

Failing to Empower Women Peacebuilders: A Cautionary Tale from Angola

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In the summer of 1994, against the backdrop of the Rwandan genocide and the deterioration of conditions in Somalia, one of the few hopeful developments on the African continent came from the Zambian capital of Lusaka, where Angolans from the Government and the rebel UNITA movement and international mediators were working to end two decades of civil war that had killed a half million people. In my position as President Clinton's special assistant for African affairs, I had the privilege of supporting these negotiations, which bore fruit in November 1994 with the signing of the Lusaka Protocol.

This comprehensive peace accord promised an end to the conflict and a new era of national reconciliation and reconstruction.

Addressing an audience of African scholars on the Lusaka Protocol in late 1994, I was asked about the role of women in its negotiating and implementation. I responded that there was not a single provision in the agreement that discriminated against women. "The agreement is gender-neutral," I proclaimed, somewhat proudly.

President Clinton then named me as US ambassador to Angola and a member of the Luanda-based Joint Commission charged with implementing the peace accords. It took me only a few weeks after my arrival in Luanda to realize that a peace agreement that is "gender-neutral" is, by definition, discriminatory against women and thus far less likely to be successful. The exclusion of women and gender considerations from the peace process proved to be a key factor in our inability to implement the Lusaka Protocol and in Angola's return to conflict in late 1998.

Consider the evidence. Most telling was the failure to insist that women participate in the Joint Commission itself. As a result, at each meeting of this body, forty men sat around the table. Not a single delegation - the Angolan government, UNITA, the United Nations, Portugal, Russia or the United States - had a woman on its team. Not only did this silence women's voices on the hard issues of war and peace, but it also meant that issues as internal displacement, sexual violence, abuses by government and rebel security forces, and the rebuilding of social services such as maternal health care and girls' education were given short shrift - or no shrift at all.

Those in the Joint Commission who sought to address gender issues encountered other barriers. The peace accord was based on 13 separate amnesties that excluded the possibility of prosecution for atrocities committed during the conflict. One amnesty even excused any actions that might take place six months in the future. Given the prominence of sexual abuse and exploitation during the conflict, including rape used as a weapon of war, these amnesties meant that men with guns forgave other men with guns for crimes

committed against women. This flaw also undercut any return to a culture of rule of law and accountability, and introduced a cynicism at the heart of our efforts to rebuild and reform the justice and security sectors.

Similarly, as we launched disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs for ex-combatants, we soon realized that the agreement defined a combatant as anyone identified as such by their military's leadership. The thousands of women who had been kidnapped or coerced mostly into the rebel forces were largely excluded by their leaders, since most of them were exploited as cooks, messengers, bearers, and even sex slaves. Thus, we had to scramble to provide any support to these victims.

Male ex-combatants received a little money and demobilization kits consisting mostly of seeds and farm tools. We then shipped them back to communities where they had no clear roles, since they lacked marketable skills and the communities had learned to live without them during the decades of conflict. As elsewhere around the world, the result was a dramatic rise in alcoholism, drug abuse, divorce, and domestic violence, and the breakdown of the coping mechanisms that gave women some protection during the conflict. Thus, the end of civil war unleashed a new era of violence against women.

Even such well-intentioned efforts as clearing major roads of landmines to allow the more than 2 million refugees and internally displaced persons to return to their homes backfired against women. Angola was plagued by up to a million landmines planted by a dozen separate military forces throughout its conflict. But road clearance demining efforts preceded the demining of local fields, wells, and forests. So as newly resettled women went out to plant the fields, fetch water, and collect fire wood, they faced a new rash of landmine accidents.

The Lusaka Protocol was largely silent on or had inadequate mechanisms to deal with a wide variety of other issues, including trafficking in persons, reconstitution of reproductive health care systems, a displacement-related burgeoning of the HIV/AIDS rate, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in civilian hands, and psycho-social assistance to the victims of rape and other sexual violence.

Faced with these challenges, the indefatigable UN Special Representative Alioune Blondin Beye - who later lost his life in the pursuit of peace in Angola - brought out gender advisers and human rights officers to guide our efforts. Our embassy launched programs in maternal health care, girls' education, humanitarian demining, micro-enterprise, and support for women's non-governmental organizations. Moreover, we insisted that women be involved as planners, implementers and beneficiaries for our humanitarian and reconstruction assistance programs under the guidance, "Nothing about us without us."

These efforts were greatly assisted by excellent guidance from the Women's Commission on Refugee Women and Children, Widtech, and Special Envoy Paul Hare. But it was too little, too late. The peace process was already viewed as serving the interests of the warring parties rather than the general population. Thus when the peace process faltered

in mid-1998 because of insufficient commitment from both the government and especially UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi, there was insufficient civil society pressure on the leaders to prevent a return to conflict.

I leave it to an enterprising researcher to fully document the case, but I have no doubt that the exclusion of one-half of the population from the Angolan peace process - and from institutions of governance and the formal economy - meant that inadequate attention was paid to areas essential to consolidate peace and reconstruct the country. This contributed to the return to another three years of fighting that ended only with Savimbi's death in 2001.

The adoption in 2000 of UN Security Council resolution 1325 brought the promise of a systematic approach and concentrated energy to address these issues, but thus far, has largely been a dream deferred. Courageous and talented women trying to help build peace around the world still face discrimination in legal, cultural and traditional practices. Sexual violence and threats against women in power structures still impose a stigma of victimization that makes the most impressive women think twice before stepping forward. And yet there are more and more cases -- from Liberia to Rwanda to Nepal to Uganda -- where women are contributing to peace and reconstruction processes.

There is much to do to make such cases the norm. As a global community, we must safeguard and strengthen women peacebuilders with personal security and training. We must ensure a critical mass - beginning at 20-30 percent - of women in peace talks, reconstruction conferences, and governance mechanisms.

We must focus on rebuilding social structures with particular importance to women, such as reproductive health care and girls' education. We must end the culture of impunity that turns a blind eye toward violence against women. We must bring more women into the security forces of post-conflict countries.

Even within the UN system itself, we have a long way to go. As the world hailed the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as president of Liberia, the UN Secretary General issued a report in September 2006 identifying the benchmarks that would allow for the drawdown and withdrawal of UN peacekeepers from that country. Of 39 benchmarks on security, governance, rule of law, and economic revitalization, there was not a single mention of women or gender. Of the remaining seven benchmarks on infrastructure and basic services, only the last item mentioned the need for girls' school enrolment.

This situation is dangerous. Including women in building peace it is not just a question of fairness and equity. Peace agreements and post-conflict governance and reconstruction simply work better when women are involved and gender is taken into account. With the growth of new peace negotiations and peacekeeping mission globally, the case of Angola is a cautionary tale that we ignore at our peril.

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