

# **BREAKING THE INERTIA: WOMEN'S ROLE IN MEDIATION AND PEACE PROCESSES IN WEST AFRICA**

**By**

Lydia Mawuenya Amedzrator<sup>1</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> Mawuenya Amedzrator is a Researcher at the Faculty of Academic Affairs and Research, Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre. Her research interests are in women's representation at the peace table and emerging security issues.

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*“It [is] useful to reflect on the accumulated experience of women’s cultures over the centuries in the work of feeding, rearing and healing humans, building their social and physical environments, and then rebuilding them after destruction ... This process of feminist reflection on the social order and its workings is more urgent than ever... That development should be celebrated by exploring how women think about the future and the action models they generate to bring these futures into being” (Boulding, 1994)*

## **Abstract**

Women play various traditional roles (caring for the wounded, performing domestic chores) and non-traditional roles (combatants, activists, perpetrators and advocates) during conflict situations.

Mediation and peace processes are perceived as a male-dominated enterprise. This is because men are often credited with competencies and tendencies that ‘qualify’ them for such roles while women are virtually perceived as the only vulnerable group in war situations. The responsibilities of participation in peace processes may be tough for both men and women but cannot be used as a pretext for excluding capable women. So what is this rigidity towards the ‘inclusion’ of women in mediation and peace processes? This essay argues that there are particular challenges such as discriminatory attitudes to women’s participation in peace processes and violence against women which inhibit women’s efforts to attain equitable status at the peace table.

## **Introduction**

As survivors, perpetrators, victims, combatants, activists and advocates, women play active and multiple roles in peace processes. However, their roles in conflicts are not highlighted and their long involvement in mediation and peace processes is barely discussed in the literature. Their mediatory roles at the informal levels have served as blueprints for negotiations. This is because the competence of women in dealing with rebel groups and other conflict parties has set the pace for official negotiations that were organized by ECOWAS and other regional bodies (Brownell, 2011). Increasingly, women's emerging roles at national and international levels are widening the scope of their participation in mediation teams. Although statistics on their impact are sparse, quite a number of women – Leymah Gbowee<sup>2</sup>, Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf<sup>3</sup>, Wangari Mathai<sup>4</sup>, Graça Machel<sup>5</sup>, Betty Bigombe<sup>6</sup> and Asha Hagi Elmi<sup>7</sup> – have been recognized globally for their effectiveness as advocates or as negotiators. In the West African sub-region in particular, women such as Mary Brownell<sup>8</sup> navigate their way to talk to rebels and warring factions during conflicts, attempting to convince the parties involved to end hostilities and agree to dialogue. However, they remain underrepresented at formal decision-making and implementation levels. A UNIFEM study reveals that women are the least represented at formal peace processes as signatories to peace agreements, delegates, witnesses, mediators or members of mediation teams, and members of technical committees (UNIFEM, 2010). Principally, women feature as representatives of civil society with observer status, where they are rarely consulted on decisions and their perspectives and needs are barely integrated into official negotiations. So, what exactly causes this reluctance to include women at the negotiation table? How can women enhance their visibility on the

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<sup>2</sup> Executive Director of Women, Peace and Security Network (WIPSEN-AFRICA), and a Noble Peace Laureate

<sup>3</sup> Current President of Liberia

<sup>4</sup> A 2004 Noble Peace Laureate. She was elected into Kenya's parliament in December 2002, and from 2003 to 2007 was the Assistant Minister for Environment, Natural Resources and Wildlife. She is recognized for her role as a mediator; her fight for democracy; human rights and environmental conservation.

<sup>5</sup> Graça Machel is recognized for her role as one of the three mediators in the Kenya crisis in 2008.

<sup>6</sup> She is recognized for her efforts as a chief mediator between the Lord's Resistance Army and the government of Uganda in an attempt to end 20 years of conflict in Uganda.

<sup>7</sup> Leader of the 'sixth clan', clan of women; who participated in the Arta Peace talks on Somalia. She is believed to be the first woman to sign a peace accord on Somalia.

<sup>8</sup> Former school administrator and founding member of Liberia Women's Initiative (LWI).

international scene? How can women's views be rigorously integrated at formal peace processes?

This paper argues that women have proved their capability by risking their lives during conflicts to do the groundwork for negotiations to proceed; hence, the need to highlight their mediatory roles at the local level, and also outline their efforts from the grassroots through to the formal negotiation of peace agreements.

The paper will first of all present a brief historical perspective on women's involvement in mediation and peace processes. It will then focus on women's roles during the conflict situations in Sierra Leone and Liberia. In these two countries, women's involvement provides a striking model of how women were able to work against the odds in these very destructive wars despite the patriarchal nature of these societies that positioned women as second-class citizens and made them virtually voiceless (Aning 1998). Nevertheless, we also find in these two countries the examples of Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf<sup>9</sup> and Hon. Elizabeth Lavalie<sup>10</sup>, who demonstrate the impact that competent and empowered women can make when they are in the hierarchy of decision-making. The next section of the paper examines the challenges that women face in participating fully in mediation and peace processes. Finally, the paper will offer some suggestions on how we can increase women's representation in peace processes and how to integrate their views and efforts seamlessly at the negotiation table.

### **Women in Mediation and Peace Processes: A Brief Historical Perspective (1915 to date)**

As far back as World War 1, women's activities in mediation and peace processes were recorded in the annals of history. During the First World War, about 1,000 women from 12 warring and neutral countries convened the first International Congress of Women (ICW) (Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002). This group of women demanded, among other things, the recognition that equality between women and men was intrinsically connected to the sustainability of peace. This is crucial because the legality and sustainability of negotiation deals have shown a worrying trend.

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<sup>9</sup> First elected female president in Africa.

<sup>10</sup> She is the Deputy Speaker of Parliament in Sierra Leone, and a leading member of the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET).

More than 50 percent of peace agreements fail within five years of signature (InternationalAlert, 2006). The ICW drafted a plan of action for the creation of a non-partisan international organization which would mediate conflicts between countries (Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002). In pursuit of this agenda, the ICW sent 30 delegates on the first women's peace mission to share their deliberations with European Heads of State. As part of the mission, the ICW president, Jane Adams called on US President Woodrow Wilson and suggested to him some of the 'fourteen points' which he presented at the Versailles talks which terminated World War I (Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002).

Furthermore, women's groups did not cease their involvement in conflict resolution when the First World War ended. Women were 'given space' within the United Nations, when it was established after the Second World War ended in 1945, to continue their fight for peace. In 1945, the 'Commission on the Status of Women' was established to spearhead elimination of all forms of discrimination – race, color, sex, language, birth or 'other status' and the promotion of the equality and dignity of human beings (United Nations, 1948). Subsequently, in 1975, for instance, the first World Conference on Women was organized and afterwards the period 1976 to 1985 was declared the UN Decade for Women. Also, in 1979, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted. In 1985, the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievement of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace was convened and this conference is considered the 'birth of global feminism'. In 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing. This conference resulted in the formulation of a 'Beijing Platform for Action' which was reviewed by the UN Division for Women. The review asserted that:

*"The fundamental transformation that took place in Beijing was the recognition of the need to shift the focus from women to the concept of gender, recognizing that the entire structure of society, and all relations between men and women within it, had to be re-evaluated. Only by such a fundamental restructuring of society and its institutions could women be fully empowered to take their rightful place*

*as equal partners with men in all aspects of life. This change represented a strong reaffirmation that women's rights were human rights and that gender equality was an issue of universal concern, benefiting all."* (UN Division for the Advancement of Women 2000)

It is important to note that the involvement of women in peace efforts was not limited to the international sphere. Women were also involved in the West African sub-region. They mobilized families, communities and other women for the peaceful resolution of conflicts. For instance, the Women in Peace Network (WIPNET) initiated the implementation of the Accra 2003 Comprehensive peace agreement by organizing seminars and workshops to explain the clauses in the agreement. This contributed to the success of the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) process of the country (Bekoe and Parajon 2007). The impact of the group's activities was evident in the latter stages of the conflict where they organized demonstrations, mass rallies and sex strikes in order to call attention to the destructive nature of the war (Massaquoi, 2007).

The Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) was also instrumental in the fight for peace in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. The group is a collection of high-level women from political networks as well as grassroots women who organized to end the fighting that had engulfed their countries<sup>11</sup>. MARWOPNET was formed in 2000 in Abuja under the auspices of ECOWAS (Brownell, 2011). It was established at a time when the conflicts in the respective countries intensified and there was urgent need to gain access to peace actors who could facilitate an end to the atrocities.

With support from some influential people such as Bineta Diop of Femme Africa Solidarité, the MARWOPNET women, among other women's groups, attended the Accra Peace Talks on Liberia in June 2003 as members of the observer group (Brownell, 2011). They were not invited officially to the negotiation table so they could not contribute directly to discussions (Brownell, 2011). However, their position did not deter them from using available means to engage the

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<sup>11</sup> Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea

warring parties. At one point during the Accra talks, the women realized that the disagreements between the warring factions pointed to the fact that the meeting was going to be stalled (Brownell, 2011). To ensure that interactions continued between the government group and the rebel group, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), the women lobbied the ‘moral guarantors’<sup>12</sup> to mount pressure on both sides to sit at the negotiation table until an agreement was reached (Brownell, 2011).

Women have also played an important role as peace actors at the grassroots. A case in point is that of the women’s groups which organized for peace in the Nkonya / Alavanyo conflict in Ghana. The conflict stemmed from a disagreement over a stretch of land at the boundary between the two communities. Consequently, there was a protracted violent conflict which brewed animosity between the two communities. There were mediation efforts but each side resisted any efforts to dialogue in order to end hostilities. It took a queen-mother in the community who seized the opportunity during one of the mediation meetings to create space for negotiations to begin (Abdallah and Amedzrator, 2011). At a point when it was apparent from the deadlock at the negotiations that no meaningful agreements would be reached, the queen-mother intervened and said:

*“We have left Egypt for a long time, we are seeing Canaan (peace and stability), nobody can prevent us from reaching Canaan, we will reach Canaan, so the men must be careful because those who are here talking... they never went to war, those who go to war are the ones suffering so they (men from both communities at the negotiation table) should stop the nonsense (disagreement) and accept peace”* (Abdallah and Amedzrator, 2011)

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<sup>12</sup> These were the people who supported the peace process with funds and other resources and were respected by the conflict parties. They include Mr. Peter Penfold, the British High Commissioner and Mr. Francis Okello who were present at the meeting.

This unprecedented stand of the queen-mother ‘shocked’ the men in the meeting ‘into action’ and this contributed to reconciliation between the communities. There was a peace smoking ceremony afterwards (Abdallah and Amedzrator, 2011).

Although the approach during the different periods of history and in the different contexts has been diverse, their momentum has always been the same. Women mobilize for peace across dividing lines, not casting any section of the society as the ‘enemy’ or the ‘dehumanized other’. This fundamental vision for peace was translated from the concept that was introduced by the ICW during World War I and, recognized later in the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, which was passed in 2000. UNSCR 1325 asserted, among other things, the leading roles women play in the maintenance of international peace and security and in the resolution of conflicts. It affirmed:

*“the important role of women in peace-building and stress[ed] the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision making with regards to conflict prevention and resolution” (United Nations 2000)*

This affirmation is in line with the many international, regional and national normative frameworks and commitments such as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); the Beijing Platform for Action; and the Women, Peace and Security component of the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework. These identify the roles women play as peace actors at the heart of deadly conflicts – where they defy the threats to their lives, mobilize their scarce resources and challenge their under-representation at decision making and implementation levels in order to contribute to peace (Abdela, n.d.).

## **The Roles of Women in Mediation and Peace Processes: Cases Studies from Liberia and Sierra Leone**

### A case study of Liberia

Liberia was plunged into a 14-year civil war between 1989 and 2003. The violence claimed the lives of over 150,000 people (United Nations Mission in Liberia, n.d.). Many more were internally displaced or became refugees. There were interventions by peace actors to end atrocities that were committed and women played active roles in that respect. Peace marches, demonstrations, vigils, sit-ins in front of parliament, radio discussions, and meetings with rebel groups were among the activities undertaken by women's groups (Massaquoi, 2007). In appraising women's role in the Liberian conflict, Amos Sawyer<sup>13</sup> commented that:

*“Women’s role extended throughout the process. From day one actually, as I recall, women’s concern about the war and the conditions leading to the war were very well known. They may not have been organized today, but we know prior to the war, either in collaboration with, or...as part of the Liberia Council of Churches [that] women were involved” (African Women and Peace Support Group 2004)*

One of such women's groups which was involved in the peace process during the Liberian civil war was MARWOPNET. It acted as a kind of pressure group which mobilized women and other groups in their communities to appeal to warring parties to stop fighting and adopt negotiated settlements of disputes (Brownell, 2011). It facilitated talks across divides and engaged in shuttle diplomacy between warring factions. This was applied when conflict engulfed Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. Delegations were sent by women to speak to rebels and warring parties in order to convince them to accept dialogue (Brownell, 2011). It is believed that these efforts helped bring about the Accra peace talks on Liberia in 2003. The efforts of MARWOPNET were

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<sup>13</sup> He was the president of the Interim Government of National Unity in Liberia. He is currently the Chairman of the Governance Commission of Liberia.

recognized. It was the only women's group to receive an official invitation to attend the Accra talks, though with observer status only (Brownell, 2011). As mentioned earlier, the Accra Peace Talks on Liberia did not yield meaningful results. Shortly after the signing ceremony in June 2003, news broke of renewed fighting in Liberia. This development highlights the question of whether peace agreements address the underlying issues which cause conflicts. A review of the issues which are discussed during negotiations points to the fact that emphasis is usually placed on the political aspects – especially power-sharing between warring factions – while other root causes of the conflict such as economic issues are glossed over.

The renewed fighting in Liberia called for new interventions to deal with the impasse. The warring parties however refused to sign a new peace accord. Here again, the women's groups whose aim was to represent the victims who were being disproportionately targeted and victimized in Liberia, mobilized to hold the men hostage after the meeting by blocking all access routes and preventing them from exiting until they signed the peace agreement (Ekiyor and Gbowee, n.d.). This effort of the women was vehemently opposed by the warring factions who retaliated by taking the leaders of the women's group hostage. The warring parties locked the women up in a room when they realized that the women's intention was to take them hostage. As a last resort, the women leaders who were being detained decided to engage in 'disrobing'<sup>14</sup>. To prevent any evil consequences from the act of disrobing, the men finally agreed to return to the negotiation table, and a cease-fire agreement was signed by the warring factions on 17 June 2003. To reward them for their hard work during the negotiations, the women were invited by the chief mediator to the signing ceremony as witnesses to the peace agreement (Brownell, 2011).

Subsequent to the June 2003 Agreement on Ceasefire and Cessation of Hostilities, the August 2003 Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement on Liberia was brokered and elections were scheduled for 2005. Women took up the task of sensitizing their communities on the relevance of democratic elections (Brownell, 2011). Women's groups in Liberia organized workshops and sent women around the country to educate people. Women also voted in large numbers and this is believed to have contributed to Ellen Johnson Sirleaf becoming the first elected female African

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<sup>14</sup> Disrobing is when women decide to show their nakedness in public in order to attract bad consequences. It is also a source of shame for the people at whom it is directed. This act is considered a curse in most African settings.

president (Bekoe and Parajon, 2007). Women also featured in the post-conflict reconstruction phase of the country. They went to the local communities in Liberia to promote reconciliation and appealed to victims of atrocities to forgive perpetrators (Brownell, 2011).

### **The role of women in Sierra Leone**

Mutilations, amputation of limbs, cutting of tongues, rape, and abduction are some experiences that the people of Sierra Leone suffered during the decade long civil war (Keen, 2005). In organizing to fight for peace, Sierra Leonean women joined forces with others from the Mano River area. Their initial tactic was to engage the rebels whose identity was unknown in the early days of the conflict (Brownell, 2011). A mass rally was organized in areas where the war was concentrated to call on the rebels to lay down their arms and to allow negotiations to begin. Although options for engaging the rebels were limited, the women used any available means to engage with the rebels. For example, a means was devised to write letters to the rebels (Lavalie, 2011). The women would leave the letters in areas where they believed that the rebels would find them. Fortunately, the rebels replied the messages. Through the letter-writing process, the women realized that there was a possibility that the rebels would agree to dialogue with the government. Eventually, after persistent efforts by the women, they got the conflict parties to agree to a ceasefire and then the negotiations started (Lavalie 2011).

Civil society groups were also involved in negotiations on the Sierra Leonean conflict. The leadership roles women played in such civil society groups<sup>15</sup> facilitated women's participation at such peace conferences (Mahdi, 2011). Noticeable among the women leaders are Hon. Elizabeth Lavalie, Zainab Hawa Bangura<sup>16</sup>, Amy Smythe<sup>17</sup> and Kadie Sesay<sup>18</sup>. The women leaders mobilized their communities, especially women, to fight for an end to the war. At a point, they

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<sup>15</sup> The civil society groups involved in the fight for a ceasefire and peace include the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone and the Association of Women's Organizations of Sierra Leone.

<sup>16</sup> She is the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict. She is also the Minister of Health and Sanitation in Sierra Leone, and the Chairperson and Co-founder of the Movement for Progress Party of Sierra Leone.

<sup>17</sup> She was the former president of YWCA, Sierra Leone

<sup>18</sup> She was the former Chairperson of the Commission for Democracy and Human Rights

met President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah and implored him to arrange for them to speak to Foday Sankoh<sup>19</sup> who had refused to dialogue with the government (Brownell, 2011). The civil society groups also worked closely with the international community and other groups<sup>20</sup> which offered technical advice (Brownell, 2011).

MARWOPNET in particular was concerned about the hardship and the violations caused by the war in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea (George-Williams, 2006). Of specific concern was the situation in displaced and refugee camps where women, especially, were sexually assaulted. In an attempt to find solutions to the conflict in Sierra Leone, MARWOPNET also learnt that a regional conflict had developed which involved Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea and in that conflict, President Lansana Conteh<sup>21</sup> and President Charles Taylor<sup>22</sup> were not willing to participate in negotiations (Brownell, 2011). The women organized protest marches to the mansion of President Taylor in Monrovia, Liberia, on 6 May 2000 (Brownell, 2011). They carried placards, some of which read “We want peace, no more war”. MARWOPNET also arranged with the wife of Lansana Conteh who scheduled a meeting, for the women, with Mr. Conteh (Brownell, 2011). Several attempts were made by the women to persuade the two presidents in question. For example, during their meeting with Mr. Lansana Conteh, one of the women, Mary Brownell, told him that if he refused to negotiate with Charles Taylor, she would lock both of them up in a room and release them only when they agree to settle the dispute. Mr. Conteh was moved by what she said and told her that “Mother, wherever you want me to meet Charles Taylor, I will”.

Mr. Taylor and Mr. Conteh agreed to dialogue and the two presidents finally met in Morocco in 2002 at the negotiation table under the auspices of the King of Morocco (Brownell, 2011).

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<sup>19</sup> He was the leader of the Revolutionary United Front, Sierra Leone

<sup>20</sup> They women held meetings with Mr. Peter Penfold; the British High Commissioner, Ambassador Francis Okello; Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General in Sierra Leone and the Women’s Forum.

<sup>21</sup> Then President of Guinea

<sup>22</sup> Then President of Liberia

## **Multiple Roles of Women**

As mentioned above, there are stereotypical assumptions that seek to portray women as generally ‘vulnerable’ or ‘peaceful’ (Coulter, Persson and Utas, 2008). These assumptions do not take into consideration the changing and diverse roles women play in conflict situations. Apart from their roles as peace ‘contractors’ and survivors, women also act as combatants and perpetrators among other roles (Coulter, Persson and Utas, 2008).

Additionally, gendered stereotypes depict them as inherently peaceful (Aning, 1998). This is because the ‘natural’ role of women as ‘life savers’ is considered ‘appropriate’ while their role as fighters are referred to as ‘unnatural’ or ‘deviant’ (Coulter, Persson and Utas 2008). According to Mazurana (2004, cited by Coulter et al. 2008), women comprise about 30 percent of all fighters in armed groups in Africa. The female fighters are either abducted or voluntarily inducted into armed factions. Although some of those who are abducted manage to escape, some stay in order to participate in the fighting and enjoy the items looted by the combatants. As combatants, most women have access to food, clothing and a gun. Some of these female combatants are perceived to be brutal and, according to Coulter, Persson and Utas (2008), female combatants were described by ‘civilians’ as ‘cold-blooded’, ‘cruel’ and ‘more wicked’. This is corroborated by one ex-female fighter, who says that:

“Women were really fighting. If you saw us entering Waterloo on the 5th of January (1999), to enter the city (Freetown), you wouldn’t have been able to look at our faces. We were bloody...We were like slaves, very dirty. So to ask about women fighting! Some were even braver than some men.”  
(Coulter, 2008)

Particularly in Liberia, some of these ‘aggressive’ and ‘cruel’ female combatants attained prestigious positions as commanders of rebel groups (Coulter, Persson and Utas, 2008). For example, Martina Johnson of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), Ruth ‘Attila’ Milton, Liberia Peace Council (LPC) and ‘Black Diamonds’ of the Liberians United for

Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) were commanders. Some females led small groups of female combatants while others led units of both men and women (Coulter, Persson and Utas, 2008).

Moreover, as part of survival strategies, some women undertake various forms of activities. These activities include trading and prostitution. For instance, during the civil conflict in Liberia, Aning (1998) makes mention of well-educated women who had to resort to selling grated cassava in the New Kru market in Monrovia in order to survive.

### **Breaking the Inertia: What are the Challenges to Women's Participation in Official Peace Processes?**

Women's representation in official peace processes appears critical to the sustainability of peace agreements. This is because there are capable women who possess a wealth of knowledge and perspectives acquired through their efforts in peace processes at the grassroots. It is also important that the needs of women and their perspectives are integrated into peace agreements. While international legal instruments, civil society organizations and national governments have made some commitments to increase women's participation, there is a lot more that needs to be done to confront the challenges that hinder women's effective participation at the negotiating table.

First, in most parts of the West African sub-region, women have been considered as subordinate to men, who make final decisions in the family (Aning, 1998). Women may be virtually voiceless and subservient due to the intimidation that they suffer. This attitude to women is sometimes reflected in peace negotiations. When women show interest in participating in local peace processes, they are seen by men as violating culture and tradition (which have either placed women at the margins of public decision making or has excluded them from decision-making positions. These social attitudes could dissipate women's interest in seeking representation at official peace negotiations.

Secondly, in conflict situations, there are violations of many forms. Men and women suffer sexual, physical and psychological violence. However, women are the most affected. Statistics

show that women form the majority of people who are raped and used as domestic slaves in conflicts (O'Neill and Ward, 2005). Some women are snatched by rebels and used as 'wives'. Most of these women who are violated become traumatized for life, and are unlikely to participate in any efforts to restore peace to the community. Furthermore, women who have played various roles during conflict situations are not normally consulted during peace negotiations (Chinkin, 2003).

Thirdly, most women lack access to financial resources (USIP, 2011). More women in the developing world work in the informal sector and their wages and earnings are significantly lower than earnings of men. It is estimated that women's earnings are 20 percent lower than men (UNICEF, 2006). In general, women control fewer assets and often have little say in the allocation of household incomes. In informal household settings in Ghana, for instance, incomes from farm products are virtually controlled by men. Where women engage in their own businesses or work in the formal sector, in some cases, their earnings are controlled by men. This leads to economic dependence of these women. Added to the limited access to resources is the marginalization of women. In some cultures, women lack ownership rights to properties. Also, women do not have full rights to the ownership of family properties in most patriarchal societies. One consequence is that the standard of living of some women is reduced when they lose their husbands. This particular situation of some women does not encourage them to participate in political positions and in mediation processes. Women need to be financially independent in order to be able to make personal decisions about the levels at which they will engage in peace processes. Their dependence on men limits their options during peace negotiations.

Furthermore, most women lack formal education. Research indicates that more boys attain higher levels of education than girls (UNICEF, 2006). Some of these girls get pregnant along the way and they are not encouraged to continue their education after child birth. Where there is scarcity of resources, more boys are supported to go through school while the girls are made to stay out of school and support their parents to improve the economic situation of the family (UNICEF, 2006). These factors coupled with social discrimination tend to reduce their chances of acquiring the skills which will help them gain public decision-making positions and participate in political processes.

Grassroots women who mobilize at the local level also lack specific technical knowledge and skills which will help them to translate their local expertise into official peace negotiations and processes. Women need to demonstrate that they are knowledgeable about the peace process and mechanisms and are able to articulate the issues. In most cases, women do not have the requisite technical skills and it becomes difficult for them to operate on the international scene as mediators.

There are stereotypical assumptions about women's 'appropriate' roles in society, particularly, decision making and their areas of expertise. Women are perceived as 'passive' victims, who cannot contain the stress that is experienced during negotiation processes. There are usually doubts about whether they can endure the 'rules of engagement' for achieving peace during conflict situations. This is because mediation is seen as a male-dominated area due to the sometimes dangerous occurrences during the peace process that make safety and security an issue. In mediating and participating in peace processes, people become targets of perpetrators of conflicts. Some participants are threatened during negotiations. People's homes are bombed, and their relatives could be jailed or killed or simply uncertain of whether or not they will live to see the next day (Brownell, 2011). These risks can deter women from participating at levels they would have preferred to.

The 'crab' mentality of women is another challenge (Brownell, 2011). It is common knowledge that some women have the tendency to undermine fellow women. They castigate instead of encourage other women to take up leadership positions. Some women barely support one another when positions are being contested by both women and men; some women would rather put their weight behind the men (Brownell, 2011). This tends to give men the chance to marginalize women. Moreover, when political activities are organized, few women actively participate. Sometimes when some of these women stand for elective positions, they usually do not get enough votes to win even though women form the majority of most populations (Brownell, 2011).

Lastly, during peace processes, the neutrality of women as peace brokers comes into question. Warring parties tend not to take women's advocacy programmes seriously because they are labeled as 'affiliates' to the 'enemy'. Also, the different factions tend to see women more as 'wives' than as full parties to the negotiations (Lavalie, 2011). In some of these cases, women

have to expend a lot of energy to prove that they are pursuing a common goal, one which cuts across the ‘fault lines’ – ethnic, religious, cultural and political – so that the warring parties agree to ceasefire and peaceful resolution of the conflict through dialogue.

### **Breaking the resistance to inclusion: the way forward**

It is an indisputable reality that women are at the margins of the peace table. Their full representation and inclusion has been inhibited by discrimination, violence, lack of education and technical abilities among other factors. Although a lot of work has been done to improve women’s position during official peace processes there is reluctance to integrate women’s perspectives in negotiations and increase their participation at international levels of mediation and peace processes. To deal with this inertia, what will be the way forward?

Women should form solidarity groups that sustain individual interest in participation. Women should demonstrate neutrality during peace processes; they should acquire training and formal education. Women should also be more assertive, and finally, there should be greater commitment by international agencies and national governments, and greater efforts by civil society organizations to work towards the inclusion of women in peace processes.

To start with, women groups should form solidarity groups, whose work cuts across political and ethnic lines in order to link women to a common cause – peace. This will stimulate women’s interest in improving their representation at formal peace processes. Bankrolling has been practiced in countries like Sierra Leone where nomination fees were borne by women’s groups to support the participation of women in political processes (Abdullah, 2011). This can be replicated in all other West African countries where women and men who understand their cause can establish funds to support the inclusion of competent women in the governance structures of their countries. Such solidarity groups can create the platform for competent women to participate more actively in the political space of their countries. Such groups can also invest in the grooming of women who possess the qualities to make an impact on decision making when they are elected into public and political positions.

Women groups should position themselves strategically in order to locate resources that can empower them to be represented at more official levels. They should put mechanisms in place to raise funds at domestic levels before they go out to seek external funds. When this happens they will be seen as independent and they will earn the respect of external sponsors and the international community which is then likely to commit more funds to support their programmes (Brownell, 2011).

Pain, loss and hardship are experienced by both men and women in conflict situations. During conflict situations, people lose their livelihoods, their children and relatives. They become traumatized by the suffering they experience. There are people who are displaced and others who spend their lives in refugee camps. In the midst of the suffering, women have to perform their traditional roles of caring for the family, sometimes at the expense of seeking medical attention for themselves. Also, while fleeing from conflict, some women leave behind vital identity documents which are sometimes required for access to humanitarian aid. In some cases, these women have to depend on men for sustenance. For women, these situations aggravate their frustrations because their mobility is restricted. However, these emotions and frustrations can be channeled into making demands to participate officially in peace processes. This will demand extensive orientation and training to enable these women to contribute more effectively when they are included at decision-making and implementation levels.

Additionally, women should undergo training on how to conduct advocacy on issues that concern both women and men. Men also need to be trained to understand the different needs of both men and women and women's capacity to contribute to mediation and peace processes. Further, women tend to have the knack for mediation, but they need to be trained to appreciate the specifics of mediation and peace processes. This training has to be complemented by systematically supporting the education of the girl-child to the highest level. At the tertiary level, specific technical training in areas such as advocacy, effective communication, leadership and negotiation should be made compulsory for women to enable them to become familiar with international conflict resolution techniques. Younger women need be mentored to enable them to acquire the skills and professionalism needed during mediation and negotiation.

Women need to be more assertive. They need to recognize that their participation in peace negotiations is a right which is enshrined in international frameworks such as UNSCR 1325.

They should bring to bear on the political arena their personal experiences and the challenges that hinder their abilities to care for and protect their families. As the lack of security and peace hamper women's abilities to perform their responsibilities in wartimes, women should use their experiences to inform the implementation process of peace agreements. Women should be ready to confront the risks that are associated with this so called male-dominated terrain: mediation.

ECOWAS has recognized civil society's role in the mediation process and this informed the establishment of the West Africa Civil Society Forum to coordinate civil society's input to conflict resolution in the sub-region. Women groups like MARWOPNET are part of this coalition as actors who have a sustained presence in the conflict-ridden areas and who are involved in opening and maintaining lines of communication between warring parties. Thus, civil society has to use this opportunity to increase the participation of competent women in negotiations. Capacity-building programmes will have to be organized for potential women mediators who do not have the requisite technical capacity to operate at the level of the technical and decision-making groups.

Moreover, most national governments have allocated quotas to increase the political participation of women; however, these quotas are not always filled. Entrenchment of these quotas in national constitutions and other frameworks will have a positive impact on the status of women in their countries and enhance their technical skills. This will support them to perform creditably on the international scene as mediators. Apart from legislated quotas, seats should be reserved for women in national parliaments as a special measure to facilitate the positioning of women to take part in official peace processes. Political leaders have to be made to account for quotas and all other measures that are promised to promote the representation of women in government positions.

Furthermore, the international community has to make rigorous efforts towards the inclusion of women. This is because discriminatory attitudes towards women, unequal access to resources and disparities in social power structures along with gender-based violence all combine to reduce women's representation at mediation and peace processes (USAID, 2012). Therefore, monitoring of national action plans of member countries of the United Nations by the UN is essential for the implementation of UN Security Council resolutions on women's participation in peace processes. Frameworks and conventions on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against

women should also be monitored. Gender provisions in peace agreements and gender expertise to support the implementation of gender needs and priorities enshrined in international frameworks on women's participation have to be legalized and monitored to ensure that women's role in supporting the peace process is significantly improved. Security and protection has to be provided for women during election periods to ensure their participation in the democratic process of their countries – to vote and stand as candidates for elective positions and their participation in mediation. In addition, initiatives of grassroots women's peace movements have to be supported with technical and financial resources. The capacity of women to mobilize at the local level has to be enhanced with technical training in order for them to translate these local mediatory skills to the international level. Young women also have to be encouraged and groomed for leadership positions in order to create a pool of potential women mediators who can be included in mediation and peace processes.

## **Conclusion**

In spite of the negative cultural assumptions, women perform multiple roles in times of war and peace. While some women are combatants and perpetrators of conflict, there are also women who, as survivors in conflict zones, perform various duties in order to contribute their quota to efforts to repair the destruction that engulfs communities. Increasingly, women have engaged in conflict situations as activists and advocates for a negotiated settlement between warring parties. Some women's groups have mobilized people at the grassroots and held dialogues with conflict parties, activities which have sometimes paved way for peace negotiations. Nonetheless, despite the efforts and competencies they demonstrate, there appears to be some resistance to vigorously involving significant numbers of capable women at various levels of peace processes. This paper argues, however, that although challenges exist, opportunities also exist which can be explored by women, regional and international organizations to systematically promote the inclusion of women during mediation and peace processes at national, regional and international levels.

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**About the Author:** *Lydia Mawuena Amedzrator* works with the Faculty of Research and Academic Affairs (FAAR), Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC). Her research interests are in emerging security issues, Youth and Violence and the Role of Women in Peace Processes. Some of her publications include the Continuing and Changing Transitions in North Africa: Examining the Role of Sub-Saharan Africa (with Dr. Kwesi Aning); The Economics of Militancy and Religious Extremism in the Sahel (with Dr. Kwesi Aning); and Security in the Sahel: Linking the Atlantic to the Mediterranean (with Dr. Kwesi Aning).

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