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GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND PEACE PROCESSES IN WEST AFRICA

OUTLINING A FRAMEWORK FOR MEDIATORS

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Text by Elisa Tarnaala
Language editing by Stephen Thompson

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1. INTRODUCTION

In West Africa, peace processes laid out the bases for new societies during the first decade of the 2000s. When agreements were negotiated, conflict-related gender-based violence that had occurred during the war years was not addressed officially. In post conflict, violence continued at alarming levels. Today, issues that affect rights and gender equality are understood as base lines for inclusive peace processes. In retrospective, the conflict cycles of West Africa, and those of the Mano River Union countries in particular, can offer many lessons for mediators working in violent conflicts around Africa.

The four countries of the Mano River Union - Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone - not only share common boundaries, but have been linked by instability and affected by conflict of different intensity over the past two decades. They represent a typical conflict system, in which the actors and drivers for conflict may be local or national, but their effects are regional in character. Many effects, such as displacement and disruption of trade can be felt both by immediate neighbours and more widely across the region[1]. In the MRU countries as well as in West Africa in general, the political and economic causes of conflict are tightly interwoven with structural social problems, including, in particular, gender and generational conflicts. Gender relations have rarely been the root cause of conflict, but gender-based injustices have been significant manifestations of discontent since the 1990s. Gender-based violence still contributes to the conflict configuration in the region.

The post-Cold War proliferation of small arms changed the scenarios of war, with civilians in general and women in particular becoming more tightly involved in conflict, both as its targets and its actors. The vast majority of today's conflicts have moved from battlefields to cities, their outskirts, and villages where civilian lives are intertwined with war and conflict actors. This has imposed them to rules of violence for extended times and changed their roles drastically. When wars are not fought by nation states and their armies, but rather by informal entities - gangs and warlords using small arms and improvised weapons - the grey zones of peace and conflict have become normalised living environments for countless people. In these daily contexts, women provide services to fighters; organise support; and manage intelligence and money. They raise their children to take part in conflict, and can be key agents encouraging their communities to engage and keep up violence. Simultaneously - and because of these new settings - women have emerged as indispensable actors in mediating peace: they lead and understand the logics of peace movements, and are essential in shaping the international normative frameworks regulating conflict.

This study offers West African mediators a first insight on which issues regarding gender-based violence should be taken into account in a peace process. It is not a concrete toolkit, but a conflict analysis, which suggests how the current context could be analysed from a perspective of gender and women when the mediation strategy is being defined. The study highlights how local, national, and transnational conflict constellations frequently overlap, and how it is imperative to consider the role of women within all these different layers. Gender in this study, thus, is a relational concept. It is also, as a central premise of conflict analysis, a context-specific concept. The idea of a "continuum of violence" is another key notion of this study, because it offers a framework for describing how different types and levels of violence interact with each other, and how past conflicts are built-in in the logics of contemporary violence.

We define Gender-Based Violence (GBV) as an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will and that is based on socially-ascribed (gender) differences between males and females:

> Gender-based violence encompasses a range of human rights violations and includes, but is not limited to, forced marriage, attacks against defenders of women's human rights, other harmful traditional practices and sexual violence (including rape, sexual slavery, trafficking, forced impregnation, forced abortion, forced sterilisation, forced prostitution, indecent assault, inappropriate medical examinations, strip searches and sexual harassment). The results are devastating as survivors face multiple psychological and medical problems including HIV and other sexually-transmitted infections, pregnancy, infertility and genital mutilation. GBV can be directed at women, men, girls and boys, but is more often directed against women and girls and is linked to women's subordinate status in society[2].

The report is based on interviews of local and international experts, government officials, local organisations, focus group discussions, reports on West Africa in general and Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire (CI) in particular, and academic literature. It is not a comprehensive sample nor based on high-profile cases;[3] the evidence builds strongly on the workshops and in-depth interviews conducted during fieldwork in Liberia and CI, and discussions in November 2011 and October 2012 in Abuja with ECOWAS officials. The findings do not represent all West African conflicts and their aftermaths in a systematic and exhaustive manner, but pretend to create a general framework of the situation for the coming years, in regard to the work of mediators.

While West Africa appears calmer in 2012, there is also convincing evidence that the region remains fragile and prone to instability. While Liberia and Sierra Leone are consolidating peace, the recent political crisis in Côte d'Ivoire, and the on-going crises in Mali and Guinea-Bissau have resulted in large numbers of refugees in neighbouring countries, and also cross-border movement of small arms, 'dissident' groups, and mercenaries. Gender-based violence has recently been committed by armed groups, including state security forces, in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea as well as by armed groups in Mali. The interrelated conflict drivers that cut across the region are weak government structures, endemic corruption, persistent poverty and social exclusion, mismanagement of

natural resources and the spillover of conflict and instability into neighbouring states.

Some of the new threats to West African stability are of a criminal, rather than political nature. The Institute for Security Studies identifies drug trafficking, terrorism, piracy and subsequent challenges to democratic governance as new threats to the region. For example, there are obvious connections between drug trafficking and the challenge of border insecurity, high rates of youth unemployment and disenfranchisement[4]. These tensions affect gender relations by accentuating the old link between masculinity and violent conflict of the past, where combatants and other armed men regulated social and political relations in the region and acted as the main power players.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is increasingly engaging in mediation and conflict prevention in moments of crisis within the region. Mediation functions are provided through the Council of the Wise and the Mediation Facilitation Division. ECOWAS' framework for peace and security includes the Protocol on the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, and the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. The early warning system (Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN)), set up under the Protocol, began operation in 2003 and is established in alert and response structures. In 2008, a comprehensive Conflict Prevention Framework (CPF) was adopted. This includes operational prevention, such as deployment of the ECOWAS Standby Force. The Conflict Prevention Framework recognises it's Women, Peace and Security objectives to *"propel and consolidate women's role and contribution to center stage in the design, elaboration, implementation and evaluation of conflict prevention, resolution, peace building and humanitarian initiatives while strengthening regional and national mechanisms for the protection and advancement of women[5]"*.

2. GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE DURING CONFLICT

According to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination of Women (CEDAW), *"Wars, armed conflicts and the occupation of territories often lead to increased prostitution, trafficking in women and sexual assault of women, which require specific protective and punitive measures"*[6]. Gender-based violence takes different forms according to the context of each conflict, and transforms through the various phases of the conflict cycle: it should not be analysed independently from other social and political violence occurring in these situations. International scholarship on gender has long showed how sexual and gender-based violence rarely conforms to the timelines of peace treaties and ceasefires but endures beyond them. This is why, in order to prevent this violence, more should be known about its causes and why its manifestations change. The interviewees and focus groups for this study noted the artificiality of clear conflict phases, but agreed on analysing each separately, as a way of structuring the conversations.

The first series of discussions focused on GBV prevalent during conflicts: sexual violence, prostitution, HIV, violence against refugees and IDPs, and the difficulties in registering and reporting. The experts emphasised that these themes are interlinked and intertwined. Sexual violence and prostitution lead to the spread of HIV, whilst the conditions at refugee camps very often lead to high political and psychological tensions and forced silence about rapes. The lack of accurate data was emphasised in several consultations; much of the information discussed was based on confidential testimony or on other meetings. It was acknowledged that many personal stories were repeated without questioning their representativeness. These observations from the field echo the concern of the United Nations: several Security Council resolutions in recent years specifically request numerical data on the 'prevalence and trends' of sexual violence. Estimates and percentages have become part of the academic and policy debate on what we know about sexual violence and how it could be tackled. In response to this, Cohen and Hoover Green suggest that it is preferable to use accurate, if vague, terms ('many thousands' to describe the extent of rape in the Liberian case, for example), and to adhere to the principle that one human rights violation is one too many[7].

2.1 SEXUAL VIOLENCE

During the past years, numerous reports have brought to public knowledge how gang rape, sexual slavery, sexual torture, rape with objects, and sexual mutilation have been used against women (and, to a lesser extent, men) in conflicts. In West Africa, testimonies and other evidence have been collected especially from the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Rapes occurred in front of family members and in public spaces, and some victims were abducted and forced both to provide sexual favours for soldiers and to perform daily labour for the warring factions.

Many young men were coerced into violence against their own family members and then forcibly recruited. This made it almost impossible for them to return to their family of origin. There are some reported instances of sexual violence by proxy - when people were forced to rape others, often their own family members. In a study by PRIO

on sexual violence in African conflicts, this form of violation was reported in five of the conflicts: Uganda, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Burundi, and the DRC[8]. In this context, it has been reminded by scholars that (just as it is not constructive to consider the Liberian conflict a 'war of a third kind',) sexual violence is not an isolated violation; it follows logic that can be researched and understood[9].

Building on this, it is easier to see the link between civil war and sexual violence. Pre-existing social conflicts were exploited by warlords in West Africa - above all, Charles Taylor - when they mobilised young men's willingness to fight lawlessness and exploitation. The war established new hierarchies between young and older men, when young men were trained to become commanders who brutally disempowered old authorities. On the orders of the warlords, commanders systematically employed (mass) rape of the women and girls of their respective opponents as a war tactic. Many women and girls were abducted as sex slaves or "bush wives," whereby young militiamen and soldiers usurped control over their sexuality and fertility - a privilege previously reserved only for older, higher-ranking men[10].

Some young girls joined the militias more or less voluntarily in order to escape forced marriages, among other things. In this role, they had to take on numerous different tasks, such as participation in combat missions and raids, weapon and munitions transport, intelligence services, torture, robbery and pillage, provision of basic daily supplies, care of the wounded, and sexual services[11]. In demobilisation processes, the necessities of these female ex-combatants have rarely been taken into account, and the specific problems in their return to civilian life have seldom been discussed. The interviewees reminded that both raped women and female ex-combatants are often rejected by men and also by other women and children. This is why, in order to avoid shame and stigmatisation, women usually try to hide the violence perpetrated against them as well as their own actions as perpetrators of violence. Especially out of the fear of being stigmatised and abandoned by their communities, women frequently do not want to report GBV to local leaders.

According to Nordås, it appears that victims of sexual violence have been less selectively targeted in the conflicts of 2000s in Africa than during many of the wars of the 1990s where victims were clearly and purposefully selected. Not all selecting was made for political reasons, though. Sierra Leonean rebels, for example, were reported to have specifically targeted very young girls to reduce the risks of STDs[12]. During post-conflict electoral violence, such as in Côte d'Ivoire or in Guinea in 2009, however, sexual violence was discriminate, targeted towards the opposing political faction or against anti-government protesters as in the case of Guinea.

It is difficult to tell whether the situation of sexual violence would be improving, due to the increased publicity and improved channels of reporting. Some estimate that rape would not be getting worse over time. We do not know, however, the total number of victims per year. Utas suggests that aid recipients are aware of this dynamic: he found that Sierra Leonean refugees in Liberia likely believed rape victims received special attention from aid organisations and answered researchers accordingly.[13] What we do know through the testimonies is that sexual violence follows the conflict cycle and converts from wartime rapes to violence inside the communities, perpetrated by family members, neighbours, youth gangs, and ex-combatants. We know through statistical evidence that post-conflict survivors of sexual violence tend to be far younger than survivors of domestic violence and other violent crimes. Instead, perpetrators of sexual and domestic violence are generally considerably older than their victims[14].

More attention should be directed to community violence against women as a manifestation of GBV in post conflict. This is not indiscriminate sexual violence on a (massive) scale, nor domestic violence in the sense of incidents always happening inside homes and by intimate partners, but a persistent pattern of attacks during post-conflict or low-intensity conflict. It is a way that wartime sexual violence translates to a "normal state of affairs" in turbulent post-conflict societies. A recent study by Small Arms Survey found that, while females are the predominant targets of sexual and domestic violence, males and females generally experience similar rates of victimisation in terms of overall criminal offences[15]. Despite almost even rates of victimisation between genders, women are nevertheless perceived as more likely than men to become targets of crime and violence. This may reflect a societal perception of women as being weaker and more vulnerable - and thus more at risk - than men[16].

Sexual Violence: Entry points for mediators and their teams

Mediators should seek available research on sexual violence during conflict and enquire as to the priorities of victims' themselves. Rapes might emerge from troops on the ground and occur because of weak chains of command. Alternatively, sexual violence might be committed with high prevalence because of explicit political or ethnic targeting and be used as a "strategy of war." In order to prevent this violence, more should be known about its causes and why its manifestations change. Cycles of hatred and revenge produced by sexual violence rarely conform to the timelines of peace treaties and ceasefires, but endure past them and are difficult to reconcile.

2.2 REPORTING, REGISTERING AND THE LIMITS OF THE JUSTICE SYSTEMS

Judicial structures at the national, local and community levels should operate around principles of equality between women and men. The focus groups reminded, however, that in order to sentence someone for rape, judges require solid evidence, which is often impossible for victims to obtain. The fact that the victim has to provide the evidence shows that crimes against women are not viewed as seriously as crimes against men. In reality, women face several difficulties when reporting cases of GBV in the justice system almost everywhere. Courts in countries recovering from conflict are regularly understaffed, leading to cases not being called for hearing. In many West African countries, legal advice is unattainable for women due to its high cost. In Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone, a medical certificate proving rape to the court can cost more than one hundred U.S. dollars - an amount that most women cannot afford. Sexual and domestic violence cases reported to the police might result in an arrest, but few are tried in court and convictions are rare.

Corruption is another reason that makes it difficult to hold perpetrators of GBV accountable in West Africa. If a case is reported to the police, the perpetrator can pay to make it disappear. Nonetheless, sometimes there is no need to bribe, because govern-

ment officials automatically side with the perpetrator. In other words, due to seeing GBV as something "normal", government authorities often undermine gender-based violence. The focus groups noted several examples of judges not considering GBV a severe crime: "I can't put a man in jail for having sex", a judge had commented on an alleged rape to one of the focus group participants. In many cases, judges may be aware of the problem of GBV, but think that it is not their issue to tackle. From the point of view of women, the government authorities are perceived as distant, inefficient and on the side of men. Therefore, training and awareness-raising among judges is vital. Another serious issue that prevents women from reporting is the fact that survivors are often pressured to regard their cases as internal family matters to be dealt with outside of the formal justice system.

The experts underlined the importance of maintaining confidentiality and protection of victims throughout the process of collecting testimonies on GBV. Women need to feel that they will not risk anything by telling their story. Furthermore, counselling needs to be given before the testimonies are recorded; this way remembering can contribute to the healing process. In fact, the workshop participants shared examples of opposite developments, where sharing testimonies had led to more frustration, as nothing had followed after several rounds of talking to outsiders. Counselling, shelter, vocational training, and microcredits are all important ways to support victims of GBV. In addition to legal and economic aid, women also need support to internalise empowerment. Overall, the experts thought that a holistic approach is needed for the empowerment of survivors of GBV.

Since there are no gender-sensitive legal provisions in place related to the participation and protection of witnesses and victims, the experts noted that creating mechanisms of informal data gathering and approaching other witnesses of GBV is also important. Pharmacists and health clinic personnel, for instance, are often well aware of the prevalence of GBV and might more likely share their insights with outsiders. It should be important to create systems for anonymous reporting for these witnesses who are not victims themselves. National monitoring systems may not always tell sufficiently either, because of the extent to which they reflect the actual situation depends on a combination of state capacities to respond and provide data on incidents of violence and the ability or willingness of survivors to report them[17]. Interpretation of the data should be taken seriously as well. For example, in the case of Liberia, no study currently exists based on interviews with male perpetrators of sexual violence.

If alternatives to the formal justice system are explored, their effectiveness and their compatibility not only with gender but also with international human rights standards should be tested. The biggest problem of traditional justice or customary practices for the focus groups was understood to be its lack of gender sensitivity, both at the level of individual justice operators, and in structures. There was also a strong feeling that confidence in formal justice in general, where operational, was so low that it lacks the potential to address the conflict triggers identified. Alternatives might include local mediation, use of paralegals, Palava Hut discussions and codification of customary law. Women should be consulted in the application and modification of these alternatives.

Justice Systems: Entry points for mediators and their teams

Functioning judicial systems for trying and judging cases of GBV are important for peace to be inclusive and for the victims to trust the state institutions. Concrete support to victims should go beyond collecting testimonies. Mediators should insist that the society debates to what extent wartime perpetrators of GBV face legal consequences. Practice of traditional justice should be evaluated for effectiveness and its compatibility not only with gender but also with international human rights standards. The creation of free and otherwise accessible mechanisms of reporting and registering should be encouraged.

2.3 THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS & REFUGEES

Many West Africans have oscillated between the statuses of IDP, refugee, and returnee during the decades of conflict and instability in the region. In the case of Liberia, for example, with half of the population estimated to have been displaced, the task of dealing with the consequences of displacement is enormous[18]. It has been emphasised that displacement impacts the lives of women and men differently, as women assume new responsibilities as heads of households during their status as IDP or refugee. Frequently women leave their homes as wives of men at war, but end up taking care of their children as widows during the displacement. Many become mothers in camp conditions and also take care of their elderly parents. In case of return, women and men differ in attitudes toward going back, but women's concerns are seldom heard. Displaced women and refugees suffer special risks of sexual and gender-based violence. Women's Participation in IDP organisations is important in order to involve them in post-conflict peace building.

Recently it has been alerted how women also in camps frequently become victims of sexual or gender-based violence. At the camp, surrounded by a tensioned atmosphere, women fear that their daughters or they themselves could become victims of violence again. This only intensifies the initial traumas of GBV. In an enclosed context such as a refugee camp, the impact of stigma is powerful - and, worse, the violence is seen as somehow "normal" or at least inevitable. Many women are too afraid to talk in the camps. While this situation often reflects a wider culture of impunity, sexual violence is a particularly hidden crime as victims are reluctant - or unable - to report attacks: survivors of sexual violence frequently encounter severe prejudice from members of their families and communities and are therefore reluctant to publicise any attacks[19].

Besides, what often makes reporting more difficult is the fact that men are in leadership positions in camps. As this is true both at administrative and ground levels, it makes reporting impossible for some women for cultural reasons; in other cases it is because of ignorance and rejection from the part of men. A certain gender-blindness takes also the form of unequal resource distribution: men are almost always in charge of dividing the received aid among the IDPs, and the special needs of women are often ignored in the camps' resource allocation. There are also other gender-specific concerns within the context of displacement. First is the difficulty associated with young men because of their age and gender with participation in conflict. These young men

become vulnerable to forced recruitment from the camps, even when in exile in neighbouring countries. Secondly, when it comes to demobilisation camps particularly, many are still not equipped to take in female combatants; rather, they categorise women and children, at best, as members of male fighters' families. Former female fighters frequently face physical and sexual violence, although the camp authorities are obligated to protect them against it.

Access to justice within refugee and IDP camps is lacking or non-existent. Lucy Hovil notes that camps are too often run and perceived as isolated islands outside of national jurisdiction, particularly in cases where the UNHCR or other international actors effectively run the camps in a context of limited national capacity. Linked to this is the somewhat xenophobic notion that what goes on inside a camp is irrelevant to wider national processes unless it has a direct bearing on the "outside"[20]. Lately within the humanitarian establishment there has been a major shift, with growing awareness of the political ramifications of humanitarian action. The concept of the passive "good" refugee without agency or political intention has begun to be challenged[21]. This is even more important in the context of the discussions that noted that many African IDPs do not live in camps. In fact, in many countries, there are more displaced persons and refugees living outside of camps than inside them. Most of them are women.

IDPs and Refugees: Entry points for mediators and their teams

In assessing the differential impact of displacement on men and women, one needs to distinguish between camp settings and other conditions of displacement. Outside camps, the vulnerabilities of displaced women and refugees are often higher. In camps, conditions for speaking freely should be provided for both men and women, and issues of sexual violence should be taken to the fore. The political backgrounds of tensions should not be ignored and there should be an insistence on proper analysis of the IDP camps. It is essential to report clearly on IDP camps in a standardised manner and develop data that differentiate between women and children and provide gender indicators.

3. GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND POST CONFLICT

In 1989, Charles Taylor brought war to Liberia when he launched his incursion from Côte d'Ivoire. That war spilled over into Sierra Leone in 1991 and fighting also briefly spread into Guinea during 2000. Sierra Leone started its transformation from conflict to peace in 2002 and elected a new president in 2007. Liberia's transition began in 2003 and was consolidated with the 2005 election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who was re-elected for a second term in 2011. The 2006 arrest of Charles Taylor to face war crime charges for his actions in Sierra Leone's civil war marked another turning point in the region's stability. Guinea has not had large-scale conflict but has endured fundamental political instability for many years. Elections in 2010 marked an end to military rule and conflict was again avoided when the results of a hotly-contested presidential race were respected. The July 2011 armed attack on the presidency is a sign of tense relations with the army. Despite these diverse national trajectories, post-conflict scenarios and effects are shared by the four countries of the Mano River Union, and the region more widely.

The link between formal gains made by women in many post-conflict legislative and constitutional developments, together with the political displacement of power for many men, creates a complex social and legal terrain. It is upon this territory that women's gains and the changing roles of men in post conflict are played out. Land ownership, property inheritance, and elections stand out in this context as the most contested issues. The manifestations of domestic and sexual violence in post conflict should be regarded at least partly as consequences of these changes. There is some evidence that post-conflict societies do at least statistically experience greater proportions of domestic and intimate violence. Increased reporting may simply mean that reporting is possible where it was not previously. On the other hand, other forms of violence may be hidden in post conflict and have more to do with the previously-mentioned real or symbolical displacement of men from pre-war or wartime power positions. Due to these power struggles - in order to secure benefits for women - implementation arrangements need to be negotiated within the peace agreements.

3.1 DDR AND DOMESTIC AND COMMUNITY VIOLENCE

When demobilised but not completely disarmed combatants return to their homes and families, war behaviour moves to the private sphere. In many countries that have suffered a violent conflict, rates of interpersonal violence remain high after the cessation of hostilities[22]. The focus groups for this study emphasised that children and youth who have seen violence in their communities during conflict are more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviour themselves. In this sense, disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration are at the heart of gender-sensitive peace agreements. Not everything can be resolved in a peace process, but with today's knowledge on post-conflict violence, mediation should always address the prevention of future community violence.

Within the household, arms are used by intimate partners and friends to commit

violence. This happens during conflict as sanctions against violence break down, and women's social and economic vulnerability increases, but also escalates in post conflict. In situations of conflict and endemic violence, hyper-masculinity plays an enlarged and elevated role. Its social power is intensified when violence is endemic, and other social structures are weak. The keeping up of these hyper-masculine patterns and hierarchies is particularly strong in the immediate post-conflict process. Schäfer has noted how outside the capital in Liberia, old male and female elites used all means at their disposal to undermine the new national guidelines in post conflict[23]. Also in neighbouring Sierra Leone, female circumcisers, who are highly regarded and powerful, interpreted selective female genital mutilation as a way to help re-establish the old social order. Some received expense allowances from the wives of high-ranking politicians. This political support by elite local women was also reported in Cote d'Ivoire.

Many female ex-combatants who joined the combat units in the hope of a better future are reported to be the ones with the most miserable existence in West Africa. This fact was emphasised in the focus groups both in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire. Many are frustrated and could take up weapons again to secure their livelihood. Another frustrated group, surrounded by distrust and rejection in society, are the young male ex-combatants. According to a study by Small Arms Survey, despite the persistent stigma that would appear to surround this group in the Liberian society, the role of ex-combatants in sexual violence in post-conflict Liberia may be overstated[24]. Perpetrators of sexual and domestic violence are more likely to be friends, neighbours or family members than those persons who commit other types of offence. MoGD data shows that approximately four per cent of GBV cases are gang rapes. The same data indicates that 95.2 per cent of GBV offenders are males who are generally much older than their victims[25]. A rape counsellor at the Du Port Road Clinic in Monrovia observes that most rape cases she comes across involve girls and young women between five and seventeen years old[26]. A disturbingly high number of survivors are very young girls who have been raped by family members, friends, or neighbours.

Echoing these findings, the IRC states that the primary threat to women in West Africa is not a man with a gun or a stranger. It is their family members and neighbours. Over 60% of assault survivors whom the IRC assists in West Africa are seeking help because of violence committed by an intimate partner. For the IRC, if the humanitarian community ignores what has been considered a "private matter," it fails to confront one of the most significant public health crises and primary obstacles to women's empowerment in post-war societies[27]. Besides, the deepest scars of domestic violence are often the least visible, because they manifest themselves as shame, humiliation and isolation. This isolation inhibits women's participation in social, economic or community activities. It inhibits young girls to become full members in their societies.

DDR and Domestic and Community Violence: Entry points for mediators and their teams

DDR and its subsequent implementation phases create scenarios for power struggles when ex-combatants return to their homes and communities. In order to provide secure conditions for women, the impacts of DDR arrangements on civilians needs to be assessed before the implementation of reintegration programmes. The situation of female ex-combatants needs to be analysed carefully and the different needs of this group considered. The vulnerability of young women should be emphasised, as they are commonly the victims when domestic and community violence rates go up after a demobilisation process.

3.2 PROPERTY INHERITANCE AND LAND RIGHTS AFTER CONFLICT

In the West African civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia in the 1990s, and to a large extent in Côte d'Ivoire at the beginning of 2000, land rights were at the heart of the conflict. Young men in these countries took up weapons in order to remove corrupt political elites who had ruined their countries and robbed the natural resources. In addition, the young combatants targeted powerful old men in the villages who had demanded extremely high bride prices when they married off their daughters. Marriage, land-use rights, and political participation were prerequisites for recognition as full men. This was systematically denied to young, low-ranking men, which is why many joined the rebel groups. This intense competition for economic and sexual resources as well as opportunities together with rigid age stratification was one of the triggers of violence.

During conflict, massive lootings, the loss of land and restricted access to fields impoverished entire families. "How are we supposed to forgive when we are hungry?" ask certain women in CI. When war was over, especially widows had to struggle to retake possession of their husbands' land in situations in which their in-laws did not recognise their right to the land. In most cases, property inheritance and land ownership was regarded to belong to the male family members of the husband. Worst off were the women whose husbands had died before they had had children. These women could not claim their husband's possessions, including land that he would have inherited. A further complication was the cases where families refused to recognise the legitimacy of marriages or children born in exile. As a consequence, women were either pressurised to leave the family land, or had to stay and accept the leadership of the male relatives or the family. "Is it normal that a person copes like this when we have nothing to give to our children to eat?" was asked in one focus group.

The experts raised land as a major issue of tension currently in Liberia and an emerging issue in Sierra Leone and Guinea. Sierra Leone's TRC report listed land as a source of dispute between 'settlers and natives' since the former arrived in 1822. Liberia's recent wars have added a new layer of complexity to the issue, as during large-scale displacement people left land they had been occupying and others took their place. This is why, with ethnic tensions heightened by the conflict, and given the importance of land for security and livelihoods, the issue of access to land has been estimated as a

potential trigger point for renewed conflict in Liberia. In Côte d'Ivoire, experts consulted for this study stated the rights of women to inherit and the practice where widows are understood as being a possession of the deceased husband's brother (levirate), as the currently most complex issues of GBV. While widespread land disputes are a war legacy, they also are source of gender-based violence today.

Some of those interviewed in a report by Conciliation Resources recounted that communities in Sierra Leone and Guinea have seen large portions of communal land parcelled out to international companies, either for the development of plantations or for mining, without accompanying documentation on land transactions and corporate social responsibility agreements. This has often led to tensions between chiefs and local authorities and the youth[28]. In Liberia, big mining and forestry projects by the government are causing tension in some regions, albeit that there have been schemes of social responsibility and redistribution of royalties back to the regions and local communities.

Property Inheritance and Land Rights: Entry points for mediators and their teams

Fierce competition over economic resources, particularly land, can trigger violence and revive old conflicts. When reparations or restitution of property are discussed, more attention needs to be focused on the rights of widows and other women as legal inheritors of land and property. Monitoring mechanisms for the effective implementation of land restitution should be created. In countries where the pre-conflict context was profoundly biased against women, there is a need to address not only the fallout from the conflict, but also inequalities and discrimination that existed before and regardless of the conflict.

3.3 TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE AND TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSIONS

All women interviewed and participating in the focus groups agreed that the war had fundamentally changed their role as women. What this meant was not easily described and certainly not a similar experience for all, but there was a common understanding that peace processes in the region should lead towards reconciliation. Reconciliation should come after a process of truth and justice in some measure. Women themselves should play a pivotal role in this development: for them, "getting the past right" means not only truth-telling and historical memory about the impact of conflict, but also recognition of structural (gender) injustices that should be addressed and transformed by transitional justice measures[29].

For some women, reconciliation is an aspect of post-conflict recovery, to be addressed technically through decisions on, for example, reparations, rehabilitation of victims, and transitional justice. For others, it is an overarching goal, under which all other themes can be subsumed[30]. But for most of the women, forgiveness necessarily has to be accompanied with recognition of crimes committed by the perpetrators. This claim is highly gender-specific and with transformative power. "*They need to recognise what they did,"* was the statement reiterated during meetings. *"We can forgive but not forget."* For most women consulted, the path to reconciliation consequently goes through the recognition of atrocities committed against women, of the state acknowledging this victimisation, and ultimately women no longer being stigmatised for what they have suffered and the demand for forgiveness from perpetrators to victims. Opinions are divided on the question of whether it is necessary that perpetrators be judged.

Will the West African judicial systems be able to respond to these expectations concerning justice? In spite of the extensive impunity and the difficulties of the judicial systems, it should be noted that there exists a certain confidence in justice among the women in the focus groups. In CI, testimonies of rape are collected by different organisations to permit the prosecutor of the Republic to open investigations. In Liberia, the 2012 enacted rape law is raising awareness about the state no longer tolerating this type of crime. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, the TRC processes, albeit criticised for many aspects, collected tens of thousands of testimonies, out of which 47 and 36 % respectively were from women. The Liberian TRC was the first to include a country's diaspora in a truth and reconciliation process. Among the diaspora, statements were taken from Liberian refugees in the United States and in neighbouring West African countries. The recently established Ivorian TRC has included in its mandate listening to women refugees and IDPs, and has mandated two specific commissionaire posts for women.

Significant gender sensitive requirements on transitional justice have been characterised by very high levels of international involvement and pressure. According to Aroussi, this may have facilitated the inclusion of model provisions on justice for gender-based violence, but has created significant threats to the peace process. Most importantly, it might result in peace agreements that carry very little hope of implementation[31]. Other analysts have come up with different conclusions and underlined that transitional justice mechanisms are - and should be - vehicles for creating gender justice, which corrects structural injustices of the previous regimes.

Transitional Justice and TRCs: Entry points for mediators and their teams

It is important to ensure that a gender perspective is inclusive throughout the implementation of transitional justice mechanisms and not just reduced to parallel administrative structures; to the mere nominal presence of women or to separate chapters in the reports of truth commissions. The implementation of TRC recommendations should be a high priority, including recommendations on memorialisation, reparations, and state recognition. The society must know the truth about GBV in conflict. *Recognition of the specific nature of suffering that women have undergone can become a driver of post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation.*

4. GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, RECONSTRUCTION, AND STABILIZATION

4.1 ELECTIONS, YOUTH, AND REGIONAL INSECURITY

Electoral processes in several countries of West Africa have been marked by political instability and extensive violence between opposing factions. In Côte d'Ivoire during the presidential elections of 2010, widespread human rights violations, including sexual violence against women, occurred in the aftermath of the elections. In general, disturbances and destruction of lives and property have been feared before several electoral processes in the region, in Liberia and Sierra Leone most recently. Elections have become a scene for violence, and a major test to the stability of the regimes. Threats to female candidates are common during electoral agitation, as well as making campaigning and voting difficult for women when they have to fear attacks. Participants raised fears about the porosity of borders, which allow for easy transport of light weapons, and illegal substances, such as drugs, to fuel instability during electoral times.

With this regional insecurity, youth are perceived to be deployed among countries of the region to commit violence and back political campaigns in neighbouring countries. Participants cited cases of former combatants in Sierra Leone who had been approached to support an uprising in Guinea in late 2010 during the political crisis there, and of others who had gone from Liberia to join forces with groups fighting in Côte d'Ivoire after the November 2010 elections. A critical concern, both for the experts and the local focus groups for this study, was the tendency by political parties to recruit these groups of young people to fuel tension and violence during election campaigns and voting. In a report by Conciliation Resources, young people were suspected of having been recruited from neighbouring countries specifically because they spoke the language of the ethnic groups in the country where they were recruited[32].

Contrary to estimates that violence should decrease as countries stay democratic for longer periods of time, electoral violence has continued in Africa. In fact, there seems to be little relationship between the two: electoral violence seems to persist at the same rate in 2008 as it did in 1990[33]. In Côte d'Ivoire, national identity and property issues linked to community tensions and political manipulation of ethnic and national groups are mentioned to explain the electoral violence of 2010. Since April 2011, the security situation has gradually improved but still remains precarious in certain parts of the country. In spite of the international presence, notably to the west of CI, violence remains common: reiterated lootings, massacres, and rapes are reported every month.

In one of the workshop sessions, participants cited the case of ex-combatants-turned-bike riders and elections to illustrate the fear and mistrust felt towards youth within society. As a result of non-existent education and no economic opportunities, a large section of the youth population is marginalised and easily mobilised to commit election violence or engage in mercenary activities. Many bike riders are former combatants who used the money received as part of the DDR process to buy a motorbike to earn a living by providing a taxi service. In Sierra Leone and Liberia they have organised themselves into an association. Similar associations have developed in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea. Even though the bike riders provide an essential service to communities, because of their past they are still treated with mistrust by the population. Many people see them as those who killed during the war years and associate them with violence and criminal acts, such as smuggling, robbery, and sexual violence. Older women perceived the bike riders as ex-combatants corrupting the younger children to "war behaviour", which include drug consumption and violence against young girls.

Elections, youth, and regional insecurity: Entry points for mediators and their teams

Electoral data and research seem to show the failure of electoral violence in Africa to abate over time, at least in the medium term. Contrary to estimates that violence should decrease as countries stay democratic for longer periods of time, electoral violence seems to persist at the same rate in 2008 as it did in 1990. Electoral violence is manifested in violence against women. Threats and violence against women candidates are common during electoral campaigns. Mediators should secure the possibilities for women to postulate, campaign, and vote. The means to prevent the mobilisation of youth to commit election violence should be assessed.

4.2 ORGANISED CRIME AND VIOLENCE

Illegal exploitation of natural resources funded the conflict in both Liberia and Sierra Leone. Participants in a Conciliation Resources workshop indicated that while exploitation is coming under greater control, lack of effective governance has made the MRU countries vulnerable to organised crime. Money made from trafficking of drugs, weapons and people could still fuel further conflict, if other triggers were in place[34]. This new landscape of organised crime and violence raises questions about the appropriateness of classifications like "armed conflict" and "post-conflict." The new realities require new terminology, with profound implications for how the international community thinks about responses. In this space of economic struggle, Gary Barker and Christine Ricardo very importantly point out the rise in the parallel economics of criminality and "normal" violence, which allow certain forms of masculinity to endure and provide both status and material needs[35].

There are clear indications that this parallel economics in the context of the fragile states has impacted the lives of women in West Africa at the organisational and socio-economic levels. It has had an impact on the sexual and reproductive rights because the gradual shift from arms to criminal activities has fuelled prostitution, sexual violence and human trafficking. The growing role of organised crime in destabilising the still fragile states emerging from conflict is adding an international angle to the analysis, as the structures of organised crime are increasingly transnational, and the impacts of drugs, arms, and human trafficking transit the borders between weak and established states. The successes and failures of demobilisation processes after armed conflicts have commonly been analysed from a domestic perspective in which post conflict and problems of transition are treated as internal issues.

In many parts of the world, organisations defending women's rights have been the first ones to point out the links between private security groups, mafias and state agents, locally and nationally[36]. In a context of criminal networks and warlords, especially in the popular neighbourhoods of the large cities and in strategic rural areas, women have encountered both old and new forms of violence. This environment has naturalised violent practices, deepened discrimination, and conditioned the survival for women to accepting the limited space of sexual division of labour of war and criminal gangs[37]. In Liberia, in interviews with high-level public officials these links were frequently seen and accepted, albeit still very few actions in combating this reality were suggested. The focus groups in the regions could see the impacts of criminality in their daily lives, and frequently analysed them in great detail. In many sessions, the attention easily concentrated, again, on young men as perpetrators of violence and responsible for corrupting the even younger generations. In CI, the context was not ripe to analyse crime or drugs.

This is why young people were commonly perceived by the focus groups as a 'bad asset', holding back progress in their respective countries and perpetuating conflict and crime. The 'criminal' and 'youth' categories are of an ambiguous nature and overlap with other groupings. It should not be forgotten that one grouping also in the case of young males is that of victim. While government officials at high levels emphasised prostitution both at street level and as an organised activity in trafficking, it almost solely concerned young women. Although little research currently exists on sexual violence targeting males in Liberia, there are initial indications that prostitution and drug use in parts of Monrovia, especially at night, are contributing to impoverished boys' and young men's exposure to such abuse.[38]

Organised crime and violence: Entry points for mediators and their teams

The parallel economics of criminality and trafficking in people, guns, and drugs makes the region continuously vulnerable to renewed conflict and upholds a normalisation of everyday violence and abusive gender relations. Organised crime has resulted in increased prostitution, sexual violence and trafficking, including the abuse of men and boys. Analysis of organised crime should be seen in parallel with data on gender-based violence and the links between the two should be explored. Mediators should assess the possible actions of criminal actors and consider gender-based violence as an indicator when foresight methods are applied.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Peace processes lay out the bases for future society. They outline priorities for new institutions and practices, with the aim to building lasting peace. Women's effective participation in peace processes can offer women political gains on a wide range of issues that affect their rights and gender equality. For many women, addressing conflict-related, gender-based violence through different measures means "getting the past right", but also a recognition of broader structural injustices that should be addressed and transformed through the peace process. An integration of a gender perspective implies engaging the negotiating parties to transformative thinking, and to making decisions that do not allow a return to a situation of status quo.

This is particularly important in contexts where gender-based violence has been a significant manifestation of the conflict and has featured as one of its triggers. Women who have become direct victims or who have seen atrocities committed in their surroundings have also acquired unaccustomed social and political leadership roles to manage their communities when men are engaged in warfare. In many conflicts, this has strengthened the roles women play in mobilising constituencies and advocating for an end to the conflict with key combatant actors. An observation of Kvinna till Kvinna is that in some conflicts women have managed to find a limited space to exercise power and influence using the image of themselves as "mothers", e.g. inherently peaceful and neutral. This self-identification was a powerful motivation for women's drive towards reconciliation. This role may, however, simultaneously serve as an effective excluding mechanism[39]. It is important to understand that these multiple roles women assume are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Women are often actors, victims, leaders and negotiators at local levels. Simultaneously they are mothers taking care of their children and daughters taking care of their elderly parents.

Conflict dynamics frequently change gender relations. The reassertion of violence in the private sphere during the transitional phase may constitute a form of compensation for male combatants; for their loss of public status and hegemony. Furthermore, engaging in violence can be a rational choice for men when few other opportunities may be provided to gain economic security, social status and value within their communities, and security for their families and communities[40]. Without addressing these causalities within a framework that integrates masculinities, we may also fail to address the ongoing realities of how masculinities closely interconnect with post-conflict social, political, and economic outcomes. If gender is a relational concept, conflict analysis conducted for the purpose of peace processes cannot omit the roles of both men and women.

Gender cannot be addressed in the post-conflict environment only by addressing women's rights in legal documents. What peace mediators should do, thus, is engage the negotiating parties in thinking how equal social and political rights for all men and women could open a transition towards peace and reconciliation. All the injustices cannot be righted in one agreement. But through the effective implementation and monitoring of an inclusive peace agreement, obstacles to women's agency in peace and security can be removed, and the structural factors that may constrain women's agency gradually reformed.

FIELD CONSULTATIONS, FOCUS GROUPS, INTERVIEWS

Focus Group Discussions
The following focus group discussions were held with Liberian and Ivorian women in 2012:

Liberia
- 35 women participants in a focus group discussion in Zorzor, Lofa County, on February 27, 2012.
- 24 women participants in a focus group discussion in Ganta, Nimba County, on February 28, 2012.
- 25 women participants in Gbarnga, Bong County, on February 29, 2012.

Côte d'Ivoire
- 35 women participants in a focus group discussion in Yopougon, Lagunes Region, on July 11, 2012.
- 35 women participants in a focus group discussion in Abobo, Lagunes Region, on July 12, 2012.
- 18 women participants in a focus group discussion in Bouaké, Vallée du Bandama Region, on July 14, 2012.
- 56 women participants in a focus group discussion in Brobobo, Bouaké, Vallée du Bandama Region, on July 15, 2012.
- 58 women participants in a focus group discussion in Duékoué, Moyen-Cavally Region, on July 17, 2012.
- 28 women participants in a focus group discussion in Danané, Dix-Huit Montagnes Region, on July 17, 2012.
- 35 women participants in a focus group discussion in Danané, Dix-Huit Montagnes Region, on July 18, 2012.

Nigeria
- A closed-door high-level seminar held in Abuja on November 29-30, 2011.
- A closed-door high-level seminar held in Abuja on October 28, 2012.

Interviews and Consultations
The GBV Team was granted special audience with the President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

The following people were either directly interviewed or otherwise consulted for this research:
Amonkou Akpo, Antoine
Director of Cabinet, Ministry of Health and Fight against AIDS, Côte d'Ivoire

Badjo, Juge Paulette
President, National Commission of Inquiry, Côte d'Ivoire

Bosé, Marie Chantal
Manager for Partner Capacity-Building, International Rescue Committee (IRC) Côte d'Ivoire

Conteh, Brima
Executive Director, Advocacy Movement Network (AMNet), Sierra Leone

Coulibaly, Fanta
National Committee of Côte d'Ivoire to Combat Violence against Women

Cummings, Lena T.
Coordinator, Women in Peacebuilding, WANEP-Liberia

Gayflor, Vabah
Minister of Labor, Government of Liberia

Gbadi, Brigith
Gender Adviser, Culture and Human Rights, Côte d'Ivoire United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

Greaves, Frances
Voice of the Voiceless International

Daramola, Esther
Advisor, Directorate for Early Warning, ECOWAS Commission

Diabaté, Fatima
Association of Women Lawyers of Côte d'Ivoire

Diallo, Maître Geneviève
REPSFECO (Réseau Paix et Sécurité des Femmes de l'Espace CEDEAO)

Diop, Bineta
President, Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS)

Donli, Suleiman J.
Technical Assistant, ECOWAS Commission

Effah Chukwuma, Josephine
Executive Director, Project Alert on Violence Against Women

Fofana, Kaba
Director of Equality and Gender Promotion, Côte d'Ivoire Ministry of Family, Women and Children

Fofana, Valérie-Aline
Chargée de programme WIPNET-CI de WANEP-CI

Fructueux, Jean Bako
Director of Cabinet, Ministry for Human Rights and Civil Liberties

Iheme, Florence
Acting Director, Early Warning and Observation Monitoring Center, ECOWAS Commission

Kaudjhis Offoumou, Maître Françoise
Commissioner in Côte d'Ivoire's Truth, Reconciliation and Dialogue Commission

Koué, Pauline
Gender Adviser, Culture and Human Rights, Côte d'Ivoire United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

Lamptey, Comfort
Senior Gender Adviser to the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL)

Lansanah, Davidetta
Office of the Gender Advisor, United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL)

McCay, Jackie
Angie Brooks International Center

Moustapha, Soumaré
Deputy SRSG for Recovery and Governance, United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL)

Murithi, James
Gender Advisor, United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL)

Ndieli, Adekemi
National Programme Manager, UN Women Nigeria

Ongile, Grace
UN Women Representative to Nigeria & ECOWAS

Osakwe, Bridget
Program Manager, Women in Peacebuilding, WANEP-Nigeria

Porquet, Salimata
President, REPSFECO (Réseau Paix et Sécurité des Femmes de l'Espace CEDEAO)

Richards, Marbue
Deputy Minister of Youth and Sports, Government of Liberia

Sangaré, Namizata
President, Organization of Active Women in Côte d'Ivoire (OFACI)

Siagbé, Trah
Gender Affairs Unit, United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (ONUCI)

Tah, Christiana
Minister of Justice and Attorney General

Tokor, Charles K.
DCOP/ Police Planning Cell, ECOWAS Commission

Toure Honorine, Veil
Executive Director, Generation Femme du Troisieme Millenaire

Ugbe, Sintiki
Director of Gender and Child Development, ECOWAS Commission

Varpilah, Tornolah
Minister of Youth and Sports, Government of Liberia

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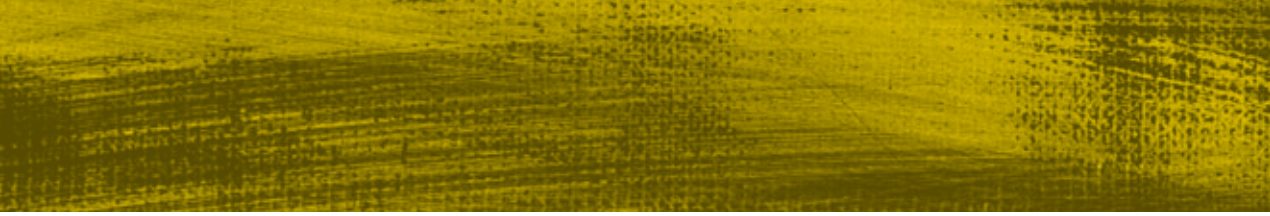


CMI

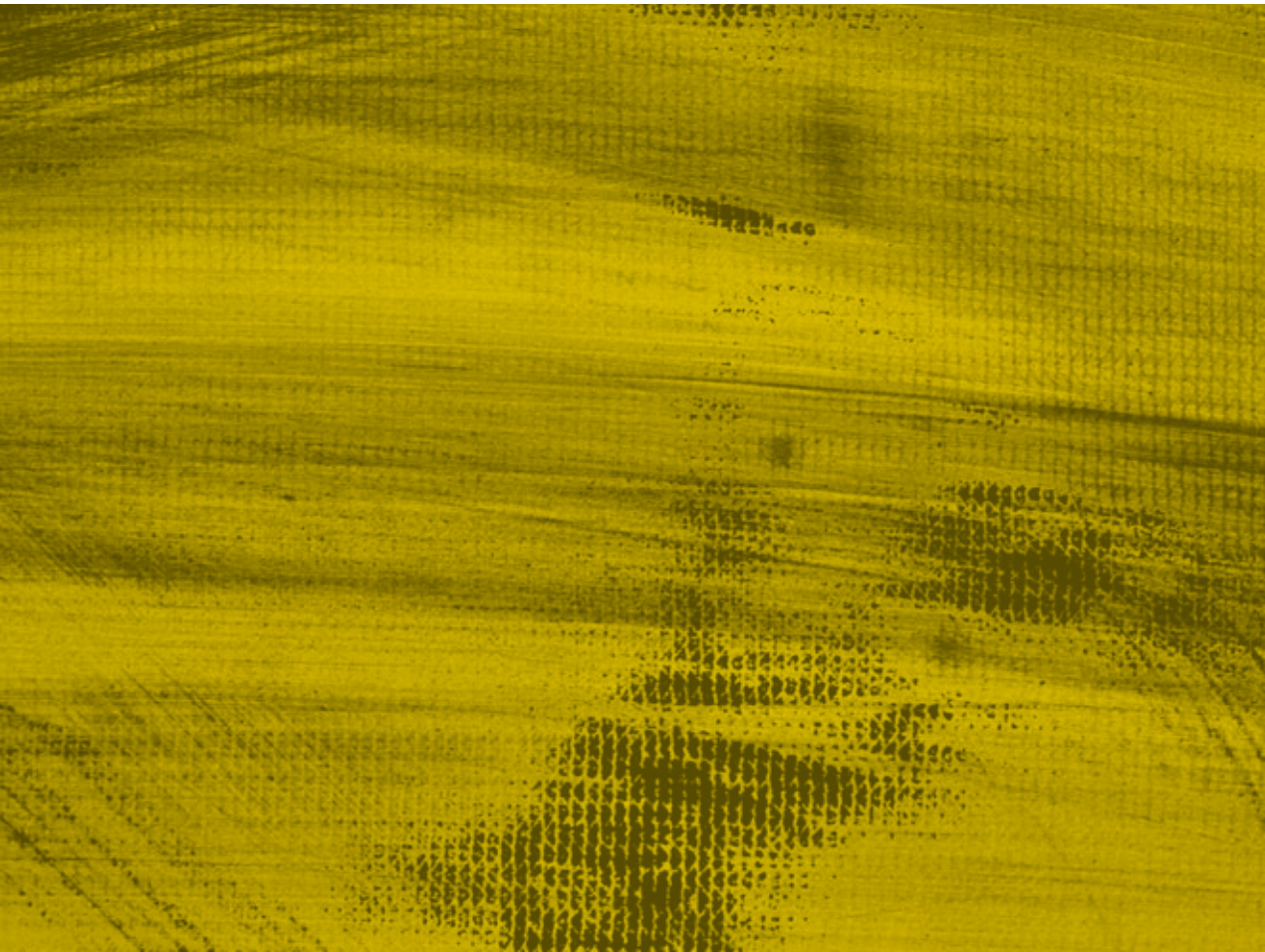
Martti Ahtisaari Centre

Crisis Management Iniative
Eteläranta 12, FI-00130 Helsinki, Finland
tel +358 9 424 2810, cmi.helsinki@cmi.fi

205 Rue Belliard, Box 3, BE-1040 Brussels, Belgium
tel +32 2 239 2115, cmi.brussels@cmi.fi
www.cmi.fi

WANEP

Building Relationships for Peace

West African Network for Peacebuilding
P.O. Box CT 4434
Cantonment-Accra, Ghana

Tel: +233 302 775975/77, 775981
Fax: +233 302 776018
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