

The case for a feminist approach to peace and security

The case for a feminist approach to peace and security Date |
08 March 2023

Solomon Ayele Dersso, PhD
Founding Director, Amani Africa

For a number of years, some countries such as Canada, France, Mexico and Spain have adopted a feminist foreign policy. At the start of this month, coinciding with the women's month, German Foreign Minister announced new feminist guidelines on foreign policy. As we mark the international women's day, it is very fitting to reflect on the case for such a feminist approach to peace and security. I attempt to do this by drawing on the work of the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC).

It was in 2010 that the PSC took a decision to have the women, peace and security (WPS) theme as its standing thematic agenda. However until its convening on WPS at the level of Ministers in 2021 under Kenya's Chairship, its engagement has broadly taken two dimensions. The first and key dimension concerns the question of protection. This is premised on the recognition of the gendered nature of conflicts and its vicious impact on women and girls. The second dimension, which also affects the first, relates to the place of women in peace processes. This is the concern about women's participation and leadership role in decision-making on peace and security and in peace processes. Arguably, much of the policy actions of the PSC and the AU on WPS mostly centered around these two areas.

A broader feminist approach to peace and security that

concerns itself with the structural conditions that lead to gender oppression affecting women and girls, going beyond manifestations of gender oppression in situations of insecurity, has not received as much attention. The PSC came close to having such a feminist approach during its ministerial level session at its 987th meeting held on 22 March 2022.

Two elements of the communique of this session stand out in terms of espousing elements of a feminist approach to peace and security. The first is the acknowledgement of the significance of the issue of gender equality in society in general beyond peace and security. As contained in operational paragraph 1, it underscores 'the need to promote peaceful and inclusive societies ... broadening women's access to education, improving their participation in the economy and decision-making, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels'.

The second element reflecting the feminist approach is the reference to a comprehensive approach. Thus, in operational paragraph 6 the PSC put premium on the 'Pertinence of adopting a comprehensive approach resting on the four pillars of prevention, protection, participation and, recovery and relief for the full and effective implementation of gender equality and the Women, Peace and Security agenda.' The nod towards gender equality in particular is most significant.

In a statement that we submitted to the session at the time, we at Amani Africa welcomed the focus on 'gender inclusive culture of peace'. This framing that centers WPS on a feminist approach, we argued, helps us to discuss the source of oppression of women and girls in society. This is the source of oppression that both limits women's access to equal enjoyment of all their human rights and their equal role in society and exposes them to some of the most barbaric acts of

violence, particularly in times of conflict as reports from ongoing conflict settings attest.

This feminist approach thus brings to the center of our analysis of how to advance WPS agenda the core issue at the heart of gender oppression. This is patriarchy and how patriarchy defines the roles and place of women and men in society. Patriarchy and its pervasiveness in nurturing and perpetuating structures of hierarchy and inequity in the social, political, economic and cultural life of society sustains the conditions for the unequal access of women and girls to the full measure of their rights. As the renowned Egyptian author and feminist advocate, Nawal El Saadawi, who passed away the day before the convening of the 987th session, put it, men are also less free due to the burden that patriarchy puts on them. This unfreedom of men relates to the fact that the expectation that patriarchy sets for them to act and live in a certain for them to be treated as worthy of being men.

Indeed, the way politics is organized and mobilized as well as the continuing hold of patriarchal conceptions of power not only enables social traits of domination and violence in society but also inhibits gender inclusivity. The resultant absence or weakness of gender inclusive culture of peace both exposes women and girls to domination and violence in times of negative peace (one cannot be able to speak of positive peace in conditions of pervasive oppression of women and widespread perpetuation of GBV and sexual violence) and makes them more vulnerable to be targets of violence in conflict situations.

The feminist approach to peace as a matter of necessity thus requires the dismantling of the association of politics and power to patriarchal masculinity. The dismantling and reframing of the patriarchal approach to and conception of politics and power is indeed a pre-requisite for ensuring a gender inclusive culture of peace and thereby creating the

conditions for women and girls both to enjoy the full measure of their rights on an equal basis but also to live a life free from fear. This radical approach goes beyond the symptoms and manifestations and targets the underlying factors of vulnerability of women and girls to become targets of oppression and violence both in times of (negative) peace and during conflicts.

With respect to the representation and participation of women in peace processes, this approach makes it clear that the assumption of leadership positions by women at various levels of decision-making at the national level is essential. In the absence of such widespread presence of women in positions of leadership at the national level it would not be possible to have the pool of women leaders from which women can be recruited to participate and take leadership in peace processes. Additionally, there is a need for the creation of gender sensitive conditions of work in peacekeeping operations and in mediation and peace negotiation as critical measure for ensuring their effective participation in these processes free from the constraints of a patriarchal work environment that does not take account of the specific needs of women.

Arguably therefore, taking the WPS agenda to the next level requires the full embrace of this feminist approach to peace and security. The foundation laid by the 987th session of the PSC with its emphasis on gender inclusive culture of peace offers a unique opportunity to carry out this important undertaking.

Dedicated to the women leaders in Africa and beyond who are at the fore front of championing the WPS agenda – especially the AU Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security, the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa (past & present), the women in diplomacy particularly the women ministers, Ambassadors and colleagues in the field of peace and security

and to the many women colleagues at Amani Africa and in and beyond Africa as well as to my daughter, wife and Emaye. Happy international women's day!

The content of this article does not represent the views of Amani Africa and reflect only the personal views of the authors who contribute to 'Ideas Indaba'