The role of women in the reconstruction and building of peace in Rwanda: Peace prospects for the Great Lakes Region

Cecilia Ntombizodwa Mzvondiwa*

In view of the fact that women bear the heaviest burden of failed states, it is inevitable and logical that they should play a central role in designing and implementing peace-building programmes. This not only improves the quality but also the increases the chances of success and the consolidation of peace. This article uses Rwanda to highlight how women are affected by collapsing states and prescribes the role that they can play in reconstructing societies emerging from violent conflicts. It strongly recommends the inclusion of women in post-conflict reconstruction and peace-building as model for good governance.

* Cecilia Ntombizodwa Mzvondiwa is currently working on a Masters in Human Security and Peace Building with Royal Roads University in Victoria, Canada, and is a regional trainer for Peace Country Health Region in Northern Alberta, Canada. Her areas of interest include women and gender issues, governance and education.
**Introduction**

Focus on the role of women in conflict prevention, in the reconstruction of failed states and in peace-building is not merely a question of equity and fairness (Steinberg 2003) but arises from the knowledge and experience that bringing women to the peace table improves the quality of agreements and increases the chances of success in planning, implementing and fostering peace. Unfortunately, policy-makers and analysts have neglected the role of women. This neglect is all the more deplorable because in most failed states women suffer most from the consequences of conflict and social fragmentation that accompany failed states. This discussion is premised on this assertion.

First, the working definition of failed states is adopted, and highlights the reasons that Rwanda fits into this category. Second, a brief history of Rwanda before, during and after the genocide is explored, to provide insight into the importance of the role played by women in ‘resuscitating’ that country. This will flow into the rationale for the focus on Rwanda as a model for initiatives in human security and peace-building. The paper will conclude by evaluating Security Council Resolution 1325 as key to implementing peace in our world. The merit of this resolution is to allow women to participate fully, not merely as victims of war and post-war situations, but as stakeholders and activists providing a new perspective on the urgent needs for security and development. It is hoped that this approach will contribute to what may be termed ‘feminised diplomacy’: diplomatic approaches that rely on methodologies and qualities that are unique to women.

**Concept of a ‘failed state’**

The concept of a ‘failed state’ is complex in that there is no universally accepted definition or criterion. The complexity stems from the confused use of the term by various groups, making it a contested conception. Researchers and academics use it as an analytical concept, while policy-makers, politicians and powerful states utilise it as a value-laden label for self-interest pursuits (Helman & Ratner 1993). Even investors and multinational corporations (MNCs) are interested in this concept, since it helps to determine where to put their investments. Rotberg (2000) defines a failed state as ‘a nation consumed by internal violence and incapable of delivering positive political goods to its citizens’. ‘Political goods’ means human security in all its facets, for only when security has been sustained, does delivery of all other goods become desirable. Thus, this discussion adopts Rotberg’s definition for the prime reason that he sees state success as anchored in providing human security for its citizens with its heterodoxy a condition for state failure.

In 1994, the situation in Rwanda depicted Rotberg’s conception of failed state. The collapse of the central government sparked massacres in which 800 000 of the majority
Tutsi and the moderate Hutu were killed in a record span of a hundred days. Going beyond Rotberg’s definition, Rwanda in 1994 exhibited most, if not all, of the twelve factors that are used as criteria to rate a state as having failed. For example, there was mounting demographic pressure, with massive movements of refugees to neighbouring countries and abroad. There was a legacy of vengeance seeking, with the Hutu determined to annihilate the Tutsi. There was uneven economic development along group lines. The Tutsi had prospered in colonial times, but after the 1959 revolt and subsequent 1962 independence from colonial rule, the Hutu took their turn. A sharp economic decline, partly caused by the IMF and World Bank’s structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) and mismanagement by the Rwandan government, contributed to the failure. President Habyarimana turned a blind eye to the realities of what was taking place in the country, manipulated ethnic tensions, and incited violence to divert public attention. There was a progressive deterioration of public service and widespread violation of human rights as people were killed like flies, and women were raped and subjected to bodily mutilation and discrimination on the grounds of gender and ethnic origin. The only factor that was not fully met is that there was no significant intervention by external actors. (We shall not explore that here, but merely observe that the non-intervention by the international community has remained a daunting and soul-searching experience to many.)

While these criteria show how in 1994 Rwanda qualified as a failed state, it is useful to look at the events before and during the genocide as well as its immediate aftermath. In pre-colonial Rwanda, ethnic categories had been relatively fluid, based mostly on wealth. But the Belgian colonial administration consolidated local power in the hands of Tutsi chiefs and privileged the Tutsi over the Hutu in land rights, education, access to power and socio-economic opportunity (Powley 2003). Independence in 1962 brought about the overthrow of the ruling Tutsi minority and the birth of a ‘social revolution’ that culminated in the genocide of 1994. This genocide was gendered: women were targeted because they were women.

All Tutsi women were targeted, simply because they were Tutsi, and large numbers were killed often after having been subjected to sexual violence and torture ... Educated, elite women were attacked, regardless of their ethnicity. Some Hutu women were subjected to violence by RPF soldiers in revenge for the violence perpetrated by Hutu men (Newbury 1988).

Hutu extremists formulated ‘the ten commandments’, which were nothing but methods of unleashing hatred for Tutsi women. It is estimated that 250 000 Rwandese women and girls were victims of some form of sexual violence (Izabiliza 2003). Because of the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, 66 per cent of women who were raped tested positive for the disease. An unknown percentage of women became pregnant. Rwanda is predominantly Catholic, and the Catholic Church, which is well known for its patriarchal and dogmatic stance on the issue of abortion, influenced the decision of Catholic mission hospitals to
refuse abortions to these women. Some women participated in the genocide alongside their brothers, fathers and sons. They killed, tortured, informed, and collaborated with killers. As a group, women were not blameless, although they represented only 2.3 per cent of the participants, but for the most part they were victims (Powley 2003). One major factor that led to the extreme violence against Tutsi women was inter-ethnic marriage. These women were betrayed by their husbands – some of them were killed by their own husbands who were under pressure from extremist Hutus. The logic was, ‘either you kill your Tutsi wife or we kill you’ (Avega-Agahozo 1998).

### The role of women in reconstruction

The conflict in Rwanda was to some degree gender based (as shown above), and recovery must be too! Gender-based and sexual brutality was employed as a tool for violence and conflict. This is a trend that we see today in civil wars, for example in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), in which hundreds of women are raped every week. Reports from organisations such as Médicins Sans Frontières and Human Rights Watch show how every day clinics have to deal with sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/Aids and the trauma that goes with these experiences. In Darfur, gruesome rape cases are reported. Thus the role of women in reconstruction and peace-building has become imperative.

In the immediate aftermath in Rwanda, women and girls constituted 70 per cent of the population. This provides a strong rationale for the focus on Rwanda as a model in the reconstruction of a failed state (Powley 2003). Owing to the demographic shift and social upheaval, Rwandese women have assumed non-traditional roles, including leadership in the public sector. The women were in the forefront of finding homes for orphans, caring for survivors and rebuilding homes (Izabiliza 2003). In the private and public sector, women emerged as leaders in fields in which they had once been virtually invisible, such as bank tellers, cab drivers, mechanics and cabinet members (Enda 2003).

From the discourse so far, one can deduce an internal paradox in which state failure, which culminates in civil war or genocide, can bring about new opportunities for women to transform their lives in terms of their independence and empowerment. Conflict opens up unintended spaces for empowering women, producing new socio-political and economic realities. Realities such as these drew attention to a more subtle and unfamiliar distinction and achievement provided by the Rwandese women. Women were able to use the opportunities that arose during the genocide. They became heads of households, assumed land rights, rebuilt homes, repatriated thousands of displaced people, and made important decisions.

Comparative research reveals that this new empowerment is not always sustainable. For example, in Mozambique, after the conflict, the chiefs did not recognise the new roles
and responsibilities that had been gained by women. In Eritrea, heroines and women icons soon lost their newly gained independence after the war. In Rwanda, though isolated cases of backlash still exist, the difference is that the government acknowledged the ingenious ways in which women bore the brunt of the genocide with resilience and endurance, and yet stood up with boldness and determination to rebuild their families, their communities and their country. Thus the government put in place mechanisms to defend the spaces created for women during the struggle.

This leads to an assessment of how the government of Rwanda made the inclusion of women a hallmark of its programme for post-genocide recovery and reconstruction (Powley 2003). This approach is novel in both intent and scope, in that it resonates with, and gives meaning to Security Council Resolution 1325 of October 2000, which calls for the involvement of women in the reconstruction of nation-states. The role of women was formalised in the constitution, which set aside 20 of the 80 seats in the Chamber of Deputies for women. Throughout all levels of government in Rwanda, positions have been created to address women’s issues and gender concerns. At national level, the Ministry of Gender and Women in Development coordinates with the government in gender-mainstreaming policies, creating gender focal points in other key ministries and conducting gender awareness training. At provincial level, there are civil servants with gender and women portfolios. At district level, the post of vice-mayor for gender has been created and local women’s councils are active at cell levels. At the official opening of a gender-training workshop for parliamentarians in 1999, President Paul Kagame said:

> The question of gender equality in our society needs a clear and critical evaluation in order to come up with concrete strategies to map the future development in which men and women are true partners and beneficiaries. My understanding of gender is that it is an issue of good governance, good economic management and respect of human rights (Powley 2003).

One can infer that the government did not regard these aims as philosophical ideas, but as necessary, practical mechanisms for reconciliation and reconstruction. In the March 2001 sectoral and district elections, Rwanda employed an electoral mechanism aimed at including women (and the youth, who were formerly unrepresented). Each voter used three ballots: a general ballot, a woman ballot and a youth ballot. The triple ballot voting technique was effective in getting women into office and building the partnership that Kagame talked about. While this technique guaranteed women’s participation, it created space for women to compete and gain experience in campaigning and in serving in government (Powley 2003). Historically, women’s participation in politics and decision-making in Rwanda has been insignificant, owing to the patriarchal social structure of this society, with one exception: Queen Muhumuza, wife of King Rwabugyiri, gained prominence by becoming involved in political struggles, including the fight against colonialism. She was banished from Rwanda and was killed in Uganda by colonialists.
Unfortunately, her role has often been portrayed as negative and used to discourage women from public participation.

Another mechanism used by the government is a parallel system of women’s councils and women-only elections. These are grassroots structures, elected at cell level by women only (and then through indirect election at each successive administrative level), which operate in parallel with the general local councils, and represent women’s concerns. (Izibiliza 2003). The role of the women’s council is one of advocacy rather than policy implementation. Women are involved in skills training and awareness campaigns. They articulate women’s views and concerns on education, health, and security to local authorities. This system has been effective in that it brought some women into the national parliament. It breaks the traditional bonds that have characterised male dominance and women’s subordination in Rwanda. Berthe Mukamusoni, a parliamentarian, says: ‘Hitherto women were not supposed to talk, or “think” in the public arena; the women’s councils have been a mobilisation tool educating women to express their views.’ However, although Rwanda is used as a model in this discussion, the participation of women is still in its infancy; a lot needs to be done to fulfil these initiatives. For example, the women who participate at grassroots level and in the councils are doing great work, but their involvement is often disparaged as ‘volunteer’, charitable or social. (Had these positions been occupied by men, they would have been funded and paid.) Women have strength in grassroots organisations; they are involved in providing food for the community in the agricultural sector; and they have to provide clean water for the families. These vital contributions cannot be regarded as merely social and charitable.

What has been the impact on the role of women?

In Rwanda today, women hold nearly 49 per cent of the seats in the Lower House of Parliament. This is the greatest representation worldwide, according to a tally by the Geneva-based Inter-Parliamentary Union. In 2003 the union reported that Rwanda ‘had come the closest to reaching parity between men and women of any national parliament’, replacing long-time champion Sweden (Enda 2003). This set-up has seen women’s contributions to good governance. Women began serving in the executive, legislative and judiciary arms of government. This kind of high-level involvement is likely to have a great impact on how girl children perceive their role in Rwandan society. It calls for a challenge to the government of Rwanda to reform the educational system to ensure that girls have access to education, should women’s empowerment and their role in peace-building and reconstruction be sustainable. The first executive secretary of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, established in March 1999, was Aloisca Inyumba. She saw its conception, design and initial programmes (Powley 2003). The commission shaped its agenda through grassroots consultations throughout the country.
and initiated civic education programmes. Today, Fatuma Ndangiza, another talented woman, is the executive secretary of this commission.

In 2001, Rwanda revived a traditional conflict resolution mechanism: the Gacaca system. This is a traditional participatory and restorative judicial process, which today is modelled on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa (Meintjes et al 2001). Women are being elected as judges in this system, a position traditionally reserved for highly respected men. Although researchers have pointed to the weaknesses of the system, it suffices to highlight the role played by women. Women are the primary witnesses of the genocide and so will be the best to deal with reconciliation. Women participated in drafting the new constitution in May 2003.

The post-genocide period has been characterised by women performing non-traditional roles such as decision-making, managing financial resources, building households and roads, thus increasing their access to and control over resources and above all participation in the reconstruction and development process. The socio-economic empowerment of women in the reconstruction period has brought tangible changes in community perceptions of women; it has redefined roles and responsibilities for women and contributed to building ‘lasting peace’ and restoring reconciliation. Women have contributed remarkably to the repatriation of refugees, working side by side with men in constructing houses (thus breaking taboos such as one that says that if a woman constructs a house, it leaks). This is not to suggest that women can reconstruct a failed state on their own, but their outstanding contribution in Rwanda provides a strong model for good governance. There are many other ways that demonstrate what the women in Rwanda have done in the past eleven years in the reconstruction and rebuilding of the state. The focus for this discussion is to show how in seeking human security and peace for the world, it is imperative to include women as partners and beneficiaries, not only as victims.

**Conclusion**

The assessment of women’s role in the reconstruction of a failed state is timely in that a number of conflicts in Africa and elsewhere are gendered. Women have been targeted and used as weapons of war in much the same way that terrorists target civilians. In the DRC, thousands of women have been raped; the same can be said of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Sudan. On another note, in the pursuit of ways to prevent conflict, and build sustainable peace, the world is searching for effective means of establishing human security. This is why the United Nations declared a decade for women (1976–1985), recommending that one third of legislators in states should be women. The UN has gone further in the initiative by Security Council Resolution 1325 to involve women in the process of reconstruction and peace building. One recommendation to the Security Council would be that while Resolution 1325 is a positive step, women’s involvement
must go beyond nation-states. Women’s representation in the Security Council itself must be advocated. This is where the highest level of diplomacy and decision-making takes place. While many have acknowledged the positive role of Rwandese women in reconstruction and peace-building, women need to be fully empowered to compete in presidential elections. Perhaps they could learn from Liberia, where Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf became president in 2006. The international community has to accept the example provided by Africa for world initiatives in global governance, and not push it aside as models for Iraq, Afghanistan, East Timor and Cambodia.

References


