Women, religion, violence and peace-building: The need for a gender-relational approach to conflict transformation

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1. Introduction

"The nexus between gender justice and reconciliation means that there is no justice and reconciliation without gender justice. If we don't apply a gender lens to any peace-building, community led reconciliation and mechanisms for justice we only further entrench violence and structural oppression against women, LGBTIQ+ persons and reinforce violent masculinities. If rebuilding the nation is reimagining a better, more just society, then we must prioritise the creation of a gender-healed nation (Emdon, 2017)."

The complex interplay between gender, conflict and post-conflict rebuilding is receiving renewed attention around the world. There is an increased awareness of how long-term violence impacts economic livelihoods, socio-cultural norms and gender roles, which in turn increase the effects of conflict and peace on women in particular. Gendering peacebuilding is noted as essential for sustainable peace (Reinke 2016). In such gendered peacebuilding, it is essential that violence against women (VAW) is seen multi-dimensionally. What underlies all forms of VAW is "a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to the domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women" (DEDAW, 1993). Therefore, addressing VAW, during conflict or peace, requires addressing the structural gender inequalities that facilitate this violence (COFEM, 2017), rather than just the overt manifestations that can draw most public attention (such as sexual violence survivors).

Women's exclusion from formal peacebuilding processes form part of this understanding of VAW. But many women have found creative ways to contest their formal exclusion, to engage in peace-making and peacebuilding differently, and to raise important questions of gendered harms. This concept note highlights key lessons learned in terms of this creative engagement and on-going exclusion, as well as focusing on specific gendered harms in peacebuilding, reconciliation and post-conflict settings. The implications of these findings will then be tied to the potential role of religion and religious leaders in conflict, peacebuilding and reconstruction. Three countries will be used as short case study examples: South Africa, Uganda and Liberia.

Liberia's 14-year civil war had two main phases and 14 failed peace agreements. It ended in 2003 with the signing of a comprehensive peace agreement and a 2005 democratic election. The conflict was characterised by tribalism, use of child soldiers (15-20,000) and female combatants (30-40%) and high levels of sexual violence by all sides, often tied to bodily mutilations. 150-300,000 people are estimated to have died with over 2 million displaced. Post-conflict, Liberia remains a fragile state, with 90% unemployment, 80% living below the poverty line, high rates of VAW and a corrupt judiciary. However it has also promoted the inclusion of women in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconciliation and in public life (Le Roux, 2014).

South Africa, whilst not experiencing conflict in a conventional sense, nevertheless faced the 'ravages of a system of domination that created two distinct worlds' and systematically deprived black men and women in different ways. An estimated 16-20 000 people died over the peace talks period with high levels of vigilante violence (Meintjes, 2009). South Africa offers lessons around reconciliation as part of sustainable peace-building and transitional justice through its 1995-1998 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process and its involvement of both religious figures and women's voices in this. Women also played a role shaping the new dispensation through a consultative Constitutional process. Two decades on however VAW and inequity still remain endemic in society.

The 20 year conflict in Northern Uganda, spearheaded by Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and countered by the Ugandan government, lasted from 1987-2006. It was characterised by the use of child soldiers, severe bodily mutilations and high levels of sexual violence within local communities, including the taking of long term 'wives' by commanders. Women took on new roles in this time, often being designated economic heads of household in aid distribution within the IDP camps where many families lived for years. After the 2006 peace agreement, the focus has been on community reintegration and rehabilitation here, with limited success to date and high levels of unemployment in the North (Reinke, 2016).

2. Engaging Women: Moving from conflict to a sustainable peace for all?

In the process of moving from conflict to peace and shaping post-conflict settings, women are playing a role. As the discussion below will show, this role is usually unacknowledged or at the very least underrated. Nevertheless, their presence and participation is very real every step of the way: as victims, combatants and peacemakers during conflict; as facilitators and mobilizers during peacebuilding processes; as strategists and leaders during reconciliation activities; and as activists and lobbyists for post-conflict gender-inclusive structures. They fulfill these roles both as individuals within their particular positions of influence (be it local, provincial, national or international), and also creatively through coordinated group effort, using women's networks and organizations. What is characteristic of all of these efforts, is that women use innovative and novel methods of achieving their outcomes, at least partly due to the fact that they are fairly consistently excluded from the formal processes. But including women formally does not mean simply allowing them to join the existing (often failing) negotiation tables. Rather, it means recognizing the value and impact of their innovative approaches to peace-making and peacebuilding, their alternative, often bottom-up methods of engagement, and their women-centred agendas. Their insights, gendered perspectives and methods offer vital contributions that are urgently needed if peacebuilding is to be sustainable for all. Only in this way can movement be made intentionally towards a world where violence is not merely transferred into other spaces, remaining endemic in new concerning ways in peacekeeping forces, economic violence, crime rates, domestic violence and child abuse, but where its underlying structural roots are dismantled. This sits at the heart of a gender-inclusive approach to conflict transformation and not merely to short-term conflict resolution.

Various examples from around the world can be given of how women within conflict-torn countries have mobilized for peace. These include individual women located within positions of influence (such as Betty Bigombe in Uganda) or through women's networks and organizations (such as WIPNET in Liberia) that engage in often informal discussions with fighting factions, brokering and encouraging talks around peace. However, women have had to adopt creative strategies of engagement in the face of exclusion from formal peace talks and government delegations. Due to the exclusion of women, peace negotiations themselves remain gendered, reflecting a male and masculine bias. This results in the products of peace negotiations (such as transitional justice mechanisms) typically carrying the same gender bias. Bell and O'Rourke (in Borer, 2009) see this gender bias of peace processes as the core reason why it is so difficult to achieve equal gender relations in a post-conflict setting, which in turn contributes to the continuation of VAW. Furthermore, even if women are included in peacebuilding and reconciliation processes, this inclusion usually only recognizes women in their role of peacemakers and not in their role as combatants in conflict and perpetrators of violence (Meintjes, 2012). This fails to recognize women's agency and limits the issues on which they can speak. It can reinforce an exclusive binary view where women as victims are juxtaposed against men as perpetrators (Scanlon, 2016).

Betty Bigombe, District Resident Commissioner in Gulu, Uganda, received global recognition for pioneering instigating peace work with LRA rebels, involving and training religious, district and community leaders in this process seen as the groundwork for later peace, and for involvement in post-conflict politics (Oywa, 2002; Rubimbwa & Mugisha, 2011). During the conflict years, ordinary Liberian women were mobilised by organisations like the *Women in Peacebuilding Network* (WIPNET)[1] in creative grassroots activities including sex bans, rallies, marches for peace, and the drawing of attention to sexual violence in the conflict. They attended and lobbied formal peace talks and used resourceful strategies to engage rebel leaders as objective intermediaries. In 2003, WIPNET spearheaded a woman's *Mass Action for Peace Campaign* to confront and engage rebels all over the country. Members also attended the 2003 Accra peace talks. Despite being excluded from formal peace negotiations, they actively lobbied with participants during breaks. When negotiations were failing, they staged a sit-in, refusing to allow them to leave until meaningful agreements were reached. Two weeks later the Peace Agreement was signed (Ouellet, 2013: 14-15).

While signing of peace accords are an important step, active implementation is needed in order for conflict not to erupt again. Women have also played roles in this peacebuilding phase, as was recognized in 2000 by UN Resolution 1325, aimed at mitigating women's exclusion from international peace and security agendas. This was followed by six more resolutions and has been partly effective in reshaping representation and inclusion, although criticized for taking a 'women protective' and not a 'gender relational' stance (Scanlon, 2016; El-Bushra, 2012). Key women globally are playing recognized roles as peace-conveners. See, for example, the active role of the *Global Network of Women Peacebuilders* in many conflict zones. However, this may not translate into improved on-going participation or improved status of all women at all levels, especially in poorer rural areas.

After the Liberian Peace Agreement was signed, WIPNET shifted its focus from mediation to implementation to engage women directly, empowering civil society as a watchdog. When women were shut out from formal disarmament processes they again took up creative strategies, e.g. engaging with fighters in the camps to convince them to lay down their arms (Lawson, 2017).

Woman are also present in reconciliation processes, not least because they are so often the victims of conflict. Unfortunately, reconciliation processes are often detrimental to such female victims, prioritizing public peacebuilding rather than individual healing. One sees this especially in relation to the sexual violence perpetrated against women during conflict. With the emphasis on the high-level reconciliation narrative, it often places an unfair burden on victims to perform pre-set roles publicly and this process can even lead to secondary trauma, as was noted in South Africa with the TRC. A focus solely on national unity often creates blind spots around local intersectional power relations, such as customary law (Musuva, Adekeye & Cook, 2015).

Scanlon (2016) points to lessons from South Africa regarding the nexus between gender justice and reconciliation, by highlighting the concept of "gendered harms". She points to the danger of "geographies of violence" where so-called reconciliation processes merely move existing violence into interpersonal spaces, rather than resolving it, something she suggests has been seen in South Africa. She calls instead for a gender inclusive reconciliation that goes beyond gender mainstreaming to explore the existing unequal power relations between men and women. These are often perpetuated and reinforced by reconciliation processes, where only public structures and hierarchies are overhauled, while private ones are left untouched (Glatte: 2011).

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[1] WIPNET's Peace Campaign received recognition when their founder received the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize.

The establishment of peace offers possibilities for the transformation of gender roles and the empowerment of women. In many countries, women's organizations have seized the opportunity to push for reforms and greater participation. (Heinecken, 2013).This was illustrated in South Africa (as well as Uganda and Liberia) with the drafting of new constitutions, legislation, political structures and institutions, creating an opportunity to focus attention on reshaping gender-equality issues.

In South Africa, women made submissions to the constitutional process, building on their long struggle roles as fighters, activists and organisers. Effective pressure was exerted through the formed-for-purpose, broad-based Woman's National Congress (WNC), which united diverse women's organisations in regional coalitions to put pressure on male-led formal negotiations. It significantly improved gender provisions in the constitution, monitoring gendered implications and gendering citizenship (Meintjes, 2012). It lobbied effectively against suggestions by traditional leaders that women remain minors and that customary law trump constitutional values (Meintjes, 2012). Their influence ensured that the Constitution's founding principles reflected both non-racism and non-sexism, and set up a Commission for Gender Equality as a new national human rights institution. This offered a window of opportunity for women as traditionally private issues such as land rights were catapulted into the public realm. But while the WNC mobilised around a shared agenda of gender justice and equality, unfortunately it has not retained a shared momentum longer term, fragmenting into party identities (Meintjes, 2009).

However, the implementation of gender-sensitive legislation and structures does not automatically or necessarily follow the official sanctioning of such legislation and structures. For example, post-transition, South Africa has been formally seen as a "women-friendly state" (Meintjes 2009:108), with strong gender legislation domestically embedded. But while senior political representation by women (nearly 45%) has been achieved post-apartheid through an effective quota system, effective translation of gender laws and policies remains a concern. Real material and economic transformation remains elusive for many poor rural black women, with feminization of poverty, high unemployment and few female economic leaders, as well as some of the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world. Political will, legislation and action plans to improve female access to law courts, markets and commercial credit, as well as bodily autonomy, needs effective implementation if gender laws and policies are to translate into sustained justice (Bekoe 2007). Grassroots women's organizations can and are often playing a partnering role to link together women in government, female lawyers, and grassroots organizations around key issues. But the need to maintain momentum forwards is essential if gaps between words and actions are to be bridged. On-going inclusion of women in gender-responsive post-conflict restructuring programs is key – but at the same time female representation alone is not enough (as South Africa shows)

Lessons learnt
- Recognise the diverse, participatory roles that women play in both conflict and peace settings and avoid stereotyping them as only victims and/or peacemakers.
- Women and women's networks and organizations play a key and often innovative role in peace-making, peacebuilding, reconciliation, and post-conflict gender transformation.
- If there is only a pragmatic public performance of one high-level reconciliation narrative, the specific and diverse experiences and trauma of especially female victims can be side-lined.
- There is a need for gender-inclusive reconciliation processes that address specific gendered harms within the conflict. 'Thin' reconciliation processes have a tendency to merely shift violence from the public sphere to the private – where women are the biggest victims.
- On-going political will at all levels is important to ensure both women's representation and the inclusion of women's issues as a core part of peacebuilding and post-conflict agendas.
- Post-conflict settings offer opportunities for positive gender reforms but needs consistent ongoing efforts to ensure implementation that leads to systemic grassroots change.

3. VAW within all these spaces

Violence against women, and especially sexual violence, is a recognized aspect of armed conflict. What is less recognized is how VAW often continues in the aftermath of conflict, and the various, hidden forms that this violence often takes. For example, the exclusion of women from peace talks, peacebuilding and reconciliation processes – as discussed above – is in itself a form of VAW. And it results in gender biases in the outcomes of these processes, which in turn generate more and varied forms of VAW. During peace talks, peacebuilding and reconciliation it is therefore important not to just address the VAW explicitly perpetrated during the conflict, but to also look at what structures, systems, processes and social norms will need transformation so that further VAW is not generated.

Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programmes are an essential part of post-conflict recovery strategies; combatants need to be effectively reintegrated into society, socially, politically and economically. Many of them are also victims, especially in Liberia and Uganda where a large number of child soldiers were involved in the conflict. However, these programs can contribute to continued VAW, especially sexual violence, for a number of reasons. First, DDR programs tend to have a very low participation of female combatants, even where women and girls made up a significant part of the fighting force, as was the case in Liberia. This suggests and reinforces a failure in DDR programs to address the specific issues and security threats that women face during the post-conflict period (Heinecken, 2013). Second, programs are often run ineffectively, leaving civilians vulnerable to violence-prone, traumatized ex-combatants. Unemployed ex-combatants, often socialized into violence and militant masculinities during the armed conflict may form gangs that threaten communities post-conflict and may also engage in VAW (Bastick *et al.,* 2007).

At the individual level, one sees that during armed conflict, the gender roles and restrictions placed on women can be eased in some ways. In order for them and their families to survive, women are tacitly permitted to take on new roles, such as herding animals, building houses, running businesses, heading households, etc. (Sideris, 2000). Unfortunately, what one often sees post-conflict is that the empowerment that women have achieved during periods of conflict tends to be reversed once peace is established. The post-conflict setting often remains hostile towards women and in many societies, there are forceful attempts to place limits on women's roles and rights, positioning them again as subordinate to men (Meger, 2010). Post-conflict there is often a move to re-establish traditional gender roles (as 'natural'), even where gender transformation was part of revolutionary rhetoric and where women played an important role in political transformation (Borer, 2009).

Gender Backlash in South Africa – During the constitutional process, traditional leaders pushed for a return to an idealised traditional past, customary laws and traditional gender roles that had shifted over the struggle period. Women's involvement mitigated against this in important public ways with an ongoing presence in political spaces. But there were missed opportunities to challenge ideologies of domination in private spaces and rates of intimate partner violence suggest a patriarchal backlash to public empowerment (Meintjes, 2012).

Meintjes (2012: 17) notes "when the war is over, men want to return to their previous gender status where their authority remains dominant and unquestioned and this can be reinforced by a nationalist narrative positioning women back into caregiving roles as 'mothers of the nation'". Thus what is called a "patriarchal backlash" (Walby, 1990) takes place. Under such circumstances VAW and the threat of VAW continue to be ways through which women's subordination is policed and (re)enforced. Women may be pressured to limit their public leadership participation (Willett, 2010) due to the threat of violence as well as the lack of support for gendered needs or a concern that women's political activism will interfere with their expected role as mothers (Scanlon, 2016). High levels of

interpersonal violence send a clear signal regarding women's 'place', acting as a subtle deterrent on wider female advancement. VAW also serves as a means of regaining and retaining control over economic resources and over women's productive and reproductive rights (Borer, 2009).

Furthermore, the influence of military masculinity and hyper-masculinity also shape a wider sexually violent culture in civilian spaces. This leads to civilian men (and not only ex-combatants) within conflict-affected areas displaying militarized, hyper-masculine attitudes of violent verbal and physical aggression and sexual relations that establish male dominance and female submission, with little concern for female experience (Lwambo, 2013). Hypermasculine responses to female empowerment carry a real threat of VAW and offer one explanation for why post-conflict rates of sexual violence often remain so high. This 'masculinity crisis' highlights the importance of gendered peacebuilding, reconciliation and VAW interventions that can specifically engage with root causes of violence, such as harmful masculinities (Scanlon, 2016).

VAW is an issue that is inadequately addressed during peacebuilding and reconciliation processes. When VAW, especially at a structural level, perpetrated during conflict is not addressed during reconciliation processes, it tends to bleed into the new dispensation. Increasingly research (e.g. Horn et al 2014) is exploring how VAW, especially intimate partner violence, often increases post-conflict.

South Africa's TRC and women
Women made a range of submissions, including on the role of religion in reinforcing patriarchy. Diverse voices narrated poignant testimony and lament by victims, and acknowledgement by some perpetrators. However, many women victims were not healed by publicly testifying and even cited further trauma (Scanlon 2016). Gender-based crimes were subsumed here under human rights violations. Stigma and shame related to speaking in open court made barriers high for women to speak of their own experiences and they were predominantly presented as wives and mothers, silencing their sexually violent experiences in the struggle, and showing a gendered hierarchy of harms. Ross (undated) notes that only 4 out of 59 women who gave public TRC testimony spoke about their own experiences of violations. TRC recommendations around dealing with conflict-related trauma as integral to peacebuilding did not materialise and nor did many reparations. Such reconciliation without social justice could be seen as treating wounds lightly, failing to confront entrenched legacies of gendered socio-economic inequalities and normalised violations, while being preoccupied with individual violations (Meintjes, 2009). The TRC responded to many women's suggestions but "did not heed the group's call for a more integrated understanding of the gendered nature of struggles and a gendered methodology in research and reporting" (Meintjes, 2009:106).

Women's organizations working in post-conflict settings have highlighted the psycho-social needs for healing at community level, including counseling, survivor shelters, focal report people, and on-going reproductive health support. They stress the existence of gendered harms, where conflict has affected women differently, and thus their need for specific interventions. While NGO work by women can signal women's marginality at formal government level and even reinforce a stereotyped role for women as 'carers,' their roles here also broaden how peacebuilding and reconciliation is conceptualized, for example the value of gender-sensitive traditional community rituals (Bubenzer & Kasande, 2016).

Reflecting on women's experiences of VAW – and especially the experiences of sexual violence survivors – highlights the need for a multi-level justice that responds to both historical and present violence, and also prevents future violence. The first level is the importance of institutional justice for sustained peace. It is very difficult for a survivor to be part of a process of relational reconciliation (or simply for her to move on from what happened to her) if she has not received some form of justice at institutional and constitutional levels. What makes healing so difficult is that

VAW survivors rarely receive this public justice. At country-level, survivors still rarely access the judicial system or receive justice, often due to a dual legal system where traditional law is applied to so-called 'family matters'. VAW is not always prioritized or even recognized as in issue in intimate partner relations (Maddison, 2016).

Secondly, justice requires the reshaping of power dynamics. Justice for women requires the restructuring of interpersonal power dynamics. Justice is not only about punishing the perpetrator, but about changing the power imbalances and ideologies that allowed violence to be perpetrated in the first place. The patriarchal underpinnings of society have to be transformed in ways that go beyond merely addressing the symptoms of survivors. Holistic justice requires a process of the transformation of multiple intersectional dominations, including male and female, which in turn can enable gender reconciliation (Scanlon, 2012; Glatte, 2011).

Thirdly, justice should be multi-leveled. Working simultaneously at multiple levels around both VAW and reconciliation is critical to prevent one form of engagement merely being transferred into another sphere. At a local level, work must be done relationally with survivors, perpetrators, community leaders and communities; at macro level, work must be done institutionally and constitutionally to transform legal, judicial and political systems (Glatt, 2011).

Lastly, justice should be restorative (a key aspect of the South African TRC) with a core goal of empowering the disempowered. Focused effort must be put into rebuilding the fragmented identities of all marginalized victims, including women survivors. This kind of work is being done in survivor networks, where survivors support each other, but also raise awareness and engage in advocacy. Justice is not just about punishment of the guilty, or about restructuring power, but also about restoring the sense of self and value of the survivor. Evidence suggests that it is this aspect that is either neglected or assumed to happen organically, often resulting in unresolved identity issues around both perpetrators and survivors which can shape the next generations and lead to new conflicts (Bubenzer & Tankin, 2015).

Lessons learnt:
- Recognize the various forms of VAW and the need for sustained transformation of the societal structures and systems that underpin its justification.
- DDR programs inadequately recognize women as combatants and therefore do not address their specific needs.
- Ineffective implementation of DDR programming may lead to traumatized ex-combatants schooled in militant masculinity and gang violence continuing to perpetrate VAW.
- A 'patriarchal backlash' often occurs in post-conflict settings, where men reinforce gendered limitations and normative expectations placed on women. VAW is one way such reinforcement is enacted.
- Harmful (and usually sexually violent) masculinities become more common due to conflict. Peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts should engage in addressing these harmful masculinities.
- Institutional justice is important for addressing VAW, as relational reconciliation is difficult to achieve without any form of institutional justice.
- Justice for women requires the restructuring of interpersonal power dynamics, which means transforming the power imbalances and ideologies that undergird violence.
- Justice should be multi-leveled, in order to avoid VAW in post-conflict settings simply moving from the public sphere to the private spaces of home and community.
- Justice should be restorative, restructuring survivors' sense of self and power, rather than creating secondary trauma though a lack of gender-sensitivity in the processes.

4. Implications for Religious Leader Engagement

Religious leaders and institutions are often important actors in numerous peace-building zones, playing a key social role, especially in fragile states. The populations of many conflict-ridden countries continue to have high levels of active religious affiliation. Religious actors and ideas have significant social influence at multiple levels of society (Le Roux et al, 2017), especially in times of transition, typically forming an important and sustainable grassroots social network across rural and urban areas where other structures may be limited. But religion can be caught up in the conflict itself and typically plays multiple, changing and even ambivalent roles at various stages of peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. These ambivalent possibilities become even more so in regard to issues such as gender, exclusion of women and VAW. Better awareness of these multiple roles can shape a gender-inclusive process around reconciliation and post-conflict processes that amplifies constructive roles for religious leaders that are gender-transformative, not regressive. This section highlights case studies that offer insights on ways in which religious actors can and have been both a resource and a roadblock, specifically in relation to women's involvement in peacebuilding and VAW post-conflict in South Africa, Uganda and Liberia.

In South Africa, where over 80% of the population affiliate with Christianity (Rule and Mncwango, 2010; Statistics South Africa, 2016), religions and their leaders played multiple roles in struggle and transition periods: legitimating dominating ideologies; mobilising people in ecumenical and interfaith grassroots resistance; and public TRC roles for faith leaders. A shift away from a Christian constitution required faith leaders to rethink their public roles in the new society. Representations by faith communities to the TRC highlighted this ambivalent role and stressed the need for religion to play an on-going healing role at community level, including implementing human rights that ensured gender justice (Villa-Vicencio, 1992). Women of faith stressed the patriarchal nature of many religious systems. However, this has failed to translate into coordinated engagement within society, with a backlash by some religious leaders that can reinforce traditional gender roles and customary practices in the name of religious tradition and morality.

In Uganda, according to 2014 statistics, over 84% of the population is affiliated with Christianity and 14% with Islam (Ugandan Census Report, 2016). Religion played a role in the conflict, often tied to tribal identity and seen in the use of religious rhetoric by the Lord's Resistance Army. At the same time, traditional and religious leaders also played an important role in brokering peace. The *Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative* and the *Catholic Justice and Peace Commission* (who resolved their sectarian differences to work together ecumenically) are two examples of such religious leaders and structures that worked to establish peace (Roderiguez, 2002). Furthermore, in the rehabilitation process, religious and traditional models have been involved in attempted community reintegration of former child soldiers (Nabukeera-Musoke, 2009, Bubenzer & Tankink, 2017).

In Liberia, according to the 2008 national census, 85.6% of Liberians identify as Christian and 12.2% as Muslim (Liberian Census Report, 2009). Religious groups form an old, influential aspect of Liberian civil society, with significant moral authority. They have played roles in human rights monitoring before the war, conflict-resolution within it, and post-conflict peacebuilding. For example, during the conflict-resolution process, the *Interfaith Mediation Committee* modelled a successful approach. However, in the new dispensation there is a danger that without capacity building they may reinforce a return to traditional social norms in ways that mitigate against the needs for gendered social transformation.

4. 1 Possible Roadblocks/Dangers for religious leader engagement

An androcentric approach that fails to see gendered harms. Religious traditions and the use of their rituals can unwittingly re-enforce gendered blindness or a selective recognition of violations. It can also place a strong emphasis on individual virtues, such as forgiveness and harmony. While important, it can be simplistic when applied to complex post-conflict spaces and unwittingly reinforce gender stereotypes by portraying women only as peacemakers or being silent on structural violence. For example, South Africa's official reconciliation processes, embodied publicly by the TRC, were religiously garbed and presided over by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in formal religious dress. Its public narrative was also laden with Christian overtones, with public prayers and religious ministers on the commission. While women made a range of submissions, including noting the role of religion in reinforcing patriarchy, it was inadequately addressed at the time. Later scholars have noted that the TRC lacked an "integrated understanding of the gendered nature of struggles and a gendered methodology in research and reporting" (Meintjes, 2009:106).

The patriarchal nature of religious institutions. Multiple studies have shown that most religious institutions such as churches remain patriarchal institutions (Phiri & Nadar, 2011; Museka et al., 2013). This is embodied by their predominantly male leadership and structures and plays a definite but often unrecognized role in both the marginalization of women and the continued perpetration of VAW. Through their beliefs, practices, structure, and interpretation of sacred texts, they can also promote male interests and fail to acknowledge or address pressing women's issues such as gender inequality and VAW (Kanyoro, 1996; Franz, 2002; Nadar, 2004). In the light of the need to tackle women's exclusion from peace-building and post-conflict leadership and its gendered biases, religious involvement needs rethinking if it is not to compound these (Silvestri & Mayall, 2015).

Entanglement of Religion and Culture. As religion, culture and society are intimately linked (Ter Haar, 2013), religious leaders can find it difficult to challenge the beliefs and practices of the culture/society in which they are located. Various studies show that religious institutions are to a large extent a reflection of the culture and society in which they are situated and can often replicate societal and cultural injustices (Le Roux, 2014). An approach that places both religious and traditional leaders uncritically together can reinforce this slippage, leading to an approach that unquestioningly reinforces rather than transforms problematic aspects of traditions. Reinforcement of discriminatory cultural or social norms as natural or god-ordained can shape the post-conflict space in ways that may be harmful to women and/or lead to reversals in gains made by women over the conflict period. For example, in the South African constitutional process, some religious and traditional leaders pushed for a return to old customary laws that marginalized women, polarizing the needs of religious tradition and of women.

4.2 Opportunities for engagement

Evidence around working with religious actors in diverse settings on difficult issues suggests that they often can be on-going catalysts for sustained positive change and are not just one-off entry points into the community (Le Roux et al, 2017). Gender-inclusive engagement here could amplify religion's positive possibilities for gender-transformation as part of sustainable peacebuilding. This requires engaging with religion's spiritual capital in ways that acknowledge its patriarchy, but also its dynamic diversity, and working to build credible, inclusive religious networks (Ter Haar, 2013).

Co-ordinated inter-and intra-faith engagement on issues of justice was seen during the transitional periods within each of the three case study countries, but may need strengthening post-conflict, especially in relation to VAW. Experiences in South Africa suggest that public religious engagement can dwindle or even collaborate with efforts to reverse important gains for women, rather than to consolidate them, giving patriarchal practices an "aura of morality" (Musuva, 2015:1). In the light of this, the four recommendations below offer some constructive opportunities for engagement:

1. *Religious groups can offer spaces for micro-level reconciliation.* Multi-level reconciliation points to the need for micro and macro-level engagement in post-conflict reconciliation, highlighting the role of storytelling in this process, with interlinked spaces of constitutional, institutional and relational reconciliation (Maddison 2017). Embodied rituals of lament, witnessing, and speaking one's truth can be important ways of hearing voices of survivors. This can play a role in processes of dialogue and engagement with former enemies, to acknowledge that building peace is an on-going process (McKay & De la Rey 2001).

2. *Intentional capacity building.* Religious leaders and institutions may have to confront their own internal and external practices and norms that still reinforce traditional gender roles, harmful masculinities, shaming of and discrimination against VAW survivors, and exclusion of women. They will need intentional gendered capacity building if they are to play transformational roles in grassroots post-conflict models (such as Liberia's peace huts), that authentically support multi-level reconciliation, bridge ethnic and gender divides, and restore inclusive social fabrics. As educators trusted by many within local communities, they have clear potential to disseminate these concepts widely through their own networks.

3. *Influential Change Agents.* Religious institutions, such as churches and mosques, typically have a unique ability to influence beliefs, attitudes and behavior at grassroots level. They can catalyze social transformation within communities and families where much VAW takes place. They can also mobilize wider justice-based socio-political engagement across a country, as has been illustrated by some women's religious groups that have already played creative roles, often outside official structures. Harnessing informal voices as a bottom-up approach can help to challenge the on-going male bias within religious structures, which is a result of male dominance of leadership positions. This dual approach to religious actors (Le Roux et al, 2017) enables better recognition of the important roles that many religious women have played and can still play in the implementation of new VAW laws and policies.

4. *Mobilizing a Wider Political Role for Justice.* Selected religious actors in many countries, including all three case study countries, made a shift from being solely neutral providers of pastoral care and support, to mobilizing a more active wider political role in struggles for peace and justice within the conflict, a role that often stems from core convictions within their respective religious identities. This may give them ongoing credibility and the clout to continue educating people post-conflict (through local networks) about the intersections of gender and peace and the need for damaging social norms to be transformed.

5. Conclusion

In the complex processes of moving from conflict to new post-conflict societies, the input, perspectives, and experiences of women should play a central and formally acknowledged role. But this should not be an 'add women and stir' approach to existing forms of peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction, many aspects of which are currently failing or problematic. Rather, it means significantly rethinking and transforming how sustainable peacebuilding is enacted by men and women together, in gender-relational ways that take specific note of context-specificity, as the case study examples demonstrate. It requires a creative re-envisioning of what a post-conflict, peaceful society should look like: not simply the reestablishment of the society prior to conflict, with its illusionary return to a golden past, but rather the transformation of society. A gender-relational approach to conflict transformation and not merely short-term conflict resolution is essential. Transitional and post-conflict settings offer possibilities for societies as a whole to move forward in positive ways. This should be seen as an opportunity to recalibrate all settings where conflict leads to violence, both public and private, a shared opportunity needing all stakeholders to participate.

Religious groups and their leaders hold influential positions within communities, especially within fragile states and in times of transition. They are often trusted institutions with grassroots institutional presence and moral authority. Faith leaders have played roles around human rights monitoring, peace-brokering in conflict, and continue to exert social influence in community spaces where women remain vulnerable. However, for religious groups and leaders to contribute to gender-relational processes of conflict transformation (rather than merely conflict resolution), they will frequently have to confront their own beliefs, norms and practices that continue to reinforce traditional gender roles, harmful masculinities, unwitting shaming of and discrimination against VAW survivors, and the exclusion of women from much formal leadership. They need gendered capacity building if they are to effectively catalyse and support women in particular within their institutions: to equip them for roles in wider society; to help enable them to be creative leaders longer term in post-conflict initiatives for gender justice; to support them in having their gendered harms voiced and their gendered needs met at many levels, as a part of the justice that makes peace real.

These gender-relational religious approaches can play a wider grassroots educative role in multi-level reconciliation in many spaces, by bridging divides, consolidating gains, and restoring inclusive social fabrics, and helping to prevent myriad violences from merely moving from the public arena into so-called private spaces. Religious leaders have the potential to be either roadblocks or resources in this important, gendered task of sustainable peacebuilding for justice.

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