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Building sustainable peace after violent conflict: the importance of gender-sensitivity

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Introduction

Even if gender equality were not a desirable objective in its own right, we know that gender equality is a key component of stability and security.

Gender inequality - and particularly violence against women – is an indicator of where a society is at risk of violent conflict. The bigger the gap in opportunities between women and men for them to participate on an equal footing in the economy, in politics and in social life, the more likely a country is to be involved in inter- or intra-state conflict, and the more likely a state is to respond quickly with violence in a conflict setting. Countries with lower human rights standards, including those related to gender equality, are more likely to suffer from violent conflict, including intrastate conflict and are more likely to be more highly militarised than those with that adhere to higher human rights standards. Gender inequality is also a proven hindrance to sustainable economic development.

If gender inequality is an indicator of a propensity towards violent conflict, it follows that gender equality should be at the heart of conflict prevention and resolution and sustainable peacebuilding. Research regularly shows that peace deals that include women negotiators, mediators, witnesses and signatories are more likely to hold for longer than those that do not. The likelihood of reaching a peace agreement in the first place is higher when women's groups are involved in the process than when they are not.

However, despite all the evidence that shows the links between gender inequality and an increased likelihood of violent conflict, 'gender considerations' remain largely marginal to conflict prevention policy and practice.

1. Gender analysis

We know that any interventions in a society affected by conflict, or at risk of violent conflict, will affect the conflict dynamics. For this reason, we stress the importance of ensuring that all interventions in such situations are grounded in robust conflict analysis, that take into account the root causes of the conflicts and how these change over time, the key drivers of conflict and of peace, and comprehensive actor mapping. Good conflict analysis will also include rigorous gender analysis because gender analysis helps us understand how power works in a given situation.

This is because 'gender' means so much more than 'add women and stir.' 'Gender' refers to the set of socially constructed roles that all women, and men, and boys and girls play in a society. An individual may play several gender roles (e.g. wife, mother, businesswoman, warrior, breadwinner) at a given time. Gender roles are also, crucially, intersectional: they

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are affected by other identities, such as socioeconomic class, religion, ethnicity, (dis)ability, sexual orientation, level of education, geographic origin, political affiliation. 'Women' and 'men' are not homogenous groups, but sets of different people with different interests, needs and aspirations.

Gender roles are upheld by all men, women, boys and girls in society, but they are not fixed. The importance of gender analysis lies in the insight it gives us into the power relations between different gender roles. That is, how different people acquire, maintain, use and lose power, and so can shed light on how power flows through social as well as formal institutions. In some situations, the ways in which women hold and exercise power may be unfamiliar to external observers, because power can look different depending on who wields it. Gender analysis will therefore help clarify how social institutions – which may be at least as strong as the formal institutions of state – shape society, and suggest entry points for transformative conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Gender analysis helps us challenge our assumptions to get a clearer picture and understanding of complex issues. For example: it is often assumed that women only join violent extremist groups, including those notorious for their misogyny, due to coercion rather than choice. In other words, that women are only passive victims of the group rather than agents in it. But closer examination of recruitment practices by groups such as Boko Haram and Da'esh show that these groups have gender-sensitive recruitment practices: they describe how women will be agents, active participants in their groups and appeal to certain women, particularly women who feel excluded in their own societies, to join them. These women may then choose to join them.

Gender analysis will also reveal how patterns of privilege and exclusion work, and will help ensure that externally-supported interventions do not inadvertently strengthen patterns of exclusion, thus Doing Harm.

Interventions based on robust conflict analysis, which must therefore integrate rigorous gender analysis are therefore less likely to Do Harm and more likely to support the successful, positive transformation of conflictual relationships and lead to more sustainable peacebuilding than interventions that risk inadvertently exacerbating conflict dynamics.

2. Political participation

It is nearly twenty years since the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325, the first in the series of resolutions on Women, Peace and Security (WPS). These resolutions recognise the important roles that women play as peacebuilders, mediators, peacekeepers, politicians, economic actors and leaders. They focus on the need for women's participation in peacebuilding and in security. They also underscore the criminal rather than inevitable nature of harms, particularly sexual violence, inflicted on women and girls, men and boys during conflict.

The UNSCRs on WPS, and the National Action Plans that result from them have also provided much-needed platforms for women peacebuilders and women's organisations to

voice their opinions at the UN, at regional organisations and with national governments, and participate in peace processes.

Yet despite this progress, nearly 20 years on, women and girls still suffer extensive human rights violations, including sexual violence. Women human rights defenders are targeted in different ways from men: they receive death and rape threats, threats to their children; speaking out is deemed immodest and not lady-like; they are branded unfit mothers, bad wives or 'loose women'; they are threatened and hounded on social media; women's refuges have been closed down amid allegations they are brothels. Or women are squeezed out and shouted down. Similarly, when civic space closes in a country, it is often the women's associations, particularly those outside the capital and representing more marginalised women who are silenced earliest.

Although we have seen an increase in participation by women peacebuilders and women's associations in peacebuilding, whether at UN headquarters in New York or in specific peace processes since the adoption of the WPS agenda, we must also acknowledge that this participation has been limited.

Too often, women are required to speak with 'one voice' as though women in any conflict are a homogenous group. To the contrary, women in conflict zones do not necessarily have a shared understanding of what the conflict is about, and are not neutral. Women have different interests, motivations and sides in conflict, and different political, ethnic, geographic and religious affiliations. Yet often a small group of women – usually urban, educated, and relatively wealthy – are presumed to speak for all women.

While women's associations have become more routinely engaged in peacebuilding processes – even if not on the full range of peacebuilding issues, a point I shall return to – there is a risk that women remain excluded from 'mainstream' civil society and that women's participation is limited to women's associations.

Where women are consulted, too often the agenda is limited to so-called 'women's issues' – usually the effects of rape and other forms of sexual violence. Women's voices are too rarely included in national consultations of issues of central importance to women such as the political settlement, the economy and employment, security, access to services.

When designing interventions, we must therefore be careful to ensure that women participate meaningfully in all parts of the peacebuilding process and all aspects, that their participation is not limited to so-called 'women's issues' or only through women's associations. We must recognise that different women have different opinions, needs and interests in conflict – as men do. There is no single 'women's voice'; we should hear a range of differing perspectives. We must also ensure that 'mainstream' civil society is inclusive of men and women from different walks of life. Finally, we must pay attention to how women human rights defenders and activists are targeted differently from their male colleagues, and that women's voices tend to be among the first to be silenced when civic space closes.

3. Economic empowerment

Just as women's political participation is central for building sustainable peace, women's economic empowerment is the second interconnected element for sustainable conflict resolution. Women's economic empowerment has a multiplier effect on a country's local and national well-being. Empowering women and promoting gender equality is crucial to accelerating development and producing more equal societies, which are important elements in preventing violent conflict.

States with a higher level of female participation in the labour force tend to have lower levels of international violence and a lesser propensity to use military force than states with lower levels of female participation in the labour force. They are also less likely to experience internal conflict.

Societies with higher female participation in the workforce also tend to be wealthier – if men and women participated equally in the economy, the results would add up to US\$28 trillion, or 26 percent, to annual global GDP by 2025, according to a report by McKinsey.

Economic empowerment is not limited to participating in the formal labour force, of course. Women are still routinely excluded from owning land and property, controlling assets, accessing legal and financial services, even in some cases from travelling independently, all of which reduce the ability of women, often married women in particular, from full economic participation.

4. Sexual autonomy

The importance of women's political and economic participation in peace, stability and security is clear. Yet political and economic participation are based on an assumption of sexual autonomy - if a woman does not control her own body, how can we imagine she may participate equally to a man in the political, social and economic life of a country?

Despite numerous developments in international law and policy, impunity for sexual violence, including in the context of conflict remains widespread. Men and boys are also victims of sexual violence in conflict, and often suffer even more stigmatisation than the women and girls who continue to be the majority of those targeted.

Current moves within international organisations and the non-governmental sector to insist on zero tolerance for Sexual Exploitation and Abuse are an important opportunity. We must ensure that peacekeepers, humanitarian workers, the personnel of international organisations and NGOs are aware that sexual exploitation is not acceptable, and that the mechanisms are in place to ensure accountability.

We must also continue to press for security sector and justice sector reform to limit impunity for sexual violence in conflict zones and to support initiatives that transform negative social norms to ensure that women and girls control their bodies, the prerequisite for meaningful participation in peacebuilding.

Conclusion

The twenty years since the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1325 have seen significant progress in engaging women peacebuilders in peace processes around the world. This has contributed to better, that is, more sustainable, peace making and to better gender relations.

Yet much still needs to be done. We need to move gender equality objectives from the periphery to the heart of conflict prevention and resolution.

We need to ensure that all interventions are based on robust conflict analysis that integrates gender analysis to ensure that, at the very least, external interventions do not exacerbate conflict dynamics, and to improve the chances that they may contribute to sustainable peace building.

We should ensure that a wide range of women and men participate in peacebuilding – from formulating peace agreements to the longer-term undertaking of transforming conflictual relations in society so that sustainable peace can take root.

We We need to strengthen the social and legal mechanisms that protect women's and men's human, civic and political rights and limit impunity for violations. And we need to ensure that the people who go to help build peace in conflict zones never exploit or abuse the women, girls, boys and men they work with and for.

We need to watch more closely for signs that women peacebuilders and human rights defenders are being targeted and silenced. This means broadening our understanding of who a peacebuilder or human rights defender is, and the different types of support and protection different peacebuilders and human rights defenders want.

Finally, by ensuring that gender equality objectives are at the heart of all policy in and towards conflict-affected and fragile settings, we will be able to design better intervention that contribute more effectively to long term, sustainable conflict prevention, peacebuilding, stability and security.