparty elections in Mozambique was not, as with Malawi and Zambia, a sustained process involving a wide range of representation from civil society. Instead, Mozambique has been much more specifically affected by external global forces."² The emphasis on peace and reconciliation in turn imposed specific conditions on the transition process, as the peace process had become equated with the achievement of multiparty elections. According to Jacobson, "what might in other contests have been an authentic and healthy political conflict became a potential threat to the fragile equilibrium reached since the peace accord in 1992... Women, who had borne the brunt of the suffering, were particularly bound up in this, as some aspects of their experiences, specially that of sexual violence, are particularly difficult to voice."³ But what of some of the other gender issues evident in Mozambique's transition process? And what are some of the implications?

Firstly, it is important to recognise the nature of gender constraints on the ability of women to participate at the formal political level. The divisions between the public and private spheres are deeply entrenched in Mozambique, with women clearly restricted in large part to the private/domestic domain, apart from their important public role in some community rituals. But at the same time, women have substantial experience in community organisation at the more informal political level. Thus, taking the overall electoral process as an example, while women were largely excluded from the public sphere by i.a. their inability to speak Portuguese which is

¹ FRELIMO, the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique, conducted the armed struggle for independence from 1964. With independence achieved FRELIMO converted itself into a Marxist Leninist party. RENAMO, Resistencia Nacional Moçambicana, was created by the then Rhodesian Central Intelligence Office following the Mozambique government's compliance with United Nations sanctions against Rhodesia. With Zimbabwean independence in 1980, South African Military Intelligence took over the training, arming and management of this force.

² Jacobson R., "Dancing towards a better future? Gender and the 1994 Mozambican Elections". Report prepared for NORAD, November 1994, p. 10.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Mozambique's official language⁴, women's organisations of various types were crucial for the success of the civic education programmes. This is because their existing community based structures provided access to the non-literate sectors of the urban and rural population. Nonetheless, according to some observers, women's organisations found themselves marginalized in terms of resources such as transport around the rural districts, and as a result would have been less visible in an important public sphere.

Secondly, it is important to examine the gender profile of political parties and the position of women and men candidates on party lists. Here FRELIMO adopted an explicit policy decision on affirmative action – one third of places on party lists were allocated to women and another third to “young people”. This quota system for candidates was similar to the one used by the ANC in the South African elections earlier in April 1994. According to FRELIMO's statements, the affirmative action strategy resulted from their recognition of the demographic structure of the population plus the vital role which women have always played in the party, in government and the nation. In fact, 37 per cent of the candidates presented by FRELIMO were women whereas RENAMO had only 9 per cent women candidates. The final results, announced on 19 November 1994, revealed that women had obtained 24.4 per cent of the seats in the Assembly with 61 out of a total of 250 deputies.

There is an important gender issue here and an ongoing debate concerning representatives – whether women or men – and representation of gender interests. Clearly what is specially relevant is how representatives contribute to the process of defining gender responsive policy and appropriate programmes which address existing inequities and gender differentials as part of the overall process of reconstruction. In the case of Mozambique, one critical issue will be the question of land, and how existing constraints on access for women in many contexts can be overcome. This crucial debate, however, was completely absent from the political platforms of either of the major political parties in the electoral campaign. There is another related issue concerning the renewed interest in reaffirming the right of traditional leaders to represent their communities. This aspect has become linked with the role of decentralisation and the democratisation debate in several African countries. In Mozambique's case, it also stems from the need to consolidate the process of reconciliation and also FRELIMO's desire to win over segments of Mozambican society, which had been alienated as a result of the earlier policies against traditional authorities. However, there are gender implications, as traditional authority structures are often based on notions which preclude equality of participation by men and women, despite the fact that some women are present in these structures.

In the case of Namibia, the process of transition involved a lengthy struggle for independence, in which women were active as PLAN fighters, and a protracted involvement by the international community. The process culminated in the first democratic elections for a Constituent Assembly held in November 1989. There has therefore been a five year period for the consolidation of institutional democracy. Clearly, there are many differences in the experience of the two transition processes, not least because of the size of the populations involved whereby many more women of

⁴ In 1991, women represented 75% of the rural population aged 20-24 who could not speak Portuguese and 80% of the urban population. Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA), *Mozambique – Country Gender Analysis*, 1993.

⁵ This information comes from the analysis of local government elections undertaken by Hubbard D. and Kaveri K., “Affirmative Action for Women in Local Government in Namibia”, Legal Assistance Centre, Namibia, June 1993.

Mozambique's 16.5 million inhabitants had been affected by the war than in Namibia with an estimated overall population of 1.7 million people.

In the first election for Namibia's Constituent Assembly in 1989, 5 out of 72 elected members were women, which represents 7 per cent. This percentage at the national level compares with 24.4 per cent in the Mozambican parliament. The local government elections held in Namibia in November 1992, however, provided very interesting results concerning women's participation at the local level⁵. There were two types of elections, local authority elections for municipal councils, town councils and village councils on one hand, and regional council elections on the other. In the case of the former, it is important to note that the Local Authority Act of 1992 made provision for affirmative action. Each party list had to contain two or three women as candidates. Elections for regional councils made no such provisions, and women comprised only 12 per cent out of 195 candidates. Three were elected, giving a 3.16 percentage representation to women on regional councils. By contrast, women constituted 38 per cent of the total candidates for local authority elections, and the results gave 26.4 per cent in town councils and almost 34 per cent of seats in village councils to women. Four village councils have women in the majority.

The affirmative action provision may indeed have contributed to the higher participation of women in local elections as compared with regional and national elections. But there is another important aspect to the Namibian example which relates to an earlier point, namely the possibility of gendered perceptions of institutional democracy. In this regard, despite the narrowness of the concept "institutional democracy", it is possible to distinguish between the types of issues dealt with by institutional structures at different levels. Thus, there is the perception that critical areas of community interest such as water, education, health sectors – which are of direct and specific concern to women because of their gender roles – can and should be lobbied for at the local level. In the case of Namibia, these are the village, town and municipal councils, which reflect an active participation by women in the electoral process.

This participation, however, is also the formal political expression of a long history of Namibian women organising in various community based organisations at the community level. Women have experience, and it is now becoming visible in the formal political arena particularly at the local level. Mozambique is scheduled to hold elections for local government in the future, and it will be very important to monitor the gender dimensions of that process.

It seems probable, due to various types of gender constraints, that it is easier in some respects for women to participate politically at the local level. (This is borne out by recent experiences in many European countries.) But clearly, major resource allocations and the establishment of policy and legislative frameworks are being debated at a higher level and frequently without informed discussion on the potential gender implications of such decisions these implications having their impact at the local level. Thus there is a need for strategies to be designed in an integrated way, to take account of the interrelationships between institutional structures at different levels and with various actors and groups in civic society.

The process of consolidation of democratisation, leading to more equitable systems of access to resources and opportunities, clearly requires going beyond narrow definitions of institutional democracy. Only a gendered approach to these questions is likely to ensure an effective transition to effective democracy.