Engendering the Peace Process in Africa

Generando el proceso de paz en Africa

Processus de paix en Afrique

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ENGENDERING THE PEACE PROCESS IN AFRICA

“Women ... are rarely consulted during the political process of peace negotiations, yet they are often the ones who keep their communities alive – emotionally and physically – during the times of war.”

(Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 1995)

PROCESSUS DE PAIX EN AFRIQUE

Inspirées par la plate-forme d’action de Pékin, les femmes d’Afrique sont plus que jamais déterminées à participer activement aux nombreux processus de paix et à ne plus demeurer des victimes passives de la guerre. Dans cette détermination renouvelée, les femmes africaines ont préféré préconiser et influencer les lignes de conduite afin d’aider à résoudre les problèmes à la base au lieu d’utiliser des mesures «bouchetrous» dans des situations d’urgence. Ces désirs se sont traduits aujourd’hui par des actions à travers toute l’Afrique; de nombreux groupes de femmes, au niveau national, régional et sous-régional, militent activement pour la paix et participent à des négociations de paix de haut niveau. Cet article est destiné à souligner l’engagement de Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS) dans la création du processus de paix en Afrique.
INTRODUCTION

At the threshold of a new millennium where development is flourishing in all regions of the earth, Africa is a continent in turmoil experiencing poverty, illiteracy, corruption, famine, debt and an explosion of internal conflicts whose effects are most often borne by women and children.

Women in war-torn regions of the continent have seen their husbands, children, relatives and friends blasted or hacked. They have had their homes and farms torched and livestock stolen. Many have been raped, some repeatedly. A significant number were impregnated by the very men who murdered their husbands and children. They have given birth to unwanted children. More than any other group, they live in life-threatening situations marked by fear, insecurity, trauma and helplessness. To their traditional roles of housewives and caretakers has been added the role of breadwinners, a role most of them are ill-prepared to assume. Thus women bear a disproportionate share of the negative impact of war.

Furthermore their children have been particularly victimised by these conflicts. They are orphaned, the boys are recruited into the army as child soldiers, exposed to drug use and abuse. Usually deprived of an education or training in marketable skills, the young recruits who make up these armies often find that soldiering is the only occupation for which they are equipped. The girls are raped, and exposed to prostitution as well as HIV/AIDS.

In view of this situation, African women have realised that they can no longer be passive victims of conflicts. They have come to the conclusion that while the peace process tends to focus on bringing warring factions together, room should be made for women representatives who will be responsible for much of post war social rehabilitation. Their representation at the negotiating table has thus become imperative.
Women insist that greater recognition and visibility should be given to them and their work by supporting their participation in governance mechanisms. A proper balance could then be restored and democracy could prevail, which will be a vital process for establishing an environment conducive to durable peace and sustainable development in Africa.

These desires have been translated into action as today, throughout Africa, many national, subregional and regional women’s groups are actively advocating peace and creating alternative communication networks that are opening new spaces for non-violent conflict resolution and new forms of solidarity. African women have preferred these forms of conflict management to militating for the implementation of humanitarian instruments of law, which in their view insists on conducive environment for war and does insist on building sustainable peace. To this end African women, sponsored by UNESCO, came together in Zanzibar to elaborate a culture of peace at the Pan-African Women’s Conference on a Culture of Peace entitled “Women organise for Peace and Non-violence in Africa” which was held in Zanzibar, United Republic of Tanzania on 17-20 May 1999.

Other African women’s organisations, individually and collectively, have seized the opportunity created by the Beijing process to come together for effective debates and mobilisation. One such organisations is Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS) based in Geneva.

THE ROLE OF FEMMES AFRICA SOLIDARITÉ (FAS)

Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS) is a women’s organisation founded in June 1996 by women leaders from various African countries representing different professions. Since its inception in 1996, FAS has been working to promote the leading role of women in the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts on the African continent. It does so through advocacy to bring women’s concerns to the
attention of national, regional and international bodies and by facilitating dialogue among women groups.

FAS believes that political crises in Africa that turn into internal wars derive mainly from the absence of good governance and failure to respect human rights and rule of law. Denial of participation and politics of exclusion further add to the multiple factors and forces that cause conflict and political instability on the continent. It is important to develop more comprehensive policies and practices for conflict prevention and management in order to strengthen capacity to manage conflict at national and regional levels.

To this end FAS advocates the involvement of women in the peace process at national level, notably through peace and solidarity missions. Such missions have been carried out in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Burundi. This advocacy and lobbying programme targets local governments, political parties, diplomatic corps, UN and OAU representatives and the media. Another specific characteristic of this strategy is the use of the experience and influence of African women leaders to sensitise these actors to women’s best practices so that their role can be visible and fully recognised.

This forceful strategy enables local women NGOs to interact with different actors involved in the decision-making process in order to adequately involve women, mainstream gender into policies and programs, and get support from these actors.

As an advocacy network dealing with peace, gender and development, FAS targeted four main institutions at regional level. These are the Organisation of African Unity (OAU); the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA); the African Development Bank (ADB) and the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACEPR). FAS also works with other sub-regional institutions like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), The Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) and the South African Development Committee (SADC).
FAS Advocacy on Peace

Facing African women's growing involvement for peace and their strong determination to be involved in political decision-making in order to help solve problems at source instead of using stop-gap measures in emergency situations, FAS uses advocacy and capacity building as its main strategies to facilitate the participation of women in the various peace processes and to strengthen women's position and influence. Women leaders and women organisations are thus introduced to the existing mechanisms at regional and continental levels and they are also trained in negotiating techniques. In this regard FAS facilitates and brings together other women organisations who work at the grass roots and national levels to form effective platforms for advocacy. This has been achieved by:

- mobilising local women's NGOs involved in the peace process and encouraging their networking, and facilitating the establishment of strong partnerships between these groups and peace and development bodies at all levels;

- supporting women's NGOs attending the sessions of the governing bodies of AWCPD, OAU, ECA, ADB and ACPR to better understand the proceedings of those different bodies, improve knowledge of their mechanisms and functions and translate them to the grassroots level;

- facilitating the creation of a women's caucus within these institutions which will serve as a platform for local NGOs to meet regularly to exchange information, hold briefings and formulate their agenda to be presented through these mechanisms;

- strengthening women's organisations within the caucus by providing them the necessary advocacy techniques and tools, and making use of press releases and daily meetings to mobilise public and political support;
• sensitising these institutions to the role of women in peace and development, and stressing the importance for African States to ratify and implement legal instruments addressing women’s human rights;

• monitoring and evaluating the progress made towards the implementation of the various Platforms of Action addressing the empowerment of women adopted by African States;

• organising campaigns through the media and sensitising the public to the role of women and their NGOs’ best practices in the peace process;

• building partnerships with women from other continents to support these campaigns;

• collecting data, statistics and evidence of women’s best practices and disseminating this information;

• raising funds to support women’s initiatives on conflict resolution and peace building.

Achievements of FAS Advocacy

Advocacy Campaign: Engendering the Peace Process

FAS has lobbied for and obtained institutional change in international, regional and national bodies. It participated in the campaign organised by the African women’s peace movement which led to the creation of the African Women Committee on Peace and Development (AWCPD) in April 1998 to ensure women’s participation in the activities of the OAU’s central organ, in particular through the Mechanism of Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution. It is meant to work in close
co-operation with the OAU’s Women’s Unit and the ECA’s African Centre for Women. To bring women’s voices and concerns to the ongoing peace process in Burundi, FAS also successfully advocated the participation of Burundian women at the peace negotiations which are currently being held in Arusha, at which they were granted observer status.

Violence against Women

FAS has participated in the elaboration of legal instruments to protect women’s human rights. In this regard, FAS has supported women’s participation at the UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York, which is in charge of drafting the optional protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Also at regional level, FAS has successfully campaigned for the appointment of a Special Rapporteur for women’s rights at the ACUPR, this was accomplished in April 1998. It also successfully lobbied for the inclusion of more women members in the Commission, which has brought the number of women from two to four during the OAU Summit in June 1999 in Algiers; and also for the elaboration of an additional protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights for the establishment of an African Court of Human Rights, which is pending ratification at the OAU level, as well as an additional protocol on Women’s Human Rights.

FAS has also intervened at the UN Commission on Human Rights and at its Sub-commission regarding the situation of women in armed conflict, especially in Sierra Leone, during the 1998, 1999 and 2000 sessions. These interventions led to the visit of the High Commissioner on Human Rights to Sierra Leone and the creation of a tribunal to investigate the crimes perpetrated during the conflict.
Solidarity and Peace Missions

FAS sent several high-level delegations to visit Burundi in December 1997, Sierra Leone in February 1997, Liberia in July 1997 and Ethiopia and Eritrea in September 1999. The missions were aimed at encouraging and supporting women’s peace initiatives in these countries; sensitising the different actors involved in the negotiations to the need to involve women in the decision-making process on peace; and sharing experiences on African women’s initiatives on conflict management and resolution.

Capacity Building

FAS has organised training workshops and fostered an exchange of experience and information among women and their associations in many parts of Africa, especially in Burundi in December 1997; two training sessions in Liberia in July 1997, in Sierra Leone in February 1997 and in the Great Lakes region in March 1998. Such training workshops focused on civic education, conflict resolution and negotiation techniques, as well as leadership building. FAS has also built national women’s networks in the Great Lakes and Mano River regions, through the creation of sub-regional networks such as Femmes et Paix and the Mano River Women’s Peace Network.

Democratisation Process

FAS has successfully conducted women-only election observer missions to Liberia in 1997, designed to assist the electoral process as a whole. This mission was carried out in four phases. The first phase was a solidarity mission as well as a training programme on civic education to support the women. This was followed by an election observer mission. The third phase was an evaluation programme which
was combined with a training session on advocacy and techniques of negotiation; and the final phase centred on the promotion of gender issues into government policies and programmes.

**Communication**

FAS promotes communication, with a view to maintaining contacts between women and the international community and building partnerships. To this end, FAS has developed a Web site www.fasngo.org which offers information on women’s peace activities and makes available a “Leadership Bank” on women leaders working for gender equality, peace and development in Africa. FAS also publishes, twice yearly, an advocacy newsletter, *FAS Advocacy News*, which reports on and analyses the role of women in peace initiatives and monitors progress in gender, peace, development and related issues. The various missions of FAS are also published in the form of books. During its previous programme, FAS published four mission reports. The first one addressed the democratic process in Liberia and the second one was devoted to Women’s Best Practices in the Sierra Leone peace process; the third and fourth ones were on Women’s Best Practices in Burundi and the Mano River Union States of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. These publications have been widely distributed for information purposes to women’s NGOs, governments and OAU Member States.
CONSTRAINTS AND LIMITATIONS

African women have joined the struggle to achieve peace and development, they have mobilized to get recognition and visibility, they have created those institutional mechanisms needed for the advancement of women. Still, more needs to be done, particularly in order to place more women in the seats of power where decisions are made on war and peace, military spending and policy.

Some of the constraints they face are due to the fact that:

- Most of the time, limited resources are put into efforts which deal directly with those who bear guns and priority is not given to long-term initiatives aimed at reconciliation.

- There is resistance among men to seeing women at the negotiating table on the pretext that they are not party to the conflict, in other words, because they have not themselves taken up arms; another argument is that in negotiations, women are by nature more conciliatory. It is clear that the main reason for this resistance is the desire to avoid sharing the “pie”, which the men consider exclusively theirs.

- When women have succeeded in removing the barriers and participating in negotiations, after a peace agreement is reached they are excluded from the governance mechanisms. The usual rhetoric is that now that they have made peace they should go back to their families or do community work.

- Women do not have access to the resources that facilitate monitoring, for example, of arms flows.

- Competition among the members about the resources available weakens the Movement.

- The spread of HIV/AIDS in Africa, which is diminishing the human and financial resources.
THE WAY FORWARD

In conclusion, in order to remove the above-mentioned barriers, we need to find new strategies. These include:

• Developing new ways and means of mobilising funds, for example, by attracting private funds for women’s initiatives in post-conflict reconstruction;

• Building strategic alliances between women’s mechanisms for peace, for example by establishing institutional links between the AWCPD, WAWA and MRWPN;

• Supporting existing networks and creating a space for dialogue and discussion for consensus building, for example by organising a consultation with NGOs on issues such as disarmament or violence against women;

• Looking into a regional approach for effective conflict resolution, for example by organising regional consultations among women’s groups;

• Sensitising more men to gender issues and promoting a culture of peace for an effective partnership, for example by establishing a permanent dialogue with the leaders at the OAU Central Organ and including more men in the Movements programmes;

• Monitoring the mechanisms dealing with peace processes, for example by understanding the IGAD and ECOWAS systems in order to promote women’s leadership role in their councils of elders in early warning and in peace missions;

• Building the capacity of national peace committees, for example by providing training to the Gabon National Peace Commission and sharing experiences to enable it to promote effective conflict prevention in a country surrounded by neighbours in conflict,
• Putting such issues as HIV/AIDS on the agenda and advocate its inclusion on the African Leaders’ Agenda;

• Using the media as a preventive tool in a conflict setting, for example with the creation of an African women’s radio station, which would promote a culture of peace and tolerance.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is difficult to measure the direct results of women’s peace movements in Africa but clearly they have had a major impact in sensitising public opinion and pressuring governments and international bodies. However, concerted efforts need to be made to consolidate gains from initiatives already started by women groups instead of starting the process all over again. The participation of women in the Burundian peace process has suffered a major setback because it is now being promoted by UN agencies that do not take the initiatives already started by women groups into account.

These initiatives will also be more effective if funding agents concentrate on ongoing initiatives to see them to a fruitful end instead of changing their areas of priority with the ever dynamic international discourse; all the more so since such initiatives must be preceded by intensive sensitisation programmes on both men and women in order to open the way for advocacy and capacity building programmes.

Finally, neither Femmes Africa Solidarité nor any other women’s organisation can claim to have the solutions to conflicts in Africa. As you continue your various researches especially in the conflict zones of Africa, we will be glad to brainstorm with you on more effective ways and means of conflict management, effective ways and means which take the views of all affected groups into consideration.