ABSTRACT

Since recorded history, the world has experienced unprecedented acts of violence (wars) by humans against others, and the intensity of these wars have often been very dramatic. Even with the establishment of the United Nations (UN) in 1945 with the intention to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war and to maintain international peace and security, the last fifty years of the 20th Century saw an estimated 86 million of people killed. In all of these conflicts depleted nations, especially those in Africa, the necessary resources and finances required for the post-conflict recovery are absent. The processes of reconstruction and peacebuilding tasks of the national or care taker governments and their international backers, diplomats, multilateral agencies and the international community are huge and complex, which therefore demands greater cooperation among various stakeholders in order that the outcome (peace) becomes sustainable.

In most African countries, the processes of conflict management, peacemaking and peacebuilding at the end of most of the conflicts, if not all, the international community, as well as the affected state and society, have been engaged in what is now generally called peacebuilding. Until recently, these peacebuilding processes have been mainly state driven and apparently conducted between the state, the rebel groups and the international mediators and backers with little consideration for local civil society involvement. But unfortunately however, these state driven approaches have often produced state- oriented problems ranging from corruption on the part of government, nepotism, tribalism/regionalism, marginalisation, exclusion to favouritism. The failure of these state driven peacebuilding processes has now therefore led to the wide international acknowledgement of the role of civil society (CS), especially local women civil society (LWCS) as an appropriate alternative; because of their renowned activities such as monitoring, lobbying and their pressure on state authorities to fulfill their responsibilities and implement the rule of law—which is the focus in the current crisis management approach by the United Nations and some International Non-governmental Organisations (INGOs).
Available literature on violent conflicts in Africa show that CS, especially LWSCOIs have been and continue to be deeply and effectively involved in peace work and peacebuilding initiatives – i.e. the reconceptualization of peace and security from a ‘state-centered’ process to one that is ‘people centered.’ For example the Giriama uprising (1911 – 1914) of Kenyan women who refused to pay taxes to the British and to do forced labour in a bid to drive them away from their lands; the Japanese women’s protest against racism and nuclearism; Palestinian and Israeli women trying to overcome barriers of distrust and enmity; Northern Ireland women protesting against the violence that prevailed there; the South African women whose long history of nonviolence resistance was central to the country’s struggle against apartheid and many others. However, and unfortunately though, these meaningful contributions by LWCSOs have often been overlooked or not accorded the value it deserves in Africa in general and Sierra Leone in particular. Despite the huge efforts of LWCS in Sierra Leone in support of non-violence, the conduct of Bintumani I & II conferences that protected and upheld democracy; and their efforts in making the Lome peace talks a reality i999, they had no formal representation at the talks. Nonetheless, they have continued to contribute meaningfully to building of a peaceful and sustainable environment that every Sierra Leonean and even the international community is yearning for.

In the light of LWCS’s sustained involvement in the peacebuilding process and its ramifications, this study was designed to explore, using an exploratory descriptive feminist research methodological approach (interviews, participant observation, informal conversations, focus group discussions, questionnaire administration, photographs and storytelling, review of related literature, and the use of books, articles, journals, dissertations and internet materials); to assess and put together a comprehensive and premier report on the contributions and challenges of LWCSOs engaged in ten years (2002 – 2011) of peacebuilding in Sierra Leone. Special attention was adequately paid to important ethical considerations as required by a credible academic research of this nature. The study was not only meant to bring out the contributions and challenges faced by the three case study LWCSOs (50/50, WIPNET and MARWOPNET), but to also establish the long standing link between Sierra Leone women and peace from a socio-cultural standpoint since pre-historic Sierra Leone for a better understanding of the context, gauge the existing political will and space; and the contributions and influence of international community on the peace process.

In a bid to accomplish this task, the study examined questions such as: why Sierra Leone, why civil society and why LWCSOs for the study? In an attempt to address these issues adequately, this study undertook an in-depth analysis of concepts such as: the concept of civil society, civil society and peacebuilding, women war and peace, women and civil society, in Sierra Leone raises one main research question and three sub questions. But most importantly however, all of the above questions were not intended to provide definitive or precise answers to the research topic but rather; they were used as guide to the study. The study raised one main research question – i.e. what contributions are LWCSOs making to the peacebuilding process in Sierra Leone? and three sub questions - a) how are the activities of local women’s civil society organisations impacting on the target beneficiaries and promoting women’s issues in Sierra Leone? b) how are these activities of LWCSOs contributing to the growth, and enhancement of civil society’s role in the Sierra Leone peacebuilding process? and c) what are the challenges faced by the LWCSOs in their efforts to establish a more peaceful post-war Sierra Leone and how can these be overcome?

With the adoption of a feminist methodology that is clearly outlined in chapter one, this study found out that the extensive and effective awareness raising by LWCSOs on women’s gender and human rights and the need for equality, mending and building broken relationships, building capacities and empowering women and civil society in general with conflict management and resolution, peacemaking and early warning through trainings; contributing to girl child education; undertaken reconstruction and development programmes etc. are some of their remarkable and irrefutable contributions to peace in Sierra Leone. Through advocacy and lobbying, LWCSOs have been able to influence the enactment into law of three gender justice laws (GJLs) and others, the development of a National
Action Plan on UN Resolution 1325 and 1820; secure a 30 percent representation at political and decision making levels and the Gender National Action Plan; which, if effectively implemented, will enhance the equality that women are yearning for. Their efforts have not only given voice to women and civil society, demonstrated their ability as equal partners in the pursuit of peace; engaged in massive voter campaigns, and increased election and political participation but also their election into prominent policy and decision making positions, especially at the local governance level. The study also reveals that lots of women organisations are constrained because of lack of confidence and the high level of illiteracy among them. Similarly, it was discovered the national advocacy programmes, which are mainly done through the media/radio are constrained because of lack of logistical support and the financial needed to pay for air time. However, there is some support by UNDP/UN Women to women’s training for involvement in governance and livelihood programmes.

Domestically, it was found out that women have been able to reduce direct gender-based violence through peace education programmes, protest marches and through their work with the family Support Unit (FSU) of the Sierra Leone police. However, there is a very low capacity among LWCSOs and the few trained and skilled ones are very busy with domestic and livelihood issues.

The study also found that regardless of the high illiteracy rate and different educational statuses among women, the differences in age and political affiliations, LWCS are indeed peace lovers and builders as they have been able to endure and to break through the gender, cultural and political barriers in order to consolidate peace. The driving force behind the success of women’s contributions to the peace building process has been their willingness, determination ‘never again to remain silent,’ and the commitment and cooperation among them. For instance, they rose up to the challenge and seized the opportunity presented by the post conflict period to rally their efforts together and to ensure the survival of their families and prevent the country from slipping back into war and to ensure lasting peace.

The study found out that LWCSOs are playing very important cultural and traditional roles as mediators and advocates in their families, communities and helpers of those in need and have sufficiently raised the awareness of both their women folk and the general civil society on the rights of women and their role in peace. These roles are very critical to women’s participation and voluntary activities aimed at promoting peace building at community and household levels. Similarly, the study also found that LWCSOs are not only collaborating exclusively with women organizations but with others headed by men to build positive peace, influence the country’s democratic processes by contesting for elected positions and massively voting in elections, engaging in constitutional reviews and decision making; law and legal reforms, participating at district and provincial committee security meetings and working with Office of National Security (ONS) in the gender department.

The role of local women’s peacebuilding organisations, it was discovered, provides a very good platform for addressing gender inequalities and women’s empowerment in post-conflict societies. Additionally, LWCSOs contributions support the process of addressing violence, human rights, and human security in enhancing national and international development targets – MDGs.

But despite these substantial contributions to peacebuilding, women still face a host of challenges that continue to hinder their full and effective participation and contributions to promoting sustainable peace. Some of these challenges range from inadequate financial and political support and will, persistent discriminatory customary and traditional practices; poverty; slow or lack of implementation of policies/enacted laws and recommendations by women’s groups; their continued subjection to subordination and GBV; to political intimidation. The study revealed that the prevalent high illiteracy rate, discriminatory cultural and religious practices, and the financial and logistical constraints, all undermine women’s confidence and capacity to participate effectively in community and national programmes.

In conclusion, the study recoded some suggestions by interviewees such as: focusing on specific gender projects,
increased financial support and collaboration with LWCS groups, capacity building, provision of an unhindered political space, the implementation of gender laws; and a proper reparative justice mechanism as possible solutions for overcoming the challenges.

Remark: The summary of the dissertation should be written on A4-size pages and should not exceed 4,000 Japanese characters. When written in English, it should not exceed 1,500 words.