The Role of Women in Transition Societies

Emanuela C. Del Re

A crucial year

The year 2011 has been a crucial year for women in conflict and transition societies, for a number of reasons. One relevant reason is that the Nobel Peace Price has been awarded to three women: President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Leymah Gbowee of Liberia, and Tawakkul Karman of Yemen. Moreover, it is important to stress that for the first time the Nobel Committee's citation included a direct reference to the UN resolution 1325.

Another reason is the crucial role that was played by women in the "Arab Spring", and the consequences of the echo of their voices in concrete political steps:

a. Tahrir Square mobilization virtually started with a young girl's appeal on Facebook;

b. According to estimates 40 per cent of protesters in Egypt were women;

c. The revolution in Libya was initiated by a group of women lawyers;

d. Syrian women began the demonstrations against Assad by organizing sit-ins on highways.

Women are active agents, agents of change, a driving force.

What follows is a short and intense journey around the world trying to understand the real dimension and possible definition of the role of women in societies in conflict and in transition, emphasizing successes, biases, perspectives, recommendations.

The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, adopted in 2000, calls for the participation of women in decision-making and peace processes, underlines their role in conflict resolution and peace-building and advocates the protection of women's rights. Nevertheless the number of women who have been officially involved in peace negotiation process is still very low. In 2008 the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1820 which extends Resolution 1325 explicitly recognizing sexual violence as a security issue and tactic of war, demanding parties to armed conflict to adopt concrete prevention and protection measures and, most importantly, asserting the importance of women's participation in peace processes.

The issue of the vulnerability of women in conflicts has been analyzed in depth in the past years, but the crucial role that women play in preventing, resolving conflicts, in the reconstruction phase and in the so called transition as well as in the stabilization after a conflict is still rather unexplored. One reason is due to the fact that the most important and urgent issue during and after conflicts is protection and human security. In fact, for example, according to the UN today around 90 per cent of war casualties are civilians, the majority of whom are women and children, while in the past the majority were amongst the military.[1] Obviously it must not be forgotten that there is also a phenomenon of women combatants, fighting alongside men, both willingly and unwillingly; as many as 40 percent of all child soldiers are girls.[2]

Women suffer in particular because of their social status and gender. Systematic rape, enslaving, forced pregnancy or sterilization and other, are a common tactic in many conflicts, with immediate consequences as well as long-term effects on individuals and communities.

The vulnerability of women is balanced by their fundamental role and ability to protect their families in extreme situations such as conflicts, and in participating in peace movements at grassroots level, although they are rarely involved in decision making in the post-conflict transition phase. For example, despite women were celebrated in last year's historical events in Egypt as protagonists, the exclusion of women from the committee for the Constitution and the lack of women amongst the first appointed cabinet ministers was negatively significant. Besides, the announcement during the protests of a civil society initiative to form a "Committee of Wise Men" was definitely a bad sign.[3] It depends on the contest, of course, because it is also true that women may also benefit from conflicts, not just at economic level, but also through the so called "gender-dividend," which allows them to indulge in playing roles traditionally occupied by men, or playing non traditional roles, acquiring new skills and know-how. This happened in the Albania in 1997 or in Kosovo in

1999, for instance, where the intervention of the international community gave local women an opportunity to improve their status being employed by international organization and entrepreneurs, being able to participate in innumerable initiatives, having access to the media, their voices being listened by the world.

The issue is not whether women are able to and/or can play an active role in transition societies, because they can and are able to contribute at many levels: there are no doubts regarding the role women play informally. The issue is how their participation as active agents can be formalized. How to involve women formally in political processes, including peace negotiation and conflict resolution and reconstruction?

There are examples of formal involvement such as the participation of women at the Bonn negotiations for Afghanistan, which has had a strong impact resulting in the inclusion of women rights in the Constitution and the inclusion of women in political decision-making roles.[4]

Time of Awareness

If one looks at the evolution of the so called international community's awareness regarding the importance of women in peace processes, in preventing and resolving conflicts and in transition societies it emerges that it is a very recent phenomenon compared to the indisputable role that women have played in history. The UN resolution 1325 was adopted in 2000, at the beginning of the 21st century. In the same period the European Parliament adopted the Resolution 2000/2025 (INI) on the participation of women in peaceful resolution of conflict and the Resolution MEG-5 (2003)4 on the roles of women and men in conflict prevention, peace-building and post-conflict democratic processes – a gender perspective, adopted by the 5th European Ministerial Conference on Equality between Women and Men in January 2003, both of which encourage the integration of a gender perspective in all activities aimed at conflict prevention and resolution.

The gender perspective is always interesting, but it can have a stagnating effect in the collective imagination, confining women to a stereotyped role for them to play at the end of a conflict and in the transition period. How can the innovative approach fostered by the UN and EU resolutions become a concrete tool in societies where women are traditionally marginalized?

More action is needed to increase the participation of women in conflict prevention, resolution and recovery. The latest Report of the UN Secretary

General on "Women and Peace and Security" presented in September 2011 calls for further action to open doors and provide seats to women in official and observers roles.[5] The report also stresses that there is a low number of women involved in mediation and that this should be changed; it also appeals to the Member States to include women in official delegations. Consultations with women leaders and peace activists at the earliest moment in the mediation processes must be included in the special envoys' and mediator's agendas, as well as regular meetings with women civil society groups. Analyzing the effect of concrete actions such as the Resolution 1325, it emerges that 34 countries have elaborated National Action Plans on resolution 1325, with others who are in the finalizing phase.[6] Amongst the 34 there are countries like Liberia, Chile, Uganda, Bosnia-Herzegovina as well as Austria, Italy and the USA. Several regional organizations have adopted policies on women, peace and security. There are initiatives at UN level to equip the system with new tools to ensure that women can be more involved in conflict prevention, resolution and recovery. A strategic framework has also been defined aimed at the implementation of Resolution 1325 in the next decade.

Are all these good intentions going to become true implementing strategies?

At least there is good news on the concrete aspects of this movement of thought, that derives from the fact that the UN system is working to increase the percentage of funds for women empowerment and gender equality in post-conflict spending, raising it to 15 per cent within a few years. Women participation in peace-building is starting to be recognized as a priority, as the Peace-building Fund has paid out 5 million dollar gender promotion initiative, a call for proposals to support women participation in peace-building and will double its spending on women empowerment in 2012.

Women perspectives

If we take the Arab Spring as a striking example of women participation, we must also analyze some of the critical issues it has raised. What will it mean to women? Which risks? Which opportunities?

An interesting example is the debate over the so called "Suzanne's laws" that were promoted in Egypt by Suzanne, the wife of Mubarak, which are seen by many as a very important step forward for women rights and family life.[7] Yet, given that they were passed during the rule of Mubarak, for part of the Egyptian population they must be abolished; another reason is that they are seen by some as one of the strategies to oppose the Islamist parties, which now constitute an important option for the country at political level. The result is

that the actual content and relevance to Egyptian women and family life is obscured by these polemics. But the question remains: what will happen to the rights that women acquired during the dictatorship?

Moreover, what will the victory of Ennhada in Tunisia - an Islamist party - mean for women? There are concerns, because Tunisia has been until now one of the most liberal countries in terms of women issues. There are interesting initiatives such as October 24 Front, founded by women activists to defend women rights in the aftermath of the Islamists' electoral victory in the country. They declare: *"We want a constitution that respects women's rights and doesn't roll back the advances we've made"*.[8]

Arab women are embattled on multiple fronts. First and foremost are the deep-seated patriarchal customs that constrain women.[9] When women went out and protested, during the revolutions, they challenged tradition. They have challenged the conservative mentality that still dominates the political sphere. Nowadays there are a number of denunciations that new patterns of violence are emerging in the post-revolution climate, which target politically active women in Egypt.[10] Is it appropriate to think that if there is advancement in democracy there is also an advancement in the condition of women? Or not?[11]

The condition of women becomes also a geopolitical issue, exasperating the contraposition with the West. Melanne Verveer, U.S. Ambassador-at-large for Global Women's Issues affirmed recently that: *"there are actors in these societies who clearly intend, and even often vocally express their desire, to push women back. Some claim the West is trying to impose its values on the Arab people by promoting women's rights, but this is neither a Western issue, nor an Arab issue, nor a religious issue. It is matter of universal human rights."*[12]

There is still need to engage in the education of women who still perpetuate a subaltern role because they do not possess any other instrument to find their role in society, also because there is no doubt that women's full participation in decision making must be granted.

Stability depends on democratic reforms that will write a new social contract between the government and citizens, including women.

- An active role of women in the public sphere;

- Strengthens the economy;

- Increases the chances that health and education reach the most marginalized;

- Increases the level of awareness of all the parts of the population.

Nevertheless there still a strong resistance against women active role in politics.[13]

We must change the way we interpret women issues: we must shift from the general concept of gender to the identification of the function of women as catalysts.

An interesting example of this approach surprisingly does not come from Egypt or Tunisia, but from a country that is learning from the experience of those countries: Morocco, which is trying to avoid unrest, taking advantage from the lessons learned from the recent events.

King Mohammed VI of Morocco delivered an historical speech on the 9th of March 2011, which can be seen as a striking example of conflict prevention. In the speech he identifies all the crucial social agents in the framework of regionalization, which constitutes one of the most delicate issues the country is facing at the moment with all related risks – for example the pressures for autonomy from the Western Sahara region could lead to conflict. Amongst the key guidelines, one is dedicated to women: *"Promote the participation of women in the management of regional affairs in particular, and the exercise of political rights in general; in this respect, the law should favor equal access by women and men to elected office"*.[14] The general perception regarding the speech is that it has positively affected the Moroccan society, both as regards the recognition of its diversity and as regards the equality between men and women, fostering a new concept of identity at all levels.[15]

It would be simplistic to limit the discussion on the role of women in transition societies to these examples, but they can be seen as emblematic, because the events in Maghreb have created irreversible opportunities for women.

One of the opportunities is the relationship between women and the internet. Internet plays a key role in action planning and women have played in that particular situation a role as bloggers and propagators. When the public sphere of women is limited and restricted, internet provides a free space of expression. I refer, for instance, to Alsanea Rajaa, a Saudi woman who in 2005 published a book entitled *Girls of Riyadh* (2005 in Lebanon; 2007 in the United Kingdom)

that is famous all over the world because through emails to her friends she diffused news about the condition of women in Saudi Arabia.[16] Unfortunately, the book was banned in Saudi Arabia.

In Egypt 30 per cent of women have access to the internet and use it to speak up, but the problem is that they belong to the middle and upper classes, and that the rest of the women remain excluded from the system of communication, which indicates to us all that it is important to create a women agenda for the cyberspace. Internet can be a tool, not the solution, because while it favours part of societies, it silences another part that is even bigger.

There is a great part of women who do not or cannot access the internet.

The internet is also very fragile, considering that the domino effect of the Arab Spring is so strong that in China because of the fear for internal security they immediately obscured the internet.

In Syria, where the protest against Assad is repressed violently, women are paying a high price, women bloggers are in prison or have disappeared. Mothers have their children's tortured corpses returned to them in rubbish bags. "This is a women's revolution before it is anything else" affirmed Rana Kabbani.[17]

Continuing our journey, from Maghreb we land in Europe. The internet is underestimated: women issues are relegated to a sectorial domain, and are often perceived as an expression either of feminism or of *"female interests"*, with a negative diminishing connotation, even in a contexts of undeniable emancipation. This incoherence and social schizophrenia is widely debated. For instance, there is a movement of thought regarding the representation of the image of women in the media. The famous documentary by Lorella Zanardo entitled *"Women's Bodies"* is very significant.[18] It critically explores the way the body of women is depicted in the European media, and in particular in the Italian media, which mirrors the so-called Western world. The documentary has created a lively debate in Europe – it has been presented at the EU Parliament and in other key institutions – especially thinking about future generations. Not indulging in the analysis of the condition of women in Europe – their political participation is still too low despite the very advanced legislations that recognized their rights – it is legitimate to wonder whether emancipation is inversely proportional to the way women are depicted, and vice versa.

Symbolism and pragmatism

There are a number of positive stereotypes that can influence the approach to women issues. A recurring element is that women are more inclined to peace, or that women have a deeper mutual understanding based on their sharing the same basic experiences in the lifecycle (being daughters, spouses, mothers). This can constitute an immense patrimony when shared in conflict or transition societies, because it can help overcome psychological borders erected by the parts against each other. This falls into the concept of *"gender mainstreaming", that the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) has defined as follows: "In any area and at all levels, a gender mainstreaming perspective is the process of assessing the implications for women and men in any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes. It is a strategy for making the concerns and experiences of women as well as of men an integral part of design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and social spheres, so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal of mainstreaming is to achieve gender equality"*.[19]

As stated in 2004 by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Resolution 1385/2004: *"conflict is a gendered activity: women and men have different access to resources, power and decision making before, during and after conflicts. The experience of women and men in situations of tension, war, and post-conflict reconstruction is significantly different"*.[20]

Going back from where we started, the cruciality of 2011 for women is also marked by the historic visit of Queen Elizabeth II to Ireland in May 2011, at the invitation of the Irish President Mary McAleese. A significant moment in terms of symbolic compensation, it was important also for various other aspects. Many underlined the importance of the fact that two women were meeting and made comments about the influence of their gender on the political affairs: an interesting way of synthesising the qualitative dimension of the role of women in conflicts. If, as the UN also says, the role of women is promoted by understanding the pragmatic benefits of enlisting the distinct knowledge, networks and resources that women offer, than the image of the British Queen and the Irish president, two women, becomes a memorable one, together with images of women around the world, which it mirrors in its thousand shades.

The symbolic aspect is important as a source of inspiration, but it must be accompanied by concrete actions, which must derive from a serious assessment of the situation.

A valuable example is given by African countries, as emerges in the study by Miriam Agatha Chinwe Nwoye on the role of women in peace-building and conflict resolution in African traditional societies.[21] She points out that we should look at the fundamental role that women have played in the past towards the promotion of the culture of peace and conflict resolution in traditional Africa, and also take into consideration the peace mediation methods that women have applied in the past. Women engineered conflict resolutions rituals that contained important psychological/spiritual healing powers.

This constitutes an innovative approach because it puts the accent on the fact that the role of women in conflict and transition societies is implicit, inherent to those societies, and any external intervention or aid should start from the recognition of a given society's women own original and traditional contribution.

For instance, Chinwe Nwoye says that *"peace in Africa is seen equivalent to health and well-being, there is need for the introduction of welfare measures in various local African governments to benefit large families: housing, health care, means of transport and communication, loans and early child education. In this way, there is need to assess the opportunities for practices which go beyond the restitution of 'negative peace', that is, the mere absence of war, to promote 'positive peace, i.e. conditions and practices of political and social non-violence"*.[22]

Recurring to traditional methods would also help overcome one of the most serious problem in the process of resolving conflicts, that is the long delays.

To improve the inclusion of women in conflict prevention, resolution and transition activities, it is very important to concentrate on training and education, and on women security. In post-conflict situations, women must be trained to become change agents for the new generations and for other women – new generations of women and men. If conflict is gendered, peace must not be gendered, and the needs of men and women must be addressed equally, to promote a long lasting and positive peace. Integrating gender in the post-conflict process includes in particular the recognition that sustainable development requires gender equity, recognizing the right of women to take part in all aspects of the transition. In conclusion, there is a strong need to contribute to the affirmation of "sustainable women", as the Global Peacebuilders suggest.[23]

Understanding the role of women in conflict and transition societies must take into account the diversity of the experiences of women in conflicts and post-conflicts situations, going beyond the universalistic aspirations. Moreover,

it is important to overcome the image of women as victims, and promote the image of women as active actors of change, with different agendas according to different contexts, stressing upon the fact that women influence the evolution of societies also in conflict, post-conflict and transition phases. More analysis is needed to support the gender dimension implicit in all aspects of the conflict – before, during and after.

Sustainable peace depends also on the dignity that is recognized to the gender perspective. New social tension might derive from underestimating or ignoring gender issues. The gender perspective can ensure a healthier development of the readjustment of the identity, roles, status and balance of power in societies that have gone through conflicts and are experiencing a phase of transitions.

Recognizing equal dignity and relevance in the process to all parts of society is essential, and allows a positive horizon to come to sight in the often uncertain journey of transition towards the future.

Notes

1   United Nations, 2000.
2   Hobson, 2005.
3   Khalife, 2011.
4   Action Aid, 2011.
5   UN Secretary General, 2011.
6   Peace Women, 2011.
7   Reem, 2011.
8   Henegan, 2011.
9   Coleman, 2011.
10 Afify, 2011.
11 Saner, 2011.
12 Voice of America, 2011.
13 Gribaa, 2009.
14 King Mohammed VI, 2011.
15 Assarrar, 2012.
16 Alsanea, 2007.
17 Saner, 2011.
18 Zanardo, 2009.
19 UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), 1997.
20 Council of Europe, 2004.
21 Chinwe Nwoye, 2004.
22 Chinwe Nwoye, 2004.
23 Global Peacemakers, 2011.

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