

**Women and peacebuilding: The use of traditional
methods of conflict resolution by women from Casamance, Senegal**

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Zusammenfassung zur Dissertation

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The significant role that women play in negotiating for conflict resolution is equally emerging as an important debate in peace research work and studies. Relatively little attention has been paid to the relevance of traditional approaches to conflict resolution, particularly women's contributions using such methods. For the purposes and context of this dissertation, the use of "Traditional Methods", will borrow its usage from Zartman (2000) and Mac Ginty (2008) who have applied it to mean methods of "conflict management that have been practiced over an extended period, and, have evolved within African societies rather than being products of external importation". These methods are neither adequate nor complete but are meant to compliment other conflict resolution mechanisms. In the case of Casamance in Senegal, the participation of women using these traditional methods of conflict resolution ultimately impacts on balancing gender representation in peacebuilding processes. This research therefore takes a deeper look into the role of women in peacebuilding using the women groups in Casamance, as the empirical case study. The dissertation focuses on how the use of mystical ceremonies, football and wrestling matches, peace committees and programs on radio as traditional methods for conflict resolution has contributed to peacebuilding in Casamance.

Casamance lies in an area of 30,000 square kilometers and is situated in the southwestern part of Senegal, bordering Guinea-Bissau to the south and separated from The Gambia. As a result of the continued marginalization resulting from political, cultural and social-justice issues such as challenging the government decision to allocate land to non-locals and the lack of infrastructure to support agricultural activities, a rebellion broke out in 1982 under the leadership of the Mouvement des forces démocratiques de la Casamance (MFDC) (Ba & Bassène, 2018). Shortly before Christmas that year, approximately 1000 people marched from the center of Ziguinchor, to several government buildings where they replaced the Senegalese flag with a white flag. Carrying "Free Casamance" signs, the demonstrators expressed the desire to secede from Senegal. Among these protesters were women who donned traditional attire and carried with them palm fonds and calabashes. The women also sang traditional songs and were joined by the men (Osemeka, 2011,

p. 59). The government responded violently with mass arrests including the organizers of the demonstration (Faye, 2006, p. 28). Since then the conflict in Casamance has persisted, resulting in social, political and economic hardships for the communities living in the region.

The aim of this study is to critically analyze the significant role women play in peacebuilding in Casamance, specifically highlighting the traditional methods of conflict resolution. This study is therefore anchored on the question of “how the role of women’s use of traditional methods of conflict resolution has contributed to peacebuilding in Casamance”. My research has endeavored to contest the postulation that women are missing in peacebuilding and fill the gap by showing that women are involved in the peacebuilding process in Casamance. As central actors in their community, the women groups bring a voice that essentially contributes to the strengthening and sustainability of peace efforts in the context of peacebuilding.

The findings reveal that at the beginning of the conflict the women were supporting the rebels in fighting the state by providing them with food supplies and information. They also played an important role of initiating the rebels into the forest using traditional oath taking ceremonies. However, with time this support waned as the women bore the psychosocial consequences of the conflict and reversed their attitude from support to opposition. Starting from the mid 1990-s to the present time, women have increased their peacebuilding activities by engaging more actively at the grassroots and national level to address the question of the conflict in Casamance. An increase in advocacy groups led by women peacebuilders as well as community initiatives that are based on known local practices for conflict resolution, such as the methods mentioned are directed at sensitizing the members and raising awareness about the need for collective efforts for peace in Casamance.

This research sought to understand how the different actors are involved in the conflict, either directly or indirectly. The conflict supports different interests from the actors, and these have determined the course of the conflict over the years. One of the respondents who is a member of the peace committees in the interview in Bignona on 23 September 2018 remarked:

“the situation is very complicated, we suffer here and those who are responsible for ensuring the end of the conflict are not doing enough, is it not the duty of the politicians to speak on our behalf in the assembly...and these rebels have made our lives difficult with

their constant harassment and the government refuses to get rid of these landmines that are in our farms we are just tired and now we have to find a solution ourselves”

As a result, this study adopts the Actor Network Theory (ANT) approach. It accounts for the presence of actants, which Lewis and Westlund (2015, p. 23) described as “material objects that are notable for their association with human actors and the activities they undertake in conjunction with such objects”. This research borrows from this view and constructs on how the actors (women) together with their practices, and the actants, in this case the mystical ceremonies using fetishes and rituals, the peace committees, traditional wrestling matches or theater group performances contribute to peacebuilding in Casamance. Investigating the women and their activities allowed the research to understand the relationships and agencies of these different actors and actants, while at the same time using it as a basis for a conceptual framework to show the various entanglements.

The research used semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) to generate data. The sample population was a selection of youth groups, media, community members, NGOs members, development workers, government officials, the military representative, academia, MFDC rebels (both active and retired), as well as women groups with emphasis on the women of the Bois Sacré (these are the priestesses who perform the mystical ceremonies in the sacred groves). The study employed a thematic analysis for analyzing the collected information. This enabled the identification of patterns, themes and concepts in the data that infer the interpretations and the understandings of what the social phenomena of traditional methods of conflict resolution used by women presents.

The findings from the interviews and FGD’s support Werner’s (2010) assertion that, no system of dealing with conflict resolution is perfect, therefore the most important thing to be considered is the legitimacy and acceptance of a method, in the context of the culture within which it exists. This dissertation acknowledges that communities in Casamance contribute to peacebuilding by applying the knowledge of traditional methods in creating an awareness about the use of domestic or communal approaches to address the conflict.

The traditional methods used by the women of Casamance include the use of mystical ceremonies, football and traditional wrestling matches, peace committees and programs on radio and they highlight the role that culture and tradition play in the communities in Casamance. By using existing popular culture such as football and the popularity of radio, as well as organizing the elders in different areas to form the peace committees, the women have been able to use these platforms as a way of reaching the community from a grassroots level. For example, the use of football matches organized across the different communities is an avenue through which the community are sensitized on peacebuilding. The matches also create an atmosphere of harmony among the community and a sense of normalcy, therefore giving the women groups the opportunity to promote the idea of discouraging the youth from joining the rebels. During half time, women group representatives take the chance to give speeches on the dangers of joining the militia. On the other hand, traditional wrestling matches, known as 'laamb' which are also an immensely popular cultural sport in Casamance and in Senegal in general, have been effective in bringing the community together by using the gatherings as a platform for advocacy and sensitization on peacebuilding. The 'laamb' atmosphere is an ideal occasion for the women groups to reach the sensitivities of the community by organizing several activities such as inviting youth groups involved in peace advocacy to address the spectators. In addition, the approach of using peace committees has been able to create a sense of local ownership of the peacebuilding processes and boosted the community's involvement at the grassroots level.

Literature reveals that there still exists a glaring gap in the implementation of laws regulating the role of women in peace and security between the continental and national levels, specifically between the African Union (AU), and national governments, and the reality of the lives of the women involved in peacebuilding work at the grassroots level (Hendricks, 2017). It is clear from the findings of this research that the AU approach is more state driven than people driven, thereby causing a major setback in the efforts to ensure more effective participation of women, hence making the implementation of these instruments difficult. Considering that several clusters of women organizations in Casamance, especially the Plateforme femme pour la paix en Casamance (PFPC) have focused their activities on economic and social platforms that are in line with the requirements implementation of the National Action Plans (NAP's). However, due to lack of awareness and representation at the National level then their efforts are not fully celebrated.

The agency of actors as spoilers and initiators of peace in Casamance has had a significant impact on the conflict resolution and peacebuilding process. My first observation from the findings in this dissertation suggests that, a group of the actors is clearly working towards an agenda of peace, while the other group exhibits unclear objectives towards attaining the peace. An analysis on the behavior of one group of actors, specifically the Senegalese state and MFDC, indicates that they seem to be hindering the efforts towards committed conflict resolution and sustainable peace for Casamance. This explains the non-existence of any serious platform that can be considered as an initiative set up for purposes of fair resolution and ultimate reconciliation from all parties involved. In the course of examining the motives for finding sustainable peace for Casamance, and in addition to understanding the obstacles to the attainment of the same, this research brings to light additional facts, such as the flourishing illegal timber and cannabis trade, together with individual interests related to the economy of conflict situations. This is partly attributed to the MFDC factions that have weighed in to shaping and prolonging the conflict. In understanding what drives the actors in their behavior, the arguments on the theory of greed and grievance in economic agenda of (civil) war have been reflected.

This has also been an impediment to any way forward to resolving the conflict in Casamance. The geo-political and geo-strategic backdrop of Casamance puts the Senegalese state under the spotlight because of the history of conflict in the West African region in the last decades. The state approach has so far only recently considered using soft power through some mediation attempts to try and bring the factions to the negotiation table although there has been no progress so far and no concrete results. The women groups under the umbrella of PFPC have on several occasions mobilized and organized marches in protest of the conflict and have on their own tried to meet with the factions of the MFDC in an attempt to encourage dialogue with the state to resolve the current stalemate. The women also in resorting to using mystical ceremonies are seen as attempting to return to age-old traditions that are known and respected by the community.

Future research in Casamance could look into an analysis of why the Senegalese state has spent vast resources to equip the military in the last three decades in fighting the rebellion instead of investing the same in developing the area and finding a solution to the conflict.