Through Using a Multi-Level Approach,

What Role do Women Play in Peacebuilding and

Conflict Resolution in the Acholi Ethnic Group of

Northern Uganda?

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Abstract

Northern Uganda is home to the Acholi people, the predominant ethnic group of the region.

The northern region of Uganda has been impacted the most by the civil war the country faced

from 1981-1986 and, thereafter, the 20-year war with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) that

spanned from 1986-2006. Using such conflict-settings as a predisposition, this article aims to

examine the role of Acholi women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution through a Social

Ecological Perspective approach. In adopting a gendered perspective to analyse a vital area

within peace studies, this article uses a multi-level approach in examining what role women

play in peacebuilding and conflict resolution in the Acholi ethnic group of northern Uganda.

Keywords: Conflict resolution; Peacebuilding; Gender; Ecological Perspective Approach

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Introduction

In terms of impact, representation and the discourse surrounding peacebuilding and conflict resolution, gender plays a central role. Studies show that women are disproportionately affected by conflict but are the least represented in peacebuilding (Wittkopp, 2009, p. 23). That is why this paper draws on Jennifer Ball's (2019) *Women, Development and Peacebuilding in Africa: Stories from Uganda*, as it documents case studies of Ugandan women who have been integral parts of peacebuilding within their communities. The case studies amplify Ugandan women's voices within peacebuilding and conflict resolution, from top-down and bottom-up spaces, and highlights the challenges of women in the field, as well as their successes.

Inspired by the cases, this paper aims to add a contribution to the area of gender within peace-building and conflict resolution through using the multi-level Social Ecological Perspective (SEP) approach, which will enable a gender analysis on multiple levels for a more holistic understanding of the case in its context. Moreover, this article is based on one of Ball's (2019) in depth case studies on an Acholi woman named Betty Bigombe. Building on this qualitative data, an analysis of gender in peacebuilding and conflict resolution will be made in the context of the Acholi ethnic group of Northern Uganda. Therefore, the research question is, "through using a multi-level approach, what role do women play in peacebuilding and conflict resolution in the Acholi ethnic group of Northern Uganda?". Methodologically speaking, the case study of Betty will be examined in its context and will be generalised to add to the current literature on gender, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution (Punch, 2014, p. 122).

Uganda's Conflict Settings and Current Leadership

Uganda gained independence in 1962 and did not initially have a civil war afterward. However, the first president, Edward Mutesa, was overthrown by Milton Obote in 1966, which started 20 years, referred to as Obote I, of "tyranny and oppression; corruption; black marketeering, and economic collapse; tribalism, violation of human rights and civil war" (Leggett, 2001, p. 32). In 1980, a period called Obote II lasted until 1985 under the rule of Idi Amin. Uganda, after that, had an ongoing civil war from 1981-1986, preceded by another 20 years of war from 1986-2006 between the Ugandan government and the LRA (p. 15). During the various wars, and during colonial times, Uganda suffered immense human tragedy and experienced extreme violence, which still has consequences on its society today (Ball, 2019, p. 13).

The current president Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, who has been in power since 1986, took the country's leadership position by force with his party, the National Resistance Movement (NRM). Museveni was officially elected president in 1996, again in 2000, 2006 and 2011 (Ball, 2019, p. 13). Although Museveni's leadership ended the civil war and saw an end to Joseph Kony's LRA in 2006, he is a controversial figure as he has changed the Ugandan constitution to remain in power for so long (p.14).

Theoretical Framework

Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution

To define the principal terms used in this paper; peacebuilding and conflict resolution, Galtung's (1996) conflict triangle will be used. There is a difference between peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding. Peacekeeping decreases the levels of damaging behaviour, and peacemaking tries to change mindsets through facilitation and negotiation. Moreover, peacebuilding "tries to overcome the contradictions which lie at the root of the conflict through processes of demilitarisation, democratisation, development, and justice" (p. 2).

Gender and Peacebuilding

Looking at peace with a gender perspective moves towards the concept of 'positive peace', which seeks to reduce or remove all types of violence, but also the major causes of conflict in the future. Thus, positive peace can be defined as peace with justice for all. Even though the egalitarian vision of positive peace represents equality between regional and ethnic groups, it has undervalued the equality between the genders (Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2016, p. 182). Additionally, less attention is paid to the agents of peace and more on the institutions that are supposed to embody peace. When using a gender perspective on peace, it enables one to rethink the agents concerning peace and who the individuals are at the forefront of peacebuilding in a post-conflict context. While women might not have high positions in institutions, interact with the formal transitional processes or have proper education within peace resolution, they are active in their own lives and communities to build a peace that is supported in the everyday and tackle "the causes and the injustices of the conflict" (p. 186).

Women as Natural Peacebuilders?

There is a critical point to be made in the assumption that women are natural peacebuilders. Kouvo and Levine (2008) tackle this 'women and peace orthodoxy' (p. 363). In assuming that women are natural peacebuilders, there is an element of reproducing and perpetuating this

orthodoxy. This generally accepts the notion that there is an inherent division in gender roles where men serve at the institutional level and function at higher levels, thus having more power and status, as opposed to women, who are restrained to the domestic and community levels (p. 364). This is a crucial point to keep in mind when discussing gender and peacebuilding, and thereof women's role in peacebuilding. It would otherwise defeat the purpose of including women in the process if they are only limited to fulfilling certain roles.

Charlesworth (2008) argues that such orthodoxies assume women "(1) are 'natural' peace-makers and peace-builders; (2) suffer comparatively more during conflict; (3) should participate in peace processes because of their supposed natural affinity with peace; and demands that (4) gender should be mainstreamed but equates gender only with women" (p. 364). Even if women do have higher positions, for example in government, their influence is still limited. Bjarnegård and Melander (2013) add more nuance to this issue by noting that "[t]he suggestion that more women in parliament will lead to fewer armed conflicts runs the risk of being forwarded as an oversimplified solution to a complex problem" (p. 558).

Socio Ecological Perspective

The Socio Ecological Perspective (SEP) is an analytical tool that examines a specific context at four distinct levels (macro, exo, meso, and micro) and how they interplay with each other. It can be defined as "the study of people in embedded environments and the reciprocal influence between human behaviours and multiple environmental contexts" (Dorjee, 2013, p. 7). The framework can be used in different domains as it covers various aspects as it allows the analysis to focus on several levels, which provides a broader understanding of the situation (p. 7). Furthermore, the SEP is a multi-level approach that enables us to comprehend deeply rooted assumptions of a situation.

The macro-level analysis pays attention to "the history, values, beliefs, and ideologies of a culture interactants' conflict perspectives and behaviours" (Dorjee, 2013, p. 7). It deals with the broadest aspects of the case that enable it to be framed in a relevant context to better understand the other levels. The exo-level focuses on the influence of different recognised institutions, their procedures, and policies on the actions and reactions of people, therefore analysing how individuals interact with groups that have institutional power and influence over them. Next, the meso-level analysis looks at the impact of "immediate groups and organization" on the situation and its various actors, such as their workplace, neighbourhood community or extended family

members (p. 7). Finally, the micro-level analysis, which can be considered the more personal level, examines both "intrapersonal and interpersonal levels of interpretation and communication manifested in the actual conflict settings" (p. 7). The combination of these multi-contextual level analysis facilitates a more inclusive and holistic understanding of various conflict situations and the position of individuals within them compared to more conventional methods of case study analysis.

Furthermore, the SEP includes "parallels, discontinuities, and cross-level effects" (Dorjee, 2013, p. 8). When looking at magnitude and direction, parallels demonstrate the relationships between concepts and issues that share similarities at different levels, whereas discontinuities show the differences in the concepts and issues on different levels. The parallels and discontinuities are essential in the SEP analysis in that they add more nuances to the analysis by comparing the findings from the different levels and, furthermore, illustrating how the different levels interact with one another and are deeply connected. Finally, cross-level effects observe the "inter-relationship between the macro and micro levels' factors" (p. 8). The cross-level effects have three types: top-down, bottom-up, and interactive. From the macro, exo, meso to the micro level, the "top-down effects" indicate how the larger institutional actors influence the intercultural conflict stance. Even though the next effect isn't as dominant in the literature, the "bottom-up effects" remain important and focus on how lower levels will have an impact on higher levels. Finally, the "interactive effects" refer to how some effects at one level can influence the outcomes on other levels (p. 8).

Analysis

Macro-level

Uganda is an East African country comprising of 43.9 million people (Ball, 2019, p. 11). Data from 2018 shows that Uganda's Human Development Index (HDI) is 0.528 and has a Gender Inequality Index (GII) of 0.531, ranking it 127th out of 162 countries according to its GII (UNDP, 2019, p. 3). Uganda has improved these values consistently over time. However, socioeconomically, there are still vast inequalities and poverty, mostly affecting its northern region (p. 15). Uganda lies in a region with bordering countries that have continuous conflicts, such as Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Kenya, which has impacts on its national security. The northern part of Uganda, which borders the DRC and South Sudan, is particularly troubled with conflicts and insecurity, in part due to its volatile northern neighbours.

Uganda is highly culturally diverse, encompassing over 43 languages, and has numerous ethnic groups (Otiso, 2006, p. 17).

Uganda has been known for a turbulent political history categorised by "acts of brutality, reprisals, military coups, and bush warfare" (Inder, 2009 p. 7). Since the 2006 elections of President Museveni, Uganda has achieved more stability, prosperity, and power. Museveni has developed the central, southern, and western parts of Uganda and reconstructed their economies and government facilities, thus improving health care and educational services. The northern part of Uganda has been excluded from this development and still faces ongoing conflicts and extreme poverty (Ball, 2019, p.14). Due to such long-lasting divisions, Uganda is a politically unstable country due to continuous conflicts in the north.

Norms and values, as well as policies and political processes, regulate war and peace in an Acholi context as they determine the roles of men and women in their society. Fighting in war on the field is perceived as a man's job, whereas women are viewed as passive actors "who only step in to sing of the heroism of the men" or encourage men to put down their arms and stop the conflict (Angom & Brauch, 2018, p. 17). This perception of men and women is how many societies look at the involvement of women regarding peace and conflict. Women's identities are constructed as mothers and guardians of culture, which in turn, implicitly indicates that they are victims, therefore justifying various uses of power and violence against women or to protect them (p. 18). Therefore, it is difficult for women to be taken seriously as legitimate actors, capable of acting on higher levels, within peacebuilding.

In saying that, there are women peacebuilders in positions of influence and power in Uganda. However, there is a different playing field for them. "When viewed from a comparative African perspective, Uganda today is a leader in advancing women's rights, in spite of the continuing challenges" (Tripp, 2002, p. 6). From bottom-up struggles to top-down efforts, Ugandan women have been at the frontline of fighting for gender equality and resolving conflicts (p. 8). In 1995, the NRM ensured that the Ugandan constitution was gender-sensitive and introduced affirmative action for women to support their political participation on multiple levels (Ball, 2019, p. 17). Therefore, Ugandan women are heavily involved in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, but still face many challenges in the field due to their gender.

Exo-level

According to Bjökdahl and Selimovic (2016), there is a need to implement a gendered perspective in peace studies to create an understanding of peace that is more inclusive, grounded, and realistic to the actual situation women face. Therefore, it is important to mention the Security Council Resolution (SCR) 1325 because women in the northern region have suffered immensely due to the long-drawn conflict. Sexual violence, abuse, rape, human rights violations, and dehumanization are just a few examples of what women have been subjected to (Ekiyor & Wanyeki, 2000, p. 24). SCR 1325 has brought these violations to the attention of the Ugandan Government and how to address them in future programs, initiatives, plans, and laws (p. 24). Additionally, the resolution has been used in Uganda as an "advocacy tool for the involvement of women in peace talks between the Government of Uganda and LRD" and as a vital "tool to train women on the importance of their involvement in peace processes" to work towards positive peace (p. 24). Finally, we want to emphasize how crucial the creation of this resolution was towards improving the position of women within peace and security in countries all over the world. Knowledge of SCR 1325 remains low in communities where women, who were victims of the LRA, had no awareness of the resolution and what it stands for (p. 25).

The Peace, Recovery and Development Plan (PRDP) was created to enhance sustainable Socio-economic development for northern Uganda with four specific objectives and "seven over-arching principles which cut across all development interventions", including elimination of gender-based violence, gender equity, and inclusion, public awareness, and sensitisation (Government of Uganda, 2015). It was created as a strategy and planning framework to improve the region and provide the Government and other actors with a "good framework for post-conflict recovery and development with a mechanism for joint planning, coordination, and resource mobilisation" (Government of Uganda, 2015, p. 14). Additionally, PRDP touches upon various elements brought up in SCR 1325 and has worked closely with OHCHR, UNDP, and UN Women to address human rights violations and sexual and gender-based violence in the conflict areas.

Meso-level

The meso-level illustrates the different actors that have impacted the peace processes in the northern region of Uganda. This includes actors that have been there from the beginning, such as the Government of Uganda and the mediators, or actors that have been added during the process, such as the Uganda Women's Coalition for Peace. In having women part of the

negotiations, they can ensure that their voices are heard, and needs are considered. The post-conflict transitional phase can be viewed as a "window of opportunity" for the improvement of their position and rights within society, and gender relations and not return to the "status quo" before the conflict, thus working towards a positive peace (Chinkin, 2003, p. 11; Meintjes, 2002, p. 64).

The meso-level highlights that during the peacebuilding process, various actors can be involved, which can potentially lead to some groups being overlooked or overshadowed. Hence, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of applying a feminist or gender perspective to peace to make it visible at various levels in accordance with the theoretical context (Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2016). To achieve positive peace, there is a need to aim for an inclusive and realistic perspective of peace. Therefore, peace processes should include women as we argue that it will enhance the inclusiveness and sustainability of the process. We believe that the more groups and actors are involved, included, and represented in peace processes, the better the implementation will be (Anderlini, 2007, p. 79). We do recognize that a certain limit needs to be maintained of how many actors are involved within the security discourses as the negotiations can be complex and long-lasting. However, if each group is represented, their voices can be heard even with "limited space". According to Björkdahl & Selimovis (2016), by including "women as a category of identity within security discourse" and integrating gender as a tool of analysis, this will decrease the silences of women in peacebuilding, which will lead to diminish the "dominance of masculine universalism" (p. 187).

Micro-level

Women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution have a hard time being accepted and recognized in the field. One example is Betty Bigombe, who is a woman in leadership in Northern Uganda, who faced challenges in her efforts to attempt peace talks with the LRA leader Joseph Kony. Bigombe is a prominent figure in Northern Uganda as she is known for communicating with Kony to stop the atrocities the group inflicted on Northern Uganda in the 1990s (Angom & Brauch, 2018, p. 152). Her decision to initiate peace talks through negotiation, as opposed to violence, were taken on by herself and were not supported by the Ugandan government, at first (p. 153). Bigombe served as the Minister of State for Pacification of Northern Uganda, Resident in Gulu from 1993 to 1998. In that time, she worked with communities to encourage local families to urge their rebel sons to give up being part of the LRA and come home (p. 154).

When Bigombe first acted on her initiative to negotiate with Kony and understand the motives of the LRA better, her community perceived her as "a woman venturing in men's affairs of war" or "a woman trying to end a war between men" (Angom & Brauch, 2018, p. 153). The Ugandan government's primary approach to dealing with the LRA rebels was to meet them with punishment and violence. This approach, Bigombe thought, would be better replaced with negotiation and peace talks, and thereafter had trouble convincing the government, the army leadership, and people in her community of it. Even in a position of power as the Minister of State for Pacification of Northern Uganda, Bigombe still faced difficulties being accepted within conflict resolution and peacebuilding as a woman with a more 'feminine' approach (p. 154). Bigombe's approach was finally accepted after she risked her life by meeting Adek, Kony's middleman, who acted as a medium between Bigombe and Kony. She got the Ugandan government's approval of her peace talks mission after gaining a certain level of trust from Kony and made tangible progress the government favoured (p. 155).

After Betty's initial efforts to achieve the peace talks that gained the LRA's trust, the process was planned, but during the talks, Kony was not present. The LRA argued that the chosen venue was too heavily policed, which threatened the success of the negotiations. Bigombe phoned Kony independently and arranged to go with her team, without military protection, to carry on the talks with the LRA at Kony's preferred venue, thus risking her life. The following day, the situation had calmed down, and the talks continued, with Kony delivering a long speech. It is said that Kony told Bigombe that he would like to see the end of the rebellion of the LRA and did not state any conditions. He only asked that the government further facilitate the peace process, ensure that the rebel children were welcomed back into the communities and were educated, and give him six months to gather the members of the LRA to part take in the peace process (Angom & Brauch, 2018, pp. 154-155).

Bigombe drove these negotiations, and peace talks out of her belief that words were a better way to achieve peace than violence, through a positive peace approach. "Bigombe began her efforts with a fact-finding tour, talking to people, eating with them, and attending local burial ceremonies and crying with them. Her approach helped build confidence among the people affected by the conflict and demonstrated that women could be powerful participants in conflict resolution" (Angom & Brauch, 2018, p. 156). The outcome of the 1994 peace talks, headed by Bigombe, resulted in the Acholi people having more security. The Rebels 'came out the bush' and were free to work within the village and the government army, illustrating how Bigombe's

efforts lead to people trusting each other more (p. 155). The actions of Betty's approach have had a significant impact on various communities in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Furthermore, Bigombe's case study depicts how, as an Acholi woman with a high-level government job, she still faced challenges as a woman with a positive peace approach, but was able to overcome such barriers, thus setting an example for other women in the field.

Parallels, Discontinuities and Cross-level Effects

We have seen at the macro-level that fighting, war, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding continues to be perceived as a man's job within the Acholi community (Angom & Brauch, 2018, p. 17). However, through the case study at the micro-level, we have seen a discontinuity in that women can and have taken a very active, top-down role in peacebuilding and conflict resolution and did not fall into the "stay at home" or "grassroots" categories. We find it important to highlight that Betty is a particular case and is more of an exception of women involved in peacebuilding within the Acholi community (Call, p. 97). Therefore, we acknowledge that the number of women engaged in peacebuilding, especially at higher levels, remains low globally (Angom & Brauch, 2018, p. 12).

Peacebuilding is seen as a masculine field with a general belief that "those who did not make war should have nothing to do with the making of peace" (Björkdahl & Selimovis, 2016, p. 187). This approach, as seen through a gender perspective, represents the exclusion of women and the presence of men, especially the position men and women hold in nations, institutions, and processes, and "the expectations associated with the roles of women and men" (p. 187). From the exo-level, we have seen that resolutions and declarations remain a very 'institution-alized' and 'top-down' approach, which continues to emphasize these masculine and feminine stereotypes. Through the creation of SCR 1325, however, the aim was to highlight the importance of having women within the peace discussions and have their voices heard. Through the example of Betty, we can see a parallel between the exo-level and their micro-level actions. The implementation of SCR 1325 demonstrates this in their work to advance their position within their communities, but more specifically within peacebuilding.

Through the support given by community leaders, various associations, programs, resolutions, and members of society, women can work towards achieving peace and establishing a more peaceful and sustainable future that considers their needs in a post-conflict situation. With this support, Betty was able to achieve and maintain a high-level municipal job and not remain

'stuck' at the domestic and grassroots levels. This emphasizes that women can indeed hold higher positions in peacebuilding while using non-violent, peaceful approaches, and respecting the cultures of the communities. SCR 1325 has allowed to recognize the impact of conflict on women, but also to show the position women should having to build sustainable peace. Therefore, we believe that the micro-level and the actors at the more national and local levels involved provide us with a better understanding of Acholi women's role within peacebuilding.

Conclusion

Acholi women have been involved in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, within top-down and bottom-up spaces, but their work and influence remain challenging. Gender is not only the missing piece of the puzzle within peacebuilding but is also one of the key challenge's women are faced with. By implementing a gender perspective within peace studies, it has allowed a broader and more inclusive definition of peace. The SEP framework enabled us to present a new way of viewing gender within the field through a holistic, multi-level approach. Thus, by applying a gender perspective through this framework, we have been able to analyse Betty's position at various levels within peacebuilding and put her case in a greater context.

Through the analysis at the various levels, we showcased the importance of having women in peacebuilding and post-conflict resolution, as well as their challenges. The analysis of Betty's case highlighted how Acholi women are key actors in peacebuilding, especially at the microlevel where Betty had taken a very active, top-down approach that reflected the reality of the situation on the ground. Through the analysis of Betty's case, and her positive peace approach, we conclude that women play a key role in peacebuilding and conflict resolution within the Acholi ethnic group's northern region of Uganda, albeit their challenges, such as falling into the 'woman as natural peacebuilders orthodoxy' and not being taken seriously, even at higher, top-down levels. Moreover, there is still a long way to go in integrating women even further within the different levels of peacebuilding and conflict resolution to ensure long lasting peace.

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Limited