

POLICY BRIEF 2020

Beyond COVID-19: Challenges and prospects for the role of women in Silencing the Guns

INTRODUCTION:

At the 34th Ordinary Session of the Executive Council of the African Union held in Niamey, Niger in 2019, the Union adopted a decision to declare the theme for the year 2020 as 'Silencing the Gun: creating conducive conditions for Africa's development'.² This declaration was informed by concerns regarding the nature and scale of conflicts on the continent and their implications for development vis-à-vis the continental commitment to address violence as per the provisions of the 2016 Master Roadmap for Silencing the Guns in Africa by 2020.

Apart from the many effects of conflicts on all aspects of Africa's development, its impact on women and girls is grave. Across the continent, women and girls bear the greatest burden of the effects of violent conflicts, a realisation which has necessitated a shift in how the impact of peace and security are understood and highlighted the central role of women in efforts to achieve peace and stability. Notwithstanding the realisation, the role of women continues to be marginal in the re-

sponses to insecurity and conflict. Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges associated with women in the midst of insecurity and on the continent have been compounded by the emergence of new threats and dynamics.

It is on this premise that the AGA Secretariat hosted the 2020 Gender Pre-Forum to the High-Level Dialogue under the theme 'Magnifying women's role in conflict prevention and silencing the guns' in November 2020. The virtual event provided a platform for various policy stakeholders, civil society actors and members of the academia to dialogue on challenges and prospects for the role of women in Silencing the Guns in the context of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic which has had detrimental effects on women. This policy brief draws on discussions and reflections during the meeting³ on the experiences, opportunities and challenges facing women in peace and security.

STRATEGIC GUIDANCE

The normative frameworks guiding the promotion of gender equality, women empowerment and women, peace and security in Africa comprise of a series of international, continental and regional instruments many of which are summarised in Table 1. Despite their encouraging existence, the

various instruments require more effective and systematic implementation for the totality of their impact to be felt.

Table 1: Summary of African gender policies and frameworks⁴

Policy/framework	Significance for the role of women in peace and security
The Constitutive Act of the African Union of 2000	Member states are called on to promote gender equality in all spheres of development, including non-discrimination against women.
United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 of 2002	A landmark resolution that calls for the increased representation of women in all peace and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) processes; for a gendered perspective to be adopted in the negotiation and implementation of peace agreements; the protection of women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV); and an end to impunity for war crimes and crimes against humanity.
The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and Rights of Women in Africa of 2003 (Maputo Protocol)	Requires member states to combat all forms of discrimination against women through appropriate legislative, institutional and other measures. Article 10 on the Right to Peace calls for women's participation in the structures and processes for conflict prevention, management and resolution, and the involvement of women in peace agreements.
The AU Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA) of 2004	Article 2 calls for the full and effective participation and representation of women in peace processes, including the prevention, resolution and management of conflicts and post-conflict reconstruction in Africa.
The AU Gender Policy of 2009	Commitment 8 speaks specifically to maintaining peace and security, the settlement of conflicts and reconstruction, and emphasises the need to promote the effective participation of women in peacekeeping and security, including efforts aimed at reconciliation in post-conflict reconstruction and, gender equality.
AU Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (2019)	The strategy is based on lessons from the Gender Policy, and seeks to address structural problems that cause gender inequalities and gaps.

In Africa, UNSCR 1325 has been embedded in various continental and regional instruments.⁵ It was the first UN resolution to address the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on women. As of June 2021 a total of 30 African countries have developed national action plans (NAPs) to implement UNSCR 1325.⁶ In May 2018, the AU adopted the Continental Results Framework to monitor and report on the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda on the continent.

However, these instruments are not sufficiently linked with various initiatives taking place in parallel, such the adoption of national development plans – or even policing strategies. There is no clear roadmap or strategy in place at the level of

the AU on how these policies can be systematically implemented. Although it is laudable that efforts to promote women empowerment and gender mainstreaming efforts are increasing, these are often limited to under-resourced offices, such as that of the Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security.⁷

Given the constantly changing security environment in Africa – with human security increasingly under threat, and where new and old forms of conflict are continually emerging or re-emerging (including violent insurgencies, terrorism and the proliferation of organised crime) – it is critical for AU member states to implement these frameworks.

It is important to address a misperception, whereby gender mainstreaming is understood to amount merely to gender balancing – or the process of increasing the number of women in certain positions. This has meant that institutional cultures which perpetuate gender inequality have not been sufficiently identified or

addressed. The AU, international agencies and member states should move beyond a focus on policy documents and hard security issues, and expand their awareness and understanding of the deeper societal issues that hinder gender mainstreaming and responsiveness.

CURRENT TRENDS OF WOMEN INITIATIVES ACROSS AFRICA

Strides have been made in Africa in the efforts to establish the role of women in the prevention and management of conflicts on the continent. Women are now represented in security institutions and decision-making structures in many countries. Evidence suggests that when women are part of peace agreements, such agreements are more likely to last.⁸ Even though women are essential to peace efforts, globally peace agreements with gender-equality provisions has only increased from 14% in 1995, to 22% in 2019. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2000, women successfully advocated for formal participation in the Inter-Congolese Dialogue when a ‘peace table’ was established, which resulted in the inclusion of gender issues and women’s participation as substantive items on the official agenda.

When women have opportunities to serve as political leaders, governments are more inclusive. Women politicians have also been found to champion policies that improve health services and education systems.⁹ In Africa, there has been an overall increase in the number of women involved in political parties, legislative and government bodies. Another heartening indicator is that women in several countries hold ministerial positions, as well as leadership positions in national human rights institutions. In sub-Saharan Africa, the average proportion of women in parliament is 24.4%, with Rwanda having the highest representation at 53.6%.¹⁰ It is worth noting that when it comes to the percentage of women serving in national parliaments, African countries outperform those in Europe.¹¹

African women have always played an active role in mediating peace at informal levels, and are uniquely positioned to help bridge high-level decision-making with grassroots-level movements. An example can be seen in The South Sudan Women Coalition, which acts as a con-

duit for dialogue between grassroots activists and women involved in formal processes, which enables ground-level actors to influence formal peacebuilding processes.¹²

Moreover, several of the world’s fastest-growing economies, some of which have only recently emerged from conflict, owe part of their success to targeted initiatives to increase and expand women’s roles in production, trade and entrepreneurship.¹³ Advancing women’s equality can add US \$12 trillion to global growth and in Africa US \$721 billion can be added.¹⁴

Promoting girls’ education; improving their access to credit; and breaking down barriers to women’s participation in the public and private spheres are some of the strategies pursued by African countries. Supporting women to assume greater economic roles and expanding their livelihood options available is also a way to increase the number of people active in the labour force. Women can contribute to their households, the national economy and the overall stability of the country, especially following conflict. 6

Yet, as the sections below demonstrate, women remain a largely untapped resource, and have yet to be fully integrated into mainstream processes.

\$721

Billion

**Can be added to the african economy
by advancing Women’s Equality**

EVOLVING AND OLD SECURITY THREATS THAT THREATEN AND INVOLVE WOMEN

Sub-Saharan Africa recorded a slight deterioration of peace in 2019. Twenty countries in the region improved in peacefulness, while 24 deteriorated in the year before.¹⁶ Disputed election results and demands for political change have led to civil unrest and political instability in several countries, including Mali and Cameroon. Violent protests have also broken out in other countries over the past year. Peace and development have also been threatened by cross-border insecurity and violent extremism.¹⁷ Climate change and food insecurity also drive fragility and instability in Africa.

Climate change, in particular, has been linked to destabilising political, social and economic conditions. Women also particularly affected, as many women rely on natural resources not only for income generation, but also cash. In Liberia for example, women's employment is still concentrated in the agricultural sector, accounting for 76% of cash crop production and 93% of food production. Yet, the majority of women do not own land.¹⁸ Structural inequalities compound women's disproportionate vulnerability to climate change, as women are often excluded from discussions, processes and platforms surrounding natural-resource management.¹⁹

States like South Sudan, which are already fragile, are more likely to be future epicentres for climate-related violence and forced migration.²⁰ It is important to take note of the gendered dimensions of migration, especially in terms of resource distribution, and decisions related to staying and leaving.²¹ There is a direct correlation between conflict trends, forced displacement and poor governance.²² At the end of 2019, approximately 25.7 million people in Africa had been forcibly displaced.²³ Globally, the highest number of women to be forcibly displaced is recorded in sub-Saharan Africa (52%).

Terrorism and violent extremism (VE) remain major threats to peace, security and stability – not only in Africa, but globally. In this context, women are often thought of primarily as victims of terrorism and VE. Yet, women's involvement in such organisations has also included strategic and support roles, as well as in active perpetration of terrorist acts. This has, for instance, been seen in cases where women have been associated with the Macina Liberation Front and Boko Haram.²⁴

Understanding the complex set of dynamics that influence how and when women become involved in VE is imperative to arriving at a more nuanced and contextual understanding. Practical measures and approaches to make sense of these linkages, particularly in the African context, are yet to be fully explored. This also requires taking cognisance of the politicised nature of these challenges, as interventions are sometimes crafted to benefit the elite, rather than building sustainable peace.

APPROX. 25.7
Million
Africans had been
forcely displaced

52%
of the women who are
forcely displaced are
in Sub-Saharan Africa

CHALLENGES BEFORE COVID-19

Silencing the Guns in Africa requires a focus on the positive peace attributes to ensure that women have access to justice, resources and influence. As responses to the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated, not addressing inequalities meant that any response, even if it was well intentioned does not reach everyone equally. Responses such as social protection and assistance meant for the marginalised and vulnerable groups did not reach them or in some instances were inadequate to provide for their basic needs. Building more inclusive societies beyond COVID-19 will mean prioritising structural issues that were not addressed before the pandemic. Women's basic human rights amid COVID-19 have been downplayed or, worse, ignored – from the family structure to national processes.²⁵ Women are not only targeted in conflict, but also in countries considered peaceful. Research continues to highlight that the safety of women is linked to the safety of countries, and that violence begins in the home.²⁶ The challenges described below highlight some of the structural problems that underline violence in Africa and impede prospects for sustainable peace.

Despite research indicating that women play a key role in developing economies, women across Africa continue to be disproportionately affected by poverty.²⁷ In sub-Saharan Africa, 74% of women are employed in low-paying jobs with low job security, and are excluded from policy support programmes, such as wage protection.²⁸

Although there are instances where African women are actively involved in peace-making, such as in South Sudan, their inclusion in formal mediation processes – even at the local level – is rarely granted.²⁹ Between 1990 and 2017, globally women made up only 8% of negotiators, 5% of witnesses and signatories of peace agreements, and only 2% of mediators.³⁰

A distinction should also be made between women's presence in such processes, and their meaningful participation in a way that promotes gender-equal responses. In Somalia, for instance, clan structures often trump gender relations – with loyalty to the clan sometimes

considered more important than gender-equal processes.³¹

A peace agreement does not mark the end of a peace process, but indicates a transition from war to the rebuilding of society.³² When women are excluded from the mediation phase of a peace agreement, they are also likely to be excluded from the implementation phase. Mali is a case in point. The Algiers Agreement, signed in 2015, offered little in terms of inclusivity, as the peace process and its related bodies and mechanisms fell short of meeting the 30% quota for women, for example women only made up 6% of the National Council on Security Sector Reform.³³ Six years later, the highest committee overseeing implementation – which is made up of 39 members from the government and signatory movements – is still entirely composed of men.³⁴

An ongoing challenge is a lack of capacity among women-based organisations. Research has found that unpredictable and insufficient funding undermine the long-term effectiveness of gender interventions.³⁵ It is notable that efforts to promote the development of NAPs have led to increased funding, with the focus mostly on the development process and the implementation of the NAPs. Yet Aroussi has identified a risk that funded projects may end up being run by 'elite, urban and middle-class women, which leaves most of the rural and disadvantaged populations disengaged from the agenda'.³⁶

Despite numerous calls for gender-sensitive responses, it is clear that women in Africa are still not utilised as agents for building peace. As Hendricks described: 'In Africa, peace processes involve men forgiving each other for the wrongs they committed or those they command – especially against women and children.'³⁷

In Sub-Saharan Africa **74%**
of Women are employed in low paying jobs

CHALLENGES AMID COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has both amplified existing challenges and introduced new threats to women's meaningful participation in building sustainable peace.

Not only has COVID-19 had a severe impact on public health, but it has also affected national economies and the way society's function. This has, in turn, threatened gains in positive peace and increased the risk of outbreaks of violence and conflict. In this regard, women face the heaviest burden; in terms of response as frontline workers in addressing the spread of COVID-19, and also as caregivers at home.

The COVID-19 pandemic has evolved from a health crisis to become a global economic crisis. This has resulted in 150 million people being pushed into extreme poverty,³⁸ particularly amid fragile and conflict situations. In Somalia, for instance, many women-owned micro-businesses that depended on air freight for supplies, including candies and khat, went out of business.³⁹

During the COVID-19 pandemic, cases of sexual violence and femicide have risen across Africa. Liberia reported a 50% increase in gender-based violence (GBV) and in Kenya, almost 4,000 schoolgirls became pregnant during the lockdown an amount that nearly tripled compared to the previous year.⁴⁰ This highlights the fact that many women and girls are unsafe in their own homes. Despite policy commitments from African governments to improve safety for women, there continues to be a lack of oversight and accountability. The scourge of GBV is also enabled by a degree of cultural acceptance regarding violence against women, a lack of legal protection for women, and weak law enforcement.⁴¹

During the pandemic, service sectors, such as hospitality and retail have seen particularly high numbers of lay-offs. These are industries where women are overrepresented. Research also shows that COVID-19 will have long-term effects on women's participation in the labour force.⁴² This is compounded by the fact that many women are employed in the informal sector, which means that they have limited financial security or social protection.

Regulations aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19 have severely restricted freedom of movement and peaceful assembly. Many women peace activists experienced increased harassment, both online and offline.⁴³ In some places, freedom of expression was severely curtailed. (For example, in North Africa, authorities used vague charges such as spreading misinformation.⁴⁴)

Another worrying trend was the excessive use of force by law-enforcement actors like police to implement COVID-19 restrictions.⁴⁵ And generally, violent conflicts across the continent were also on the rise. In Mozambique, for example, armed groups in Cabo Delgado province abducted women and girls, over 1,500 people were killed.⁴⁶

These challenges directly affect women's ability to meaningfully and equally engage in building sustainable peace in their communities and countries. More than 20 years after the Constitutive Act of the AU was adopted, women still suffer disproportionately not only from violent conflicts, but also from threats to public health. During 2014-16 Ebola outbreak in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone women and girls bore a three-fold caregiver burden. They were expected to take responsibility for household level disease prevention. Women had to enforce response efforts. And they were subject to emotional and socio-economic harm.⁴⁷ In Sierra Leone for example, during the Ebola outbreak, maternal mortality rates increased to those observed during the civil war between 1991-2002.

The pandemic has not only made many people's lives more precarious, and it has also exposed the inefficiencies of states. In many contexts across Africa, the resulting vulnerability has created fertile ground for conflict. Prospects for peace and security are receding, which makes the vision of Silencing the Guns even more challenging.

There is scope for women to be proactive, for instance through platforms for dialogue, to add momentum to the realisation of Silencing the Guns, and to follow up on the implementation of commitments. Due to heightened social tension

brought about by COVID-19, the equal and full participation of women in building peaceful societies is taxing beyond matters of capacity and funding. There is additional pressure on women to do more with little support from national governments, such as being community watchdogs at the grassroots level.

Women in Africa have taken steps to try and mitigate these problems, such as developing community support networks and recognise that the pandemic will continue to pose serious consequences in ensuring the peacefulness of their communities. Egypt's National Council for Women produced a guidance document for the government to rapidly respond in a gender-sensitive manner to COVID-19 cases.

This guidance document assessed the socio-economic situation of men and women,⁴⁸ and shows that women's leadership can contribute to dealing with challenges in a way that exceeds gender issues.

Women's leadership will play a critical role in a more equitable recovery from COVID-19. The AU's 'Gender is My Agenda' campaign, for instance, facilitated e-discussions and live Twitter chats on the

gendered impact of COVID-19 throughout 2020.⁴⁹ This has created an online space where African women are able to discuss and influence the AU and decision-makers on priority actions to Silence the Guns post COVID-19.

CONCLUSION

Women's contribution to peace processes remains marginalised and is frequently relegated to being a side issue. The absence of conflict in a particular country or context is not an indicator of substantive peace, nor does it mean that women are fully integrated and active participants in their country's development. This has again been demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite robust normative frameworks, women

continue to face discrimination – and their contributions towards Silencing the Guns in Africa are considered a niche area that does not fit into mainstream discussions on peace and security. Until women can meaningfully, equally and sustainably contribute in this domain, lasting and sustainable peace will remain an illusion in Africa.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are presented to the AU and member states to recognise and promote women's contributions towards Silencing the Guns in Africa.

1. Policy commitments should be implemented through gender-responsive budgeting.

Member states must move beyond rhetoric to implement commitments made towards gender equality and empowerment. For implementation to take place requires budgeting for these initiatives, both at the continental and member-state level.

2. Gender-sensitive monitoring frameworks and actionable mechanisms for reporting should be developed to ensure that implementation strategies are effectively evaluated.

The AU's Continental Results Framework is a good step in tracking commitments and the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Africa. However, for the framework to be effective, member states will have to report on their commitments. Member states should develop and align national reporting mechanisms to report on parallel processes.

3. Assistance should be prioritised for women's empowerment initiatives that protect livelihoods and provide social support.

Greater investment in women makes economic sense. Social protection initiatives should be put in place to protect women in the informal sectors. Investments in projects that help women to transition to the formal sector should be pursued. Member states and the AU should explore partnerships with the private sector to incentivise learnership opportunities for women to be formally employed.

4. The complex and nuanced role of women in Silencing the Guns must be sufficiently acknowledged.

As explained in this brief, women are not merely victims in conflict, but also occupy various roles and responsibilities in Silencing the Guns. The AU and member states should recognise that these roles include acting as perpetrators, sympathisers, recruiters, supporters and planners of violent conflict. When the AU and Member States talk about women, it must be recognised that women do not form one, homogenous group. Women have been encouraged to build their capacity to be mediators and to undergo training to become leaders without addressing the power dynamics that exist within these processes.

5. Emerging threats require analysis through a gendered lens.

Violent extremism, climate change and forced displacement affect women, men, boys, girls, the elderly and other vulnerable groups differently. When responding to emerging threats in Africa, the AU and Member States should apply a gender-sensitive approach in understanding these problems as well as developing responses.

NOTES

1. This policy brief is based on the Reflections at The 9TH High-Level Dialogue on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance: Trends, Challenges and Prospects.
2. See Summit Orientation Concept Note on the AU Theme of the Year 2020 - Silencing the Guns: creating conducive conditions for Africa's Development, https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/38307-doc-6_au_summit_orientation_concept_note_.pdf
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