Traditional bearers

By Juliet Were Oguttu

The struggle for women's empowerment worldwide is an outcome of the patriarchal set-up of society that has for a very long time denied women access to information, communication and full realisation of their rights and potential.

For African women in particular, patriarchal social structures have left women in isolation and the major communication role that has been bestowed upon them has been to ensure that the traditional and cultural norms are passed on from one generation to another as a way of upholding the values of society.

Unfortunately, many of the traditions which are strongly valued (eg: female genital mutilation, bride price and preference of the boy child) have a direct effect on women's sexual and reproductive health and have also contributed to their marginalisation.

And, since the 1950s when a good number of African countries attained independence from differ-ent colonial regimes, the continent has experienced many civil conflicts and wars. According to the Economic Commission for Africa's African Women's Report (1998) more than 30 wars have been fought in Africa since the 1970s.

By 1996, out of the 53 African countries, 14 had experienced armed conflicts contributing to more than one half of all war-related deaths globally. Even in countries free of armed conflict, patriarchal gover-nance, weak law enforcement structures, military regimes and dictatorship nurture high incidences of gender violence and gross abuses of human rights.

When one analyses the root causes of such con-flicts, the underlying problem is failure to dialogue, poor consultation and intolerance of one another. All these are communication problems that perpetuate under-development.

However, even in situations of armed conflict, warring factions are aware of the potential of ICTs in enhancing the struggle. Rebel commanders usually have powerful communications equipment that they use to track the activities of the counter war-ring group and for sending out messages to instil fear among civilians and governments.

On the other side, governments try to control the flow of information about such conflicts to civilians.

Currently in Uganda, with the influx of the Lord's Resistance Army into parts of Teso (eastern Uganda), radio station Radio Veritas was closed down for informing the masses about the advancing rebels and the need for civilians to move to safer areas. According to authorities, the radio station was purportedly revealing government military plans and therefore making its work difficult. Under such circumstances, where access to information is denied, women and children are left trapped in conflict-stricken areas and thus are exposed to various gender-based violations.

Strategies for conflict areas

Isis-WICCE was established in 1974 in Geneva, Switzerland, with the aim of strengthening communica-tive mechanisms among women's organisations

# of information

worldwide, to share information, ideas and experiences in order to improve their status and overcome gender inequality.

As global needs for information and knowledge about women continued to grow, Isis-WICCE relocated to Uganda in 1993 with the objective of tapping the voices of African women and integrating them into the global women's knowledge base.

The organisation has since focused on women's human rights in situations of armed conflict and has used different communication strategies to make the voices and concerns of women in conflict visible.

Documenting women's stories

Isis-WICCE has since 1997 documented women's realities in situations of armed conflict in Uganda and the findings reveal high rates of psychological trauma, pathetic sexual and reproductive health and general ill-health and apathy among women war survivors.

All these are a result of the various atrocities inflicted upon women which include being gang raped, seeing their children being raped, being forced to have sex with relatives, watching their loved ones being killed, maiming and burning, among others.

Given the culture of silence around women's sexual and reproductive health, the majority of women continue to live with pain throughout their lifetimes. Most of the women who shared their experiences had not before had an opportunity to talk.

The process of speaking out and sharing their experiences was the beginning of a healing process for the women, accompanied by an urge to access information on how their lives could be improved. The outcomes of this documentation process can be found at http://www.isis.org.ug.

Capacity building

Isis-WICCE runs skills-building workshops for women leaders from different parts of Uganda who have experienced armed conflict, to equip them with skills of analysing conflicts, peace building, communication and leadership.

As part of their involvement in their communities, the women carry out sensitisation seminars in local languages and use music and drama as communication mediums. This has enabled a wider community to access information and the creation of own content.

Rural info units

During the documentation process, one of the major problems identified was the lack of a central place where women leaders in post-conflict communities could access

and the rest of the world, on the ills of war and the need to put in place mechanisms for appropriate redress for women war survivors as well as involving them in the peace-building processes.

Women's Internet café

A women's Internet café was set up in 2000 to give women and girls a supportive environment for interfacing with ICTs. The café is used for training women and girls as well as enabling them have access to different Internet applications.

Women and girls who have benefited from this initiative have built confidence in the use of ICTs and attained hands-on skills that have enabled them to interact with their peers worldwide. Some of them have gained employment through skills gained, and some women's groups have been able to access and disseminate information for empowerment, and in seeking redress.

Interventions needed

The challenges faced in promoting women's use of ICTs in conflict-affected areas are numerous and require commitment on the part of governments, private sector, civil society and all other interested key actors.

The World Summit on the Information Society is an appropriate forum that should ensure that the following interventions are put in place and fulfilled:
♦ Information and communication policies must be gender sensitive, inclusive, and must reflect the needs of the majority of African women.

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information. Isis-WICCE set up three rural information units to serve as meeting places for women leaders to talk about issues that affect their lives and exchange information. The units are equipped with tape recorders that are used for recording the best practices as well as for recording gender-based violations against women and children for advocacy and redress purposes.

Video documentaries

Due to high rates of illiteracy among Ugandan women and a sustaining oral-based culture, video is an effective form of communication. It also enables women to access information that they are normally denied. Isis-WICCE has developed two video documentaries, "Women, War and Trauma" and "A Lingering Pain" as tools for sensitising communities in Uganda, Africa

♦ Liberalisation and privatisation policies must include regulations that protect and empower the majority, especially marginalised groups such as women.
♦ Women and girls should be provided with opportunities in their localities to learn and use ICTs for their empowerment.
♦ Governments should speed up efforts to eliminate the social and cultural pressures that have continued to keep women and girls out of the public arena.
♦ Women ICT practitioners should be supported to develop concepts, theories and analysis geared towards developing relevant content for African women's information needs.
♦ Women in conflict situations must be urgently provided with efficient and effective communication systems to be able to access needed support in time.

Juliet Were Oguttu works for ISIS Women's International Cross-Cultural Exchange (ISIS-WICCE) in Uganda with responsibility for ICT advocacy. wjuliet@isis.org.ug