

## **African Women's Contributions to the Women, Peace and Security Agenda**

**Summary:** This article shows how African leaders have been able to push through the Participation pillar of the WPS agenda leveraging the global framework and regional instruments. However, continued efforts in this area is dependent on the funding priorities and structures, which may continue to focus on protection.

Over the last three decades or so, the promotion of gender equality and the inclusion of gender perspectives has been a rallying cry for those seeking to transform global governance<sup>1</sup> so that women's experiences are also taken into consideration, especially feminist activists. The United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, Women Peace and Security (WPS) of 2000 is both a result of and has contributed to the greater acknowledgement of women's roles in international peace and security. UNSCR 1325, is the first of eight resolutions that make up the WPS agenda, a global normative framework. The WPS agenda is the result of years of campaign by feminists and women rights activists who felt that women's experiences were absent from international relations policy making, and in the responses to conflict. This global framework thus seeks to achieve gender justice for women by strengthening their participation and assuring their protection especially against sexual violence in violent conflict ultimately to build inclusive peace.

The WPS agenda consists of four pillars: Participation; Prevention; Protection; and Relief & Recovery. The Participation pillar calls for the holistic participation and representation of women at "all levels of decision-making, including peace-processes, electoral processes ... and the broader social-political sphere" (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 2013: 5). Prevention focuses on integration gender perspectives and allowing women to participate in the prevention of violent conflict. Importantly, this is intended to be adopted by each country represented in the UN through National Action Plans (NAPs) applied to both national and foreign policy, and also by regions through Regional Action Plans (RAPs) .

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<sup>1</sup> Global Governance is characterised by the network of political cooperation that governs transnational interactions through multilateral institutions at the global and regional levels.

Protection has been the most visible pillar of the WPS agenda. The United Nations (UN) and its agencies, countries, regional organisations and civil society, under this pillar, should protect the “rights and needs of women and girls in conflict and post-conflict settings” (Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 2013: 5). These practices of protection include the reporting and prosecution of sexual and gender-based violence. The pillar of Relief and Recovery extends the protection focus by prioritising the access that survivors of sexual and gender-based violence have to health services and trauma counselling.

The development of the WPS agenda has brought to the forefront of international relations practices the experiences of the most marginalised and vulnerable. NAPs are intended to provide the main mechanism through which countries commit to implementing the WPS agenda so that these marginalised voices are heard and integrated into the global practices of peace and security. The UN agency, UNWomen, and civil society organisations like *Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom* (WILPF) monitor and evaluate the extent to which countries meet the targets in their NAPs. Importantly, the global nature of WPS has allowed for the visibility of actors outside of Global North. These actors particularly those from the Global South, including regional organisations and transnational civil society groupings, have also used the opportunity to engage within the WPS process thereby articulating agency and representation in global fora.

Getting a broader sense of how the WPS works particularly through the work that happens in different regions in the world can provide a unique insight into how WPS priorities are brought out of the margins of global governance. Further, this gives the specific contexts of implementation including the variances that may occur in terms of prioritisation. The African Union (AU) as a regional organisation is one African actor that has been on the forefront of interpreting the **participation** pillar for implementation in the continent even when protection continues to be the dominant lens through which WPS is implemented.

### **What does it mean to Champion *Women’s Participation*?**

The African Union (AU) was founded in 2001 as the successor to pan-African Organisation of African Unity (OAU). The AU is a pan-African organisation to which all

African states belong. It is committed to representing the interests of Africans including those in the diaspora through deepened continental integration and in the multilateral contexts of global governance.

The AU has committed to promoting gender equality and integrating gender perspectives in all aspects of its work, and this is clearly articulated in its founding document, the Constitutive Act of the AU. Enthusiasm for the WPS especially is evident in the institutional concessions that have been made to take the agenda seriously. In 2014, former AU Chairperson Nkosana Dlamini-Zuma created the Office of the Special Envoy for Women Peace and Security. This Office has the primary responsibility for implementing the WPS. Senegalese feminist activist Bineta Diop was appointed as the first and as yet only Special Envoy. Prior to holding this position, she founded and led the pan-African umbrella organization for women's rights Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS). She thus came to the job at the AU with a wealth of experience from the civil society sector to continue a job she was already doing outside of the institutions.

Together with others such as executive director of UNWomen, and the current Deputy Secretary-General of the UN, the work on WPS has been expedited in the last 5 years. As executive director of UNWomen Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka is also the global champion for gender equality and agency with primary responsibility for ensuring the mainstreaming of the WPS agenda globally. She is a South African politician and feminist activist. A key part of her portfolio as the head of UN Women is to advance women's leadership and participation as identified in the 2011 – 13 Strategic Plan (Executive Board, 2011). To that end UN women has supported the training of women as political candidate; voter registration and importantly national campaigns that support women to leadership roles through financing of civil society organisations and other programmes.

Amina Mohammed holds the second highest position in the UN. She is and a former minister in the Nigerian government. From 2002 until 2005, Mohammed coordinated the Task Force on Gender and Education, which was part of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). She continues to support gender equality as the main

champion for the successor of the MDGs the sustainable development goals, the global poverty reduction and gender equality framework of the UN.

It is evident that substantive inroads on the WPS agenda has depended on women in leadership positions. One cannot discount that these women, to do this job, relied on the formal power derived from their official positions. In global governance, leadership roles for Africans has historically been limited, and this has especially been the case for African women, including on the continent where the majority head of states are still men. The important roles of these women and their achievement in an often hostile context further underscores why the participation pillar has been seen as fundamental to the African context. At the same time, it is not just that a woman was in charge that made the difference but rather that these particular women have committed to championing gender equality.

While the WPS agenda has acted as an amplifier for gender equality and women's rights aspirations at the regional level the animus for everyday practices can be found in existing African regional laws and legal frameworks. For example, in 2003, the Maputo Protocol, formally, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa was adopted by the AU. The aspiration is for all African countries to ratify the Protocol and codify it into domestic law. The Protocol links the priorities of gender equality on the continent to those affirmed within the WPS agenda particularly then UNSCR 1325. Moreover, and as part of the principle of gender equality as articulated in the Constitutive Act of the African Union make a commitment to the "full participation of African women as equal partners in Africa's development" (Maputo Protocol, 2003). Indeed Article 9 of the Protocol is dedicated to promoting the participation of women in political life (broadly defined) on the continent.

Similarly, in 2004, the AU adopted the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa to bring forward the aspirations of the Maputo Protocol. It emphasises the WPS agenda and the importance of participation and representation of women in decision making. It created the basis for the launch of the Gender is my Agenda Campaign (GIMAC) in 2006. GIMAC is a coalition of civil society organisation and women rights activists who monitor progress on the Solemn Declaration. As a means to increasing

women's participation within decision-making, not only does GIMAC monitor implementation progress, it also helps to set the agenda for regional governance. GIMAC meets twice a year to hold Pre-Summit Consultative Meetings to the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government, thereby part setting a governance agenda that necessitates the consideration of women's experiences.

Since taking office the Special Envoy has promoted direct engagement with women in conflict and post conflict spaces on the logic that ordinary women need to be heard and those with privilege should do what they must to amplify women's voices. The most important work that has come of the AU has been to invigorate the WPS participation pillar. This has been done by championing the idea of women in leadership positions and pushing for more women's participation in peace-making through two programmes: AWLN and FemWise.

### **Pioneering Leadership Programmes**

AWLN or the African Women's Leadership Network was launched in 2017 as an initiative intended to fix the problems: the absence of African women in leadership positions on the continent and beyond. It is a joint initiative of the AU Office of the Special Envoy and UNWomen – in other words, the brain child of Mlambo-Ngcuka and Diop, with the support of Mohammed. The activities of AWLN are funded on a voluntary basis by donor countries like Germany. Its specific aim is to enhance African women's leadership with the aim of enacting transformative change that seeks to bring about peace, security and development in Africa.

The AWLN starts from the premise that women's experiences matter. And as such positions itself as a clearing house of African women's experiences of leadership. Drawing on this knowledge base, and also developing new leaders, the AWLN seeks to harness this capital and channel it towards the implementation of not just the participation pillar of WPS but specifically, while utilising the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>2</sup> and the AU's Agenda 2063<sup>3</sup>. Where typically, leadership in

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<sup>2</sup> This refers to the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda

<sup>3</sup> The African Union's Agenda 2063 is the framework designed to transform Africa's socio-economic and political landscape so that there is less poverty, it is more equal and everyone has a say. It is ground on the ideals of human rights and equality.

Africa had often been a stand-in for heads of states, or governmental officials who are mainly men, the AWLN in addition to promoting women specifically sees leadership in a much broader sense seeking to bridge the different experiences of women at the local, regional, and global levels including in the diaspora.

FemWise-Africa (Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation) was formally launched in March 2017 at the initiative of the Panel of the Wise of the AU and with endorsements of the UN Security Council. The AU Panel of the Wise is a group of five eminent Africans appointed for 3 years to advise the AU's peace and security council in on conflict prevention, resolution and management. In 2010, the Panel recommended that the AU establish a formal network of women in mediation pegged to relevant AU organs to monitor and influence decision making. However, it was not until 2016 following the African Women Mediation Workshop on the theme "Silencing the Guns by 2020: Women's Inclusion in Pre-Conflict Mediation, at the Peace table and in Social Cohesion" that plans for Fem-Wise really took shape.

Because the Network is located within the AU's African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), it is well placed strategically to contribute substantively to peace policy formulation and advocacy for narrowing the gap between the commitments for women's inclusion and the implementation. Fem-Wise has begun to train women as mediators (about 60 in total to date) to correct the global imbalance that only includes about 2% of women mediators. Fem-Wise thus constitutes an important instrument that seeks to achieve gender equality within the African Peace and Security Architecture.

### **Moving the Agenda Forward**

Getting participation (and representation) as a priority of the AU in the context of the WPS agenda has undoubtedly been helped by the leadership of women like Dlamini-Zuma, Mlambo-Ngcuka, Diop and Mohammed. While the participation pillar is often 'hidden', engaging with recent African experiences of implementation reveals innovations and important practices including the creation of the office of the special envoy but especially AWLN and Fem-Wise Africa. Beyond simply committing to the WPS agenda, African actors have, leveraged localized frameworks, to bolster the impact of the AU in interpreting and effecting gender perspectives on the continent.

One could further argue that the practices that have been normalized in the AU can feed into the global WPS framework so that Africa's push for participation becomes more of a priority within the pillar structure. While the core aim of the WPS envoy is to support the implementation of the agenda at the regional level, the broader commitment to ensuring substantive participation and representation is exemplary of what happens when women are given the space to lead. Consequently, we see that the AU is a dynamic site of practice – an importance location for understanding how the participation pillar could work in practice.

Yet, it is not smooth sailing. Despite their strategic importance to enhancing participation and leadership within the WPS pillar structure, these two programmes make they are threatened by the lack of predictable and adequate funding. In general, programmes under the WPS mandate and gender equality initiatives more broadly remains underfunded, hindering both effectiveness and continuity. In the 2015 review of the WPS agenda, the Global Study (UNWomen, 2015), one of the key findings was the chronic underfunding of the WPS agenda which threatens the sustainability of programmes. In the case of the AU especially, the majority of the regional organisation's budget come from external donors. In this scenario there is a potential for a conflict of interest in those cases were donors based in the Global North continue to prioritise the protection pillar, and especially sexual violence in conflict. Given this, the future sustainability and promotion of leadership/participation will require a re-thinking of current funding arrangements so that African WPS initiatives are robustly funded well and are not skewed towards donor priorities at the expense of regional initiatives.

### **Further Readings**

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#### Bio

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