

Analysing Women's Roles in Mediating Sexual and Gender-based Violations in Conflict: Insights from the Global South

Dudziro Nhengu

Abstract

International mediation emphasizes on resolution of political differences through peace agreements, without addressing the root causes of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in conflict and beyond. SGBV, an everyday reality, increases markedly during conflict, albeit with a feminine face, further aggravating the vulnerability of women and girls. On the flip-side, women mediators and women peacebuilders voluntarily take over the responsibility of managing SGBV cases in conflict and peace-times. This qualitative study utilized document analysis and semi-structured interviews to analyse the roles, challenges, opportunities, innovations and lessons learnt from the interventions of women mediators and peacebuilders' in SGBV cases. Findings established that conflicts present opportunities for women mediators and peacebuilders to manage SGBV during and post-conflict, using transformative gender-based mediation strategies.

Author Profile

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Introduction

The objective of this study was to analyse the roles, challenges, opportunities, innovations and lessons learnt from women mediators and women peacebuilders' interventions in Sexual and Gender based Violence (SGBV) cases during conflict and beyond. The paper further identified women's innovations in circumventing the identified challenges and highlighted existing opportunities that women mediators and women peacebuilders can utilise to strengthen their interventions. The study also documented lessons learnt from women's engagements with SGBV work. Eighteen women who identified as either mediators, as peacebuilders or as both mediators cum peacebuilders took part in the study. The study was delimited to six regions in the Global South, namely Southern Africa, East Africa, West Africa, West Central Africa, South Asia and South West Pacific.

The study had five main objectives: i) to explore the roles of women mediators and women peacebuilders in managing SGBV cases and in supporting survivors of SGBV, ii) to explore the challenges faced by women mediators and women peacebuilders as they execute their work, iii) to highlight women's innovative potential in coming up with strategies for circumventing various challenges while doing their work, iv) to identify existing opportunities for women mediators and women peacebuilders to support their mediation and peacebuilding efforts in their different contexts, and v) to document lessons learnt from the women mediators' and women peacebuilders' involvement in managing SGBV conflicts.

The study aimed to promote theory and practice for gender-based mediation by highlighting the efforts of women mediators and women peacebuilders in strengthening gender sensitive peace processes. The study plugged an existing lacuna in the study of mediation and peacebuilding in the Global South, which is characterised by both the suppression of women's peacebuilding efforts and a dearth of documented literature in that area. The indiscernibility of women's initiatives in peace processes causes their work to be devalued, resulting in skewed policy decisions and low prioritisation in the allocation of resources for women's work (Hayward 2015). The paper thus addressed an important problem in the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda – the devaluation of SGBV issues in conflict. SGBV issues are misconceived as soft issues when compared to politics, which is considered a hard security issue. The paper argued for the uptake of SGBV as a hard security issue of concern for sustainable peace. Documenting women's mediation and

peacebuilding efforts thus enhances the understanding of, and confidence in women's capabilities as peace agents.

Background

The post-Cold war period has witnessed a shift from militarized inter-state conflicts to intra-state conflicts. This variation has necessitated a localized and upstream focus on the new conflict conundrum, which involves a new brand of war actors such as tribes, clans, militias and armed mercenaries (UN General Assembly 2015; Felbab-Brown 2020). In this new conflict terrain, SGBV has conspicuously become a tactic of all wars, sometimes even heightening immediately after a conflict. Heightening of SGBV cases post conflict exposes the weaknesses in global policy and practice for effective and inclusive post-conflict reconstruction strategies. This is true especially as SGBV atrocities become particularly pronounced in contexts where fighters are demobilized without paying due consideration to the effect that their return into communities will have on women and girls. Recommendations by the Office of the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights (2010) concur with this argument, noting that armed conflicts and the occupation of territories often lead to increased prostitution, trafficking and sexual assault of women.

While this study focused on women and girls as the primary target of SGBV attacks, men and boys also fall victim to it. SGBV atrocities escalate systemically through various phases of the conflict cycle. Though not distinct from other social and political violence that occur during war, what sets SGBV apart is that it is purposively targeted mostly against women and girls as a weapon of war (Tarnaala 2011). Biologically, women and girls fall prey to SGBV owing to prevailing heteronormative designs. Socially too, owing to the gender-based perception of women and girls as by default girlfriends, wives and concubines, they remain the major targets of all violations of a sexual nature. The persistent and entrenched nature of SGBV means that it often continues beyond ceasefire agreements and peace implementation processes (El Bushra 2012). Therefore, to effectively prevent SGBV, it is crucial to gain a deeper understanding of its underlying causes and how it evolves over time. Ironically, the lack of data on SGBV downplays the graveness of the issue, while the absence of women mediators from the negotiating tables thwarts prospects for SGBV issues to be taken stock of as relevant policy issues. Concurring, the Women in International Security (n/d), perceive mainstreaming a gender perspective to peace processes as an essential part of establishing gender-specific strategies that can effectively counter the main drivers of all forms of violence against women and girls.

The gains of women's participation in mediation transcend the mere aspiration of silencing the guns and power sharing, to include the achievement of gender justice and durable, inclusive peace. This argument is supported by Krause, Werner and Bränfors (2018), who argue that a durable peace emanates more from ensuring gender justice that is enabled by inclusive, relevant and

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responsive institutions that can inclusively serve all people post-war. The concept of gender-based mediation thus alludes to women-inclusive peace-making processes that potentially deepen a shared understanding of the entrenched drivers of conflict as well as the gender differentiated impacts of conflict on women, men, boys and girls (UN Women 2023).

The absence of women from the formal peace negotiation processes and platforms is a major setback in the peace and security arena. Social and cultural norms consider mediation a male responsibility, an excuse often used to restrict women from equally participating at peace tables, and from making SGBV an everyday discourse. As such, women mediators and women peacebuilders living in war torn contexts rely on obscurity as a strategy to protect themselves and their work (Selimovic and Larsson 2014; Tabbara and Rubin 2018). Sadly, the more they hide in fear of reprisals, the more they miss the visibility and opportunities that men who always operate in the open get. These patterns perpetuate gender inequalities, further eroding the gains of UNSCR1325 on WPS (2000), and its subsequent resolutions. Gender inequality is thus, not only a violation of women's right to participation, but an impediment to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and a huge impediment to global justice. In a world that robs women of the opportunity to participate in peace processes at par with men, the little efforts that women mediators and women peacebuilders afford in their informal mediation processes enable them to entrench a culture of gender sensitive and gender responsive peace.

Ironically, the existing inhibitive culture of male dominated peace processes has not succeeded in curtailing women's agency to push for a gender-based mediation culture. Women continue to participate in mediation and peacebuilding processes. Women have increased their meaningful participation in informal peace processes at the local level. They continue to advance the theory and practice of gender-based mediation through their involvement in mediating SGBV conflicts, as well as in supporting survivors of SGBV. Taking advantage of their socially constructed roles as custodians of family cohesion in the homes and communities, women have claimed progressive spaces in providing reprieve and support for survivors of SGBV without waiting to be invited on board by men.

Gender-based mediation is part of a feminist culture to nurture a sustainable future that is characterized by gender equality, gender justice, and parity between women and men mediating peace and security processes (UN Women 2021). Likewise, the exponential effects of women's informal involvement in gender-based mediation have enhanced the strengthening of women's civil society organising across communities, countries and regions, pooling their efforts together as advocates for gender and women's rights issues in peace processes. The establishment of women's mediator networks, for example, has been a global response to the persistent under-representation of women in peace and security, and a strategy to increase women's knowledge, skills, networks and resource base (Conciliation Resources 2020). This has in turn increased the opportunities for providing technical expertise among women leaders to support gender

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mainstreaming across peace processes. Women organising for peace has also increased the development of regional networks of women mediators and peacebuilders, who work together for the common cause of promoting gender-based mediation processes. The noted growth of women's agency in peace and mediation processes has not been without its own challenges. Women mediators and women peacebuilders, especially those who seek to mediate cases of SGBV as well as support survivors of the same scourge face numerous challenges that threaten to stagnate their efforts. However, taking advantage of the opportunities that conflict situations present, combined with their feminist agency, women peacebuilders and mediators continue to circumvent challenges and push the gender-based mediation practice forward. This paper thus sought to analyse and document the challenges, opportunities, innovations and lessons learnt from such women's efforts

Methodology

Production of this paper combined a detailed literature review and semi-structured interviews with key informants that included women mediators and women peacebuilders from Southern Africa, East Africa, West Africa, West Central Africa, South Asia and South West Pacific regions. Key informants were identified from data bases and list serves of women mediators and peacebuilders. Identified women mediators and women peacebuilders were enrolled to participate in interviews as key informants, on the basis of their personal experience in conducting mediation on SGBV. The inclusion criteria also considered these women's experience in supporting survivors of SGBV in their localities, their knowledge and expertise of SGBV related mediation and peacebuilding work respectively, their ability to participate in the interviews using the English language, as well as their wilful consent to participate.

Published journals, reports, books, media articles and online articles were identified from various online databases, using key phrases such as "women mediators AND SGBV", "women peacebuilders and SGBV", "mediating SGBV during and post-conflict", "gender-based mediation AND SGBV in the Global South", "challenges of mediating SGBV", among others. Identified publications were thoroughly audited for relevance by reading the abstracts and conclusion sections. Irrelevant publications were discarded while the relevant ones were thoroughly reviewed to obtain secondary data for the study. The inclusion criteria for the publications were all articles focusing on informal gender-based mediation practices in conflict and beyond in the Global South, all articles on women mitigating SGBV crises in conflict and beyond in the Global South. The cut off point for the publications scanned was 1990, bearing in mind the time frames for the origins of the concept of mediation. For the interviews, a semi-structured interview guide was administered online, in English language.

Ethical considerations included requesting for permission from each key informant via telephone, WhatsApp or email, prior to sharing the semi-structured interview guide. Full details on the aims

and objectives of the study were provided to each key informant prior to sharing the interview guide.

To safeguard the key informants from re-traumatization that is associated with their previous experiences in mediating SGBV cases and interacting with survivors of SGBV, interview questions were crafted with sensitivity to the psychosocial well-being of the key informants. Interview questions thus avoided probing on specific cases of SGBV, focusing rather on the general issues. Some key informants highlighted the need for them to be anonymized, and as such, there was no attribution to any of the participants in the report. All interviews were manually coded and analysed for thematic commonalities and differences, using word processing, and findings were theorized and documented into this research paper.

Literature Review

Baumann and Clayton (2017) have posited that mediation takes place when a third party assists two or more disputing parties, with their consent, to prevent, manage or resolve a conflict. This definition limits the practice of mediation to the liberal mode of formal third-party mediation, where conflict resolution is perceived as a result of dialogues facilitated by an appointed elite mediator. The definition further negates the valuable roles that women play at the local levels in managing sensitive conflict cases, as well as in providing a plethora of other support services to survivors of SGBV. The need to shift from the concept of mediation as the act of conflict resolution *per se*, to mediation as conflict transformation practice that involves various acts, processes, players and interventions at different levels helps to create a more comprehensive understanding of mediation (Lederach 2003; Väyryne 1999; Munduate, Medina and Euwema 2022).

Mediation as conflict transformation, also conceptualized as 'transformative mediation' or 'transformational conflict resolution' has better political value than mediation as conflict resolution, in terms of its capacity to influence change processes for individual, community and national empowerment (Burgess and Burgess n.d; Väyrynen 1991; Miall Ramsbotham and Woodhouse 1999). In this paper, the three terms 'mediation as conflict transformation', 'transformative mediation' or 'transformational conflict resolution' are used interchangeably.

During conflict, women are often silenced and forgotten, yet incorporation of a gender standpoint into peace mediation enables transformative thinking about the different roles of men and women in transitions from conflict to peace. Incorporating a gender standpoint into peace processes further brings to the fore issues that could have been relegated to the background (Tarnaala 2011), including SGBV cases, which are in most mediation processes regarded as soft social issues. Yet cost of SGBV to the human and financial capital in any State proves that this scourge is not a soft social issue but rather, a hard security issues with huge bearing on the achievement of sustainable development. SGBV in the case of women and girls has many negative effects. These include

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unwanted pregnancies, teen pregnancies, child marriage, forced concubinage, sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS, maternal mortality and infant mortality, over and above the huge expenses that the States incur in trying to mitigate the consequences.

The core of any mediation process is therefore not the moment of negotiation between the disputing parties. Rather, what happens before and after the peace table can be equally vital to resolving the dispute and fulfilling any agreement. Conflict transformation is thus more than an act of resolving conflict. It is a framework of change that includes the strategies of intervention, the aspect of conflict management, transformation of relations and establishment of inclusive institutions and processes that enable cooperative peace practices between women and men. This conflict transformational approach is characterized by two pro-active foundations which include a *positive orientation* towards the conflict, and a *willingness to engage* in further peacebuilding processes post the conflict resolution stage, to produce constructive change that can counter visible and hidden long-standing cycles of hurt and destruction (Lederach 2003). The roles of women as mediators are thus, not far removed from their roles as peacebuilders. Transformative mediation also entails a progressive and ambitious progression from conflict to a negative peace, and finally to a positive peace, which entails removing the structural forms of violence such as political exclusion, discrimination and dis-empowerment, including SGBV, which often underlie the conflict and in the long run leads to violence (Galtung 2000).

Transformative mediation has four facets which include actor transformation, issue transformation, rule transformation and structural transformation. *Actor Transformation* refers to the internal changes in major parties to the conflict, or the appearance of new actors (Väyrynen 1991). In the case of gender-based mediation, actor transformation entails the inclusion of women as part of every level of the peacemaking and peacebuilding process. *Issue Transformation* alters the political agenda of the conflict, in essence, altering what the conflict is about (1991). Actor transformation has a huge bearing on issue transformation because once the marginalized women are brought to the centre of peacemaking and peacebuilding processes, issues pertaining to violation of women's rights are automatically brought to the fore. *Rule Transformation* redefines the norms that the actors follow in their interactions with each other, and demarcates the boundaries of their relationship, meaning in essence that once women and men start to interact for conflict transformation through mediation and peacebuilding processes, including the agendas of both genders, the rules of engagement will transform from male domination to democratic participation. *Structural Transformation* alludes to changes that may transpire in the system or structure within which the conflict occurs, which is more than just the limited changes among actors, issues and roles (Väyrynen 1991). Just as structural differences often lead to conflict and violence, transforming the social, political and economic space to a democratic one rids environments of violence.

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There are many reasons why SGBV issues go unreported, and in times of war this is made worse by the general lack of a permitting environment to do so. In such instances, gender-based mediation or transformative mediation remains the possible strategy to support human rights and justice for survivors. However, mediation for SGBV is controversial and highly sensitive matter which must be carefully considered to ensure protection of the rights of the abused persons as well as the rights and protection of those who seek to intervene on their behalf. Perpetrators of SGBV atrocities are usually the high-powered elite, the war lords and soldiers, armed militias and gangsters, and ordinary civilians backed by those with political or military power. This study thus expands the meaning of gender-based mediation to include more than just bringing the parties together for dialogue, to embrace other actions that enhance the potential for the prevention, reduction and possible elimination of SGBV, the prosecution of perpetrators and the rehabilitation of survivors.

Different levels of peace belong to different tracks, and of concern to this paper are Tracks I – III. Track I involve formal negotiations by high-level political, governmental and military leaders who facilitate negotiated cease fires and peace agreements. Track II includes unofficial dialogue and actions in which civil society and other influential actors lobby Track I actors at national level through advocacy or consultative dialogue processes. Track III encompasses dialogues and actions between grassroots individuals or among groups, aimed at reducing hostilities and fostering interactive relationships. Depending on the context, the three Tracks can sometimes feed into each other holistically to inform progressive problem-solving activities for sustainable peace. Often times however, the three Tracks operate as pillars with different priorities and strategies, and also exclude the majority actors from the grassroots levels from feeding their ideas, needs and aspirations into the peace process (Dudouet et al. 2018; Federer et al. 2019). Foregoing research has established that Track I actors conceptualize peace as the direct opposite of war while Track II and Track III actors, especially the women's NGOs and the women in particular rightly perceive peace as transcending the war narrative to incorporate interpersonal relations, eliminating violence against women and girls, as well as eliminating all forms of structural violence, meeting basic needs, and accessing stable and secure livelihoods (Anderlini, Naraghi and Tirman 2010).

By default, mediating SGBV cases requires the maximum involvement of women at Track II and Track III levels to mediate and provide other supporting roles that survivors of SGBV may require for the mediation to succeed. Though it happens at the local level, mediating SGBV cases in its truest sense is such an intensive, highly sensitive and resource demanding terrain. As a result, a whole infrastructure of professional organisations staffed with professional mediators has emerged globally, albeit concentrated in the West than in the Global South, an aspect that points to an institutional gap for addressing women's issues for the Global South. For example, in Germany, an organisation called WAAGE Hannover e.V (see euforumrj.org), working as a consortium with other organisations, has developed standard operating procedures (SOPs) for handling SGBV related and domestic violence cases. Before mediation happens, a pre-fact-finding exercise where the survivor is invited to a consultative interview to explore the possibilities or advantages and

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disadvantages of a victim-offender mediation takes place (see euforumrj.org). This consultation provides a needs assessment of the relevant support services such as food, shelter, counselling, therapy and other possible options. Thus, the line between women's roles as mediators and their supporting roles as peacebuilders throughout the mediation process is often blurry as they play different roles at different points of a mediation process – *inter alia* as counsellors, community volunteers, community health care providers, peer educators and peacebuilders.

Transformative mediation does not necessarily meet expectations of international mediation in many ways – in terms of process design, visibility or formality, but this aspect does not erode it of its political and social significance. In fact, mediation led by women at the local levels has more political significance with potential to transform relations for long term post conflict reconstruction. Secondly, local level mediation of SGBV cases exposes women to better chances of experiential learning which the exclusionary nature of international mediation cannot offer (OECD 2021). Gender based mediation further avails opportunities to provide continuous protection and care support to ensure the safety of survivors prior to mediation, including managing existing power imbalances and relationship dependencies that may cause continuous victimisation or re-traumatisation (OECD 2021). Gender-based mediation enables construction of strategic partnerships and networks, cooperating fully and closely with organisations, networks and individuals who offer specialized support services for survivors of SGBV and other forms of violence, and ensuring women have the necessary access to support services so that they can make an informed decision for or against participating in mediation.

The literature reviewed in this section demonstrated that women's local level peacebuilding and peace-making efforts lack recognition from policy makers. The literature also established that women mediators and peacebuilders who work on SGBV cases face multiple challenges, without however delving into the context specific challenges that these women face, because of lack of documented evidence. The reviewed literature also demonstrated a glaring gap in specific women led SGBV mediation cases from the Global South. This paper thus attempts to fill the gaps by highlighting in detail the specific experiences of some local level mediators and peacebuilding in the ensuing section.

Findings

The first finding was that although women remain largely excluded from participating in formal peace processes, they are extensively involved in informal gender-based mediation and peacebuilding processes at the local levels, and that their involvement leads to lasting, positive peace that goes well beyond just the silencing of guns. The second finding was that women face a range of challenges in their work to manage SGBV cases and support survivors. Thirdly, the study established that women peacebuilders and mediators have demonstrated capacity to innovate strategies to circumvent the challenges that they face in their work. Fourthly, the conflict situation

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continues to present opportunities for women mediators to engage with peace and mediation processes, and the work that they do to support survivors deepens the world's understanding of conflict while also laying the ground work for sustainable peace processes in the future.

The key informants who participated in the study reported that they engaged with mediation of SGBV cases as well as supported survivors of SGBV in conflict and natural disasters in various ways. Of the 18 key informants who participated, 12 (67%) were mediators who intervened in conflicts between survivors of spousal violence *and* their partners or their families. They also observed that most of the women deliberately choose to not report SGBV incidences to the police, and neither do they seek legal action, unless they get support from other individuals or support groups. This was mainly because of the sensitive nature of such cases, as well as the culture of silence that surrounds issues of violence against women. According to one of the key informants,

Reporting the cases to the police without the consent of the survivors usually presents more problems than challenges because the survivor, who is the main witness, may refuse to cooperate during investigations, or may refuse that such an incident ever happened. Forced reporting may also worsen the conflict, and expose me to danger from the perpetrators and those who sympathize with them. (Anonymous online key informant. October 15, 2023).

These key informants also attested that they intervene in cases of rape of women and girls, abduction of women and girls for purposes of sexual exploitation and forced concubinage, as well as forced marriages. According to the key informants, these atrocities are perpetrated by both State and non-state actors during conflicts and natural disaster periods. In most of these cases the survivors want the perpetrators to be brought to book and to be prosecuted, and they also expect redress from governments. The key informants also reported that the women mediators either report the cases directly to the police or work through the authorities of the state security actors and the Non-State Actors (NSA) to seek for dialogue in order to establish facts and evidence for possible prosecution.

The remaining 6 (33%) of the key informants identified as peacebuilders who offer various forms of support to survivors of SGBV during conflicts, natural disasters and in peace times. The support services that they offer include listening to cases of violations, approaching the women to gather evidence and manage the cases for the purposes of tracking their welfare, raising the women's awareness of their right to report cases of violations, as well as providing them with information on referrals, accompanying the women to hospitals for treatment, to the police for reporting, and to the courts, when the women decide to take the cases up for prosecution of perpetrators. These women peacebuilders also connect the survivors to NGOs and other professionals who can offer them support including legal advice, shelter, funding for travel expenses and psychosocial support and trauma healing.

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Of the 18 key informants who participated in the study, 3 (17%) work as individual volunteers at the community level. These 3 key informants reported that they are, like the rest of the participants, connected with NGOs, women's peacebuilding and mediator networks, lawyers' associations, government ministries and agencies to ensure adequate protection and prosecution of culprits. Some reported that they tread in dangerous terrain such as SGBV cases emanating from political conflicts and rivalries. The key informants also provided information on how they provide specialized trauma informed mediation services and psychosocial support, liaising with psychologists to provide specialized care to the survivors. Other reported initiatives of a political nature to support women who face violence of a political nature. Feuding parties have been known to exploit women and girls through sexual violence, including rape, and to launch sexually charged campaigns, further entrenching harm and perpetuating gender-based violence. Other peacebuilders reported that they provide radio show services and an anonymous helpline service where women and girls call in for referrals. One of the women mediators who offers trauma healing and psychosocial support noted that,

One of the primary aspects of my work involves providing a safe and non-judgmental space for survivors to share their experiences. Connecting with mental health professionals, I have helped survivors to access crucial psychosocial support to cope with their traumatic experiences, including counselling, therapy, and support groups (Anonymous online key informant, October 22, 2023).

Another key informant, a community peacebuilder who works in a war zone supporting survivors of SGBV commented that, "Many survivors face legal hurdles in seeking justice. I've collaborated with legal experts to assist survivors in navigating the legal system, ensuring their cases are properly documented, and advocating for their rights" (Anonymous online key informant, November 11, 2023).

Findings from the research highlighted the different types of challenges that women peacebuilders and women mediators face in their work of promoting gender-based mediation and offering support to survivors of SGBV in conflict, disasters and in peace times. One challenge is that the majority of women are reluctant to speak openly about SGBV issues, because of the stigma attached to the issues of rape and sexual violations. The key informants noted that some of the violated women are married and fear losing their marriages once their husbands or in-laws come to know about it, while the unmarried girls protect their prospects for marriage, arguing that stigma and discrimination become major challenges for them once the community knows that they have been sexually violated.

My challenge ... is how to create a safer space for the women to be able to trust the process and articulate the truth which can help me find a way into the negotiations and reporting. Without the evidence from the women, it is difficult to proceed with the case, even to

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approach the commanders of the state security actors to charge the security forces without evidence is not possible, just as approaching the traditional leaders and other community leaders with accusations against non-state actors is also meaningless without the women's willingness to talk (Anonymous online key informant, November 20, 2023).

Another key informant also noted that,

... sexual and gender-based violence in conflict is not easy especially for women to speak out about. It is a fact that the cases that are tackled scrap the surface as most women fear being ostracized once they mention sexual and gender-based violence. ... A few years back, during elections in my country, I led a project on prevention of violence against women in elections. ... The police were keen at that time to follow up on any cases reported but the targeted beneficiaries being women were not confident and did not trust the institution of the police. Most women said they feared reprisals and the incidents being known by their partners.... (Anonymous online key informant, November 12, 2023).

The findings also established that women peacebuilders and women mediators sacrifice their security in order to support SGBV survivors to get required assistance.

Survivors often fear the social stigma associated with SGBV and may be hesitant to come forward. Our work includes extensive awareness campaigns to reduce the shame and fear surrounding SGBV. Working in a conflict zone brings security challenges. The safety of survivors ... is paramount, and we've had to adapt our approach to ensure safety (Anonymous online key informant, November 12, 2023).

According to the findings, there are situations where the women peacebuilders and women mediators manage to gather enough evidence that can assist in the prosecution of perpetrators from the survivors. However, the challenge is that in most cases the perpetrators, both state actors and NSAs are men with power and authority in society, and often not easy to reach for establishment of facts. Reporting such cases straight to the police in conflict contexts is challenging because the police may not always cooperate. Sometimes when the police cooperate, some of the perpetrators are moved to different duty posts, making it difficult for survivors to establish their whereabouts.

All the participants in the study concurred that the countries where they come from are patriarchal societies, where gender is misconstrued as a feminist agenda driven to make women lose their traditional morals. The key informants further highlighted that in some of the grassroots communities where the women peacebuilders and mediators operate, talking about sex is considered a taboo, and likewise, highlighting issues of forced sex is likewise considered a silent issue. As a result, there is a culture of protecting perpetrators of SGBV, as well as a culture of shaming survivors into silence.

You may successfully arrange for a mediation either between the aggrieved parties, between their families or through the traditional leaders' court. In such instances it is the survivor who is usually shamed, accused of lying or of having conceded to the act in the first place (Anonymous online key informant, October 29, 2023).

The findings established another setback faced by the women peacebuilders and mediators as general lack of motivation and poor accountability among the police forces to follow up on SGBV cases.

Sometimes you gather enough evidence from the women that warrants an investigation, and you successfully report, but the case dies a natural death because of lack of evidence (Anonymous online key informant, November 10, 2023).

The findings also established a general shortage of resources to provide long-term post-conflict reconstruction support for survivors of SGBV. Seventy five percent of the key informants agreed that there are poor budgets for women's issues during conflict in most countries, and that the dwindling donor base does not match the upsurge of SGBV. Key informants also reported that during conflict, SGBV cases tend to be politicized, and women activists get accused of interfering in politics.

Many of the sexual and gender-based incidents that I have dealt with have pitted the political protagonists against each other it has been difficult to get support from national government which is led by the ruling party (Anonymous online key informant, November 12, 2023).

A key informant from a different region also commented that,

Government support is almost impossible when it comes to Sexual and Gender Based Violence or any other gender related violence. ...Through experience, as soon as ceasefire agreements are made, and first governments are installed, the political process takes precedence from [sic] addressing the impact of the conflicts including SGBV and the demilitarization of the ex-combatants (Anonymous online key informant, October 1, 2023).

Likewise, another key informant highlighted the following,

The politics were a major obstacle. If you belonged to one side of a political Party there was no government systems to report the violence to. So mostly assistance came from NGOs (Anonymous online key informant, October 3, 2023).

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Speaking about the lack of resources to promote her work for supporting survivors of SGBV, one key informant noted that,

There is limited service that provide safe hubs for survivors. This challenge results in ad-hoc and inconsistent services provided to survivors of SGBV. Very few volunteers take courage to care for SGBV survivors. If you are one, you are almost working alone. I felt that working in volatile situations is a 'Lonely Walk' (Anonymous online key informant, November 25, 2023).

Twenty percent of the key informants stated that the work that they do to provide gender-based mediation and related support to survivors of SGBV causes them burn out, trauma, high blood pressure, fear and depression. They further reported that they do not get any resources or services for psychosocial support from their national governments, and that their work is rarely recognized as work that requires to be considered for national budgeting processes. One key informant reported that,

I find it hard to sleep for days after listening to a survivor's story, the rejection they face from their family...There has not been any support for my own trauma healing. It is a group of friends that help me deal with it (Anonymous online key informant, November 10, 2023).

Innovations

The findings of the study projected the women peacebuilders and mediators as creative agents who are able to design context specific programmes and activities as solutions to the challenges that they face in executing their work. Their work and encounters with both state and non-state security forces has serious repercussions for their security. The key informants reported that they are always exposed to vulnerability, and that the sensitive nature of the work impacts on their psychological well-being a lot, especially in the face of the harassment intimidation and strict social controls exerted on them. One key informant provided the following insights,

It became clear that if a peacebuilding project had to get under way this issue of violence against women and the trauma emanating from it had to be addressed and so we introduced a psycho [sic] approach to peace building to address the issue of sexual and gender-based violence. We work together with experts on psychosocial support and trauma informed mediation in the women's networks to which we belong, and we benefit from free online coaching on these skills. Communities have trust in traditional leaders, faith leaders and the police, so we built strategic alliances with them (Anonymous online key informant, December 8, 2023).

Another woman explained how they relied on the Church to cushion themselves from attacks from the perpetrators and other community members who felt threatened by their work, 'Yes [we

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started] working with churches and equipping church leaders to conduct the PB [peacebuilding] work and mediation since [in] every community there is a church', she reported (Anonymous online key informant, September 15, 2023).

One of the areas of great innovation was in providing one stop centre initiatives for longer term rehabilitation of survivors. A key informant whose work focuses on trauma and psychosocial support for survivors commented that, *"My organisation constructed safe spaces for women and girls that are survivors, where different services are offered including emergency cash transfers, dignity kits, getting survivors organized in VSL groups and giving them, a seed fund to start a revolving fund"* (Anonymous online key informant, October 15, 2023).

Opportunities

The findings established that conflict and disaster periods present numerous opportunities that women exploit to advance gender-based mediation, such as documenting SGBV cases which can be used to facilitate investigations and legal prosecution of offenders in the future. The availability of UN Agencies, donors, development partners and NGOs were also identified as an opportunity with potential to provide specialized funding to support all aspects of gender-based mediation. A further opportunity identified was the potential to connect grassroots mediation initiatives with national level mediation processes, which can be achieved by increasing the visibility of local level mediators and their issues during national level mediation processes. The presence of many non-state actors at the community levels was also identified as an opportunity because they provide safe spaces and resources to support sexual and gender-based survivors. One of the key informants commented that, *'... and at times they are able to crack the nut and have the women speak out knowing there is a buffer for their support'* (Anonymous online key informant, October 28, 2023).

Lessons learnt

One key learning from the study is that despite the hardships that women peacebuilders and mediators encounter in their work, they focus on problem solving and on providing all the necessary support to survivors of SGBV than on their challenges. This characteristic espouses the political value that they place on providing a gender lens to the processes of peace making and peacebuilding. The women's engagements tend to be victim and survivor centred, and this work buttresses an ethic that peace building strategies should be driven by local peace builders to guarantee local concerns, because local peacebuilders and mediators are more connected to local issues, and some of them have survived some of the challenges, and thus have a connection that seeks to change the situation for a sustainable future. Another lesson learnt is that SGBV in conflict

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is a serious atrocity that touches at the core of human rights, hence the need to emphasize it as a hard security issue that befits attention during mediation of conflicts and beyond.

A further point of learning from the study was that collaboration with local organizations, communities, and international agencies is vital as no one organization or individual can address SGBV in isolation, owing to its complicated nature. The study also revealed that during conflict times, both the survivors of SGBV and the mediators and peacebuilders who work hard to support them face insurmountable trauma and distress. As such, in the words of one of the key informants,

... bringing in a psycho social approach to peacebuilding, foregrounding psychological well-being and mental health of the population into the peacebuilding matrix, creating a safe space for expression, bringing women across fault lines together, creating networks of solidarity and most importantly supporting a cadre of community level "barefoot counsellors" are some of the steps that can be taken by women peacebuilders. Support for survivors is a long-term endeavour, women mediators must have the needed resources and be mentally prepared to give this support (Anonymous online key informant, October 28, 2023).

Conclusion

This paper concluded that although women remain largely excluded from participating in formal peace processes, they are extensively involved in informal gender-based mediation and peacebuilding processes at all levels of the peace cycle, and their involvement in peacebuilding and mediation leads to lasting, positive peace that goes well beyond just the silencing of guns. The paper also concluded that women face a range of challenges in their work to support gender-based mediation practice, especially that relating to SGBV issues, which is a very sensitive area. Thirdly, the paper concluded that in the face of challenges that they face, women peacebuilders and mediators demonstrate a high level of capacity to innovate strategies to circumvent existing challenges. The fourth conclusion was that the conflict situation continues to present opportunities for women mediators to engage with peace and mediation processes, and the work that they do to support survivors deepens the world's understanding of conflict while also laying the ground work for sustainable peace processes in the future.

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