Africa Peace and Security: Enhancing the Role of Women

Bineta Diop
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Introduction

Bineta Diop, the African Union’s (AU) Special Envoy for Women, Peace and Security, spoke at Chatham House on the role of women in enhancing peace and security.

The meeting and the question and answers session were held on the record. The views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an aide-memoire for those who took part, and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

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Mme Bineta Diop

Diop discussed the contribution of women in formulating and upholding peace processes across Africa. She drew attention to the role of former UK foreign secretary William Hague as the Prime Minister’s Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict, and also to the agenda of AU Chairperson Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma. She pointed to the UN Security Council’s adoption of Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, which drew on the commitments of the Beijing Platform for Action. Resolution 1325 was a landmark resolution. In containing what Diop referred to as the ‘three Ps’ – presence, protection and prevention – the resolution identified women as more than just victims of war.

Diop highlighted Resolution 1325 as a serious framework in Africa, drawing attention to the AU’s Maputo Protocol, a human rights instrument regarded as progressive at the global level. She also referenced the AU’s Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa, which contains a principle of gender parity that finds its expression in the parliaments of Rwanda and Senegal. However, Diop added that these protocols are not necessarily being implemented, and noted that the Beijing Platform for Action – which reaffirmed the human rights of women and girls as integral to universal rights – needs to be applied.

Diop referred to the role of Liberian, Sierra Leonean and Burundian women who have led processes of reconciliation in the region, in part thanks to organizations such as the Mano River Women’s Peace Network. She identified this participation as a key factor in the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as president of Liberia. She also highlighted the role of women in the Burundi peace process overseen by Julius Nyerere and Nelson Mandela. Diop also noted that research has found that peace talks that involve women in the process are more sustainable than those that do not.

Diop spoke about her recent visit to South Sudan as one of two women in a team of five UN commissioners. She described the progress made in community-based peace talks there; women from Nuer and Dinka communities are now engaged in dialogue. Women in the Central African Republic, despite being divided along Christian and Muslim lines, have been central in establishing improved community relations. Both instances demonstrate that positive dialogue from women drives reconciliation.

Women in Somalia are engaged in reconciliation and rebuilding processes and require protection to safeguard this important work. However, Diop stated that this needs to entail consideration of the possibility of gender-based violence as linked to the presence of peacekeeping forces. In Nigeria Diop had recently met with the ‘Bring Back Our Girls’ movement, and held closed discussions with escaped Chibok girls who described the sexual violence they suffered. Diop noted that there needs to be accountability for the treatment of the Chibok girls, as well as justice and reconciliation efforts.
Diop referred to her role within the AU Peace and Security Council, which is to ensure a gender component within the AU and governments across Africa. At a recent meeting in Addis Ababa, the issue of accountability was raised by women from all represented countries. In efforts to defeat Boko Haram, engage in the Sahel and counter al Shabaab, the accountability of member states must be ensured, and for this reason an accountability and implementation mechanism for Africa is being designed by Diop’s office. The speaker identified the UK’s National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security as another successful mechanism to improve accountability.

Diop called for more debate concerning the accountability of governments and of the UN, which is conducting a review of Resolution 1325. She drew attention to a study conducted by UN Women of how far member states and the international community have implemented this agenda. In addition to the accountability of governments, the AU and the UN, the speaker emphasized the need for greater citizen contribution. During recent elections in Senegal, for example, women created, and conducted analysis via, the Situation Room platform, and were mobilized in their citizenship role – contributing more broadly to ensuring peace. There needs to be more collective action to ensure the success of Resolution 1325.

Summary of Questions and Answers

Questions

Is the challenge of implementation about the capacity and capability to implement, or about political will?

What can be done to support NGOs in order to ensure increased citizen involvement of women on the ground?

Bineta Diop

Diop presented Rwanda as a case study in women’s contribution and participation in peace processes. In addition to political will, the people of Rwanda have also taken ownership of the process of women’s involvement in society. The speaker explained that political will must be transferred into a framework and underlined the importance of laws protecting women. She highlighted the importance of holding institutions accountable regarding implementation of agreements. Citizens are often unaware of policy because of a lack of space for citizen engagement, and must be able to demand evidence of actions taken under resolutions. The accountability of military deployments was again noted, alongside the importance of civil society understanding the role of the military.

Comment

It was noted that education for girls must be prioritized across Africa, in order to ensure improved representation of women in leadership roles.

Bineta Diop

Diop stated that the AU is focusing on retaining female students after primary school. Education is one of the key areas being addressed within the framework of the AU’s 2015 Year of Women’s Empowerment. Other areas of focus include peace and security, economic empowerment, child marriage, and sexual and reproductive rights.
On women leaders, Diop highlighted the beneficial practice of affirmative action in Uganda and Kenya, where 30 per cent of public procurement – such as building roads and infrastructure – is given to women. Such examples should be documented so that other countries can learn.

**Question**

How are the ways in which armed societies treat women being dealt with within Africa?

**Bineta Diop**

Diop replied that traditions and customs within Africa, such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriage, are often justified with the argument of protecting women. This is being dealt with at the grassroots level and requires substantial thinking and transformation. This same argument of protecting women is also made by religious extremists. Education can help combat these issues to ensure that women know their rights. Another priority is ensuring seats for women in governance institutions.

**Questions**

Does the AU also recognize that men need to be education in women’s rights too?

Does the speaker have any advice for diaspora women?

What advice do you have for civil society organizations seeking to hasten the domestication of the UN Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and which tools are most effective in achieving this?

**Bineta Diop**

Diop stated that women in the diaspora are welcomed by the AU, as the diaspora has been recognized by the organization as the sixth region of the African continent.

On the role of men, the speaker identified successes in tackling FGM in Senegal because of the involvement of traditional leaders. The speaker underlined the importance of involving actors at the local level in changing language and attitudes, and said that issues of power, control and access should not be shied away from. Men have power, and while attitudes towards issues such as child marriage can be changed at the community level, gaining a voice for women is difficult, both in Africa and in Europe. The speaker underlined the control of resources as a major obstacle, and called for the mobilization of a common agenda of women.

Resolution 1325 is still relevant, and needs to be brought to the grassroots level, in a language that people understand. CEDAW is linked to other protocols, and also needs to be brought to women at grassroots level. It is important to ensure that CEDAW is integrated with existing domestic laws, and also to ensure that states are reporting to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva. Civil society should also be part of the reporting process. Diop concluded by re-emphasizing the crucial role of accountability. In addition to governments and institutions, the speaker highlighted partners as accountable.