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Gender, conflict, and peace-building: how conflict can catalyse positive change for women

Julie Arostegui

Although modern-day armed conflict is horrific for women, recent conflict and post-conflict periods have provided women with new platforms and opportunities to bring about change. The roles of women alter and expand during conflict as they participate in the struggles and take on more economic responsibilities and duties as heads of households. The trauma of the conflict experience also provides an opportunity for women to come together with a common agenda. In some contexts, these changes have led women to become activists, advocating for peace and long-term transformation in their societies. This article explores how women have seized on the opportunities available to them to drive this advocacy forward: including the establishment of an international framework on women, peace, and security that includes United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and other international agreements and commitments to involving women in post-conflict peace-building. The article is based on on-the-ground research and capacity-building activities carried out in the Great Lakes Region of Africa on the integration of international standards on gender equality and women's rights into post-conflict legal systems.

Bien que les conflits modernes soient horribles pour les femmes, les récentes périodes de conflit et post-conflit ont conféré aux femmes de nouvelles plateformes et occasions d'obtenir des changements. Les rôles des femmes évoluent et s'élargissent durant les conflits, à mesure qu'elles participent aux luttes et assument plus de responsabilités économiques et plus d'obligations en tant que chefs de famille. Le traumatisme de l'expérience du conflit donne aussi l'occasion aux femmes de se rassembler dans le cadre d'un ordre du jour commun. Dans certains contextes, ces changements ont incité les femmes à devenir activistes, préconisant la paix et la transformation à long terme au sein de leurs sociétés respectives. Cet article examine la manière dont les femmes ont saisi les occasions à leur disposition pour faire progresser ces activités de plaidoyer, y compris l'établissement d'un cadre international pour les femmes, la paix et la sécurité qui englobe la Résolution 1325 du Conseil de sécurité des Nations Unies et d'autres accords et engagements internationaux pour faire participer les femmes à la construction de la paix post-conflit. Cet article se base sur des recherches sur le terrain et sur des

activités de renforcement des capacités menées dans la région des Grands Lacs en Afrique en vue de l'intégration des normes internationales relatives à l'égalité entre les sexes et aux droits des femmes dans les systèmes juridiques post-conflit.

En la actualidad, a pesar de que el conflicto armado es horrible para las mujeres, los conflictos recientes y los periodos de posconflicto se han convertido en plataformas y oportunidades nuevas para lograr cambios. Durante los conflictos, los roles de las mujeres se transforman y se expanden a medida que participan en las luchas y que asumen mayores responsabilidades y tareas económicas como cabezas de hogares. Asimismo, el trauma de la vivencia conflictiva brinda oportunidades para que las mujeres se reúnan en torno a una agenda en común. En algunos contextos, estos cambios han generado el impulso para que ciertas mujeres se volvieran activistas, alzando la bandera de paz y de transformación duradera para sus sociedades. El presente artículo examina cómo las mujeres han utilizado las oportunidades que se les presentan para fomentar este tipo de incidencia. Entre las acciones que han llevado a cabo se incluye el establecimiento de un marco internacional centrado en las mujeres, en la paz y en la seguridad, el cual abarca la Resolución 1325 del Consejo de Seguridad de Naciones Unidas y otros acuerdos y compromisos asumidos a nivel internacional. El objetivo de los mismos es incluir a las mujeres en el posconflicto y en la construcción de paz. El artículo se apoya en investigaciones efectuadas sobre el terreno y en actividades de construcción de capacidades realizadas en la Región de los Grandes Lagos de África. Dichas actividades se centran en la incorporación de normas internacionales sobre la igualdad de género y los derechos de las mujeres en los sistemas legales de aquellos países que se encuentran en el posconflicto.

Key words: women; peace and security; gender; conflict; peace building; UN Security Council Resolution 1325; gender policy; women's empowerment; women's advocacy; Maputo Protocol; International Conference on the Great Lakes Region

Introduction

The world needs to know that struggle can be positive for women. (Mary Balikungeri, Rwanda Women's Network (RWN), interview, Kigali, 12 December 2012)

In my years as a human rights and women's rights advocate, I have witnessed the resilience of women who have lived through horrific situations including sexual violence, domestic violence, human trafficking, and other abuses. In recent years working with gender, conflict, and peace-building, I have also noted the opportunities that struggle and conflict have allowed for women to find their voices, advocate for policy, and at least begin to change societies. An interview with Mary Balikungeri,

Director and Founder of the RWN in Kigali, Rwanda, in December 2012, inspired me to turn that thought into this article.

This is the missing piece that people are not looking at. (Pamela Angwech, Gulu Women's Economic Development & Globalization (GWED-G), interview, 3 June 2013)

Despite the devastating impacts of conflict on themselves, their families, and their communities, women throughout the world have used post-conflict periods to reshape societies, rewrite the rules, and advance women's rights. In the Great Lakes Region of Africa, women's groups have played a major role in peace-building and in advocating for policy, both at the national and regional levels, to address the rights of women both during and after conflict, resulting in changes in laws and policies, increased participation in public life, and changes in the perception of gender roles. This article focuses on research, advocacy, and capacity-building activities carried out in the region to explore how this work has happened. It draws on interviews and work done with policymakers, practitioners, and advocates in the region – especially in Rwanda, Uganda, and South Sudan.¹

In recent decades, the nature of war has changed dramatically, with internal conflicts being waged by opposing armed groups, often divided along ideological or ethnic lines, that increasingly target civilians and wreak havoc on society – with severe physical, psychological, social, political, and economic consequences. Women and girls are especially targeted for extreme sexual violence, abductions, forced marriage and impregnation, and slavery. It is commonly said that women's bodies have now become battlefields. At the same time, women have played major roles as peacemakers and peace-builders.

With the changed nature of conflict has come an increasing need to consider the effects of conflict on women, and to address their specific needs before, during, and after conflict. There is also an increasing awareness of the importance of including women in peace and security processes. Women are half the global population and a critical part of society, and without them real and sustainable peace cannot be achieved. They are not merely victims of conflict; they also play active roles as combatants, peace-builders, politicians, and activists, and are often in the strongest position to bring about peace in their communities. Yet their participation in these processes remains limited – particularly in formal processes. Despite barriers to participation, however, women around the world have emerged as voices of peace, mobilising across communities and using their social roles and networks to mediate and mitigate violence. Women have offered fresh perspectives to peace-building processes, demanding attention to the complex issues of peace and peace-building, and the people involved, rather than to just ceasefires and power sharing.

This article looks at how, at the national and local levels, women in Rwanda and Uganda have used the opportunities provided by international and regional policy

frameworks to bring about positive change in their countries in the aftermath of conflict. The post-conflict period is a key time for countries to build inclusive and lasting peace, which requires the full and equal participation of all parts of society. Women have seized the opportunity in the wake of conflict to advocate for laws and policies that promote their rights. The roles of women are altered during conflict as they participate in the struggles and take on more economic responsibilities and duties as heads of households. These experiences change women's lives and empower them to advocate for long-term changes in their status and conditions of life after return to peace, which can result in lasting shifts in gender relations.

The article draws on the views of women activists key to advocacy in their countries, in particular Mary Balikungeri, Founder and Director of the RWN, and Pamela Angwech, Executive Director of GWED-G, Uganda. They were interviewed as part of the author's research into the experiences of Uganda and Rwanda in using legal tools to implement the women, peace, and security framework. The aim of the research was to identify best practices and lessons learned and to work with policymakers, practitioners, civil society, and religious and cultural leaders to implement international standards on gender equality and women's rights in post-conflict legal structures. In addition to the key informants mentioned here, the article draws on the views and opinions of many others involved in conflict and post-conflict activism in Rwanda and Uganda, as well as interviews and capacity-building activities carried out under this project in South Sudan. These were collected through in-person interviews and workshops conducted between November 2012 and July 2013.

The evolution of international policy

The international legal framework that has developed around gender and peace-building – commonly referred to the women, peace, and security framework – is a key tool for advocacy at all levels and has been the result of women's efforts around the world.

Globally, a vocal women's movement began with the Decade of the Woman initiated by the United Nations (UN) World Conference on Women in Mexico in 1975, and subsequent Women Conferences in Copenhagen in 1980 and Nairobi 1985. Internal conflicts of the 1990s, such as in Rwanda, where the genocide resulted in the rape of over 250,000 women and left behind massive amounts of widows and orphans (Outreach Programme on the Rwanda Genocide and the United Nations) and Bosnia, with its rape camps and massacres of men that made thousands of women widows, brought to the eyes of the world the horrific plight of women and the urgency of addressing their needs.

At the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, women from around the world came together and, for the first time in such a forum, held focused discussions on women's experience in war. This resulted in a dedicated chapter on

Women and Armed Conflict in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Chapter IV, Section E). It was a turning point, and a call to action for women.

In the years that followed, a global network of women, especially those who had been affected by conflict, worked at local, national, and international levels to call for peace and security for women. In 2000, a global group of NGOs launched a worldwide appeal for the UN Security Council to formally recognise women's rights, to promote their participation in all peace and security processes, and to protect them in times of conflict. As a result of women's advocacy, and with the support of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and the governments of Bangladesh, Jamaica, Canada, and eventually the UK, the Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 1325 in 2000, creating an internationally binding mandate to address women and peace and security.

UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and its companion resolutions 1820, 1888, 1889, and 1960 (collectively referred to here as the 1325 framework, or the women, peace, and security framework) provide an internationally recognised legal framework for promoting gender equality in peace and security, ensuring the participation of women in all peace-making processes, and protecting women against violence in conflict and post-conflict situations. They address all aspects of peace processes, including peace negotiations, peace-keeping, political participation, response to sexual violence in armed conflict, judicial and legal reform, and security-sector reform. UNSCR 1325 incorporates binding international law on the rights and protection of women and children, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Geneva Conventions, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Rome Statute of the International Court, which criminalises sexual violence in conflict, among other laws. It also specifically recognises the Beijing Platform for Action.

All UN member states are bound by UNSCR 1325 and the international human rights treaties to which they are a party. Using the 1325 Women, Peace, and Security framework as a synthesis of existing international law on the rights and protection of women in conflict and transition provides a powerful tool to build inclusive and sustainable peace and security. Although gaps remain in its implementation, it is increasingly important at all levels globally, and is a direct result of women's advocacy.

Regional systems are also sources of treaties and law that are applicable to states parties in their regions. Regional bodies in the Americas, Africa, and Europe have mechanisms that address human rights and have adopted instruments on women's rights. In the next section, I briefly consider two regional frameworks applicable in the Great Lakes Region. Regional bodies such as the African Union and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) have developed strong frameworks around gender equality and women's rights in order to build sustainable peace, driven by advocacy by women's groups and by the experiences of conflict.

Regional frameworks

The African Union's Maputo Protocol

The African Union is a union of 54 states on the African continent that aims to bring together the continent to promote integration, development, peace, and co-operation amongst its states. Since 1981, it has had in place a human rights system that includes the African Charter on Human and People's Rights. In 2003, after being pushed by women's groups to recognise that women's rights were still being marginalised within the context of human rights, the African Union adopted a Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights to address the rights of women. Known as the Maputo Protocol, it is a ground-breaking legal instrument for women's rights that expands and reinforces the rights provided in CEDAW and other human rights instruments, produced by Africans for African women.

The Maputo Protocol guarantees comprehensive rights to women, including access to justice and equal protection before the law; political participation; social and political equality with men; protection from violence and elimination of harmful practices; control of reproductive health; education; economic and social welfare rights; and rights in marriage, inheritance, and divorce, among others. The Protocol is informed by the experiences of women in countries affected by conflict, and also contains specific provisions on the participation of women in peace processes and the protection of women in armed conflicts.

International Conference on the Great Lakes Region

The ICGLR is a sub-regional inter-governmental organisation of the countries in the African Great Lakes Region that began in 2000 when the UN Security Council called for an international conference on peace, security, democracy, and development in the region. The organisation is composed of 11 member states: Angola, Burundi, Central African Republic, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, and Zambia.

The ICGLR has a strong, legally binding framework that specifically names and addresses the principles of UNSCR 1325 on the protection and promotion of the rights of women and children as critical to peace and security, and is being used as leverage by advocates in the region. The prominence of gender issues in the ICGLR framework results from the input and advocacy of women leaders, women's groups, and civil society that have all been affected by conflict. The ICGLR especially views sexual and gender-based violence as a priority, cross-cutting issue affecting peace, security, development, and good governance. Its policy framework includes the Great Lakes Pact on Security, Stability and Development in the Great Lakes Region (2006), which includes ten protocols that are legally binding – several of which address issues of gender equality and sexual and gender-based violence – including the Protocol on the

Prevention and Suppression of Sexual Violence Against Women and Children; the Goma Declaration on Eradicating Sexual Violence and Ending Impunity in the Great Lakes Region (2008); and the Declaration of Heads of State and Government of Members States of the ICGLR on Sexual and Gender Based Violence (2011).

The creation of the international and regional instruments pertaining directly to women's rights have been largely the result of the advocacy of women's groups, and show the power that women's voices can have. When armed with knowledge of these frameworks and of their rights, women from the international to the national to the grassroots levels can successfully advocate for gender equality and women's rights, change societies, and build sustainable peace.

Bringing women together in Rwanda and Uganda

Since their independence in the early 1960s, both Rwanda and Uganda struggled to establish themselves as stable, democratic nations after years of colonialism that had exploited and exacerbated ethnic and cultural divisions (Global Network of Women Peacebuilders 2011, 109–10; Outreach Programme on the Rwanda Genocide and the United Nations 2013). After suffering through years of conflict, both have emerged with strong legal and policy frameworks around gender equality and women's rights by adopting the international and regional instruments regarding the protection of these rights as well as passing national laws that facilitate implementation of such instruments. It is clear from studying the history of the peace, constitution-making, institution-building and legislative processes in both countries, and from conversations with key participants in these processes, that women's advocacy has been critical in this progress.

In the next sections I look in detail at the experiences of women in Rwanda and Uganda. In both countries, women started advocating and organising at times when conflict was at its highest – looking at how they could rally behind their own mobilising activities, forming committees, and using existing mechanisms to advance their rights. This process has supported women's empowerment from the grassroots to the national and regional levels, enabling them to build their knowledge and skills.

A detailed examination of the countries' experiences suggests there were several factors that made the time right for women's participation in advocacy and policy-making in both countries.

- International and national women's movements: women from Rwanda and Uganda participated in the UN women's conferences and associated NGO fora, and came back inspired and ready to organise, advocating for their rights. Organisations such as FIDA Uganda (the Uganda Association of Women Lawyers), Collectifs Pro Femmes/Twese Hamwe and its member NGOs in

Rwanda, and widows' organisations were being created to support women after the years of conflict.

- Gender relations were shifting, as women were heading households and becoming sole or major breadwinners – publically and visibly. Specifically in these post-conflict societies this was a common result of the fact that during the conflicts, men had stopped being the sole providers as they were away at war. Many died in the conflicts, or came back unable to resume their previous roles, leaving women to sustain families.
- Political will: the governments realised that they needed to win the support of women. Women had participated in the liberation movements in both Rwanda and Uganda, and their roles in society were changing. Both governments also realised the efficiency of channelling resources through the women's organisations that were forming.
- National and local women's organisations were able to take advantage of this new political space and bring women's concerns into institution-building.

These general points will be explored in more detail below, in relation to each country.

Rwanda

Women have played a very strong role in peace-building and nation-building in Rwanda. The conflict in Rwanda in the 1990s was based on ethnic differences between Hutus and Tutsis, which had been exacerbated since colonial times. A civil war broke out in 1990 when a Tutsi-dominated rebel group invaded from Uganda in order to unseat Rwanda's oppressive Hutu-led government. This culminated in the 1994 genocide, during which close to one million people (Tutsis and moderate Hutus) perished and up to 250,000 women were raped within a three-month period (Outreach Programme on the Rwanda Genocide and the United Nations).²

After the genocide, so many women were left as widows that they had to come together to find a way forward. Rwandan women were buoyed by the international women's movement that was flamed by the 1995 Beijing Conference, as well as political will within their country that strongly supported their participation at all levels of peace and reconciliation. In 1996, women began to establish groups and organisations which offered women a chance to come together, share ideas, and take various forms of action to advance their interests and needs, instead of being isolated. Through their advocacy, the government established funds for women to access credit and loans, as well as the Beijing Secretariat to monitor progress on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which eventually became the Gender Monitoring Office.

Rwanda now stands out globally as the nation with the highest percentage of women in Parliament, at 56 per cent in 2013 (Inter-Parliamentary Union). In the years since the genocide ended, Rwandan women have played a positive role in lobbying for

the repeal and revision of discriminatory legislation – including laws on property rights, inheritance, and gender-based violence. The Rwandan government also has a strong institutional framework for the monitoring and implementation of all relevant national legislation related to gender as well as a range of international human rights instruments on women's rights to which Rwanda is party.

During the writing of the 2003 Constitution, the Rwandan women's movement actively mobilised to ensure that equality was a cornerstone of the document. The umbrella organisation, *Collectifs Pro Femmes/Twese Hamwe*, and its member NGOs, worked with women parliamentarians and the Ministry of Gender and Women in Development to advocate for the inclusion of principles of equality and women's rights for a gender-sensitive Constitution.

The result was a Constitution that incorporates the international principles on gender equality and the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, and provides a strong legal framework for integrating gender issues into all areas of public governance. It further provides that all persons are equal before the law in all spheres of political, economic, social, and cultural life. It specifically recognises equal rights in marriage, education, and health. It provides for women's participation at all decision-making levels, and establishes several institutions that focus on women's rights and gender relations – including the Ministry of Gender and Family Protection, Gender Monitoring Office, and National Women's Council. The Constitution also recognises the importance of international law, giving it precedence over domestic law.

As a result of women's advocacy and their participation in public life, the Government of Rwanda has also recognised the importance of investing in women as a strategy to achieve both economic development, and the empowerment of women. After the 1994 genocide, women were a majority of the population and were seriously impoverished. Many were war widows faced with the challenge of taking on the new role of sole family breadwinners. Through advocacy by women's groups and recognising the need to empower women in order to move the country forward, the government established the Women Guarantee Fund to facilitate access to credit.

At the same time, women living within Rwanda were also organising and mobilising. With the support of the government, especially the Ministry of Gender, women established fora to gather together to share ideas instead of being isolated. International organisations were also very eager to be a part of the new beginning of Rwanda, and supported them. The inclusion of both women and men in the country's development and financial programmes has led to the active participation of women in commercial and economic activities that were traditionally reserved for men. The increased economic power of women has not only reduced poverty but also promoted equality at both household and community levels.

Although the post-genocide period was a time of enormous grief, it was also a time of excitement for Rwandan women to come together from all over the world and rebuild their country. This included women from the diaspora, some of whom had

lived outside Rwanda their whole lives. Rwandan women returning from the diaspora worked with women who remained in Rwanda during the genocide. The message was that they were all survivors as women – and they needed to work together.

An example is Mary Balikungeri, Director and Founder of the RWN mentioned previously, who was brought up outside Rwanda after her family fled ethnic violence. After the genocide, like many Rwandan women who were living in the diaspora, Mary was anxious to get involved in the reconstruction of her country, and felt she and women like her needed to be included in part of both national and international thinking on how to move forward. On her return, Mary first worked with orphaned street children, before founding the RWN in 1997.

RWN focuses on health care, socio-economic empowerment, education and awareness, and networking and advocacy for women. It provides dialogue spaces for local women to connect with policymakers, and has established Polyclinics of Hope, which adopt a holistic approach to the plight of women survivors of sexual and gender-based violence by addressing their health, psycho-social, shelter, and socio-economic needs. RWN promotes exchanges of women from 11 countries throughout the region to share knowledge and best practices; see RWN's activities in operation; network; and analyse and connect their experiences 'on the ground' with international human rights instruments including Resolution 1325 and CEDAW.

According to Mary Balikungeri, these international agreements have been key in successful advocacy for women's rights: she stated that 'the connectedness that gives these women opportunities to remain in touch is critical' in bringing strength and unity to their advocacy efforts, and to 'take them to the global level in order to bridge the disconnect between international advocates and what is happening on the continent and move the women, peace, and security agenda forward' (interview, 12 December 2012).

Uganda

From a policy perspective, Uganda has served as a role model for the region on inclusion and women's rights. Uganda has had a history of civil conflict since its independence from the UK in 1962 – triggered by political instability and a series of military coups between groups of different ethnic and ideological composition – resulting in a series of dictatorships.³ (Global Network of Women Peacebuilders 2011, 109–10). The return of democracy in 1986 after a five-year civil war brought on a rebellion by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in the north, resulting in the large-scale internal displacement of communities, gross human rights violations including the abduction, rape, maiming, and killing of civilians, massive recruitment of child soldiers, abduction of girls for sex slavery, and widespread sexual violence. The conflict in Northern Uganda lasted almost 20 years and caused the displacement of an

estimated two million people (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development 2008, 14), with the height of displacement in 2003–2004.

Ugandan women played a strong role in advocating for peace. Betty Bigombe, a woman parliamentarian and Minister of State for Pacification of north and northeastern Uganda, was the initial lead mediator for the government reaching out to the rebels and was critical to the peace process (US Institute of Peace Global Peacebuilding Center). Ugandan women also developed women's associations, pressed for negotiations, and advocated for gender-sensitive peace agreements, and were thus able to influence the outcomes of the agreements, which included provisions on taking a gender-sensitive approach in implementation, recognising and addressing the special needs of women and girls, and facilitating the participation of women in implementation of the agreements.

Uganda has a comprehensive, human rights-based constitution passed in 1995. It includes many provisions related to the rights of women, and has been the cornerstone for advocacy on women's rights, and a foundation for building the country's legal frameworks. The role that women were able to play in advocating for the inclusion of women's issues during the constitution-writing process was critical to their success. After years of human rights abuses, the National Resistance Movement led by President Yoweri Museveni sought to create an inclusive constitution. In fact, it was this model that served as reference for the post-conflict process in Rwanda. Extensive consultations were carried out throughout the country between 1989 and 1991. In these consultations, many women expressed their concerns over their rights to own and inherit property and to have custody of their children, about violence against women and children, and their lack of access to education, credit, land, and employment.

Women working on proposals for the new Constitution referred specifically to CEDAW's concepts of equality to advocate for inclusion of these principles, and this is reflected in a number of key provisions in the Constitution. The inclusion of women and advocates in the constitution-making bodies who were knowledgeable on CEDAW and the international human rights instruments, and the agreement of the people that Uganda's international obligations should be recognised, resulted in a Constitution that includes virtually all of the global human rights standards and promotes gender equality and women's rights. Further armed with UNSCR 1325 during the Constitutional Review of 2003, women were able to advocate for the inclusion of a key provision on marriage rights (interview with Veronica Eragu Bichetero, Washington, DC, 26 October 2012; Constitution of Uganda Article 31).

Uganda has had considerable success in institution-building, and the role of human rights principles and the strength of the women's voice during its reconstruction process helped build gender-sensitive institutions. Due to gender quotas, women comprise over 30 per cent of government at the national and local levels. Women in Uganda have also successfully used the government's international obligations to build a strong legal and policy framework around gender equality and women's rights.

Uganda has a national gender policy that was adopted in 2007, in line with its regional and international obligations to address gender equality and ensure women's rights through access to justice; eliminating socio-cultural discrimination against women and girls; addressing gender-based violence; and promoting awareness about women's rights (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development 2008, 21).

Uganda has ratified all of the international human rights instruments that are a part of the women, peace, and security framework. These international instruments have been important in advocating for the principle of equality and dignity for women, and especially in advocating for laws addressing violence against women. Lawyers, judges, and advocates familiar with the instruments are able to pull from them and use them continuously to remind the government of its obligations, which have also been domesticated through the Constitution. In an interview, Stella Bigwada of FIDA Uganda (the Uganda Association of Women Lawyers)⁴ identified UNSCR 1325 as having been especially critical in shaping advocacy strategies and messaging focusing on transitional justice⁵ (interview, Kampala, 3 December 2012). In line with its international obligations and its 1325 National Action Plan, in 2010 Uganda enacted several laws addressing gender-based violence, and has also passed legislation on land rights and inheritance.

Women's groups such as FIDA Uganda and women leaders in the Muslim Supreme Council have been instrumental in working with cultural and religious leaders, who are the gateways to their communities and often the arbitrators of disputes, on linking international human rights concepts to cultural practices in order to raise community awareness of women's rights issues, and change perceptions about gender roles.

Another example of work being done at the community level is that of GWED-G. Its founder, Pamela Angwech was working with the UN World Food Programme at the height of conflict and displacement in Northern Uganda, and was involved in food delivery to households in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. From the women who lined up for food, Pamela learnt of the problems that women were facing in the process of keeping families safe and secure. She heard stories of abduction, rape, and assault in IDP camps, but did not know where to share these stories. She started organising women under trees, advocating, telling them to speak out for their rights, mobilising for materials, and speaking on the streets about violence in IDP camps – the 'silent crime that nobody was talking about' (interview, Gulu, 3 June 2013). Pamela stated that she felt she 'had to ensure that women could speak up' (*ibid.*), and her humanitarian work thus turned into advocacy and human rights work. What started under the trees became an organisation, GWED-G, created to continue speaking for women's rights.

Pamela Angwech began looking for the tools that she could use to advocate for rights, finding out about the frameworks that were in place at the international, regional, and national levels, and considering how to build the capacity of grassroots

women to use them. She started with the international frameworks, because she felt that most people were not familiar with national law. She stated:

The awareness of rights has been the breakthrough for women to take up these issues.
(Interview, 3 June 2013)

At the time, the international frameworks were comparatively well known and being used at the global level. CEDAW, 1325, the Goma Declaration, the African Charter, and the Ugandan Constitution have, in her experience, been the strongest advocacy tools.

Part of women's empowerment has been the organisational skills that came up after conflict – we now have women's networks and women's peace groups, which were not there previously. Conflict gives women multiple responsibilities in communities as peace-builders, and in designing, planning, and implementing processes of peace-building and peace maintenance.
(Interview, 3 June 2013)

GWED-G has made a major difference in the lives of women and men in Northern Uganda, with programmes on community access to justice, women's rights, gender-based violence, human rights education, HIV prevention and maternal health, psychosocial support for war victims, and advocacy and research. Grassroots women trained by GWED-G have been elected to political positions. The discussions under the trees continue, with women and men coming together to discuss issues of women's rights including new laws related to domestic violence, and debating their views on cultural practices and pending bills such as a marriage divorce bill and sexual offences bill.⁶ According to Pamela:

The women agenda is coming up strongly – in health, economic opportunity, education, income-generating opportunities, leadership skills, fundraising, design of programmes, and in the justice system and accountability for crimes. (Interview, 3 June 2013)

Women building peace in South Sudan

After years of civil war in Sudan, South Sudan became an independent country in July 2011. Before the war, women had little opportunity. They never talked about women's rights or human rights. During the war, women played key roles – some by joining men in the army, others by staying at home to care for their families. Many became refugees in countries such as Kenya, Uganda, Australia, and the United States, and some participated in training and international conferences. They became educated and aware of their rights, and developed strong peace-building skills. The Hon. Sylvia Michael Lugor of South Sudan Employees Justice Chamber has been active in the South

Sudanese government and the nation's struggle for independence. In an interview, she emphasised the value of training on rights:

During the war and through trainings women have come to know who they are and what they want – and what are their rights. (Interview, Juba, 15 April 2013)

Although women's structures and networks in South Sudan are still in their initial stages, women advocates, with the help of international donors and international NGOs, have been working to advance the roles of women and participate in the building of the legal and policy framework of their country in order to enhance women's rights, security, and empowerment. They are pushing for constitutional and legislative norms that ensure the prevention of gender-based violence and punishment of perpetrators; women's rights to land ownership and inheritance; equal share of economic opportunities; and full participation in all decision-making. Women from across the country recently (6–10 May 2013) came together in Juba for the South Sudan Women National Constitutional Conference, organised by a group of women Civil Society Organisations, to provide recommendations to the President on gender-sensitive provisions to be included in the Constitution. They are also advocating for South Sudan to ratify key international and regional instruments such as CEDAW and the Maputo Protocol (South Sudan Women Conference 2013).

Using in part the best practices and lessons learned from the Great Lakes Region, including Rwanda and Uganda, this project is working with policymakers, legal practitioners, judges, civil society, and religious and community leaders in South Sudan to collaborate on ways to incorporate international principles on gender equality and women's rights to build an inclusive legal system. Now is the moment to empower women and to make a difference in South Sudan.

Conclusion

The evolution of the international framework around women, peace, and security, the experiences of women in Rwanda and Uganda, the current processes in South Sudan, and stories such as Pamela's and Mary's are all inspiring because they show the power that women's voices can have.

Part of women's empowerment in these countries has come with the education, advocacy, and organisational skills that they developed as a result of conflict – they now have women's networks and women's peace groups, which were not there previously. Conflict has given women multiple responsibilities in communities – as peace-builders, designing, planning, and implementing processes of peace-building and peace maintenance, and increasingly as participants in decision-making and political spaces. The women's agenda is coming up strongly – in health care, economic opportunity, education, leadership skills, fundraising, and the design of programmes.

Women are also participating in justice systems and advocating for accountability for crimes – a central aspect of reconciliation and healing. Many crimes have been committed against women, and must be addressed by legal mechanisms. Women's groups are now looking at all ways of bringing perpetrators of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and gender-based violence to justice in a timely manner, working both with formal and customary systems.

Periods of turmoil have frequently offered the opportunity for change that women need. After conflict or periods of political repression women are often considered healers that can bring a nation together, and people will look to them to move their countries forward. During these times, women can offer new visions of leadership and promote the collaboration that is necessary for reconciliation and healing. They are a voice for peace.

The international and regional frameworks on women's rights are strong. When women know their rights, they can access them and advocate for them. The more education they have, the more power they have. The post-conflict period has been an opportunity for women to come together and give power to their voices. If a positive aspect can be found for women in conflict, it should be the ability to seize the opportunity to build sustainable peace.

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Notes

- 1 This research was carried out under a project funded by the US Institute of Peace and supported by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute – SIPRI North America, focusing on using legal tools to implement the women, peace, and security framework. The aim of the project was to identify best practices and work with policymakers, legal practitioners, judges, civil society, and religious and community leaders to implement international standards on gender equality and women's rights in post-conflict legal structures. Focus countries included Uganda, Rwanda, South Sudan, and Sudan.

- 2 In the years before the genocide, through the use of propaganda and constant political manoeuvring, then President Habyarimana and Hutu extremists increased divisions between Hutu and Tutsi. The assassination of President Habyarimana on 6 April 1994 when his plane was shot down near Kigali unleashed terror against the Tutsis, who were blamed for the incident. Under the cover of war, Hutu extremists launched their plans to destroy the entire Tutsi civilian population. Tutsi and people suspected of being Tutsi were killed, along with moderate Hutus suspected of sympathising with Tutsis. Women were systematically and brutally raped and many were left as widows. It is estimated that some 200,000 people participated in the perpetration of the genocide, and that within three months between 800,000 and one million men, women, and children perished. The civil war and genocide ended when the Tutsi-dominated rebel group, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), defeated the Hutu regime and President Paul Kagame took power.
- 3 In 1966, just four years after independence, the central government attacked the Buganda Kingdom, which had dominated during British rule, forced the King to flee, abolished traditional kingdoms, and declared Uganda a republic. In 1971 Army Commander Idi Amin Dada overthrew the elected government of Milton Obote, and for eight years led the country through a regime of terror under which many people lost their lives. Amin was overthrown in 1979 by rebel Ugandan soldiers in exile supported by the army of Tanzania. Obote returned to power in 1980, ruling with army support. In 1981 a five-year civil war broke out led by the current president, Yoweri Museveni, and the National Resistance Army (NRA). Many human rights abuses were committed as the government attempted to suppress the rebellion and thousands of people were killed. The NRA finally succeeded in overthrowing the Obote government in 1986 and Museveni became president.
- 4 The Uganda Association of Women Lawyers – FIDA Uganda, is a well-known and respected association of women lawyers that operates throughout Uganda, providing legal aid and carrying out strategic advocacy and litigation in pursuit of gender equality. More information can be found at the FIDA Uganda website (www.fidauganda.org).
- 5 Transitional justice refers to measures that are implemented in order to redress human rights abuses during a country's transition from conflict or authoritarian rule. These measures include criminal prosecutions, truth commissions, reparations programmes, and various kinds of institutional reforms. It is an approach to justice that seeks to balance the need for accountability and for recognition of victims' suffering with the desire to achieve a lasting peace and true reconciliation.
- 6 Community Dialogue attended by the author in Bobi Sub-County, Gulu, Uganda, 25 April 2013.

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