

Women and Liberal Peacebuilding in Post-Conflict Northern Uganda: community social work agenda revisited?

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Abstract

This paper examines women's participation in post-conflict peacebuilding activities within the neo-liberal peace theory and framework. Using qualitative approach, the study gathered information from 40 women and several key informants working and living in post-conflict northern Uganda. The paper utilizes this information in reflecting on how women live in and engage with their communities in post-conflict settings, and also assess the actual actions and initiatives that women develop in post-conflict situation, the space available to them and the emergent context. The paper also analyses the extent to which these factors shape community post-conflict adjustments. Key challenges affecting women's participation in the peacebuilding processes, mainly at grassroots and community levels are examined. The major conclusion of the paper is that liberal peacebuilding approach does not fully espouse, embrace or explain issues of critical consciousness, social and strategic agency nor does it prepare the women to effectively engage their society. I argue that this limitation and omission do not adequately prepare women to confront social issues and oppressive practices as well as challenge certain traditions and power structures, issues that are hall marks of community based social work.

Résumé

Cet article analyse la participation des femmes à la consolidation de la paix après les conflits dans la théorie néo-libérale et le cadre de la paix. À l'aide d'approche qualitative, l'étude a recueilli des informations à partir de 40 femmes et plusieurs répondants clés travaillant et vivant dans le nord de l'Ouganda post-conflit. Le document utilise cette information dans la réflexion sur la façon dont les femmes vivent et interagissent avec leurs communautés dans les situations post-conflit, et également d'évaluer les mesures et initiatives que les femmes développent en situation post-conflit, l'espace disponible pour eux et le nouveau contexte. Le document analyse également la mesure dans laquelle ces facteurs façonnent les ajustements post-conflit. Principaux défis touchant la participation des femmes dans le processus de consolidation, principalement à la base et au niveau communautaire sont examinés. La principale conclusion de l'étude est que la consolidation de la démarche n'est pas libéral épousent pleinement, embrasser ou expliquer

les enjeux de la conscience critique, sociale et de l'agence stratégique ni préparer les femmes à s'engager efficacement leur société. Je soutiens que cette limitation et d'une omission ne prépare pas adéquatement les femmes à faire face à des questions sociales et des pratiques oppressives et de contester certaines de leurs traditions et les structures de pouvoir, les questions qui sont des marques de Travail social communautaire.

Introduction

In this paper I reflect on the participation and involvement of women affected by conflict in their communities' social, economic, political and cultural lives. I examine how the women engage and disengage with their communities in the efforts to meet and realise their needs and rights. The women considered in this paper are formerly internally displaced persons as well as other women whose lives have been disrupted by conflict. I use northern Uganda as a case but reflect generally on women's experiences elsewhere in Africa and the developing world. I do not therefore use one activity or project or programme to assess their participation, involvement and engagement, but, the overall community engagement processes. My effort is aimed at examining the issues and the environment within which participation in the communities' economic, social, cultural, political and productive life generally interweave and how the women are influencing and being influenced by their own societies.

The focus is on the day to day interactions between women at household and community levels. A number of key questions are reflected on in the discussion: What space exists in the community for the women to engage with? How does the philosophy underpinning NGO work impact on women's ability and capacity to engage with their community? How is gender and culture implicated in women's efforts to engage their community and also attain socio-economic development? These questions are addressed within the framework of liberal peacebuilding theory, the strength and weakness of which is assessed. The empirical grounding of the questions derive from a qualitative study carried out in northern Uganda in the districts of Gulu and Amuru. The main focus of the study was on war affected-women initially living within the internally displaced persons camps and who have since returned home. Phenomenological and grounded theory approaches were employed to document the lived experiences of the women, with phenomenology offering insight into the meanings of adjustment and reintegration for participants, and grounded theory offering a rigorous and systematic way of moving between emergent empirical findings and a critical conversation with the existing literature. A theme of particular interest in this inquiry was how gender was implicated in the process of community reintegration, and the availability of resources and identities which were facilitative of this process. Interviews were conducted with as many women as possible until a saturation point with regards to the key issues under investigation had been reached. The interviews addressed the stated study aims:

exploring key issues around women participation in peacebuilding and the challenges there in, as well as how issues and challenges around their participation are negotiated. All interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. These were then analysed thematically using Template Analysis (TA). TA is a useful method in analysing textual data emerging from fieldwork (Cassells et al., 2009; King, 2012). Template analysis involves reducing large amount of data into a framework of a few pages to simplify the process of analysis of substantial amount of raw data (King, 2012). What immediately follows discusses this theory.

Women and Peacebuilding

Contemporary debates on women's involvement in conflict and peacebuilding epitomise and accept the multiple roles that women play in conflict. For many years, women and girls were characterised as hapless victims of conflict often and always on the receiving ends of conflict violence. In many cases, therefore the complete repertoire of women's experiences of conflict was not documented or brought to the fore. In other cases even if some aspects were documented, the philosophy and the analytical framework used still falls short of the depiction of real experience of the women to issues around conflict commencement, progression, its end and the rebuilding process.

Recent scholarship (e.g. Schnabel and Tabyshalieva, 2012; Schirch, 2012; Kadenke-Kaiser, 2012; Graybill, 2012; Adrian-Paul, 2012; Nialain and McWilliams, 2013) all seem to point out at the post-conflict peacebuilding approaches not adequately capturing women's complete experiences or the documentation of the critical nature and varied nature and complexity of women's participation in conflict and post-conflict peacebuilding initiatives. This (complexity and variability of experiences) arguably should inform post-conflict planning approaches, framework and initiatives, as we are more likely to appreciate young women's strengths and resilience when we try to understand their experiences in totality. Moreover, there is also a widely-held view among scholars of women's participation in conflict that many post-conflict rebuilding and development initiatives including DDR do not effectively involve and embrace women, or their views. This too has been identified in northern Uganda. This therefore limits rooms for inclusiveness and the opportunity for women-oriented views to come on board (Kaufman and Williams, 2015; Bell, 2015). It is suggested that where power sharing deals are negotiated, it is important that women's participation in such deals are elucidated, increased and made more visible (Bell, 2015). Moreover, some viewpoints do not support women's involvement in power sharing presenting it as bad for women's equality and pushing other issues as more important than inclusion (for example stability), which contravenes resolution 1325 (Bell, 2015). The question to ask though is: don't men need stability the same way as women, if so then why the lack of emphasis on their (women's) involvement? Besides, women's capacity to

determine, influence or even steer the agenda of post-conflict discourse/ development processes are questionable. Bell (2015) acknowledges that despite those arguing against gender inclusivity, it is an important thing if post-conflict peacebuilding should be effective and meets needs of all categories of people in society.

Reviewing the implementation of UN resolution 1325 enacted in 2000, UN women (2015) notes the need for integrating women's participation in leadership, peace process and empowering women to stop conflict (nipping conflict in the bud, especially with those at grassroots and community levels). We should note that resolution 1325 emphasises gender perspectives, calls for consideration of women's special needs during DDR and post-conflict reconstruction issues, advises on measures that support women in all aspects of implementation of peace agreements and measures that ensures the protection of and respects for human rights of women and girls, particularly as they relate to the constitution, the electoral system, the police and the judiciary. I note that all these fall within the liberal peace agenda and framework and are intended to promote inclusivity. Kaufman and Williams (2015) raise many critical issues about women's roles in post-conflict peacebuilding. It is also possible that processes to involve women in peacebuilding at national and international level ignore subnational efforts at grassroots level, yet these could be more important for attaining and achieving sustainable positive peace. Moreover, resolution 1325 is criticised as failing to recognise the role of men and boys, and making wrong assumptions about how boys and men benefit from war/ development processes at the expense of women (Kaufman and Williams, 2015). This suggests that it is important to appreciate and contextualise women's experiences of conflict beyond the consideration under UN resolution 1325 and focus also on: a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between conflicts ending and the establishment of peace that ensures safety for girls and women; a more prominent exposition of the role played by women at grassroots level; need to appreciate also men's presence and location vis-a-vis the women; need to focus on gender neutrality; then appreciate how peace is "imagined" by the various groups affected or involved. Resolution 1820 was later added addressing specifically sexual violence against women, meanwhile resolution 2122 urges the parties including the UN agencies and financial institutions to support efforts at developing and building local institutional capacity so that they can promote more sustainable support to women in conflict and post-conflict situation.

It is suggested that while UNSCR 1325 calls for women's voices to be heard, it does not stand firm enough to propel the women at the centre of social change and social transformation initiatives. Care should be taken to avoid a tokenistic approach to women's inclusion and involvement in post-conflict resettlement and reintegration of society where a make-belief mantra of women's participation and involvement is preached when the actual power and influence is retained by patriarchal forces immanent within the social structure of society. More so, in many formerly conflict affected communities, the post-conflict planning and implementation regimes remain

very much controlled by male (and in some cases even chauvinistic) forces. Yet women's agency is also not adequately recognised, contextualised or nurtured, due in part to failure to adequately consider intersectionality of gender with such variables as age, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexuality among others. Moreover, women may get excluded from the peace process overall and their voices made not count at all. It is important to note however that not all categories of men also benefit from women's exclusion. There are those whose participation would be equally limited or even worse than those for women, showing that gender alone is not the only key variable in the equation, with other issues determining the scope and space of participation in peace processes or development.

Efforts at post-conflict reintegration and inclusivity of women in development and peacebuilding process may be constrained by earlier underlying factors, pre-existing unequal power relations and women continued vulnerability within the post-conflict settings among others. Yet studies show that women experience significant rights violations in conflict situations (see Schnabel and Tabyshalieva, 2012; Schirch, 2012; Kadende-Kaiser, 2012; Graybill, 2012; Adrian-Paul, 2012; Seymour, 2012; Nialain and McWilliams, 2013; McKay et al 2010; Honwana, 2006). This includes deliberate sexual violence during war, rape, forced pregnancy, abortion and forced sterilisation (we see cases in Northern Uganda, DR Congo, Rwanda, Burundi and even Southern Sudan in the various phases of the conflict). Women also suffer other socio-economic and physical violations which make them unable to effectively discharge their functions, including participation in peacebuilding initiatives.

Gendering traditional institutions and their utility and adaptations in post-conflict societies

According to UNIFEM (2012) seeking justice for women imply helping them to engage with such processes that shape future wellbeing, such as constitution making. It suggests that there is need to provide incentives to those working in transitional justice to bring out the gender lenses, analyse performance measures and reviews of individual and institutional reforms so as to remove barriers and improve access to justice for men and women in society. I note that evidence from practice in the context of conflict and post-conflict situations in northern Uganda and elsewhere suggest that the informal system of justice is the principal legal recourse in most cases, as they appear to be the most accessible and utilised by women in societies emerging from conflict.

It should be noted that in several communities affected by conflict, formal justice systems/mechanisms become weakened and in other cases even collapse, with cases reported where NGOs, traditional authorities and such related informal institutions taking up the space to execute public functions and keep a semblance of a functional society. Women have been noted to be one of the foremost individuals to create centres of governance at village and wider community levels where sense of accountability and responsibility is maintained and promoted to keep social harmony or enliven the spirits of community members.

In many conflict-affected communities therefore, women CBOs and other such organisations constitute important agents of social organisation with which social functions are executed and society kept moving during difficult times. Indeed, cases have been cited where difficult issues which had eluded formal institutions to resolve them) have been effectively resolved by local groups, further indicating their significance in the context of conflict. Women acting through their social groups and singularly have also made important contributions in fighting for their rights, making claims on spaces which belong to women and making inroads in male-dominated decision-making spaces and arenas. Many of these have included them working with male champions who believe in gender parity and progress and also enlisting local and traditional authority who are like-minded. Research in northern Uganda, among the Acholi community suggests that the protracted 20 years old war which raged in the region changed social institutions or the perceptions and interpretations of those institutions, customs and practices and made foreign and hitherto sanctioned practices and actions to creep within the Acholi culture. These then became entrenched and were made to pass as though they were genuine Acholi cultural practices and ideals. Due to the significant spread because of the conflict and the absence of a cultural regime to stem its inroads, these have been passed as Acholi cultural domains whereas not. These include issues such as the disenfranchisement of women, and the domination and meting of violence against women in the name of “chastisement”. It also includes certain practices which denigrates women and also violates their rights to productivity and reproduction as well as other cultural rights of association and community engagements.

Yet a critical analysis of Acholi cultural institutions and practices in the pre-conflict days, pre-independence and perhaps before colonialism also suggests very strong and important positions of women in society, with decision making not arrived at except with the complete participation of women. It appears as if the control of women over production and reproductive roles even far surpasses that of the man, with the matriarch occupying an important role within the Acholi family and cultural setups. It is doubtful however whether she occupies the same space and holds similar power today. The same applies to children as has been discussed in earlier sections, regarding how society and social institutions were set up to enhance the protection and the promotion of the welfare of the child. It should be noted however that the fights against the entrenched nature of foreign customs and practices which has infiltrated Acholi culture is not only limited to the women and women organisations. It may well include both state and non-state institutions as they seemed to have permeated all aspects of life and have ended up misrepresenting the rich nature of the Acholi culture. Moreover, such groupings also play very important roles in resolving issues around rights violation especially that of women and the girl child and following up prosecution of sexual and gender-based violence cases. Evidence in Northern Uganda suggests that where grassroots women organisations are strong and effective, cases of gender-based violence and blatant violation of the rights of women and children reduce significantly.

While efforts may be put at transforming the justice systems, it is important to note that both tradition and customs evolves over time and therefore is subject to certain degree of influence. A contrast between negative cultural infiltration and positive cultural infiltration occurs, the adoption of which may depend on other issues and forces within society. This is where positive culture can be promoted and more negative ones modified or even discarded. UNIFEM (2012) laments however, that sometimes in the aftermaths of conflict, traditional institutions are used by others to keep women subjugated or previous unequal relations between men and women are restored instead of being improved. While this may be true in some cases, in most cases external researchers and authority espousing a neoliberal agenda may not open themselves to appreciate the utility of certain traditional viewpoints; yet the actual limitations and strengths of the presented perspectives are not even adequately scrutinised and evaluated. In this case, important and significant nuances in gender relations between the sexes are missed, such as key areas where women exert direct and indirect influences and even authority in them. We may report wrongly that old gender biases and practices are returning after the end of conflict when the reported old practices were actually not indigenous to the community.

The role of women grassroots' organization in promoting economic social and cultural rights in the aftermaths of conflict

The Village Savings and Loans Association (VSLA) model of community economic financing provides an important pedestal on which women influence, power and contributions to socio-economic life at community levels can be assessed. Initially introduced in northern Uganda by the American relief and development organisation, CARE International, to support women's socio-economic empowerment, with limited capital cash infusion by development agencies; the VSLA model currently permeates the entire northern Uganda and operates in self-financing modes with community members playing key roles in its sustenance.

The assessment of VSLA (village savings and loan associations) microfinance models in Uganda and related self-help groups (SHGs) suggests that women participants in VSLA and group micro credit scheme retain considerable power over income they generate through their participation. Instead, their significance as important economic actors beyond the productive abilities of tilling the land becomes paramount and recognised by their spouses and other family members (attested to by local leadership, opinion leaders and development agencies, as well as the cultural institutions). Indeed, these women transcend gender stereotypes of women as dependents and thus parasites on male finance and resources, showing significant agency in economic terms. Their movement to income "earner and generator," in a community setting where money was controlled by men, challenges prevailing gender dynamic and relations in resource ownership, generation and even control. Such women were also shown to exercise more power in the allocation of the funds to family needs and investments, and were less likely

to suffer gender-based violence or rights subjugation: productive, social, associational and movement wise. The latter perhaps in part explained by their new-found respect as they contribute immensely to family livelihoods, and due to the presence of a support base among the group members. Studies also show that one of the most insidious causes of domestic violence among couples is alcohol abuse. Consultation with women VSLA members indicated that they have greater appreciation for sobriety which has helped keep their families organised. The women also indicated that their participation in the group activities has also enhanced their own negotiation skills and made them learn how to resolve issues without resource to violence, an issue they have applied and impressed it upon members of their households.

It should be noted that in cases where women have already tested the benefits of freedom, ownership of resources and making their decisions count at household and community levels, the return or attempted efforts to return them to a pre-conflict power arrangements and gender relations which may denigrate women or limits their potentials is resisted (see Puechguirbal, 2010). Indeed, this is a very fertile ground for social tensions to be stoked and further increased in a post-conflict context where the women have moved to the forefront to play important role in the society and in all aspects of the social and productive sector and in others words many would have assumed and embraced roles which traditionally may be considered manly and a preserve of men or other powerful individuals within society.

It is important to also note that the resultant effects of war in many societies is the subjugation of men's manhood and the constriction of spaces within which men could exercise their power and authority as well as significance as men. In this way, therefore, the return to normalcy provides the opportunity for men to regain their authority, space and power. But the women may not be about to relinquish their new-found power and freedom (inherently a potential for conflict, which we see many women in northern Uganda managing by submitting to culturally executed relation with adaptive space for exercising greater social, cultural and economic rights, within the wider social domain). What we see in northern Uganda therefore is an attempt by women to retain some power and influence yet allow their men to be men in the Acholi cultural setting. In this case radical gender ideals are shunned in favour of incremental rights and changes which do not shake the foundation of social and community stability (see also Ochen, Kayiwa and Loum, 2017; Abola et al 2009). Studies in post-conflict northern Uganda also show that women may in some cases not resist prevailing social positioning (for example male leadership on economic, social cultural and even political issues) as they appear useful for social cohesion at individual relationship level. Yet when such relations are unpacked further it is apparent that women retain considerable influence on the social, economic and political aspects of life in their community. This discourse emerged clearly in meetings and focus groups conducted with women across northern Uganda in several studies over a six-year period. In this case therefore, the return of "authority power" to

the man is regarded as important for the established social norms and practices but does not in reality preclude women's participation or the elucidation of their interests and viewpoints.

My own view however, is that analysis of social change and progress should take cognisance of other situational factors in society. There must be a balance to be found between western gender norms and rights frameworks to the local situated realities within which these women find themselves or inhabit, and these realities should direct gender relation and actions. Perhaps there is no need to break families in the name of giving women greater financial and economic powers, when such can still be exercised within the current family relational frameworks. The important thing then is to focus on enhancing and increasing the influence of the women in the key decisions that are made in the household/family and how resources and finances are put to use, both those generated by her and others that are jointly generated.

In northern Uganda therefore, many NGOs and development organisations impose western-oriented idea premised on neo-liberal development ideologies which cannot be sustained or maintained by the social context that these people live in. For example my discussion with women in several social groups indicates that the need for family stability and other such issues may be much stronger in close knit communities than the need for financial independence or wealth accumulations by an individual family member. Yet such issues are rarely given consideration in development actions and economic planning. The eventual form of gender freedom will thus be negotiated, with the negotiations happening severally at various levels: individual; inter-male female relationship levels (couples); family level between families; and at inter-communal and inter-clan levels. Informal gathering such as family and clan meetings may set up expectations and standards that guide how individual family members relate to each other and other people outside the home, and many of these could be gender nuanced.

It should be noted however that enhancing women's roles in decision making may involve displacing male power structures and is bound to be resisted by certain elements in society. While this has been the case, motivation to participate should also come from the women in the community. There are cases where women require particular service or support but are not willing to cooperate for its establishment. While this may be the exception, it can scupper social development programs especially in cases where local politics and other ethnic lines of polarisation are strong enough to occasion some scissions in society. It is possible however (as shown by fieldwork in northern Uganda) that spaces and opportunity for cooperation remains stronger even when women belong to different political parties. In this case the central point of their cooperation is the rallying point (e.g. a VSLA or SHG) with political affiliations and belongingness regarded as a private matter which should not derail their wider cooperation objectives¹.

1 Focus group discussion, women Self-help groups, Northern Uganda

I note however that efforts at challenging institutions and existing power relations and patriarchal hegemony remain scanty and weak. It should be emphasised however that not all institutional structures are inherently against women and nor do they advance the views of men more than that of women, as new research have emerged showing that in any case male power structures nurtures and protects the interest of the female and children in several and very elaborate ways (Ochen, 2014; El Bushra, 2017).

Challenges to enhancing women's contribution to post-conflict peacebuilding and development

Analysis of several post-conflict situations (Uganda, DR Congo, and South Sudan) suggests however that many a time NGO programmes are abruptly ended at a time of great need. This is especially the case when it comes to supporting the civil society organisations to address emergent issues affecting women and children in the immediate, medium term and longer term aftermath of conflict. A case in point is northern Uganda which suffered an atrocious and brazen conflict for 20 years and when the peace agreements were signed by both government and the rebels, most of the development and humanitarian agencies ceased operation in the region, without due appraisal of the conflict trajectory, a thorough conflict analysis, and assessment of whether the remaining local organisations (including local governments) are prepared and equipped to take over the roles that the international agencies had been performing.

This failure to link process and outcome to sustainability of programme defeats the purpose of intervention as due attention needed to be given to the processes of adjustments and readjustments, the development and formalisation of social processes, socio-economic structures and the rejuvenation of local institutions. Moreover, analysis of the research evidence in several African countries (Rwanda, Burundi, DR Congo, South Sudan, Uganda), also suggests that few governments consider it prudent to fund and finance civil society organisations as the latter is held in fear by the state, and in extreme cases even accused of subversive actions. It should be noted that the reduction in the number of organisations working within northern Uganda also in a way constricted spaces for women empowerment and participation. This is because NGOs had played a key role in deepening and widening the spaces for women's involvement in post-conflict peacebuilding processes, with many women leaders and champions identified to lead and trained to lead processes of community engagements or contributions to the building of socio-economic infrastructure. In many post-conflict contexts as in northern Uganda, women have emerged conspicuously in standing up for their families, meeting needs of orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs) in their community and building a strong social capital base from which economic resources have been derived. In other cases, women have also played a key role in engaging communities and local governments as well as other actors to establish important facilities such as water points, community schools, and medical and recreational facilities (Ochen, Kayiwa and Loum, 2017). I note however that as most of these interventions were conceived and implemented within

a neoliberal framework, and are not particularly 'knee jolting' nor are they aimed at promoting critical consciousness among the target groups.

Moreover, few local organisations have in most cases developed robust and meticulous structures to avoid the pitfalls of intervention challenges, which have seen many NGOs foldout as quickly as they were formed. The capacity building of the civil society organisations should ideally therefore take the form of gradual mentorship which should include; infusion of technical skills together with inculcating a culture of leadership and commitment and drive that define women organisations that are dynamic, responsive, accountable and providing opportunity to grow and develop. This however does not appear to be what happens. Some peacebuilding programs and institutions do not integrate women's economic empowerment with the post-conflict interventions implemented (see UN 2015). This deprives society of the socio-economic outcomes of enhancing access to income for women and its potential for family-wide results/outcomes. UN (2015) advances the need to involve women in post-conflict governance; restoration of social institutions for basic services; improving women's participation in decision making; participation of women in developing the programmes, designs, implementation, monitoring and evaluation; developing socio-economic infrastructure and psychosocial support.

Paternalistic presentation of conflict development perspective is rooted in neo-liberal development ideology where the focus is not so much on the communities and their capacity to sustainably address issues pertaining to war and conflict; but rather objectified aid delivery outcomes such as: the presentation of the quantities of relief items given or distributed; the presentations of kilometres of community access roads; kilograms of seeds distributed for farming to vulnerable communities; and the presentation of number of people provided with mosquito nets or particular products. The preoccupation also build on the nature of reporting requirements and the accountability for funds received which emphasise outputs and products at the expense of process, outcome and change which should be the main point of emphasis in a peacebuilding project or programme aimed at creating positive relationship at community level. It should be noted however that the key assumption and discourses of the global neoliberal approaches to peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction (which defies many interventions supported by traditional donors) does appears to be very much predicated on quick results and visible outcome to satisfy the curiosity of a donor preoccupations with a version of peacebuilding that does not epitomise the qualitative changes which are more often associated with psychosocial support interventions. I argue that where donors are preoccupied with specific outcomes and products, limited room will be given for NGO-driven community engagements, mobilisation processes, and actual time for preparation and project implementation.

Reporting process is thus not women and affected community-focused rather it is donor driven. It appears as if the interests of the donor agencies and organisations are more important than that of the communities whose life was to be transformed. This

scenario pulls the focus of the development from the project's target, and participants are used as mere pawns in a chess game whose protagonists do not care so much what happens to them rather only for the interest of the protagonist(donor) to be met and their constituency satisfied. Donor interests range from international relevance to political significance of the mother country in a particular developing country. This positioning also narrows the space with which women can engage the actors, engage society, and ends up constraining instead of deepening and widening the women's strategic and social agency to create change at individual and community levels. Within this neoliberal (peace) theory it should be queried how it is possible for the story of the young women burdened by conflict to be well told and relayed to capture her peacebuilding experience, or whether time will be given for the documentation, understanding and appreciation of this experience. As a result, limited space will also be available for activities and initiatives that build and promotes strategic agency.

I argue that donor interest on quick and quantifiable results puts implementing organisations under extreme pressure and thus make it more difficult to them to research, experiment with novel ideas and apply blended interventions which builds on the pace and strengths of the targeted communities (women inclusive). Within such an intervention framework, most of the planning is done for the women, with women representatives participating to confirm ideas already decided by implementation agencies, and their sub grantees implementing donor preferred peacebuilding model or activities. Recent scholarship postulates a more beneficiary/target group orientation than that of donor, at least in the presented theory of change and strategies of several organisations or donors (see UNDP 2015; Middling et al 2014). These are however still weak in addressing strategic community needs.

The shift away from donor orientation to victim/participant/ target group has helped to draw some attention to the unseen strength, resources and opportunities of the target group (in this case the women affected by conflict and their communities) as well as their inherent and very important roles in the rebuilding process. While this is a crucial development (shifting focus of programming to the target groups), they are starved of funding as few external donors are prepared to finance fairly open-ended programme or interventions whose major aim is social transformation, using methods and approaches that delay the documentation of development outcomes (often quantitative). Emphasis on local community organisations and structures such as self-help groups (SHGs) and village savings and loans associations (VSLAs) who determine their own strategies present important opportunity for social development programmes to more emphatically address community needs/issues. In many communities therefore, women started taking centre roles in the process, with many recruited as change agents, or representatives of the development agency within the community (commensurate with new thinking).

Another issue is challenges arising from the nature of engagement. While women are brought on board to 'just make the numbers' in planning process, actual decisions are

in most cases taken elsewhere with participation only occasioned to rubber stamp and legitimise the idea that are already pre-determined elsewhere. Moreover, the fact that no formal DDR occurred (in the case of northern Uganda) at the conclusion of the conflict, and not as a result of a fully negotiated and signed peace agreement, this reduced the collective space within which the young women could meaningfully and more strategically be involved in the peacebuilding process and development. Opportunities for collectivist actions and participation as a group (interest group) also become thinner and much more remote in the peace process. Indeed the demobilisation process in the Northern parts of Uganda and its disjointed nature, with different organisations using varied and different approaches presented challenges in terms of the how women's interest groups could motivate women so affected to participate more effectively in the peacebuilding processes and the transition thereafter. There is also no evidence that issues agreed at the 2006 Juba peace process have informed subsequent post-conflict DDR programmes in Northern Uganda.

Another significant participation challenge is that most participation occurred within an "invited space" created and determined by and also controlled by the external development actors, who in many cases also had little understanding about local situated realities and community dynamics. Within such a space there is not much that young women can do and in most cases radical ideas deemed untoward or too revolutionary may not be entertained and in other cases, actively suppressed. In other words this development actor has the power to act as a censor on ideas that can be considered obnoxious or untenable. CSOs may also constrain the participation of its clients if it considers that particular resultant actions by the target group may affect their relationship with local or central government. Real participation thus rarely applies in such invited space as some good ideas and opportunities to influence the local environment, immediate environment and national development process gets thwarted.

Schirch (2012) further decries the limited amount of resources dedicated to women in post-conflict reconstruction. Schirch suggest that failure to provide adequate consideration of and support to women issues and interest in post-conflict situations reinforced earlier pre-war male dominance and advantage on aspects such as education, employment, with even bias on financial assistance to promote male interest and less resources are made available for issues such as trauma and healing from sexual violence earlier meted on the women. I note however that in the case of northern Uganda even men required psychosocial support and equally suffered for lack of care. Indeed experience from northern Uganda suggests that when the conflict ended in 2006 there was a sharp draw down of agencies doing psychosocial support (PSS), with reduced donor funding and concomitant interest of government programme going for physical infrastructure and such hardware interventions. Indeed, limited attention appears to have been given to the issue of personal recovery and healing which was needed to help fore most victims of rebel abduction, child, mothers and many other women who

experienced violence at the hands of both the LRA rebel and the government soldiers (see also Allen and Schomerus, 2006; Ochen, 2011; Ochen 2012; McKay et al, 2010).

How women confront social injustices in post-conflict society

Studies suggest that women suffer both private and public violence in conflict and post-conflict communities, which compounds their vulnerability and the multidimensionality of harm (Niaolain and McWilliams, 2013; Schirch, 2012). Analysis of the data emerging from northern Uganda suggest that similar challenges seem to be encountered by women individually, collectively and socially. Many of the incidents of violence however remains undocumented, un-reported and in some cases even unacknowledged by the legal framework and the civil society. Schirch (2012) suggest additionally that this violence could also be direct and structural, which occurs during and in the immediate aftermath of conflict; and in peace times. Moreover, as Niaolain and McWilliams (2013) show, women and men's security in post-conflict situation is not similar nor are they identical, with women's security risk and threat far more enhanced or heightened compared to that of men. Women remain vulnerable to sexual violence, physical violence and other such violations which affect their personal security as well as psychosocial and physical wellbeing. Reports from Northern Uganda suggest that many women have been attacked when they try to stand up for their rights for both personal protection, safeguarding their property and fight for the rights of their children. This has affected mainly widows and other female headed households, pitted against members of their own extended family and other community members. This surely confirms the widely held view within the literature that women face more significant obstacles to be secure and safe within the post-conflict and transitional environments; yet many times post-conflict dynamics and peacebuilding initiatives may not consider this as a special and unique security need which requires a more critical attention.

Recognising women roles in confronting injustice in their communities, and also organising change groups within the communities, Schirch (2012) contend that women are both victims of violence and also builders of peace. We should however recognise that women's experience of conflict is both individuated and collectivised, and varies from one context to another. In other words, no universal experience may be ascribed to them, even within African communities that appear similar historically, socially and politically. Moreover there are huge variances in women's capacity for peacebuilding, both contextually and individually. All these are issues which need to be borne in mind when analysing women's experiences of conflict.

Scholars such as Kumar (2012) and El Bushra & Sahl (2005) argues that it is imperative that gender roles during conflict are understood, as they change significantly and it is important that efforts at addressing conflicts aftermaths are not superficial aimed only

at alleviating misfortunes suffered by women, but aimed at structurally transforming society including the prevailing gender relations to achieve a more equitable situation (see Ochen et al 2010). Major challenge is that NGOs and government programming do not go deep enough to engage with the social and structural forces within society. I submit however that in some cases obstacles to women progress may be found not only among male counterparts but female leaders who themselves fear the accumulation of too much powers by fellow women or the appropriation of space they enjoy in their privileged positions. These may visualise further women emancipation, opening up spaces for women as threatening them and their continued stay at the top. I note however that more opportunities for structural changes within the socio-economic and political set up do occur in the aftermath of conflict. Question to ask then is whether these opportunities are taken or people look forward to returning to the old situation which may in fact not even hold particularly strongly within the new set up? These are issues to be revisited and discussed although as I note, while women desire and embrace gender changes in the post conflict roles and contributions, many still consider and upholds strategic gender roles disaggregation and the uniqueness of roles of traditional institutions, elders and men so as not to cause significant disruption to community wellbeing and social harmony. These are however contested viewpoints.

Objectification of women in conflict and post-conflict situation

An issue that is rarely discussed yet a challenge to the reintegration of women in peace time are the NGO objectification and subtle exploitation of women as intervention targets. Because donors and the global public are visualised as moved by the macabre and the horrific, only the negative aspects of the women's experiences are given during NGO resource mobilisation strategies and endeavours. In many cases therefore the positive aspects of the women and the success stories present among women is subjugated and deemphasised. Many NGOs thus feel happy presenting a morbid story line of the women experience of conflict or post-conflict and do not bring out the strong agential positivity that these women may as well exude. In other cases even sexism (a form of objectification) very much fuel violence against women. The objectification of women by development actors undermines their aspirations, and is an affront on their human rights and quest for social justice, yet many times the women beneficiary of service are so vulnerable that they cannot confront such violations. This pedantic and paternalistic approach to engendering peacebuilding to ostensibly redress social injustice ends up doing the exact opposite of what it is intended to do: objectify women and dehumanises them as mere pawns for resource mobilisation support to causes that the women so used to raise funds for may perhaps not even subscribe to or benefit from either individually or collectively. Perhaps a more

balanced approach is needed to enhance the relaying of the stories of these women and the presentation of their conflict and post-conflict realities? For this to happen it appears therefore that a rethink of post-conflict reintegration and development programming may need to be made and liberal peacebuilding approach and its assumptions revisited (see Richmond, 2009, 2010; Andersen, 2012; Permunta and Nkongho, 2014).

It is a contention among scholars of conflict that post-war reconstruction is to ensure war does not recur, and to address conditions that led to war in the first place, yet at times in post war reconstruction, women are not fully protected, with the protectors themselves becoming perpetrators of violence against women (Schirch, 2012; Schnabel and Tabyshalieva, 2012; El Bushra and Sahl, 2005). Feeling vulnerable and without help, women initiate coping actions which may put them in more detrimental situation and jeopardise both their security and physical wellbeing, but it should be noted that this is in most cases done to exercise some degree of agency in determination of livelihoods, survival or socio-economic progress. This is exemplified through forced prostitution, and in some cases exposure of the women to HIV. Northern Uganda HIV/AIDS figures far surpasses (almost double) that of the rest of the greater north, when north east and north west are considered. However even North-west and North East was not as that affected by the northern insurgency, as the north central. For Karamoja (in north east), it was mainly cattle rustling pitting communities against other invading rustlers. Some scholars have argued that sexual violence that was widespread and used as a weapon of war does play a big role in the spread of HIV/AIDS orchestrated by both government soldiers and rebels or dissident forces (see also Ochen et al 2010; O'Manique, 2005; Elbe, 2002; Fourie and Schonteich, 2001; Donovan, 2002; Card, 1996). Yet in many cases such areas do not even see adequate resources devoted to forestalling or mitigating the impact of HIV/AIDS and other diseases emerging due to the conflict; all of which significantly impinge on women agency to initiate and implement change in their communities.

Conclusions

Liberal peace theory seems to be at the centre of most peacebuilding and development interventions in conflict and post-conflict communities in Africa. While the neoliberal peacebuilding initiatives premised on liberal theory provide important benchmarks for supporting post-conflict reconstruction and the restoration of normalcy, it does not go far deep enough to enable an explication of particular important issues, especially those that challenge established power structures and social relations. Moreover, it has the dangers of being hijacked by development pirates who may not be happy seeing social progress across the whole community or society. Such pirates may be either men or women, local leaders, development actors or ordinary people within the community

who use their position or influence to hijack benefits of development programming. This is one of the drawbacks of representational participation in development activities, yet one may not be able to form a logistical point of view to bring all target groups on board. It does not thus effectively prepare the target groups, in this case women who have been severely affected by war and conflict, attain the confidence and capacity to engage effectively with the institutions of society and socio-economic and political processes around them.

The focus of most of the interventions as well as the preparation of the communities in post conflict situation has been on how they can access basic needs and not so much on how they can come out of the unwanted socio-political and economic conditions exacted on them, by the war its antecedents and apologists. As a result, critical consciousness is not built within the targeted individuals, and nothing other than mundane activities take place. Moreover liberal peace does not fully espouse, embrace or explain issues of critical consciousness and building social and strategic agency. I argue that this limitation and omission do not adequately prepare women to confront social issues and oppressive practices as well as challenging certain traditions and power structures in order to promote equity, service access and human rights protection. This perhaps also explains why few international NGOs if any handle issues that involve engagement within the conflict situation of northern Uganda, fearing state reprisals and perhaps suspension from operating. Perhaps this also explains why at some point in time women activism enters a dormant and quiet phase, as has been noted through scholarly research in northern Uganda. Women activism appears to be more rigorous during active emergency and in the early recovery phases, but tend to fizzle out as interventions moves towards more developmental and longer term issues. This is exemplified by fewer NGOs remaining on the ground, with more grassroots organisations attempting to take the vacated space. Perhaps these are the missing ingredients in the interventions which liberal theory formulations and its dynamics do not enable in the community or target groups, yet one would expect one of the main issues along which community capacity strengthened is the identification and redressing of injustices that emerge in the context of war and conflict; and what better way to do that than train and build critical consciousness in community members?

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