

What contribution can women bring on Board?

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Following the outbreak of the conflict in South Sudan in December 2013, between the government under H.E. President Kiir and rebel leader Dr. Riek Macher, South Sudan as a new independent state faces enormous challenges. These challenges include a deteriorating security situation, a collapsing economy, a society divided by tribal alliances and allegiances, and the loss of property and lives.

Although the fighting is between the military supporters of the two leaders, the victims of the fighting are the communities. Women and children are the principal targets of the military on both sides, and they are left helpless and defenseless. Issues of war, conflict and human rights affect both men and women, but women suffer disproportionately. Women suffer more domestic abuse than men and currently, sexual violence is at its worst. Being the principal caretaker for children, women often remain at home while men find refuge or join the fight

Since the December 2013 crisis, South Sudanese women's groups at different levels and in different locations have been playing a vital role in calling and working for peace, yet such efforts were not coordinated. Following shared consultations with women leaders working for peace in Juba, whom expressed the need to come together to share ways of reinforcing women's voices in the peace process, the Women Monthly Forum on peace process was established to act as a foundation to update, coordinate and share with women leaders; to lobby and advocate for women's inclusion and participation in the peace processes and provide feedback loop on activities and issues surrounding women engagement in the peace process. The forum, which comprises of around 42 women's groups and has a membership of 81 individual women leaders (representing nine states), has a secretariat composed of 10 core team members.

In response to numerous violations of the cessation of hostilities agreements, delayed negotiations and unstable signed agreements, South Sudanese civil society leaders, women leaders, politicians, and academia came together to advocate for peace through the Women Monthly Forum on peace process. The WMF then held multiple meetings and events, including a Procession and National Prayer on peace-building, as well as issuing statements such as an open communiqué, press releases, and a women's position paper on the peace process. These led to women being recognised in the IGAD, it also led to peace negotiations in Addis Ababa under the umbrella of the women Bloc and finally, women are now legitimate stakeholders of the Agreement.

After over a year of negotiations, the Peace Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan was signed in August 2015. Although the agreement focuses primarily on power sharing, many questions remain unanswered, especially on issues related to women and an inclusive transition. The south Sudanese women envision their engagement to continue to represent grass root women's voices in the implementation of the current agreement or any other future political processes including peace building.

During negotiations, the IGAD mediators allowed four women called the ‘Women’s Bloc’ to participate but as observers only—they could not make propositions to change the text of the agreement and they lacked voting power in critically contentious issues such as accountability for women as victims of the current conflict. Although there were women delegates from CSOs, faith-based groups and representatives of the warring parties to the peace talks, there were little to no consultations on views of women at the community level for inclusion in the peace agreement and processes. Women’s issues were not substantively addressed in the agreement, including issues of gender-based violence and sexual assault.

With continued violations of the cessation of hostilities agreement, misinformation and misinterpretation of the content of the agreement, the majority of the public, including women must play an active role in holding the warring parties accountable and ensure the implementation of the peace agreement for a lasting and sustainable peace.

Now that the agreement is signed, the next step for women now is to find and address the Gender Gaps in the Peace Agreement and Peace Processes: this can be done by strengthening their coordination, doing a gender analysis of the agreement and the peace process and then educate citizens, on the national, state and grassroots levels, on the state of gender equity in the current agreement and process. This will lay the foundation for advocacy for more inclusion of women in peacebuilding and the transition.

To ensure that these gaps are addressed and the agreement is implemented properly, women throughout the country should be prepared to monitor the agreement and to advocate for women’s inclusion and participation in key areas of the peace agreement, including the legislative and institutional reforms, economic empowerment through the implementation of the Women Development Fund, constitutional-making processes, electoral review, and monitoring and evaluation of the peace agreement. This will address the issue of the exclusion of women’s voices by connecting the voices of women with other women leaders and decision-makers.

However, there is also a need for awareness raising and disseminating information about the peace agreement at a national, state and grassroots level. Through this information, civil society nationwide will be better informed and better able to support the implementation of the peace agreement and conduct advocacy around it. Holding briefing meetings on the agreement for all women leaders at all levels. This is what the south Sudanese women are currently doing and needs to be done continuously.

The Women under the WMF will then compile information from state consultations to share with other stakeholders to the agreement; an overview of the content of the peace agreement, the implementation mechanism and the role of women in the peace process. The aim is to incorporate citizens’ views (especially women’s) into the implementation of the agreement to gain legitimacy and ownership.

In conclusion, there is still so much for women to do if they are to be caretakers of the fruits of the agreement, access justice and live in a secure and peaceful environment. Women, being half of South Sudan’s population, should participate and have their voices heard in all democratic process including the constitutional review process and the current peace process.