

# Roles Played by Women During Times of War: Evidence from Conflicts at Njobokazi, Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa

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## Abstract

The article highlights key roles played by women during times of war or violent conflict. Performance of these roles ensured that community activities during times of war and violent conflict. During faction fighting, political violence and action research, transformation in terms of gender equality was evident because there were opportunities where women leadership was exercised because there was no any other person to provide leadership thus community members experienced and tasted women leadership. A key factor in this article is the contribution of women, who are a major resource for bringing peace and transforming the community of Njobokazi.

## Introduction

Women as peacebuilders would seem overt but during times of conflict these roles become covert as they continue to play roles that society would never expect them from performing. Women's roles during conflict are often unnoticeable since the attention is focused predominantly on the conflict and its processes. They have demonstrated that during conflict they are able to keep the community functioning even during times of distress. Men who are in the battlefield rely on women for many things including survival. This paper presents and reflects on the role played by women as peacebuilders during and post Njobokazi conflict. This paper is drawn from a Njobokazi study, The Njobokazi study focused on understanding the depth of the nature of the violence in Njobokazi, in terms of intrapersonal and interpersonal issues, as well as the relationships between communities," [1].

## Context and Background

The community of Njobokazi has been engulfed by violence from 1938 to 1994. This rural community at the remote border of the eThekweni Metro, Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa has been the scene of violent conflict for decades. This was understood as faction fighting until and during 1987, when it transitioned into political violence, [1]. Many residents have been killed and several homes and community assets were destroyed. A key factor in this research was the contribution of women, who are a major resource for facilitating peace"; [1]. They were however, had not been involved or invited in the peace-making and peace building discussions – nor were they allowed to fight," [1]. Warrior culture and ubunsizwa (strong masculinities) are the main root causes that fueled the cycle of violence in Njobokazi.

The Njobokazi warrior culture was characterized by a conquest mentality where men have the determination to win and conquer the other group. Each faction or group would ensure that they arm themselves

and mobilise friends and their allies so that they became a powerful block that would conquer the opposing side [1]. This mentality means that enemies need to be eliminated. In most cases, those who are supposed to be eliminated are key leaders in the community and warriors. Those who are defeated need to leave the area for good because, if the winning side does not do that, the losing side could regroup, re-strategise and attack again" [1].

Ubunsizwa (strong masculinity) is the term used to refer to the masculinity that drives rural men to believe that no one will conquer them. Key informant Gasheni (January 2020) maintained that "it is a problem to deal with strong masculinities (ubunsizwa) but as things move, people have realized and experienced where this ubunsizwa syndrome led them to at the end, [1] The warrior culture and ubunsizwa led to Njobokazi to use violence as solution to violence. Shozi [1] observed from the study that there is a practice of solving problems through violence. This led to a cycle of violence where two groups would fight and conquer one another. The irony though was that, once the one group had left, the remaining group would fight amongst themselves. The next discussion focuses on the theory that enabled the researchers to understand issues relating to the roles that women played during and post conflict.

## Theoretical Framework

The main theory used in the Njobokazi study was conflict transformation theory. This theory best explains roles played by women during and post conflict women as peacebuilders. During conflict, several changes and upheavals occur. Thus, conflict changes the social and community status quo. This was the case during the Njobokazi conflict. This is more than a conflict resolution but a rebuilding of trust and relationships. The conflict transformation theory assists in trans-



forming violent conflicts to ensure that the community lives peacefully and does not revert to a conflict situation. Shailor [2] describes conflict transformation as 'a concept that emerged from the social, political, and cultural struggles of the later 20th century'. Muchemwa [3] adds that "we can trace its growing acceptance and recognition from the end of the cold war and John Paul Lederach is credited for pioneering and popularizing it as a theory. Hendricks [4] reminds us that 'conflict transformation theory is about change, if not change limited to a certain form or determined direction then change with certain values – justice, non-violence, and participation.'

Lederach [5] points out that "conflict transformation theory deals with presenting problems and the content of the conflict, seeking to find mutually acceptable solutions to conflicting or warring factions." In addition, Lederach [5] states that conflict transformation also aims to rebuild trust through fostering forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation. Shozi [1] argues that Lederach's theory of conflict transformation presents levels of leadership, namely top, middle, and the grassroots level. Some writers refer to the levels of leadership as actors. These actors are important to analyse, to understand their role in perpetuating violence or promoting peace. Lederach [6] states that top level leadership includes military, political religious leaders with high visibility. Top level leadership resolves conflict through high level negotiations. Specifically, top level leadership emphasizes cease fire led by highly visible and single mediators.

Middle range leaders include respected leaders in sectors like ethnic/religious leaders/academic/intellectuals and humanitarian leaders (NGOs). Middle ranged leaders resolve conflict through solving problems, running peace workshops, training in conflict resolution, as well as establishing peace commissions. The grassroots leadership include local leaders, leaders in indigenous NGOs, community developers, local health officials and refugee camp leaders. The grass-root leadership resolves conflict through local peace commissions, peace building training, prejudice reduction, and psychosocial work in post war trauma. In Njobokazi women were outside these levels of leadership and that is why it was difficult for them to influence mainstream peacebuilding initiatives.

Lederach [6] argues that conflict transformation theory provides four dimensions of conflict transformation. These four dimensions are personal, relational, cultural, and structural. The four dimensions relate to relationship building during the intervention. The first level of conflict transformation is individual. Swartz [7] argues that transformation of the individual person involves starting with individuals and their journey of personal transformation. During the dialogue and the focus group discussions it was acknowledged that Njobokazi people need to change and transform as individuals. The cleansing ceremonies brought back the hope of healing and the community healing dialogue instilled and ignited the healing journey.

The second level of conflict transformation is relationships. Swartz [7] argues that "we live in community with people and need to embrace our interdependence. To make changes in our lives and in those around us we need other people, groups, organisations, and institutions to strengthen the journey to independence." For example, the two intervention workshops which were healing of memories and AVP were in part attempting to build relationships amongst members of the Njobokazi community. The third level of conflict transformation is community systems. Swartz [7] states that the various social, economic, and potential systems need to be transformed to support the development and reconstruction of the country to a more caring one. Systemic transformation process is supported when you have people that can grasp the need to and have the vision to transform systems to support the basic needs and development of all citizens. There were meetings that were organized with traditional leaders, faith-based organisations, government representatives to discuss peace issues and these meetings were innovative ways to ensure that peace activities and ethos are mainstreamed in community structures. The fourth level of conflict transformation as

per Swartz [7] is cultural, the need to have a long-term commitment to the process of change takes time. During the community healing dialogue, participants pledged what they want to do for their community. Lederach [6] suggests that "the transformation approach has a nested paradigm, which is part of the Integrated Framework for Peace building, which present the lenses that relate to prevention to the level of response which helps to transform and have long term vision and social change. Lederach et al. [6] also maintains that conflict changes individuals personally, emotionally, and spiritually. The next section discusses the research methodology of the study.

## Research Design, Data Collection and Analysis

The study followed a qualitative research design. Dawson [8] maintains 'that qualitative research explores attitudes, behavior, and experiences through such methods as interviews or focus groups.' Furthermore, 'the study selected action research (AR) as the research approach, because AR is particularly concerned with bringing positive, progressive, remedial, and corrective social change or transformation' [1]. AR empowers the community to participate in the study and be given a chance to design their own intervention(s) that would assist their communities. Action research is concerned with change for the better. Action research added to and enhanced the peace-building role women were already playing. It encouraged thinking and talking about a different (nonviolent) approach. The study at Njobokazi had three stages: discovery, intervention, and evaluation. 'The discovery stage involved data collection through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, a transect walk, and observations. During the intervention stage, two workshops were conducted which were Alternatives to violence project (AVP) and Healing of Memories (HoM).

The research had an intervention component that trained women and community members. The third stage was the evaluation stage, which included further data collection, through focus group discussions, a transect walk and interviews, [9]. During the discovery stage there were participants that were involved for example 27 key informant interviews of which eleven are females and 16 are males. Key informant interviews were identified during PRAT meetings and the snowball method was utilized to select key informants. Three focus group discussions were conducted. One focus group discussion was for men only and the second focus group discussion was women only and the third focus group was a mixed focus group discussion. All three focus groups comprised of 20 females, 17 males and last focus group comprised of three women and four males. Women were part of the focus groups and key informants' interviews to ensure that their views get integrated into all reflections and memories about violence as well as ensuring that their perspectives get recorded.

The intervention stage involved two workshops which were AVP and HOM. 30 participants attended each workshop, and the split was 50 percent males and 50 percent females. The criteria to choose people who attended these workshops were based on these elements which are delegates from various factions, gender, age, and fighters. The evaluation stage included a fraction of people who participated as workshop participants as well as key informants. The analysis of data followed this process: familiarising with data, code the data, identifying emerging themes, reviewing themes and writing. "Qualitative data analysis is primarily an inductive process of organising the data into categories and identifying patterns (relationships) among the categories, [10]. In this study thematic analysis was utilised as Braun and Clarke [11] confirm that "thematic analysis involves the searching across a data set – be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts – to find repeated patterns of meaning." The discussion that follows focuses on the findings which came because of the . analysis of themes. The findings that follow in the next section will deal with unacknowledged roles performed by women during and post conflict times.



## Gender Roles Transformed

During conflict, the world is always different and almost all societal operations operate differently. Surely as I draft this article things are operating differently in Palestine in Gaza, as Israel is shelling Gaza. The violence in Njobokazi further took a gendered role where women played a supportive role. Gender roles and division of labour were switched where women assumed work of men during times of fighting. Normally, women of Njobokazi would collect wood, get water from the river, raise children, wash clothes for everyone, cook and do other ordinary domestic duties. In contrast, men would work in town, milk cows, do hunting as a sport and look after cattle. Over and above performing their own responsibilities, women would during the conflict take over men's duties as well [1]. The roles that women took over from males include looking after cattle, milking cows, assuming of the role of being the head of the household and taking family decisions. Cheldelin and Mutisi [12] note that "violent conflict entails social upheaval, which impacts on all sectors and spheres of society. The transformation of gender roles witnessed in this study was that women were able to take additional roles which would normally be performed by men.

## Food Security for the Families and Warriors

During times of war and faction fighting women become providers of food. Women ensured that their families and the warriors had something to eat. Interestingly, most women in Njobokazi were domestic workers, and they were not in formal employment. They relied on agricultural products to support the army and their families. Women did all this amid houses that were destroyed, and livestock which was stolen and sometimes slaughtered. Some men resigned from work fearing that they might be killed, and these exerted more pressure on women to sustain the family. Thus, the violence affected the Njobokazi people economically, psychologically, and emotionally, Shoji [1].

## Burden of Care

Nell and Ross [13] remind us that women go to great lengths to care for impaired and elderly relatives, making personal sacrifices, often at great cost to their own health and well-being. Burden of care is a concept emerging in the literature that describes the physical, emotional, social, and financial problems that can be experienced by family caregivers. This concept may be useful to heighten understanding of the family caregiving (...). It is important to note that during war or violent conflict, there are many casualties, some men would get injured, and women would arrange transport to take the injured to the hospitals and those who have died, women will communicate with police and arrange funerals. "The most devastating aspect of the violent conflict is that so many people lost their lives, and some ended up being disabled. Scores of people were injured, some became disabled, and some even lost their limbs and eyesight", [1]. Women face challenges of raising children on their own whilst men were busy fighting. The study further revealed that women tended to underplay how they felt about the conflict.

Shoji [1] argues that the violent conflict in Njobokazi took a gendered dimension, with sharply differing expectations on women and on men. Women tended to underplay their both sufferings and their role during the fighting. Women did not share their sufferings with their families but continued to endure severe hardship. Some women lost husbands or boy children, observed their children not attending school, lost property and sometimes were ridiculed by men from the other factions. This explained why they were in the forefront of requesting an intervention that was going to assist them with psychosocial issues. Hence the healing of memories workshop was conducted to deal with traumatic memories of violence. Khuzwayo [14] notes that "current studies in peace building suggest that effective peace building approaches comprise intervention strategies that value the interconnectedness of trauma and peace building".

## Migration

Women were able to anticipate the consequences of the conflict. It was evident from the study that women took to looking for relatives where they would hide children and livestock and, in some instances, look for new schools. Women will move belongings between their homes and places of refuge. The study revealed that in instances, where the women's side is defeated, women engaged on several migration tasks like collecting and transporting all belongings of the family, locating an emigrating place, identifying new schools for children, ensuring that life stock is transported to new places. Beyene [15] indicates that when women saw that lives were lost and property was destroyed, children were not going to school, women used their power to flee the area and their families and husbands had to follow them. Men could not continue fighting because they needed women to provide them with food and look after cattle.

## Advisory Roles

Generally, literature project women as born peacebuilders. Women in Njobokazi were not included in the mainstream peacebuilding for example women were excluded from the execution of conflict resolution and peace building discussions. The view of women who participated in various focus groups discussions maintained that if women had participated earlier, they might have come with different ideas that might have saved Njobokazi from the devastating effects of violence. In quest for building peace women advised their brothers, husbands, fathers and or boyfriends to stop the violence, [1]. "Women of Njobokazi often supported their husbands' decisions to fight, there were those who questioned the desire for men to always want to fight. "Some key informant interviewees reported that they would speak to their husbands to stop the war because it was destructive. Although men were fighting, women from opposing sides would meet one another and would not fight but would talk about the war and other matters confronting the community [9]. This was further supported by Beyene [15] who adds that 'women have roles in conflict resolution, women played a counselling role to their husbands, brothers, sons and their relatives and friends.'

## Women as Communicators

The study found out that since the times of war, faction fighting, and political violence lines of communication get destroyed and even relatives stop communicating with one another because if they do so, they are suspected to be spies. During these tense times women play a critical role to link warring communities. Shoji and Hemson [9] reinforce this point that there had been times when there had been deadlock amongst the fighting groups. In these instances, the fighting sides would not know how they would communicate with the opposite side. During times of conflict, women broker and link the warring sides.' This occurred when it was difficult for warring factions to communicate with one another. It became evident that women would play a role of mending ruined relationships.

## Building Infrastructure for Peace

The study found out that women play a critical role in building the infrastructure for peace, first of all they ensured that there was cleansing ceremonies amongst warring factions. This cleansing ceremony involved everyone who fought in the area. Thereafter there was a follow up of cleansing of family members who participated in killing or injured family members who supported their enemies. Women brought in Shembe pastors who officiated over these cleansing ceremonies. This ensured that the religious spirit was indeed imbued in all the Njobokazi peacebuilding initiatives. This cleansing ceremony came as result of the meetings organized by Fanana Ngubane. It involved all groups that fought at Njobokazi and was attended by all groups including warriors, young people, women, and elderly people [1].





Furthermore, women in the area have started new churches whereas in the past there was one Roman catholic church and Egalile Zion church. Now there are more churches in the area. More women and children attend church services, and these church services always emphasised and preached about peace building as corner stones of development. There is a new primary school in the area and non-governmental organisation (African Child and Youth Community Development Project) that provided psycho-social programmes. Women have started agricultural programmes to assist with food security and eradicate poverty. Shozi [1] adds that the following organisations were invited to present during the healing of memories workshop helped to strengthen the journey for peace building which were African Child Youth and Development Centre, stokvel clubs, Ikhwezi Lokukhanya Community Resource Centre, African Child, and Youth Community Development Project. This is indicative of organisations that are operating in the area which are helpful to the community and present various services.

Jean Paul Lederach first introduced the concept of “Infrastructures for Peace” in the 1980s. It was based on his assumption that sustainable peace can only be the result of a deep and structural conflict transformation, including a transformation of the socio-economic root causes and political drivers of the conflict [16]. Giessmann [17] argues that there is good reason to assume that infrastructure for peace (I4P) is more than institutions alone, let alone a determined set of institutions. Giessmann [17] defines I4P as a dynamic networking of skills, capacities, resources, tools, and institutions that help build constructive social and political relationships and enhance sustainable resilience of societies against relapse into violence. As explained that women played a role in advising their male relatives to always remain peaceful. The workshops assisted women to understand issues relating to peace building and the importance of community healing. Davis, Nsengiyumva and Hyslop [18] add that community healing reduces trauma, revenge tendencies as well as anger, and builds positive 175 psychological resilience, social trust, and tolerance.

Furthermore, Davis et al. [18] adds that community healing has direct benefits for individuals and broader society in terms of increasing general psychological wellbeing, economic participation, and social cohesion. Women encouraged their family members to enroll on psycho-social programmes with department of social development and other providers that provide the similar service. The research process was gender sensitive and imparted skills on women to engage their families and community structures to always remain peaceful. Shozi [1] reminds us that one of the excellent outcomes of the intervention workshops was the demonstration of the understanding of two concepts of violence and nonviolence. The understanding by participants demonstrated that in future they will more likely resolve conflict in a non-violent manner.

“During the women’s focus group (January 2020), one-woman participant advanced an idea that “sometimes my husband would think deeply about his two brothers who passed on during faction fighting and political violence. Sometimes my husband would cry as a result, I would always comfort him and make him understand that violence has come and gone and there is nothing that could be done now”, [1] Participants indicated that in the room there were people that they used to fight with but with whom they are starting the process of healing. One participant remarked during healing of memories workshop and said: The power of healing is to see people that you fought with in the past, some have killed your beloved ones, destroyed your property but being able to forgive them, do not hold any grudges and even attend their traditional ceremonies, [1].

Women added that in the past they were also excluded and did not participate in peace building activities. Participants indicated that for peace building and healing to take place the role of women is critical and should play a pivotal role. This is because most households in the community are headed by women, [1].

From this study it was evident that Infrastructure for peace in Njobokazi related to training of community members, the schools and faith-based organisations, strong families, cleaning ceremonies and existence of the operations of the cleansing ceremony.

## Providing Leadership During Times of Crisis

The conflict transformation theory provides an interesting analytical approach in exploring the roles played by women during and post conflict. There was evidence of real transformation that occurred during and post conflict where women lead at various fronts to assume men’s roles, develop infrastructure for peace, decide where the family was going to migrate to and secure food for the family. Women demonstrated that they could provide inept leadership during crisis. This was demonstrated during violence in Njobokazi. These women demonstrated this during the process of the research. Shozi [1] adds that although it was not part of the research plan, during PRAT meetings and community meetings, members especially women participants requested the research committee to engage with civil society organisations and or government to provide food parcels to alleviate food shortages during COVID 19, since Covid 19 restrictions adversely affected community members, especially women who are in the informal sector. A few organisations were approached but only one, the African Child and Youth Community development project (ACYCDP) agreed to deliver grocery packs to thirty family members. Most of the families who benefitted were ravaged by violence and had lost their breadwinners. These families were engaged in self-help projects but due to Covid 19 they could not continue working.

It demonstrated that women are indeed excellent leaders if they can lead even during times of crisis. Shozi [1] establishes that women are not used to fight, and it is not in their DNA to promote violence. Boys and men are the ones who usually promote the culture of fighting one another.

Men bear grudges and women are capable of talking to one another and negotiate and resolve their issues peacefully (Focus group participant, September 2021).

One key informant interviewee, Mkhize (September 2021), stated that:

“As a woman if someone has wronged you, you will wait for one and or two days and you will go to her and tell her that you did not like what she said to you and then we will talk over it, and that will be end of the conflict. It is our nature as women, we do not want to inflict pain and fight with no apparent reason.” The next section will discuss concluding discussions.

## Concluding Discussions

This section will offer a summary of the key issues presented in this paper. Burden of care is always associated with women and during the war is intrusive and impacts on physical, emotional, social, and financial problems. During post war women should seek assistance for traumatic stress amassed during the conflict and avoid transmitting war related anger to future generations. The utilization of both action research and conflict transformation theory ensured that women participate in the study as research participants and some part of the committee that managing research processes. Women were part of focus groups and key informants’ interviews to ensure that their views get integrated into all reflections and memories about violence as well as ensuring that their perspectives get recorded. Women were part of the development of knowledge. The Njobokazi study and literature indicates that women by nature are not aggressive and are agents of peace. There is a need to ensure that women get involved in all the stages of peace building. UN [19] adopts the resolution 1325 was the first formal and legal document from the Security Council that required parties in a conflict to prevent violations of women’s rights, to support women’s participation in peace negotiations and in post-conflict reconstruction, and to protect women



and girls from wartime sexual violence. It is obvious that women can perform almost all responsibilities that society apportioned to men, since they excellently executed them during Njobokazi violence. These roles should continue to be shared by both women and men even during post-war times.

## Conclusion

This paper presented unacknowledged roles played by women during and post-violent conflict in Njobokazi. It is important to highlight these roles to demonstrate leadership qualities that women displayed during times of crisis and during the roll-out of action research. The paper highlighted that women take up roles previously performed by men (gender roles transformed), women ensure that families and warriors are fed during the conflict (food security), women take care of the elderly and injured (burden of care), women coordinate activities during migration periods, women provide advisory roles to male relatives, women assist with communication and link up warring factions, and women build infrastructure for people.

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