

Rural Women Peace Link Network Groups of Western Kenya

NAOMI L. SHITEMI

L'auteure examine les résultats d'une recherche sur des groupes de femmes incorporés et non incorporés installés dans la vallée du Rift au Kenya. Ces femmes se sont battues contre la pauvreté, ont construit une solidarité, ont conscientisé leur entourage et se sont donné du pouvoir grâce aux organismes communautaires qui ont émergé depuis les pressions socio-économiques actuelles, des demandes et des défis.

Over time women have often mobilized one another in order to combat the socio-economical straight jackets in which they find themselves. From humble beginnings they have struggled collectively to improve their welfare through “merry-go-rounds” often referred to in my community as *nzūkha*, which literally means, “pour me out” or “pour into me.” In these organizations, women pool together money or any other commodity in common demand and give each other turns on the merry-go-round until all members have enjoyed the benefits of all the projects undertaken as a group to improve economic standards.

Women's Welfare Organizations

Welfare organizations are established as a response to and a means of coping with emergent socio-economic pressures and changes and to provide encouragement, inspiration, and practical ideas and solutions to issues confronting women. Though targeted to women, many of the issues these organizations deal with issues are significant for the basic survival and upkeep of the entire family and community. They emanate from, and lead to, the sharing of useful information and action-ori-

ented behaviour for the betterment of the individual, the family and the community as a whole. The women empower one another and create significant and lasting positive change as a result of particular actions or series of action they take to alleviate common needs. Any plans to either start on a project or proceed with subsequent phases of an ongoing project are assessed to determine the extent to which the project will have a measurable impact in meeting their set objectives. They operate on the determination and good will of the membership, trusting that each member will have a complete commitment. As these organizations operate on a “merry-go-round” format, each serviced member is obliged to continue until all members have been beneficiaries.

A welfare objective which targets the purchase of housewares, the construction of a water tank or borehole in either homes or common grounds, the acquisition of roofing materials for more permanent homes, has a positive impact on the family as well as the community in various ways. For example, access to water ensures greater member participation as women are freed from trekking long distances with containers in search of water. Furthermore, the water will be clean which also impacts on the health of the family, and especially the children. The purchase of housewares means that women will have the tools they need to run their households, while the acquisition of roofing materials ensures appropriate shelter and comfort for the entire family.

The welfare organizations have contributed significantly to their members' standard of life, signifi-

cantly alleviating poverty. The members are also empowered by planning projects, by making action-oriented decisions, and by being accountable for the activities of the group.

The welfare groups are however not without problems. Lack of trust, envy and dictatorial tendencies often lead to premature dissolution of the organizations hence curtailing whatever benefits they could have reaped. Some members, after receiving their merry-go-round tokens, fail to either contribute or input whatever resources or materials expected of them by the group for the turn of others.

Rural Women Peace Link Network Groups of Western Kenya (RWPL)

The Rural Women Peace Link
Network Groups of Western Kenya

**They operate on the
determination and good will
of the membership, trusting
that each member will have
a complete commitment.**

(RWPL) is a post-1992 movement organized out of the infamous tribal cleansing clashes experienced in various parts of Kenya particularly in the Rift Valley and Western Kenya. It was born out of the peace and justice advocacy efforts of the National Christian Council of Churches in Kenya (NCCCK). The churches were overwhelmed by victims of the tribal clashes that took refuge in church premises. The main areas affected and which were targeted by the Rural

Women Peace Link Networks include Kopsiro, Cheptais, Turbo, Burnt Forest, Nginyang', Gucha Transmara, Migori, West Pokot and Uasin Gishu all of which were border communities, either tribal or administrative.

The churches had an obligation to assist and rehabilitate the traumatized people by taking them in, giving them relief food and other supplies, resettling them, and striving toward reconciling them with their

It was obvious women were overwhelmed by burdens that were spillovers from the clashes, poverty, and other socio-cultural factors.

assailants. This endeavour required the collective effort of everyone in the communities—men, women, youth, leaders, government officials and other stakeholders.

Deliberate efforts were made to resettle displaced persons but these victims continued to live in fear of the unknown. It became necessary to promote peace and reconciliation by making the members of the communities aware of one another, being mindful of one another's welfare, communicating with one another, and shunning ethnic or any other violence.

Seminars and workshops were held with participants drawn from among all stakeholders and victims. Women were conspicuously silent in these meetings. They had something to say but could not raise their voices.

It dawned on the organizers that they needed to re-strategize if they were to reach all members of the communities, particularly women who were the major stakeholders yet the most burdened with the post-conflict aftermath. They needed to mount a relief package that would respond to the women's needs and help them break their silence. They decided, therefore, to mount a fo-

rum through which the women could open up and share their conflict stories, losses, hopes and visions. There was need to unravel the puzzles leading to:

- the silence of women;
- their apparent passiveness and lack of interest in response to the peace-building efforts;
- the political, economical, social and cultural quagmire that seemed to inhibit the women's voices.

Misguided cultural notions that impact negatively on women's self-expression and inhibit their voices needed to be broken. These myths include:

- that public meetings were only meant for men and that women were not allowed to speak in the presence of the men;
- that it was considered a waste of time for a woman to attend and participate in meetings which were not income-generating yet they took up one's time;
- that talking in public was only for the educated and elected people who could speak and communicate in English and Swahili;
- that women are less capable and valuable than men.

It was obvious that the women were overwhelmed by burdens that were spillovers from the clashes, poverty, and other socio-cultural factors. They needed to share ideas on how they were coping. Their distress was manifest in behaviours not witnessed under normal situations, such as women drowning themselves and their children, or burning their children and either running away or dying with them. The women needed to speak out and be heard so that these situations could be handled or stopped.

Strategy

Informal women's groups already

existed in the communities without interacting with one another. These groups formed the springboards upon which the peace and reconciliation network links would take off. They were contacted and encouraged to be active. The baseline survey attempted to recognize all the existing women's groups—the ones that were active, dormant, and/or merely passive. A strategy was devised to ensure that the women's groups found channels and avenues for networking among themselves and for working collectively toward the common good—the need to promote peace and reconciliation. Leaders were then chosen from among the groups and given support and training to help them build capacity among the members and promote the networking links among the groups. The idea slowly but surely took hold in the women groups in the conflict areas and the networking links came to be known as Rural Women Peace Links (RWPL).

Women's Groups' Activities

Most existing women groups were founded long before the conflicts in order to combat and alleviate domestic needs. Politicians who promised them help if they formed welfare and self-help groups catalyzed and inspired the formation of some of the groups. Many of these, however, fell off and degenerated because the driving force was not from within and among women but political and from without.

The self-motivated groups set out to respond to needs by acquiring kitchen housewares and bedding. They would raise money and share it on merry-go-round basis until all members had benefited. On mobilization, the women were encouraged to broaden their agenda so that they could attend to more socio-economic issues from within and without.

They were urged to continue with their individual activities and even enlarge the membership. Each woman in the community was en-

couraged to belong to a women's group. The preliminary meetings and endeavours to network were held at the individual group level and representatives were subsequently chosen to attend the wider network link meetings. The individual group agenda was, therefore, included in that of the larger body. The women organized forums at which they could share their visions, objectives, and problems while collectively searching for possible solutions.

An innovative leadership strategy for the wider network link was designed. The leadership is rotational by groups. In a network link of 25 member groups members agree on the lifecycle of a leadership term which can range anywhere from three-to-twelve month periods.

Each member is assigned activities for which they are responsible and accountable. The hierarchy goes two ways with responsibility flowing from both the individual group to the network and vice-versa.

Surveys are done at the individual group level and reported for action at the larger network link. Solidarity and collaboration are essential. The executive in the individual and larger network merely serve as facilitators and bookkeepers.

The women are able to identify their needs and emerge with action plans that they then forward to any willing donors through their conveners. In this way, these organizations have built dispensaries, implemented water projects, constructed water tanks, drilled boreholes, and acquired bricks for the construction of houses.

Benefits and Impacts

Members report feelings of being appreciated and useful. Their self-esteem and levels of self-actualization have soared.

This has been facilitated by the groups' promotion of and ability to educate the youth in their communities. Through networking the women's groups raise funds to pay school fees for bright pupils particularly in

secondary schools. Women came to appreciate that they had an obligation to raise *all* the children in their communities. Parents were encouraged to report to the network leaders through their individual groups in order to facilitate the raising of funds for school fees. Alternatives to cash fee payments were arranged such as the splitting and selling of firewood to the schools, or supplying the schools with grains such as maize and beans.

Other benefits include the construction of houses, the drilling of boreholes for water, skill training and capacity building, income generation, raising awareness and advocacy for what the groups believe in and stand for. Groups also shared their ideas on peace work and solidarity.

Marketing of produce

The women developed a strategy to avoid the exploitation by middlemen who often cheat them of their produce. They have formed marketing committees made up of representatives of the women's groups to facilitate the sale of the produce. They agree on the prices and sell from only selected outstations. All buyers must buy only through the marketing committees.

The women have also decided to reintroduce traditional foods that are easy to grow on their soils and will feed the people more adequately.

Transformation, build-up of self-esteem, self-actualization

The women have broken their silence. Most of them confidently share platforms with the administrative and political leaders. Women's issues have been promoted and previously timid women are now quite vocal. Some of them are looking forward to vying for civic seats in the next elections. They even refer to themselves as "Counselors"! Some currently serve on School Education Boards and give talks at chief's *Barazas* (meetings which provide a forum for people to meet with government representatives).¹ Their motto is, "*Always to*

fight for and claim space for the rural woman in all social and community endeavors." They have earned themselves the title of *Mama Amani* (Mother of Peace) wherever they go. They identify with the networking for peace and reconciliation processes so much so that they see themselves as being custodians of solutions to whatever problems they or their community might be facing. They are reaching out as role models and are well respected in their communities. They are transformed.

The women groups have grown from strength to strength in their determination to pursue their individual and collective agenda. The basic criteria for membership in the network links is belonging to a women's group so women have been motivated to either join existing ones or formulate new ones. They feel appreciated and appreciate their own capabilities and innovativeness.

There has also been a bridging of gaps from a variety of angles. For example, the educated are coexisting with the uneducated, tribes are tolerating one another, and the rich and powerful are appreciating and being appreciated by the poor and apparently powerless. Denominational

A strategy was devised to ensure that the women's groups found avenues for working collectively toward the common good.

gaps have been bridged because the groups bring together people of different denominational backgrounds. There is political tolerance, interaction and bonding.

Funding

The women have been encouraged to be self-reliant by raising the funds they require. They appreciate it when they get foreign or external funding but they never allow the donor priorities to clash with their own. They

ask for as little as Ksh. 20 from each woman for memberships fees but there are many groups in the network and, as such, substantial amounts of money are raised.

The Rural Women Network Link has been recognized by other organizations and currently memberships are an entry point into the communities for the attainment of other broader goals, for example, poverty alleviation, the fight against HIV/AIDS and support for people living

The men confess that they see hope for lasting resolution of problems through the efforts of their wives.

with AIDS. They offer regional consultation services often on voluntary and free basis.

Equity in purpose and activity

Initially the men looked down upon the women and denied them the opportunity to be heard and even to congregate. Culture dictated that the women not express themselves on broader social issues and that men be their spokespersons and protectors.

The women had awareness yet lacked opportunities to express themselves and make a difference. They were custodians of solutions yet they had no voice. They needed space and a platform for expression. Ironically, the men often accepted women from other communities addressing them but not their own. They were initially suspicious of the motives behind the networking process and went so far as to not allow their wives to attend the meetings. On being convinced however, they encouraged their wives to attend and even campaigned for the meetings to be brought closer to home so that the women could attend.

There is more harmony in families because the men are now working

together with women for the common good. They are also riding above the detrimental socio-cultural stereotypes that made them look down on the women. They all speak peace and women, in particular, are sensitized to speak out and break their silence. They now have a voice.

Currently the men appreciate the need to work with women. The women are confident enough to work with the men and the men are supporting activities within the network areas. They have become part of the rural women peace links and, therefore, part of the peace vision. There is a sincere change in society for the better. Being a Christian-based network group, they are encouraged to uphold Christian morals and be role models in their communities.

A few men are, however, still skeptical within the network areas. They are afraid that the women are subsuming traditionally male roles. They do not believe that any good has or will ever come out of the networking efforts.

Economic impact

The women groups have been linked and they see themselves as one, regardless of their tribal backgrounds, social or educational standards. They complement each another while appreciating their individual differences and dispositions. They help to resettle the clash victims by providing assistance for the reconstruction of their homes that were destroyed during the conflicts. Previously, these people had only been supplied with polythene papers as part of the relief efforts and could only build polythene shelters for houses. The network's efforts are facilitating the construction and equipping of houses.

Problems

There were incidences of harassment by the local government, particularly chiefs, who demanded that all communication be made through their offices and that they should always give the mandate for any gath-

erings. They however changed their stance when they attended the first meetings and now urge more meetings to be held to address a variety of issues.

The men confess that they see hope for lasting resolution of problems through the efforts of their wives. They are, therefore, determined to support them. Some men have requested that the meetings and network activities be brought closer to home so that their wives can be enlisted. Nevertheless, some men still do not support the idea of their wives staying out for long periods of time while attending to network activities. Sooner or later, however, they see the fruits of the women's efforts and determination and eventually give them their support.

Other problems include the fact that some families have neither joined the individual groups nor the networks. Furthermore, ongoing tension in the valley threatens the peace process and the network's efforts.

Women are the breadwinners for their families and as such it is perceived that if they spend a lot of time attending seminars there will be no food for the family. Women are, however, encouraged to run affairs communally such as asking neighbours to take care of their children while they are at meeting. Transport is nevertheless an ongoing problem as the terrain is hilly and women mainly travel on foot.

Most of the groups targeted have communities that subscribe to female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriages. The women in these communities are strongly encouraged to join the peace and reconciliation groups. As they are a pastoral community which does not have permanent abodes but rather establishes temporary settlements wherever pasture is available, women go out of their way to seek each other, and youth, out.

Illiteracy is not viewed as a handicap although the women use all means available to learn how to read and write. Due to the solidarity that has

emerged, the literate gladly help their illiterate sisters. The literate sisters take care of documentation and assist in promoting literacy by voluntarily running adult education classes where simple learning materials and tools are used.

The following are a sample of reports made by the women's groups to the larger network link on their activities and achievements towards peace and reconciliation to date. The first case study was relayed to the Network office, handwritten, after the ceremony was successfully accomplished whereas the other reports were made at a meeting convened for all the members in the catchment area of the Network Link. The reports are quoted verbatim.

Rural Women Peace Link Meeting At Rukuini on 28th June 2002

There was a meeting organized by the RWPL to visit one of the members and her family at Rukuini, Burnt Forest area. The meeting actually was focused to bring peace and reconciliation among the different communities living in that particular area: the Kalenjin community and the Kikuyu community. The visiting were members from the Kalenjin community visiting a Kikuyu family.

The visitors brought with them a blanket, which was tied around the husband to the Kikuyu host, and a bedsheet tied around the wife of the host, a gourd of milk and cups, and lastly household goods.

This visiting was a kind of ceremony, which the Kalenjin used to practice during reconciliation and peace making among warring parties. (two or more). The wrapping of a blanket and a bed sheet to the host family was a form of blessing them; that is, they are blessed to do some duties. It also marked, symbolically, that now the Kalenjin have blessed their relationship with the Kikuyu.

By giving gourd of milk and cups, symbolizes reconciliation between the warring parties. Drinking milk from

the same gourd shows that now the differences are resolved and they have become one, thus living in a good brotherhood and neighbourhood; hence reflecting it to the whole community.

The household gift was meant to uplift the life standards of the Kikuyu host, a form of thanksgiving for hosting the visitors showing good cultivation of friendship among the two communities.

Report On Meeting With Women in Kerio Valley 2nd-3rd June 2002

Members in this group are drawn from the Marakwet and the Pokot who have been having cultural and political strifes over a long time. The two groups are both pastoralists and believe in cattle-raising as an aspect which implies manhood, courage and responsibility. Below are paraphrases of the women's observations:

One participant said she was grateful that it was the first time she heard that women are also important in the peace-building process. She would like to meet Pokot women and even go to Pokot side. She mentioned they haven't seen Pokot since the attack of March, 12th 2001 when houses were looted and burned, people were killed, among them some her neighbours and relatives. Another participant said that she was happy with the fact that mothers are going to be involved in peace as peace initiators. She stated that women are the ones most affected and that life in caves as a result of the clashes is a great burden to them. Others agreed that women are the most affected; they have to carry their children up and down hill and find ways of providing food to their families while living on the escarpment, far away from the shambas. Participants said it is good that women are going to be involved in peace issues, so far only men have been addressed. They see it is good to look into ways women are going to interact. One woman says, by virtue that

they are Christians, they must interact....

Marakwet women said they know Pokot women are also crying for peace. Not all of them like to attack; even some elders don't like it....

Since the mother is a source of peace in her home, she can also be a source of peace in the community. Women should come together and formulate their own ways of educating their youth. They as mothers are the teachers of their children.... It is important that mothers from both sides interact first to discuss issues in seminars and workshops.... Marakwet women say that they are very flexible. They are willing to even go to Pokot side to meet the other women there. Marakwet women expect that Pokot women are afraid of coming to Marakwet side....

Pursuit for peace through women could come in different ways.... Creating awareness through seminars hence equipping them with the means and strategy for discouraging raids across the age hierarchy of the men—youth, husbands, old men. They encouraged the promotion of self-help groups to work for development in order to reduce poverty and convince the men, support themselves and earn a living.... Pray for peace and encourage free compulsory education that will change practices and beliefs.

Kikatkei Women Group, Turbo Area: Member Group to RWPL

The group was initiated in 1994. It started off with 25 members most of whom have dropped out leaving only 12. Their initial objective was to purchase household items such as cups and plates on a rotational merry-go-round basis with venues rotating among the members' houses. The membership was and is open to any woman willing, able to pay the registration fee, and committed to the group's vision. They pay a membership fee of Ksh. 100, renewable every year. The host member is always the beneficiary of the money pooled that is shared between two members at a

time. Ksh.50 is raised at each sitting by the members for savings.

With time, the purchasing of household goods has extended to bedding. Bread-baking and sheep-rearing are the latest additions in the group's income generation projects. They have become the core of the group's project whereas the purchase of household items is more of an obligation to each other.

The sheep project has flourished. From two sheep, members have benefited from the offspring that are shared. These are reared to sell, the proceeds of which go towards the payment of school fees. They are also in the process of constructing water tanks for one another with the goal of providing clean safe water.

The members fundraise collectively toward school fees and individual projects such as purchase of land and contributions towards ceremonies. They also provide collective manual labour on occasions of social celebrations such as weddings and funerals.

The group works in collaboration with the RWPLs and has contributed in promoting peace and reconciliation among the displaced persons following the 1992 and 1997 clashes. By utilizing the skills offered by the network's capacity-building and policies, the group participates in creating awareness and helping manage people living with AIDS.

Conclusion

There is remarkable empowerment and gender equity facilitated through the women's grassroots welfare organizations. The welfare groups are an innovative measure derived out of need and intended to facilitate the fulfillment of identified needs. These welfare organizations, therefore, contribute toward broad-based development and empowerment at the individual, family, group, network and ultimately society levels while ensuring gender equity in a variety of social nomenclatures. Women have emerged from these groups with viable strategies to promote their self-reliability

and the sustainability of available and existing resources without necessarily relying on external aid. They are instruments of peace and reconciliation in their communities and are actively fight poverty and promoting awareness, empowerment, and gender equity through their participation in these welfare organizations at the grassroots level.

Naomi Shitemi has a Ph.D. in Kiswahili from Moi University. She has conducted considerable research on grassroots women's welfare organizations targeting advocacy and gender mainstreaming. She is currently working on a regional research project, "Women Writing Africa, which is coordinated by the Feminist Press in New York. She is the Moi University representative on the Social Sciences Committee for the Kenya National Commission for UNESCO.

¹Initially *baraza* were weekly meetings convened by the chiefs at which members of the community could come for briefings and dialogue with the administrators. They were provided a forum through which the government directly communicated with the people. They were often held on Mondays hence some communities refer to Monday as *baraza*. They are no longer held on a weekly basis but when they are held they are an opportunity for the people to meet with government representatives. Currently chiefs and their assistants capitalize on private and public functions such as funerals at which many people gather to communicate with them.

References

- Rural Women Peace Link (RWPL).
Reflective Conference 2001 Report.
December 5-8·2001
Rural Women Peace Link (RWPL).
Documentations.

PATIENCE WHEATLEY

Every Newsphoto Tells a Story

The old woman
white hair flying
hits the road
skirt up round her waist
rolled stockings
shabby underwear showing
as she
lambasts with her rolled
umbrella
a muscular young policeman

Behind her
a younger woman
perhaps sixty, robust
but outnumbered,
fights three more brave
policemen

Oh, think of the black scarfed
Mothers of the Disappeared
who circle, circle
the huge imperial square in
Buenos Aires
mourning sons
trussed up like chickens
and dropped alive from
airplanes.

And today a newsphoto of
General Pinochet
ecstatic
landing in Chile
prancing from his supposed
sickbed
into the cheers of supporters

lamentations of mothers,
sisters, wives
of tortured men and women

Patience Wheatley has had two collections of poetry published by Goose Lane Editions and lives in Kingston, Ontario.