



# Does Gender Matter in Fragile States?

**Yes! Gender relations matter often more in fragile states than in other states, yet they are all too often ignored by policy-makers. Conflict affects women in different ways to men – but reconstruction provides new opportunities for transforming gender relations in a positive direction.**

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Research shows that gender relations are affected in conflict and post-conflict situations in three areas in particular: health and education, employment and income, and violence.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Based on context-specific gender analysis, clarify gender aims: a transformation in gendered power relations or merely an improvement in the specific conditions of women (or men)?
- Draw up and implement national plans of action on Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, which includes the protection of women against gender-based violence and ensures their participation in peace-building processes. Target women in health and educational service provision, and support men and women's income-generating opportunities
- Take the opportunity of the reconstruction phase to design and rebuild institutions, organizations and legal frameworks in ways that support greater gender equity

## **HEALTH AND EDUCATION**

Fragile states are characterized by weak administrative and institutional structures and insufficient basic infrastructural services, such as education and health facilities. Widespread poverty and violent conflict may prevent groups of poor people from accessing these services where they exist. Women and girls are often disproportionately affected compared to men and boys.

Conflict-affected countries show great inequalities in access to primary and particular secondary education, and girl's educational enrolment rates have been found to drop during conflicts. Where households have to choose, boys are more often sent to school, while girls stay at home helping their mothers out, who may be single-headed households, where husbands may have left to fight, have died in the conflict or have fled to avoid it. However, gender equity has also ironically improved in a number of countries as boys become involved in the conflict. For instance, in Colombia boys have worse drop-out, repetition and completion rates

## **UN SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION 1325**

In October 2000, Security Council Resolution 1325 (SCR 1325) was adopted by the United Nations Security Council. SCR 1325 calls for the mainstreaming gender into conflict and peace processes, and in particular the protection of women's rights during armed conflicts and increasing their participation before, during and after such conflicts through effective institutional arrangements.



than girls, and in Burundi there has been a narrowing of the gender gap due to a drop in boys' educational enrolment.

When it comes to health the evidence is less mixed, pointing to stark gender inequalities. Women are often more in need of accessing health-care facilities than men due to pregnancies and giving birth, in part a result of the sexual violence that many women suffer in fragile states (including the HIV/AIDS that may follow), and because they are more vulnerable to vitamin and iron deficiencies. During violent conflicts wounded men are in dire need of health services, which may take the priority over women's needs. At the same time, women (and female children) are generally charged with caring for the sick, wounded and elderly within both the household and the community. Service provision thus shifts from the public to the private sphere, placing a significant extra burden on women.

#### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Support health and educational services during conflict and set up special measures to ensure women and girls' non-discriminatory access to and participation in these services (e.g. scholarships for girls, non-discriminatory educational materials, free gynaecological mobile services)
- Challenge the perception that women's informal work in these fields is a 'natural' extension of their household roles and ensure their access to training and remuneration

#### EMPLOYMENT, ASSETS AND INCOME

Fragile states have low economic growth and often a small productive sector. High household poverty levels push more women into income-generating work and for longer hours, typically in the informal sector and in farm-related activities. Examples from Guatemala and El Salvador, however, show that during conflict formal employment opportunities for women may increase as women take over men's jobs. War industries developed to finance the conflict can be a new source of income, as in the cases of oil, diamonds and other precious metals in, for instance, Angola, Congo-Brazzaville, the DRC, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Sudan, although the extent to which women and men benefit from this is unclear. These advances, however, may be offset by the closure of other industries and a collapse of government structures and the corresponding employment losses. In post-conflict situations the evidence is mixed. In Angola, Eritrea, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, women lost their formal sector jobs to returning men; in Cambodia and Guatemala growing textile and tourist industries respectively provided women with formal sector work after the conflicts had ended.

During conflict, the absence of men often leaves women with the sole responsibility for maintaining the household. In many of the countries that have ex-

perienced war, more than seventy percent of children depend entirely on widowed mothers to sustain them. These women are often not able to inherit or claim the property of their deceased husbands, causing severe poverty.

Through displacement, both men and women lose access to land and other assets and take up alternative income-generating activities. This may provide new opportunities for women and some degree of empowerment. In the Solomon Islands, research shows that both women and men felt that women had been empowered by having taken on traditional male roles during the conflict. For men, several studies argue, these changes in gender roles severely and negatively challenge men's identity as the household breadwinner.

#### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- During conflict, support women's income-generating activities; during displacement and upon return, support both men's and women's income-generating activities (through, for instance, loans schemes, work-for-cash programmes and other forms of social protection, vocational training and necessary reforms such as land reforms)
- Support child-care facilities for working women
- Promote reforms that protect informal and formal sector workers and the non-discrimination of women, for instance, through support to labour unions

#### VIOLENCE

Conflict-affected fragile states experience or have experienced high levels of violence. This is gendered. Most combatants are men, and many are wounded or die in the fighting. Trafficking of women and prostitution tends to increase in conflict situations, when women

#### GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

"Wombs punctured with guns. Women raped and tortured in front of their husbands and children. Rifles forced into vaginas. Pregnant women beaten to induce miscarriages. Foetuses ripped from wombs. Women kidnapped, blindfolded and beaten on their way to work or school. We saw the scars, the pain and the humiliation. We heard accounts of gang rapes, rape camps and mutilation. Of murder and sexual slavery. We saw the scars of brutality so extreme that survival seemed for some a worse fate than death."

Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002: 9, cited in El-Bushar, J. 'Feminism, Gender and Women's Peace Activism', in *Development and Change*, 38(1) 131-147.

engage in prostitution as a means of survival, and a breakdown in law and order allows for increased trafficking. In many wars women are sexually violated. They lack the mobility to flee the violence and arms to protect themselves. Rape appears to be an all-too-common weapon in war aimed at humiliating the enemy, and it is seldom a random activity but rather a planned strategy of warfare. In some places, such as Uganda, rapes have also been committed by those who are supposed to protect the population.

While it is mainly women who suffer gender-based violence, men also experience rape, though to an unknown degree due to the stigma involved. Research indicates that gender-based violence continues, but changes in nature in post-conflict situations, when domestic violence rates tend to rise.

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Secure physical protection for women during conflicts and ensure that perpetrators are prosecuted
- Establish community and one-to-one counselling services for those who have experienced gender-based violence, targeting men and women separately. Raise awareness and capacity among health staff to deal with gender-based violence

**VICTIMS OR AGENTS?**

Women and men are clearly affected differently by conflict and post-conflict situations. In several areas women suffer to a much greater degree than men, such as gender-based violence. Research shows, however, that women are not merely the victims of conflicts, but also agents of both war and peace.

There is substantial evidence showing that women often support war. This may be directly in fighting, or by providing other types of support to warfare, such as when women act as cooks, nurses or messengers. Women are also sometimes key actors in encouraging men to commit violence. In some places, women (and men) are abducted and forced to join army groups, but women also voluntarily join army groups, as in Nepal, where it is estimated that one third of the Maoist army consists of women. Here and in many other armies, women experience less social gender inequality than outside the army, although in many places this is offset by the frequent sexual abuse that appears to take place.

Women are also active in peace processes, primarily at the informal level, where women's organizations take on mediating and reconciling roles. Although Security Council Resolution 1325 calls for the mainstreaming of gender into peacekeeping operations, the realities are that women are still often marginalized in formal peace processes. Where they have participated, however, there have been important gains (see box below).

During the (re-) building of institutions and legal frameworks in post-conflict situations, opportunities

**WOMEN IN WAR IN SIERRA LEONE**

In Sierra Leone, women were involved in both pro-government and rebel forces. In the Civil Defence Forces they were spies, commanders, frontline fighters, cooks, medics and spiritual leaders, but they also experienced significant sexual abuse. In the rebel forces' Revolutionary United Front, many women were the captured 'wives' of commanders and responsible for distributing weapons and food. They also led small boys and girls units and many were involved in the mutilation and murder of civilians. Despite this, they were underrepresented in official disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs.

Adapted from Mazurana, D. et.al., 2004, 'From Combat to Community: Women and Girls of Sierra Leone'. Paper published by Hunt Alternatives Fund

for transforming gender relations have largely been missed. Research shows that any political space women gain during the conflict is all too often lost in the post-conflict phase, when formal politics and men take over. Among others, this seems to have been the case in Sudan, Uganda, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia and Guatemala, but there is also some evidence that women's political representation and participation in party politics increases in the longer term in post-conflict countries. However, systematic research on these dynamics is still lacking.

What roles, then, do men play in conflict and post-conflict situations? Men are not simply perpetrators. As noted earlier, they also suffer sexual violence. As prisoners of war and soldiers, they frequently experience human rights abuses. They are often directly targeted in violent conflicts and make up the majority of casualties. Even so, men are often described as 'masculine heroes' during conflict. In fact, several studies have shown that men's identities as breadwinners and protectors of the household are severely challenged during conflict. In Uganda, research has demonstrated the contradictory situation that men find themselves in: on the one hand, expectations of masculinity regarding marriage, fatherhood, and being the family breadwinner and main protector of the household are reinforced during times of uncertainty; while on the other hand, men find that these expectations become more and more difficult to fulfil as a result of conflicts. Violence then becomes a means of strengthening the perpetrator's masculinity and humiliating those fighting against.



## WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

Women's participation in peace talks has led to several concrete and positive effects such as a ministry for gender equality and women's affairs in Afghanistan, separate units within ministries to address gender issues in Liberia, equal rights to vote and participate in political processes in Cambodia, new attitudes to female leadership and decision-making in Northern Ireland, and in Guatemala more equal access to land and credit, a special health program for women and girls, a family reunification program, legislation penalizing sexual harassment and the establishment of the National Women's Forum and the Office for the Defense of Indigenous Women.

Source: Bouta, T. et al., 2005, *Gender, Conflict and Development*, World Bank, Washington.

In view of men's struggles to reassert their masculinity, it may not appear too surprising that post-conflict situations are mainly associated with a reversion to former gender patterns of masculine domination.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Target both men and women in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes, and make special efforts to track down women. Redefine standard definitions of female combatants to include those who have been servicing and depending on male soldiers.
- Support women's organizations to take part in formal peace processes. Ensure that gender is thoroughly integrated into peace accords and post-conflict reconstruction efforts when new reforms and legal frameworks are drawn up and institutions (re-)built.

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## FURTHER READING:

Afshar, H., and D. Eade (eds.), 2004, *Development, Women and War: Feminist Perspectives*. Oxfam GB, Oxford.

Bannon, I., and M.C. Correia (eds.), 2006, *The Other Half of Gender: Men's Issues in Development*. World Bank, Washington.

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**More on fragile situations: [www.diis.dk/fragile](http://www.diis.dk/fragile)**

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