

Socio-Political Conflict and Implications on Gender Dynamics: Cases from Central, East and Horn of Africa

By

Messash Kassaye Woldetsadik¹ and Donald O. Wandere²

¹PhD Candidate, Institute for Peace and Security Studies (IPSS), Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia. Tel: +251916584040 Email: messashkassaye@gmail.com

²PhD, Senior Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Psychology and Anthropology, Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya. Tel: +254722231404. Email: donwandere2@yahoo.com

Abstract

The objective of this article was to examine the impact of socio-political conflict on women and men, as well as gender relations in selected conflict riddled states from central, east and the Horn of Africa. Accordingly, the impacts of socio-political conflict on gender were analyzed in reference to human rights violation, economic efficiency, women involvement in politics and empowerment of ex-combatants in Democratic Republic of the Congo [DRC], South Sudan and Ethiopia. The findings from desk review within the three states are compared for possible similarity and differences. In conclusion, this article proposes, an integrated understanding of violent conflict that thoroughly addresses inequities at the cultural and structural level which is essential to considerably reduce or eliminate the harmful effects of socio-political conflict on gender. Finally it was recommended, peace building initiatives in DRC, South Sudan and Ethiopia shall include trainings and education about positive masculinity; psycho-social support for CRSV survivors of women, men, girls and boys; accountable justice system for CRSV cases and inclusive income-generating activities and DDR programs for women and men victims of war.

Key words: Conflict, Social conflict, Political conflict, Socio-political conflict, Gender, Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Ethiopia

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Introduction

Galtung (1996) remarked, conflict is the result of dilemma or dispute that can create something transformative if handled properly or turned into physical violence if the person or actors fail to evaluate alternative solutions or negotiate differences. Conflict therefore arises from incompatibility of aspirations at intra-personal, inter-personal, inter-communal and inter-state level (Galtung, 1996). This likely have ‘transcendental’ or ‘destroying’ potential.

Galtung & Fischer (2013) posit that conflict can arise from social, economic or political aspects or identity facets including class, caste, race, ethnicity, religion or gender. Supporting this, Lederach (2003) added that causal factors of conflict are usually intertwined, and initiatives to resolve conflicts shall match this complexity. An aspect of conflict with entangled causes of social, economic, political and cultural nature remains deadly and destructive at all levels.

Socio-political conflict implies various forms of social inequality and political power struggle manifested in terms of riots, unconstitutional regime change, rebellion movements, inter-communal fighting and civil war (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project [ACLED], 2023). Such complex conflicts in terms of intensity and extensity put communities or states on the verge of disintegration (Kimemia, 2021). Such conflict is highly prevalent in Africa.

In order to facilitate conflict prevention and resolution efforts, undertaking an in-depth analysis to deep rooted structural and cultural inequalities is necessitated (Galtung, 1996; Lederach, 2003). Particularly, any curative and transformative measures shall remain gender sensitive as women and children suffer more during violent conflict. Hence, women representation in conflict prevention and recovery projects is highly reinforced and men partnership is highly encouraged (United Nations [UN], 1995). Yet, women continue to become targets of violence which has a spillover effect on gender relations and community rebuilding efforts particularly in Africa.

Statement of the Problem

Socio-political conflict in Africa profoundly influences gender dynamics, often exacerbating existing inequalities. Research indicates that the socio-political context in a given nation significantly impacts women's safety, economic empowerment, political participation, revealing a stark gender gap in countries with violent conflict (El Bushra & Sahl, 2005). Their voices also remain marginalized in rehabilitation programs. What is more, socio-political conflict affect men negatively. It incapacitate men economically, politically and morally (Stern & Nystrand, 2006). This has a spillover effect on women wellbeing psychologically, physically, economically and politically as evidenced in different countries in Africa (Kimemia, 2021). These problems highlights the need for deeper investigation on socio-political structures and conflicts in Africa to women's and men's agency to flourish. This is critical mainly due to the prolonged socio-political violence and its deadly impact on

women and men inhabitants in the central, east and horn of Africa despite global, regional and national efforts to improve the situation.

Objectives

The overarching objective of this paper is to thoroughly analyze the impact of socio-political conflict on gender in selected states in central, east and Horn of Africa.

Review of Related Literatures

In this section, the essence and effect of socio-political conflict and gender is briefly covered.

Socio-political Conflicts

Conflict usually degenerates into violence or requires viable solution. Violence implies poorly managed differences featured in three forms: direct, structural or cultural. While direct violence comprises physical or verbal viciousness, structural violence stems from social injustice; while cultural violence entails beliefs and practices that justify structural inequalities (Galtung, 1996; Galtung & Fischer, 2013). The focus of this paper is on violent conflicts.

Social Conflict

A system that promotes accumulation of wealth in the hands of few, and gives higher status to some groups leads to competition. Social conflict is therefore created by unjust resource distribution or limited provision of social needs and marginalized identity (Acharya, 2014). If left unaddressed, poor social service, poverty, unemployment, and physical violence will be inevitable (Galtung, 1996). This can be manifested through weak social cohesion and direct violence (Lederach, 2003). According to Acharya (2014), this is a major threat to human safety.

Political Conflict

Politics is a competition between groups who want to gain advantage in the area of authority and resources. When political actors fail to reach rational solution on how to bridge political differences, they act antagonistically. The resulting violent protest, politicicide, coup d'état and civil war comprise political violence (ACLED, 2023). In Africa, colonial legacy, media propaganda, bad governance, resource competition, western intervention and non-state insurgency escalate the political tension (Kimemia, 2021; Stern & Nystrand, 2006). Sadly, such tension is increasing from time to time.

Socio-political Conflict

When states fail to make responsive policies to address social injustices, inter-communal violence, social fracture, organized crime or making demands through armed means become inevitable (Acharya, 2014; Lederach, 2003). On the other hand, actors involved in political conflict claim to represent the interests of a deprived social group and justify their actions in the name of that group which divide the society further (Strachan & Haider, 2015). The atrocities on human lives and infrastructural devastation due to political upheaval exacerbate existing social problems (Acharya, 2014). Socio-political conflict therefore represent a situation where social injustices and political antagonism co-exist and reinforce each other.

Gender

The term gender rose to prominence in policy discussions of peace and security since 1970s. The pivotal text on women empowerment, the Beijing declaration (UN, 1995), conceptualize gender as a system of roles, behaviors, attributes, opportunities, rights and relations associated with being a man or a woman as determined by society and culture. Accordingly, socially codified ‘masculine-feminine’ profiling of men and women were set and passed from generation to generation in defining their respective behaviors, roles and rights.

Traditionally, masculinity is expressed through being tough, aggressive, intellectualism, limited affection, independence, pain endurance, power and wealth (El Bushra & Sahl, 2005; Stern & Nystrand, 2006; Strachan & Haider, 2015). Heterosexuality and unpredictable sexual desire (Vance, 1985) are also added to the list. Femininity on the other hand is explained through submission, taking care of elderly, and modest dressing (Logo, Shah & Watson, 2022; Stern & Nystrand, 2006; Strachan & Haider, 2015). Besides, Vance (1985, p. 4) added “self-control and watchfulness” regarding feminine sexuality. Such inflexible distinction therefore perpetuate masculinity (Strachan & Haider, 2015). Thus, gender is a social and political process that justify inequality.

In order to address the effects of traditional gender profiling, remedial strategies were envisioned to improve the position of women. The input of legal instruments like Universal Declaration of Human Rights [UDHR] (UN, 1948) and Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against women [CEDAW] (UN General Assembly [UNGA], 1979) are notable in reiterating equal rights and dignity for men and women and abolition of practices that limit women empowerment in social, economic and political arenas. Yet, closing the gender gap seem to take years as per 2022 reports of World Economic Forum. This implies, a lot has to be done at all levels.

The Impact of Socio-political Conflicts on Gender

In this article, the impacts of conflict on gender are discussed in relation to violations of human rights, economic pressures, women political participation and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration [DDR] programs.

Violations of Human Rights

Conflict-related sexual violence [CRSV] is one egregious example pervasive in armed conflict. This includes rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, forced prostitution, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of similar severity as mentioned in Rome Statue (International Criminal Court [ICC], 2011) and Geneva Convention and its protocols (International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], 1949, 1977). Though victims of CRSV are women and men, women account the largest share (Buchowska, 2016, UN Security Council [UNSC], 2015). The 1995 Beijing Declaration also label CRSV as a breach of values of UDHR and humanitarian laws.

In contemporary conflicts, CRSV has become a ‘weapon of war’ meant to humiliate, cleanse or exterminate a particular social group (Barrow, 2010; UNSC, 2008). It is also used as a tactic to remunerate militants as exemplified in South Sudan (Buchowska, 2016). Perpetrators include rebels and security forces (UNSC, 2015). Considering lower regard given to women and lack of sophistication to respond to the intersection of gender and other identity markers, most CRSV cases are not reported or end with impunity (Barrow, 2010). Hence, women continue to die, suffer from bodily and mental injuries and ostracized (UN,

2010; UNSC, 2015), which has a spillover effect on their livelihood, familial bond and social cohesion.

Considering far reaching consequences of CRSV, UN Security Council adopted resolutions 1820 in 2008. Traditionally, there is a popular belief that ‘men are the perpetrators’ and ‘women are the victims’ (Strachan & Haider, 2015). However, men and boys are also victims of CRSV through oral or anal rape, genital torture, castration, coercion to rape others or forced witnessing (Women’s Refugee Commission [WRC], 2019). Such acts are used as a war strategy to emasculate men and control resources (Stern & Nystrand, 2006). To make matters worse, psycho-social support for CRSV survivors are women focused (WRC, 2019) and the UNSC framework barely recognize men as primary victims (Barrow, 2010). This is the reason, Barrow (2010) argued, the ‘men are aggressors’ narration makes protection towards them seldom, push victims to reclaim status through aggression which affects gender relations. Recent study by WRC (2019) from South Sudan, Somalia and DRC refugees are indicators of these.

Economic Pressure

In conflict zones, men are unable to exercise their ‘provider’ role (Stern & Nystrand, 2006) and remain dependent on their wives and/or family members. They stay idle which paves way for substance abuse (El Bushra & Sahl, 2005) and sexual abuse (Strachan & Haider, 2015). Since most conflict re-building projects are women focused, men feel desperate to reemerge from economic hardship. Running out of options, they are sometimes obliged to join rebel groups (Stern & Nystrand, 2006). Reports from WRC (2019) showed, men victims of CRSV suffer the most as they are unable to engage in jobs that require physical strength.

The death of men in conflict, divorce and CRSV, create many female-headed families with limited or no income. Hence, women are obliged to live in poverty or resort to cohabitation with economically strong men, or get involved in commercial sex, which further deteriorate their social position (UN, 1995; UNSC, 2015). Some even choose to be ‘bush wives’ for rebel men (Plassnig, 2020). Few get employment in the informal sector which give them ‘provider’ role as exhibited in Uganda, Angola and Mali (El Bushra & Sahl, 2005). Such independence is however short-lived (Strachan & Haider, 2015) mainly because most men are not enthusiastic about the gender role change.

Women Political Participation

Due to ‘women the victim’ narration, women are usually labelled as those in need of protection, and hence, their capacity as well as right to create equitable society is largely ignored (Greenberg & Zuckerman, 2009; Strachan & Haider, 2015). Access and voice of citizens in decisions that affect their lives is a must (Lederach, 2003). Since women have significant share in a society, and politics affect lives by enforcing policies, increasing women visibility in politics is highly commended particularly in fragile communities (UN, 1995). Such approach is highly endorsed by international organizations.

Conflict-riddled states usually adopt significant reforms due to failure of former structures and the intervention of international actors. One of the developments include increased representation of women in politics. It is to inform such aspiration that the 1325 resolution of UNSC made a global call for states to consider women political representation as a tool for sustainable peace in the year 2000. Evidence shows that states that recorded 30 or more percent women in politics are those that emerge from conflict situations (Strachan & Haider, 2015). Adoption of legislated quota system, voluntary party quota scheme, and

sanction protocols on parties and efforts to empower women in socio-economic terms played a role in this (UN Women, 2021). Nominal illustration of women is however rarely translated into sustainable political gains. This is the reason Nazneen (2016) strongly argue bringing women in to political stage and promoting gender issues as women take their seats are hard to hit targets.

Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Program

Upon cessation of hostilities, programs like DDR are proposed to re-build the socio-economic structure are usually proposed. This program includes, removal of weapons from fighters, dissolution of insurgent teams and reintegration in to civilian life (Stern & Nystrand, 2006). Mostly, it is men who are beneficiaries of DDR because fire arms are mostly in their possession, and they are the mastermind of military rule and structure (UN, 2010). However, little is known on how DDR programs are effective in deconstructing violent masculinity and building positive gender relations (Stern & Nystrand, 2006). Hence, more research in this regard is required.

Due to stigma associated with femininity and war, limited information is available on the whereabouts of female ex-combatants after conflict ends. They are usually labeled as ‘cold blooded monsters’ as well as ‘sex slaves’ (Plassnig, 2020). The fact that they have limited control over arms also limits their involvement in DD programs (Strachan & Haider, 2015). Hence, the likelihood of women ex-fighters engaging in income generating activities is limited (UN, 2010). Even though, UN expand the eligibility criteria through advocacy for inclusion of all women associated with armed forces and groups (WAAFG) (UN, 2000), many women ex-fighter lead impoverished life style due to deep-rooted stigma they face (Strachan & Haider, 2015; Stern & Nystrand, 2006; UN, 2010). The fact that DDR initiatives are donor-dependent in general prevents to fulfill the promises made to former combatants (Greenberg & Zuckerman, 2009). This undermines the success of DDR initiatives in most conflict affected states particularly in Africa.

The Impacts of Socio-political Conflicts on Gender: Cases from Central, East and Horn of Africa

This section briefly discusses the nature of socio-political conflicts and its impact on gender in DRC, South Sudan and Ethiopia.

The Case of Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Nature of Socio-political Conflict

In the DRC, challenges such as massive human rights abuse, poverty, natural resource exploitation, unemployment, economic recession, poor social services, unchecked political power and interethnic rivalry have their origins in colonial periods (Economic Commission for Africa [ECA], 2015). Hence, secessionist and insurgency movement, dictatorship, corruption, coup d'état, violent riots, disease outbreak, and poor provision of public services, job insecurity and massive displacement characterize DRC for years (ECA, 2015; Marcucci, 2019).

Even though the coming of president Tshisekedi to power in 2019 has been illustrated as an era for peaceful transition of power, the corruption rate is on rise, illicit mineral trafficking is active, rebel groups in eastern DRC are on loose and no successful peace deal

could be concluded (Marcucci, 2019). Hence, millions of its citizens have no secured future (Kimemia, 2021).

Violations of Human rights

Millions of women and girls are prone to CRSV in DRC. While Congolese security forces, rebel groups, UN peace keeping members were implicated, perpetrators rate within Congolese security forces was higher (UNSC, 2015, 2022). Besides, the nature of CRSV which involves gang rape and genital mutilation was systematically enacted to humiliate social groups (Buchowska, 2016; UNSC, 2015) or resources (Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict [OSRSG-SVC], 2022). In general, sexual violence in DRC is a long-standing problem exacerbated by unending violent conflict (UNSC, 2015). This makes CRSV only a tip of the iceberg in conflict zones.

Due to sexual brutality, thousands of women and girls died or were compelled to live with physical and mental illness, fistula and HIV infection (Sleph, Barker & Levtov, 2014; UN, 2015). What is more, they were stigmatized, lost their marriage and raise children by themselves with no income (ECA, 2015; Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2012; Stern & Nystrand, 2006). Hence, CRSV in DRC deteriorated women's position socially and economically. For men, raping of 'fathers' has become a war strategy to humiliate community groups that resulted to dissolution of marriages, forced displacement and poverty (WRC, 2019). As rightly highlighted in contexts marred by conflict, CRSV of men fuels substance abuse and sexual assault against women (El Bushra & Sahl, 2005).

The DRC government acknowledge UN resolutions and prepared a National Action Plan to guide implementation since 2010 (Ministry of Gender, Family and Children, 2018). Accordingly, sexual violence law was drafted and rape trial was established (OSRSG-SVC, 2022; UNSC, 2015). Yet, pervasive nature of sexual violence, inferior position of women, impunity of CRSV cases and perpetrators of CRSV are still part of security sector implicitly give permission for perpetrators to continue the act (OSRSG-SVC, 2022; Whitman, 2006). These seem to reproduce violent masculine behavior.

Economic Pressure

The economic downturn in DRC due to conflict is generally devastating, considering the protracted nature of the conflict for over six decades. The country ranked 179th out of 191 states in terms of life expectancy, societal health, educational attainment and decent standard of living for the year 2021 and 2022, with a majority of the population living under indigence (UNDP, 2022). For women, the situation is worse because they are dependent on men who are not educated with no economic means or are unable to work due to CRSV injuries (ECA, 2015; Sleph et al., 2014; Whitman, 2006).

Few who migrate to urban and semi-urban areas get employment in the informal sector, or engage in small-scale trade with the support of NGOs (Sleph, Barker & Levtov, 2014). However, such opportunities are short lived and fail to translate into long term economic gain because NGO work is usually subject to donor-fatigue (Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2012). For men, conflict-led poverty is a threat to their 'manliness' as they lose respect of their wives and the community. Since economic interventions are rarely men-focused, men try to reassert masculine dominance through committing crime, alcohol abuse and sexual aggression which compromise gender relations further (Sleph et al., 2014).

Women Political Participation

The country's Constitution pledge commitment towards elimination of discrimination against women and increased political engagement (Ministry of Gender, Family and Children, 2018). The Inter-Congolese Dialogue in 2001 also affirmed this. Though only 10% of delegates were women, they were able to push 30% quota for women (Whitman, 2006). Advocacy programs of women community-based organizations also had substantial contribution (Bihamba, 2018). Representation of women in parliament and cabinet therefore reached 11% and 24% respectively.

Fig 7.4: Women in cabinet vs parliament in select African countries

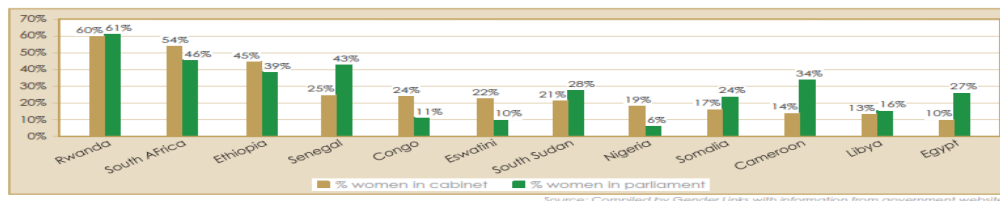


Figure 1: Women Political Representation in Cabinet and Parliament: DRC

Source. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance [IDEA], 2021, p.158)

Despite combined efforts, the 30% quota could not be met and legislated (IDEA, 2021). Contributory factors for this include, higher illiteracy and poverty rate of women (Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2012), strong finance for women political candidates (Bihamba, 2018) as well as political violence against women (ACLED, 2021). The media's gender-biased reporting has also impede women's political advancement (Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2012). Women are also labeled as 'prostitutes' stepping the political ladder due to their sex which undermine their acceptability. Above all, violent conflict is still ongoing and many women are still suffering, which undermines their aspiration in politics (Bihamba, 2018). This is the reason Nazneen (2016, p.216) argues that 'a seat at the table is not enough' for women politicians, and calls for substantial representation by addressing cultural and structural injustices.

Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Program

Like most women in battle field, female ex-combatants in DRC usually undertake non-militarized roles within armed group. Thus, it was believed they have done nothing that qualify them within DDR initiative. However, with the support of World Bank and MONUSCO awareness programs and redefinition of eligibility criteria through WAAFG, the number of women ex-fighter who join the re-integration phase appreciated from 18 to 2610 after 2006 (UN, 2010). Significant number of female ex-combatants however remain in hiding and live in poverty (Stern & Nystrand, 2006; UN, 2010) due to high level of ostracism attached to women in rebel groups.

In general, it is hard to argue, the DDR program had improved the status of women and men as well as their relations, given funding inadequacy and the ongoing conflict (ECA, 2015). Since the recent NAP pushes the Ministerial office to undertake gender sensitive DDR activities (Ministry of Gender, Family and Children, 2018), a better result might be exhibited in the future.

The Case of South Sudan

The Nature of Socio-political Conflict

Under British rule, the northern part and southern part of Sudan were treated as separate states in language, religion and socio-economic provisions. While the former adopt Arabic language, Islamic religion and remain wealthier, the latter use English language, follow Christianity and disadvantaged economically (Ottaway & El-Sadany, 2012). Such gap between the north and south led to civil war as soon as the country gain independence in 1956. After years of instability, Comprehensive Peace Agreement [CPA] was signed between Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) of South Sudan and Sudan in 2005 which led to South Sudan's independence in 2011 (Nyadera, 2018). However, deadly conflict broke out shortly due to military-political ethnic patronage among SPLM/A figures, deep rooted poverty, corruption and fuel smuggling (Nyadera, 2018).

The antagonism account to villages' destruction, massive displacement and humanitarian crisis (Logo et al., 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2015) and gross violation of human rights including gang rape and eating human flesh (Amnesty International [AI], 216). Hence, the state ranked on the lowest end of the bar in Human Development Index (UNDP, 2022). Moreover, AI (2016, p. 17) labelled South Sudanese population as "traumatized nation" considering the mental disorder they faced due to civil war. While revitalized peace agreement was signed on how to share political power in 2018, small scale insurgency still continued (Logo et al., 2022).

Violations of Human Rights

Regarding CRSV, gang rape and sexual torture against women is used as a tool of ethnic cleansing and land grabbing by security forces and ethnic militias in South Sudan (AI, 2016; Logo et al., 2022; UNSC, 2015). Like in DRC, thousands of women and girls have been brutally raped, died, impregnated, infected with HIV, physically crippled, traumatized and stigmatized due to civil war (AI, 2016; Nyadera, 2018). It is argued that, inferior position of women, militarized masculinity, and crimes of sexual violence are managed through customary laws and high rate of impunity give perpetrators a license to continue the attack (Logo et al., 2022). The belief that women's main role in combat is to fulfill men's sexual desires also contributed to widespread CRSV (Plassnig, 2020). This is why, Vance (1993) argues, traditional hegemonic masculinity is sexually oppressive of women.

With respect to men and boys, CRSV is not widely reported like the case in DRC. Remarks from WRC report of 2019 showed that, during the civil war, the rebels usually gave the men an ultimatum to be killed or raped and men chose the latter. This suggests that the reason for the underreporting might be because they had the option of trading the sexual act for their life. On the other hand, even if they need help, the support is not men focused (AI, 2016). Testimony of CRSV survivor men revealed that the whole experience made them aggressive, which is a recipe for violence towards women as illustrated in the works of El Bushra & Sahl (2005) and Slegh et al. (2014).

Like DRC, South Sudan adopted a national action plan to implement resolutions 1325 and 1820 (Republic of South Sudan, 2015). As a result, sexual assault is classified as a crime, and specialized courts have been set up. Nonetheless, it is possible to assert that rules on paper cannot ensure prevention, protection, and prosecution given higher rate of sexual violence (Logo et al., 2022) even after the signing of the revitalized peace deal.

Economic Pressure

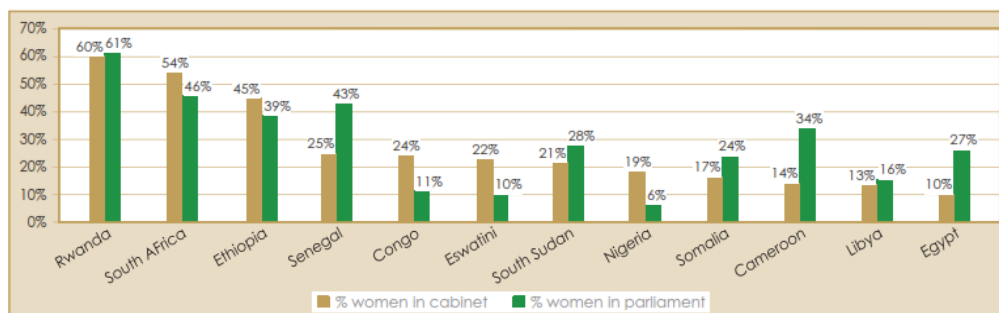
South Sudan is a state with higher illiteracy rate and deteriorated economy for long (IDEA, 2021; UNDP, 2022). Customarily, girl children are prepared for marriage and not for school because dowry from the bridegroom's family is a source of income for the daughters' families (Logo et al., 2022; Plassnig, 2020). This contributed to lower literacy rate of women as well as their economic dependency on men. So, when civil war started in 2013, women economic situation was severely impacted as they lost their husbands, or because their wealth was gone due to the conflict. The burden multiplied for the CRSV victims and female-headed households as exhibited in DRC.

The fate of most women was therefore to live in deep poverty, or to be dependent on aid (AI, 2016). Few, got employment in the informal sector or engaged in small-scale trading, though such initiatives were generally lacking in South Sudan (Logo et al., 2022). As they lost their homes and wealth, men were equally susceptible to economic pressure. Given that there was still an active armed rebellion in South Sudan (Nyadera, 2018), inaction could spell disaster in the future. In addition, young men's inability to marry owing to poverty endangered their feeling of manhood and the maintenance of the family unit (Logo et al., 2022).

Women Political Participation

Even though women were not beneficiaries in terms of education and employment for the most part, few tried to make it to the political stage through legal support. For instance, the 2011 Transitional Constitution (revised in 2013) acknowledged gender equality as important for sustainable peace and development, and guaranteed 25% representation in legislative and executive positions (IDEA, 2021). As illustrated under Figure 2, the 25% quota for women is fulfilled in the parliament though not met in the cabinet (IDEA, 2021). Even though the 2018 revitalized peace agreement aspire for 35% quota, it was not met until 2021 (Edimond, 2021).

Fig 7.4: Women in cabinet vs parliament in select African countries



Source: Compiled by Gender Links with information from government websites.

Figure 2: Women Political Representation in Cabinet and Parliament: South Sudan

Source. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance [IDEA], 2021, p.158)

Compared to DRC, women representation in both political organs is by far better: 24% and 11% at cabinet and parliament respectively (IDEA, 2021). The increased representation of women is also exhibited in peace negotiation; from 15% in the 2015 peace accord to 33% in the 2018 revitalized peace agreement (Edimond, 2021). But, given the hardship women bear due to CRSV, illiteracy and low socio-economic status, it is hard to say whether such percentages can be attained any time soon. Furthermore, lack of political will and giving deaf

ear to women activists by senior women politicians is identified as a stumbling block for women political aspirations (Logo et al., 2022). This, coupled with weak political will by men politicians to empower women, is likely reproduce hegemonic patriarchal dominance, and further push women to the periphery (IDEA, 2011).

Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Program

Initiatives towards DDR program started in South Sudan upon the 2005 signing of CPA, and was activated in 2009. However, lack of budget and coordination, delay in the commencement, public fear of SPLA and the resulting refusal to surrender firearms, influenced the lack of success of the initiative (Lamb & Stainer, 2018). Data shows that, out of estimated 90,000 ex-combatants, only 12,525 joined the demobilization and reintegration phase in 2011, which was way below the expectation (Lamb & Stainer, 2018). Given the refusal to surrender weapons and the start of a significant civil war soon after the DDR program started, it seems likely that the topic of whether former combatants had a significant role in the post-2013 civil conflict came up.

On the other hand, the number of women ex-combatants was a little bit higher than half of the whole ex-fighters mentioned previously due to WAAFG approach (Plassnig, 2020). However, few engaged in income generating activities; others got income but were still marginalized by their communities, while a majority fail to get employment and were stigmatized (Plassnig, 2020). Despite the fact that the DDR program's impact is not sufficiently supported by evidence, it is difficult to argue that it has significantly improved the lives of men and women ex-combatants, as intended by the NAP 2015-2020 (Republic of South Sudan, 2015). The reason why Lamb & Stainer (2018, p. 1) described the South Sudanese DDR outcome as "fragmented and sub-standard" may be due to this.

The Case of Ethiopia

The Nature of Socio-political Conflict

The socioeconomic condition in Ethiopia was perilous, with majority of the population living in poverty, even though the monarchy system was effective in maintaining territorial integrity. Since 1960s therefore, progressionist groups demanded redistribution of societal wealth while the regime fail to comply. The demand for class equality was expanded to include the issue of ethno-nationalism with a description of Amhara dominance, which opens the door for the growth of ethno-political groupings. The narration strengthened for over two decades and in 1991, TPLF led federal political coalition seize power and legalized regionalism along ethnic lines without consultation of popular mass (Bekalu, 2018).

The TPLF regime was typified by corruption, ethnic patronage, ethnic polarization, unchecked oppressor-oppressed narrations, fake federalism and native-settle narration (Bekalu, 2018; Yonas, 2018). All of these factors combined to cause a socioeconomic slump, animosity among some community group members and problems with power sharing within the ruling party coalition, which ultimately led to the coalition's disintegration (Semir, 2019; Bekalu, 2018). The country was already ethnically divided and at a critical stage of socioeconomic disparity when Abiy Ahmed assumed office in April 2018.

Even though, high level of euphoria swept the country following Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's assumption of office, ethnic-based attacks, salient tension between supporters and opponents of the ethnic based federal system, unbridled ethno-nationalist sentiment and sparring regional elites put the country under a political and security crisis (Semir, 2019).

Moreover, government's failure to halt hate speech and false information, uneven representation of ethnic groups into civil and military structure, and failure to assert rule of law (Yonas, 2018) widened social distancing. Because of the government's inability to effectively mediate the power struggle, the TPLF leaders were forced to leave the federal coalition, which led to Tigray war.

Even though the Ethiopian government and TPLF sign a peace accord on November 2022, it is difficult to predict that political tension will decrease given that the ethnic-domination narrative is still not negotiated. What is more, violent conflict targeting Amharas' continued especially in Oromia region involving security forces, ethnic militia and splinter factions (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2023). To date, poverty, higher cost of living, unemployment, poor provision of basic social services and insecurity characterize Ethiopia.

Violations of Human Rights

Even though there is frequent violent warfare throughout Ethiopia, reports of CRSV were vividly reported during Tigray war. The documentation of Ethiopian Human Rights Commission [EHRC] & the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR] (2021) revealed systematic and widespread of gang rape, sexual torture and intentional HIV transmission were committed by the Ethiopian National Defense Force, Eritrean troops, the Amhara Special Forces and ethnic militias. Particularly, forceful impregnation was meant to cleanse Tigray women blood line (Dr. Denis Mukwege Foundation, 2022).

As Tigray war extended to Afar and Amhara regions, similar sexual violations were committed by TPLF militias (AI, 2022). Even though there isn't much data on men and boys, however a Dr. Denis Mukwege Foundation report (2022) mentioned that some CRSV victims committed suicide. Such brutal measures towards oneself is common among men CRSV survivors (AI, 2016; WRC, 2019). Although the effects of CRSV on gender relations and the social fabric will only be determined in the future, it is reasonable to state that the harm to Tigray and Amhara community groups' ties would be severe.

Regarding the commitment of Ethiopian government to address CRSV, to date no movement towards this direction has been documented. The country endorsed the 2013 IGAD's regional action plan for implementation of UNSC resolutions 1325 and 1820 (Mulugeta, 2020; UN Women, 2015). While gender is central to all peace-building efforts and conflict early warning systems, Ethiopia lacks a specialized NAP to implement 1325 and 1820 resolutions (UN Women, 2015). If countries with a NAP, like the South Sudan and DRC, struggle to uphold the rule of law and the preservation of human rights (Logo et al., 2022; OSRSG-SVC, 2022), the question remains on how Ethiopia, that is susceptible to widespread violence and with no specialized framework, can keep control of the situation.

Economic Pressure

Ethiopia was ranked 175th out of 191 states for life expectancy, societal health, educational attainment, and decent level of living (UNDP, 2022). In light of this, Semir (2019) contends that economic stress contributes to violence since many feel they have nothing to lose. Yonas (2018) adds that elites exploit the public dissonance to advance ethnic mobilization. Hence, economic down turn and violent conflict reinforce each other in Ethiopia.

Even though women educational and economic participation increased over the years, still they lag behind by higher percentages (World Economic Forum, 2022). Since Tigray war had barely ended (at the time of writing), and violence still occurs in Oromia, it is too soon to

assess how the conflict has impacted gender relations. But, it is possible to predict that there will be a definite gender role change as families are becoming female headed. Cases of Tigray IDPs for instance shows, women are engaged in survival sex to obtain food (Dr. Denis Mukwege Foundation, 2022).

Women Political Participation

[With respect to politics, the 1993 women policy and the 1995 Constitution widely recognize the need of women empowerment for development. Ethiopia also adopted a voluntary party quota system of 30% since 2010 to ensure women representation in politics. As seen in Figure 3, women's political participation increased from 2.7% in 1995 to 41.9% in 2021, which is far more than what was seen in the DRC and South Sudan. This is due to government commitment to honor the 30% voluntary quota system, civil society organizations support to parties with more women and the 2021 Electoral Law focused on voter education and registration of women (IDEA, 2021).

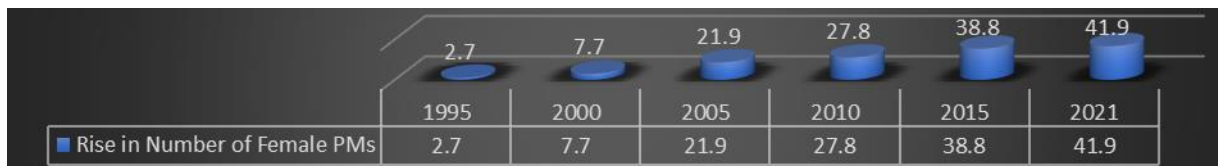


Figure 3: The post 1991 Parliamentary Representation of Women

Note. Extracted from Various Sources (Developed by authors)

However, Mulugeta (2020) contends that placing too much emphasis on the numerical representation of women in a nation with a shaky socio-political situation without plans to implement resolution 1325, and with women still suffering the effects of war, is only done to gain recognition from the international community. It is highlighted that, lower socio-economic position, gender stereotypes and violence against women politicians compromise substantial representation of women (IDEA, 2021). In light of this, the Ethiopian system must commit to include women who have an impact on policy, as Nazneen (2016) pointed out.

Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Program

The government of Ethiopia and the TPLF reached an agreement on November 2022 for a permanent cease of hostilities, but tensions are still high in Oromia region and the surrounding areas of Addis Ababa. So no DDR program had started yet at the time of writing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the afore gone discussion on cases from central, east and the Horn of Africa suggest that, socio-political conflicts compromise the health status and social, economic and political positioning of women and girls, in particular. Men and boys are also bear the brunt of suffering, though the traditional definition and expectation of masculinity makes their predicaments less expressive and explicit. What makes the nexus of conflict and gender complex in DRC, South Sudan and Ethiopia conjoined is the interlocking nature of gender and other forms of identity related social, economic and political injustices. As a result of these, CSRV, economic stress, political inclusion of women and DDR program execution, all are interrelated and intertwined. Gender complicates this dynamism because the basic causes

and aggravating variables of socio-political conflict are already interwoven and founded on structural and cultural injustices.

Recommendations

So, what is the better alternative to address such intertwined complexity? Galtung (1996) and Galtung & Fischer (2013)'s hierarchical concept of violence, which holds that direct, structural, and cultural violence are interconnected, can serve as a useful framework in this context. The structure outlines that equitable and just society can be built, not by mere avoidance of direct violence but, rather, by addressing deeper structural inequalities and even deeper belief systems that implicitly justify who should own resources. Since gender inequality is significantly affected by such cultural cues, dialogue on how to dismantle the entangled wave of oppressed-oppressor narration will help to improve women empowerment and positive gender relations. If cultural and structural justice is asserted, then people likely have no reason to engage in direct violence.

Adopting an integrated outlook of socio-political conflict therefore help to simultaneously address various cultural and structural causes of conflict that integrate with gender inequality. Otherwise, committing to direct violence and even socio-political disputes without first thoroughly investigating the cultural aspects of the conflict is akin to waiting for a volcano to erupt.

On the other hand, communities that have gone through violent conflict need immediate help in terms dealing with CRSV, generating income to feed themselves and their families and rehabilitate their position in the community. Accordingly, peace building initiatives by governments of DRC, South Sudan and Ethiopia along with partners shall focus on psycho-social support for CRSV survivors of women, men, girls and boys; accountable justice system for CRSV cases and inclusive income-generating activities and DDR programs for women and men victims of war. As a long-term plan, trainings and education about positive masculinity and a deliberate action to increase nominal and substantial participation of women in decision making ladders of institutions including political wing is critical for the three countries. With respect to NAP to implement women peace and security agenda of UN, the international community shall pressure Ethiopian government to draft an inclusive plan as soon as possible.

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