

# Women Building Peace in Africa

by Isis Wicce

*Isis-Women's International Cross Cultural Exchange (Isis-WICCE) is a global, action oriented women's organisation, whose mission is to promote women's human rights through the cross-cultural exchange of skills, information exchange and knowledge sharing to contribute empowerment towards women's. Isis-WICCE works in conflict and post conflict countries.*



**In the midst of the swirl** of intense armed conflict in some parts of Uganda, Isis-WICCE poured her energy and passion into peace building and reconstruction. The story shared in these pages is part of the experience of Isis-WICCE, the organisation that mobilised women from Luweero to Juba. It is a story of how an individual organisation in a small developing country called Uganda catalysed for collective popular action aimed at social change within an environment of disempowerment.

We summarise the efforts of Isis-WICCE in reaching out to women and creating the space for their own empowerment. It is important to point out that Isis-WICCE did not empower women; empowerment cannot be given to anyone. Isis-WICCE only facilitated the space and expertise for them to engage in the process of education and acceptance that there is something to be achieved and somewhere to be reached.

Isis-WICCE started documenting the impact of war on women in Luweero, Uganda in 1997. The major issues identified during the research were systematic rape of women during the war; lack of access to appropriate and important information by the women; inability to acknowledge and give resettlement packages to women who participated in the 'liberation' war. The documentation went beyond conventional images of women as victims of war to documenting the many different ways in which women contributed to rebuilding their communities as they emerged from armed conflict.

Since 1997, Isis-WICCE has carried out in-depth studies on women's experiences in situations of armed conflict and post-conflict in Central, Southwest, North and North Eastern Uganda. The findings reveal high levels of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) against women, trauma, apathy and poverty amongst women war survivors.

Having realised that there were many women needing medical attention, Isis-WICCE's action and feminist research approach necessitated the organisation to mobilise resources and medical experts to carry out emergency medical interventions in sexual and reproductive health and trauma management (Luweero, 1999; Gulu, 2001; Teso, 2002; and, Kitgum, 2005), thus

linking research with activism. The comprehensive reports have given Isis-WICCE empirical data to use as evidence to prove that wars are fought on the bodies of women.

Isis-WICCE's work catalysed the Ministry of Health in Uganda to prioritise mental health in its 5-year strategic plan. Through the collaboration with medical professionals, it has been possible for Isis-WICCE to utilise the documented data to develop and produce the first ever-comprehensive "Training manual for health workers in the management of medical and psychological effects of war trauma" (2006), which was adopted by the Uganda Ministry of Health – Mental Health section as its standard training manual.

As a follow up of its action oriented research, Isis-WICCE initiated a 5-year (1999-2003) leadership-training programme for women leaders from various war-ravaged communities in Uganda, on the theme "Women Building Peace from Grassroots to Parliament", to become change agents through mobilisation of communities for peace building. Isis-WICCE used the training to transform women's wartime experiences into positive contributions to society. Exchange visits within and out of Uganda were organised. These exchange visits promoted women's solidarity across ethnic and religious lines.

The trained women have subsequently replicated the skills in their communities. They have played a significant role in building a new culture of peace at the local level by organising peace education and community-based reconciliation and social reconstruction activities. Some formed community-based organisations, and these have been instrumental in addressing human rights and the human security of survivors of conflict. This has changed the image of women as vulnerable victims to that of women as a highly differentiated group of social actors, who possess valuable resources and capacities and who have their own agendas.

Following the peace negotiations in 2006 between the Government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) to end the 21-year civil war, Isis-WICCE was part of the core group of the Uganda Women Peace Coalition

(UWPC) who lobbied for the needs, concerns and priorities of women to be integrated into the Juba Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which was to be signed. Isis-WICCE played a key role in mobilising grassroots women's groups to participate in the consultative processes, as well as documenting the process.

After the collapse of the Juba Peace talks, Isis-WICCE continued supporting and engaging the women's movement in peace building and post-conflict recovery processes. It mobilised resources to review the Peace, Recovery and Development Plan (PRDP) framework from a gender and women's rights perspective, which revealed the PRDP's weakness in terms of gender equality and women's rights sensitivity and responsiveness. Isis-WICCE was then mandated by the UWPC to spearhead a collective effort to ensure that women's needs, interests and rights are prioritised and gender equality becomes a reality in North and North Eastern Uganda. This led to the formation of the Women's Task Force for a Gender Responsive PRDP (WTF), coordinated by Isis-WICCE. The WTF consists of 21 vibrant and diverse women's organisations from North and North Eastern Uganda (West Nile, Acholi, Lango, Teso and Karamoja sub-regions) and national women's organisations with interventions in the Greater Northern region.

The main objective of the WTF is to ensure that women's needs, interests and gender equality issues become a priority in the PRDP framework and its implementation. It was within this context that the WTF commissioned a participatory women's needs assessment in the North and North Eastern Uganda sub-regions of Acholi, Lango, Teso, Karamoja and West Nile. The needs assessment was coordinated by Isis-WICCE on behalf of the WTF from February to October 2009. Its main objective was to identify the main gender equality issues and women's needs in the region in order to map out strategies and appropriate interventions to address them and to involve women meaningfully in the PRDP implementation.

The needs assessment, which was validated in the Greater Northern region and in Kampala with the women respondents and various stakeholders, generated short, medium and long-term recommendations. In an effort to come up with smart, strategic, realistic and implementable recommendations, the WTF collectively prioritised the recommendations. The prioritisation was based on, not only, a rigorous analysis of the current practical and strategic needs of the women in the region but also on the PRDP planned programmes and interventions.

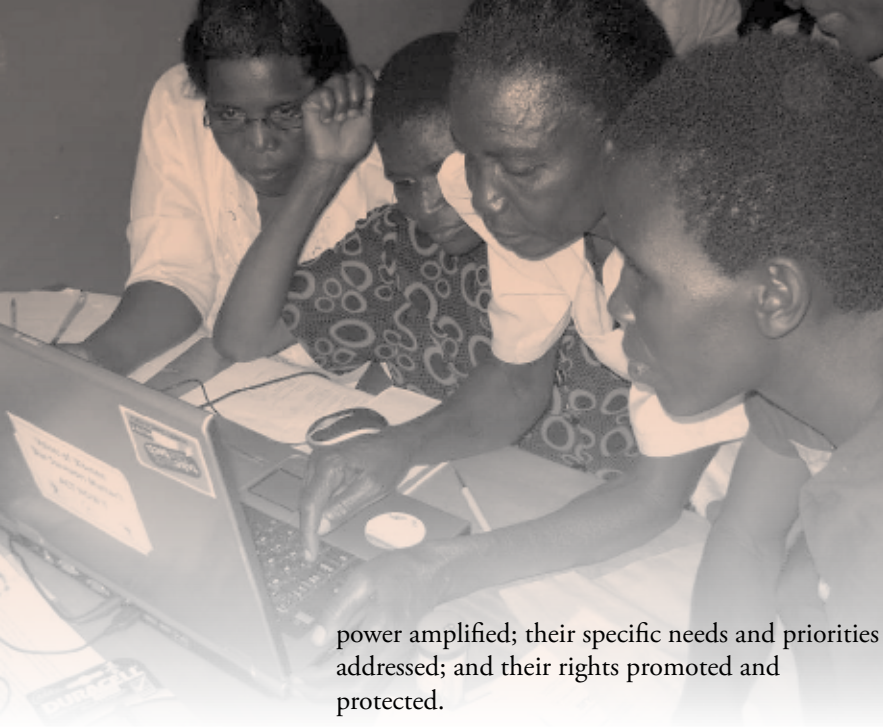
The recommendations and suggested strategies for each PRDP programme are meant to guide policy makers and practitioners during the implementation of the PRDP. Beyond these specific recommendations, the major recommendations for a successful PRDP with tangible results on the ground are:

- Decision-making, planning, resource allocation and implementation must be grounded in women's realities.
- Women and women's organisations must play an active role in the PRDP implementation, monitoring and evaluation as contributors of ideas and as beneficiaries.
- The capacity of PRDP implementers for gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment must be strengthened.
- Specific and sufficient human and financial resources have to be committed to address women's needs and gender equality issues.

Those involved in the implementation of the PRDP will need gender and community based monitoring indicators to track the desirable shifts from a gender equality and women's rights perspective. In this regard, it is expected that during the course of the PRDP there will be shifts at four broad levels, namely behaviour, engagement, definition and policy levels.

The success of the PRDP will be judged by the extent to which women's voices and visibility will be strengthened; their collective organising





power amplified; their specific needs and priorities addressed; and their rights promoted and protected.

Development work has been active for the past five or six decades. Experience and common sense tell us that if we -as individuals, non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations, donors and government machineries- continue working in the same mould of the last six decades, the transformation we want to generate will permanently elude us. Largely focusing on law reform and gender sensitisation will change a few things but can never bring about the positive transformative change that we seek in the struggle to acquire gender equality

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During this phase, the WTF and equity. If we are to realise true transformative change in North and North Eastern Uganda -one that dismantles patriarchy (the supremacy of men and subordination of women) and its related practices- the starting point is for us to learn to unlearn and to re-learn. The old political and ideological paths that we have trodden thus far are beaten and well worn, and yet we have hardly created change in women's lives. It is time for us to return to the drawing boards, look hard at the ideologies that inform our development work and to re-strategise

for real transformation in the Greater Northern region of Uganda.

Unlearning means breaking free of deeply entrenched conventional beliefs and value systems and questioning of unjust systems. Re-learning means acquiring new lenses through which to view ourselves, women, men and the world. These change processes are difficult ones, and can even be traumatic. They are guaranteed to cause a serious backlash from all traditional power bases. But if the PRDP is to make a difference in women's lives, unlearning and re-learning are necessary.

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During this phase, the WTF will use the knowledge already generated to provide technical and practical assistance on the ground. The WTF will assess progress and any challenges in the delivery of service and point them out in an effort to expand and deepen the work of implementing a gender sensitive PRDP. The WTF will measure the success of the PRDP by the commitment it generates towards women's needs and priorities of both resources and political will, from government institutions, development agencies and CSOs.

Isis-WICCE has replicated these best practices in other war-ravaged countries such as Liberia and Southern Sudan.

**Excerpted from: Isis Wicce, Peace, Recovery and Development Plan (PRDP) Final Report.**