The Evidence: Why take a gendered approach across work in fragile and conflict affected states?

WPS Women, Peace & Security Helpdesk

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WHY TAKE A GENDERED APPROACH ACROSS WORK IN FRAGILE AND CONFLICT AFFECTED STATES?

The Women Peace and Security Helpdesk, managed by Saferworld in partnership with Conciliation Resources, GAPS UK, University of Durham and Women International Peace Centre (WIPC), was established in December 2021 to increase capability across the UK Government on WPS policy and programming in order to make its work on conflict and instability more effective. If you work for the UK government and you would like to send a task request, please email us at wpshelpdesk@saferworld.org.uk. If you do not work for the UK government but have an enquiry about the helpdesk or this report, please email us at enquiries.wpshelpdesk@saferworld.org.uk

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WHY TAKE A GENDERED APPROACH ACROSS WORK IN FRAGILE AND CONFLICT AFFECTED STATES?

The Evidence

The evidence demonstrates that placing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls at the heart of our conflict, peace and security work is both the right thing to do and the smart thing to do if we are to meet our wider UK security, defence, conflict and stability objectives. Women, men, girls and boys all experience conflict differently and their life outcomes are varied as a result. Women and girls are disproportionately impacted by conflict, experiencing disadvantage and exclusion multiple times within the conflict, in their influence over and access to humanitarian support, and within the decision-making, peace processes, and reconstruction efforts that follow. The overlapping and multiple identities of gender, race, class and the unique challenges for women and girls with disabilities, often have serious implications, at times limiting their ability to access services, support and safety, hindering their ability to flee conflict, or preventing them from asserting their citizenship and rights.

Conflict increases the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) which is disproportionately experienced by women and adolescent girls, but also by men and boys as a means to emasculate or because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. Conflict also widens the gender gap in school enrolment and retention, and increases reproductive health problems. Women and girls experience additional disadvantage due to weakened institutions, weakened rule of law and restrictions to movement that are so characteristic of conflict and fragile contexts.[i]

In addition, the evidence tells us that more inclusive, equal societies are amongst the most stable. Greater gender equality is correlated with lower levels of intrastate armed conflict,[ii] and higher gender equality is associated with less severe violence in interstate disputes.[iii] Higher gender inequality is associated with higher likelihood of national use of force in inter-state disputes.[iv] Furthermore, where women have been substantively included in decision-making and peace processes, strong evidence demonstrates that there is greater chance of lasting peace and reconstruction efforts that stand the test of time.

Yet despite this compelling evidence, women are overwhelmingly excluded from efforts to prevent, resolve and rebuild from complex crises.

The following provides a brief summary of the evidence as to why we must place gender equality at the heart of our UK policy, diplomacy and implementation in fragile and conflict affected states to advance key priorities of the UK's security, defence, development and foreign policy. Implementation of WPS National Action Plans has transformative potential – National Action Plans are powerful tools for moving towards more inclusive and democratic decision-making, gender equality and to leverage more equitable peace.

The evidence is provided across the 5 strategic objectives of this National Action Plan.

I.   Decision-making

It is clear that women's full and meaningful inclusion in decision-making processes at all levels is vital to lasting peace. Robust evidence indicates that the broad inclusion of civil society actors, such as women's organisations and trade unions, in a peace process and resulting agreement, makes a peace agreement 64% less likely to fail.[v] Empowering women to meaningfully participate in peace agreements makes those agreements 35% more likely to still be in place 15 years later.[vi] In addition, an in-depth analysis of 40 peace processes since the end of the Cold War (undertaken from 2011 to 2015), found that in cases where women's groups were able to exercise a strong influence on the negotiation process, there was a much higher chance that an agreement would be reached than when women's groups exercised weak or no influence.[vii] The inclusion of women in wider, formal and informal political decision-making and policy-making, from local to national, regional and international levels, makes a significant contribution to driving greater equality across society. Evidence shows that where women participate, policy outcomes are more inclusive with the needs and concerns of women better represented. Given the correlation between gender equality and state stability both internally and externally, this is critical to promote as a core strand of conflict and stability interventions.[viii]

Peace dividends are often distributed according to gender dynamics. In some cases, large-scale conflict has broken down patriarchal norms and women have moved into new positions of influence in economy and society.[ix] Despite this, most peace agreements still do not reference women, girls, or gender.[x]

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In addition, peacebuilding and state-building processes in fragile and conflict-affected situations can provide unique opportunities to advance gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Conflict and fragility can disrupt traditional gender roles, in some cases entrenching old harmful gender stereotypes, but in some cases requiring women to take on new or non-traditional activities outside the home. This may include becoming household heads, taking on responsibility as economic providers, or moving into local decision-making roles or economic sectors previously considered male domains. These changes can enable women to mobilise in new ways to move into decision-making, peacebuilding and political processes.[xi] It is important to build on this window of opportunity. These changes must be accompanied with action to support and empower women, to ensure that that they last beyond the life of the conflict. Evidence shows the importance of preserving and building on these opportunities for women in peace processes, reconstruction and peacebuilding, and in legislative and constitutional reform to create lasting change.[xii]

Case study: Women's inclusion in Somali local reconciliation processes, 2021

Research carried out in 2021 in Somalia indicates that prominent roles for women and youth appear to have a positive impact on the effectiveness and durability of reconciliation initiatives. Women conducted outreach activities whereby they travelled across clan lines and negotiated with militia leaders to secure ceasefires. They organised events promoting intercommunal interaction, and secured communities' support for, and engagement in, reconciliation processes, including through organising public gatherings and demonstrations, holding meetings with elders and grassroots peace organisations, and developing print, radio, and social media products. Women also made substantive contributions to those processes - as participants in conferences, signatories to peace agreements, and members of joint community committees established to oversee their implementation. This experience suggests that although women's involvement often appears to be outside of formal negotiation processes, they have an important role in marshalling the demand for reconciliation and socialising the terms of an agreement amongst clan and community members, thereby generating greater social acceptance and compliance with an agreement.

Source: Durable local reconciliation in Somalia - Factors that enhance durability & success, Somalia Stability Fund, 2021[xiii]

II.   Gender-based violence

Gender inequality manifests and deepens through gender-based violence.

Well established global data shows that 1 in 3 women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime.[xiv] Conflict most typically also exacerbates gender-based violence for both women and men, with women in Fragile and Conflict Affected Contexts 35% more likely to experience intimate partner violence than in other developing countries.[xv] Gender-based violence increases in conflict due to displacement of people, the breakdown of social structures, a lack of law enforcement and the further entrenchment of harmful gender norms, among other reasons.[xvi]

Gender-based violence, including sexual violence, human trafficking, forced marriage, intimate partner violence, sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment, is intrinsically linked with conflict and fragility. Not only is it an indicator of likely instability within a state but, new research suggests rising levels of gender-based violence, in particular, sexual violence, may be indicative of future mass atrocities.[xvii] During conflict, gender-based violence is exacerbated, contributing to increased levels of intimate partner violence,[xviii] increased patterns of sexual and gender-based crimes including conflict-related sexual violence, and escalated rates of violence against women and girls which can last into the post-conflict period if not tackled.[xix] Through the UK-funded What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls programme, we have empirical evidence of how conflict increases levels of sexual and gender-based crimes and of the correlation between different forms of violence against women and girls and conflict and fragility. [xx] Global prevalence of sexual violence among refugees and displaced persons is estimated to be 21.4%, or 1 in 5 women (though chronic under-reporting suggests this figure may be much higher).[xxi]

Case study: Violence against conflict-affected women and girls in South Sudan, 2015-2016

Research was conducted among 2,200 women aged 15-64 in three conflict-affected sites in South Sudan between 2015 and 2016: in Juba, Rumbek, and in UN Protection of Civilian Sites (PoCs) in Juba.

50% (in the Juba PoCs) to 65% (in Juba and Rumbek) of all female respondents experienced either physical or sexual violence from a partner or non-partner in the course of their lifetimes. Approximately 35% of respondents experienced rape, attempted rape or other forms of sexual violence by a non-partner during their lifetime. For ever-partnered women, lifetime prevalence of physical and/or sexual partner violence ranged between 54% in the Juba PoCs and 73% in Rumbek. The research confirms the correlation and reinforcement of conflict-related and intimate partner violence, upheld by restrictive gender norms and marital practices.

Source: No safe place: Prevalence and correlates of violence against conflict-affected women and girls in South Sudan, Ellsberg et al. 2020[xxii]

The WPS Index makes clear that countries with extensive reports of conflict-related sexual violence, such as Syria and Yemen, are often among the bottom dozen countries on the WPS Index, exposing how low levels of women's inclusion, justice, and security are associated with women facing higher risks during conflict.[xxiii]

Table 1: Prevalence of conflict-related sexual violence and intimate partner violence in the 12 bottom-ranked countries on the WPS Index

COUNTRY	WPS INDEX RANKING 2021	PREVALENCE OF CONFLICT-RELATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE, 2019	CURRENT RATE OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE, 2018 (% of women)
Somalia	159	Isolated	21
Palestine	160	Not available	20
Sierra Leone	161	None reported	20
Sudan	162	None reported	17
Chad	163	None reported	16
DR Congo	163	Isolated	36
South Sudan	165	Massive	27
Iraq	166	Numerous	45
Pakistan	167	None reported	16
Yemen	168	Numerous	18
Syria	169	Massive	23
Afghanistan	170	None reported	35

Source: WPS Index 2021[xxiv]

III.   Humanitarian and crisis response

Global humanitarian needs continue to rise significantly. The Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2022 states that almost three quarters (217.7 million, 71%) of people in need of humanitarian assistance globally are living in countries experiencing high-intensity conflict.[xxv] Ensuring that humanitarian responses in conflict are gender sensitive is vital in fulfilling our wider women peace and security objectives and in ensuring more equal, and therefore more stable, states emerge from conflict and periods of instability.

Women and girls have particular needs that should be addressed systematically within all humanitarian responses. For example, sexual and reproductive health needs become particularly life threatening when service provision is interrupted due to conflict and instability. 60% of preventable maternal deaths take place in settings of conflict, displacement and natural disasters.[xxvi] Addressing these issues requires humanitarian intervention that is delivered in a way that considers gender differences and prioritises the needs of women and girls as well as universal population needs, such as the need for food and shelter.

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In addition to preventing unnecessary deaths and meeting the full range of needs within a conflict setting, the evidence tells us that humanitarian provision can be done in a way that contributes to long-term stability and resilience. For instance, in areas such as education, understanding and responding to the different barriers to access and retention for girls and boys is important not only to enable immediate educational needs to be met, but also to contribute to lasting equality and therefore stability. Evidence tells us that greater equality of education between men and boys and women and girls decreases the likelihood of conflict by as much as 37%.[xxvii]

Girls who receive an education earn higher incomes and participate in the decisions that most affect them, thereby strengthening national economies, reducing inequality and contributing to more stable, resilient societies. The World Bank estimates that failing to provide secondary education for all girls leads to a loss of US$15 trillion to US$30 trillion per year.[xxviii] A study of 130 countries between 1980 and 2010 found that female education is the single most important social and economic factor associated with a reduction in vulnerability to natural disasters, estimating that deaths due to disaster could be reduced 60% by 2050 if 70% of all 20-39 year-old women were to complete lower secondary school.[xxix]

Not only is gender analysis and inclusion needed to ensure humanitarian responses meet the full-range of gendered needs, but involving women and girls in the design and delivery of humanitarian intervention has wider benefits. Evidence shows that drawing on women's valuable knowledge and experience increases the overall effectiveness of humanitarian programmes, improving access to and use of services by everyone women, men, girls and boys.[xxx]

IV. Security and justice, including peacekeeping

Data shows that addressing gender equality within security and justice interventions and reform is important. The evidence using the Women Peace and Security Index, the Fragile States Index, and the Human Development Index, demonstrates a very strong correlation between lack of inclusion, justice and security for women and a very high risk of political violence, instability and weak overall development.[xxxi]

Evidence also shows the importance of working with security and justice institutions (including peacekeeping) to ensure women are safe from violence, including gender-based violence, and are treated fairly within these institutions.[xxxii] Integrating a gender perspective into security and justice policies and provisions means: a) having a better understanding of the unique security and justice needs and experiences, including of barriers encountered, of diverse groups of people, especially marginalised groups; b) defining security and justice policy and practice to address the needs, concerns and barriers faced of all, not just of the elites defining those policies; and c) providing effective and more nuanced responses to these needs.[xxxiii] Barriers may pre-exist a conflict due to gender-norms or patriarchal systems, however, the conflict may further entrench these ideas reinforcing these barriers if not addressed.

Interestingly, evidence shows additional, wider gains from addressing gender within the security and justice sector. A gender responsive justice and security sector can also promote greater accountability and therefore legitimacy to the local population when women and men have equal opportunity to influence decisions through public oversight.[xxxiv] This evidence is particularly important to ensure goals of security and justice sector reform are sustained over the long-term and contribute to long-term stability of a state.

A gender responsive security and justice sector also means having more diverse and representative justice and security services, willing and able to understand and meet these needs.[xxxv] For example, data reported by UN Women relating to 39 countries found that increasing the number of female police officers has been found to positively correlate with an increase in reporting of sexual assault.[xxxvi]

Women's inclusion in civilian and uniformed peacekeeper roles in operations is also key. The UN has found that women's participation in civilian and uniformed peacekeeper roles in operations leads to better engagement with the local population, especially in societies where women are restricted or prohibited from speaking to men, thereby generating gender-sensitive information to address insecurity and violence. Greater diversity and a broadened skillset translates into improved decision-making, planning and results, leading to greater operational effectiveness and performance.[xxxvii] Significantly, recent research has also found evidence that a greater proportion of female military personnel in UN peacekeeping operations is associated with greater implementation of women's rights provisions from comprehensive peace agreements in subsequent political institutions.[xxxviii] Additionally, to complement the earlier evidence regarding the participation of national female police officers, evidence suggests that female participation in UN peacekeeping units is associated with a greater reported prevalence by women of rape, though not other forms of conflict-related sexual violence. This result appears to support the claim that victims of rape in conflict areas are more likely to report abuse when more female peacekeepers are on the ground to approach.[xxxix]

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V.   Transnational threats

The links between climate change, resource scarcity and conflict are well documented. Promoting gender equality has an important role to play in mitigating climate change threats. Mounting evidence demonstrates that improving gender equality leads to better environmental governance and improved outcomes of climate related projects and policies. The strong correlation between the WPS Index and the Global Adaptation Initiative Index (which quantifies countries' vulnerability to climate change and its readiness to respond to its impacts), suggests that countries where women's inclusion and security and justice are protected are also better positioned to mitigate the rising threats of climate change.[xl]

Participation of women within their communities and at the political level is key to addressing climate change.   In Nepal and India, for example, women's participation in forest committees has been seen to have a positive impact on forest regeneration and a reduction in illegal extraction of forest products.[xli] A 2019 study of data from 91 countries found that increasing women's representation in national parliaments leads to the adoption of more stringent climate change policies, resulting in lower carbon dioxide emissions.[xlii] Likewise, improving gender equality through expanding women's access to productive resources can increase agricultural production and food security and reduce carbon dioxide emissions. If all women smallholders received equal access to productive resources, their farm yields would rise by 20 to 30%, and 100 to 150 million people would no longer go hungry. Increasing farm yields can reduce the pressure to deforest more land, reducing additional emissions.[xliii]

The OSCE has recently reported on a growing body of research indicating that violent misogynistic attitudes and attitudes supporting violent extremism and radicalisation that lead to terrorism strongly overlap.[xliv] At the individual level, violent misogyny can motivate men and women to participate in violent extremism and radicalisation that leads to terrorism. At the group level, violent misogyny plays a role in the operation and ideology of violent extremist groups.[xlv] Including violent misogyny as a central concern of preventing and countering violent extremism is in line with comprehensive gender mainstreaming, considers gender power relations at its centre and goes beyond looking at the roles played by and participation of women. Women's civil society organizations are uniquely positioned to recognize, understand and address violent misogyny as it manifests in different contexts.

Women have been found to play an essential role in promoting peace education and developing counter-narratives to tackle extremist propaganda, misinformation and hate speech.

Case study: Engaging women to address violent extremism in Pakistan

In 2008, the PAIMAN Alumni Trust began its work of engaging and empowering women and youth to become active community leaders so as to help address the issues of violent extremism in Pakistan. PAIMAN developed an integrated approach to empower women socially, economically and psychologically to work on preventing and countering violent extremism at multiple levels: a) by building their capacity in critical thinking, dialogue, community peacebuilding, early signs of extremism and also making them aware of their potential in influencing and guiding their children's lives, and in preventing them from engaging in extremist activities; b) by providing them with livelihood skills, thereby raising their status and voice in their families and communities and reducing their vulnerability to violent extremism; and c) by building the capacity of school and Madrassa teachers, police women, women activists, political leaders of all faiths and women Parliamentarians to actively participate in the P/CVE, peace and security agendas of the country at multiple levels.

Since then, women have become effective in preventing extremism as educators, influencers and positive agents of change in their families, communities and broader society, far beyond their traditional roles. Women's groups are playing a significant role in countering and preventing violent extremism through outreach and awareness raising and facilitating engagement between women and other important actors at the community level. For instance, building upon their ability to reach across lines of difference, female madrassa teachers, politico- religious female leaders and non-Muslim activists have worked to encourage nonviolent protests, and to mobilise communities to join their campaign for inter and intra- faith harmony. Likewise, the training received by women has given them the confidence and knowledge to build social cohesion collectively through dialogue and community inclusion of women at all levels.

Source: Engendering Extremism: Women Preventing and Countering Extremism in Pakistan, 2018[xlvi]

Whilst the proportion of women participating in arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament diplomacy has grown steadily over the last four decades, women remain underrepresented, comprising 32% of state delegations,

with heads of delegations mostly men.[xlvii] Balanced gender composition worsens further when it comes to small forums: when states can only send one representative to a disarmament meeting, they almost always send a man.[xlviii] The effects of this gender imbalance on the negotiations process and the outcomes of negotiations, the agreements, require further research and investigation to develop tailored policy and practice.

Article 7(4) of the Arms Trade Treaty, which came into force in 2014, requires that states parties must take into account the risk that the items may be used to commit or facilitate serious acts of gender-based violence or violence against women and children when deciding whether to approve an arms export.[xlix] Its inclusion signified a formal recognition by states for the first time of the disproportionate gender impacts of armed violence and conflict, and of the evidence highlighting the strong correlations between illicit arms flows in non-conflict states and the rate of violent crimes and intimidation against women.[l] The Treaty marks a huge step forward in recognising the role played by conventional arms - particularly small and light weapons - in facilitating gender-based violence and the disproportionate impact of these acts on women and girls. Effective implementation of this provision will help prevent gender-based violence. In 2014, the UK, following the signature of the Arms Trade Treaty, amended the Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria to explicitly mention gender-based violence or serious violence against women or children as criterion. As a result, in considering the risk that items might be used for internal repression or in the commission of a serious violation of international humanitarian law, the Government will also take account of the risk that the items might be used to commit gender-base violence or serious violence against women or children. [li]

The growth of the internet and gradual narrowing of the gender digital divide has significant benefits around access to information, networking and ability to participate politically. However, cyber brings with it many challenges. Online gender-based violence is an act of gender-based violence that is committed, abetted or aggravated, in part or fully, by the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as mobile phones, the internet, social media platforms, and email. Online gender-based violence tends to mirror and exacerbate gender norms and inequalities of the offline world.[lii] It can comprise the threat of violence, name-calling or other strategies to intimidate women and girls and includes, for instance, the sending of unwanted sexual text messages or blackmail using photos of women and girls to sexually harass Syrian adolescent girls.[liii]

There is growing empirical evidence that online harassment is being systematically targeted towards women and people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) who engage politically and take on leadership positions. In a study of 55 women parliamentarians, conducted in 2016, 42% reported experiencing 'extremely humiliating or sexually charged images of yourself spread through social media'.[liv] In an EU-wide survey of violence against women conducted in 2014, 11 % of women reported facing at least one form of cyber-harassment since the age of 15. The situation is worse for younger women: the risk of young women aged between 18 and 29 years becoming a target of threatening and offensive advances on the internet is twice as high as the risk for women aged between 40 and 49 years, and more than three times as high as the risk for women aged between 50 and 59 years.[lv]

Research indicates that 28% of women who had suffered ICT-based violence intentionally reduced their presence online.[lvi] This form of backlash against women's participation or empowerment can deter engagement by women and people with diverse sexual orientation in community and national level conflict prevention, peacebuilding and peace processes.[lvii] Other common outcomes are social isolation, whereby victims or survivors withdraw from public life, including with family and friends, and limited mobility, when they lose their freedom to move around safely.[lviii]

Beyond online violence, the internet has other gendered impacts. For instance, whilst internet shutdowns are mainly blunt tools that hit entire communities, research has noted that they have gendered impacts because of power differentials in society and the specific ways that women use the internet. For instance, in Venezuela, internet shutdowns impact those working at home, often care-givers and often women, restricting the exchange of information and their ability to work. Likewise, in India, the intersectional impact of a shutdown impacts women differently, where women may be unable to share their live location when traveling, thereby restricting their freedom of movement.[lix]

As the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences has recognised, the internet is being used in a broader environment of widespread and systemic structural discrimination and gender-based violence against women and girls.[lx] Cyber is therefore a significant actor in both enabling and preventing progress on gender equality in conflict affected and fragile states. More research and investigation is required to better understand the gender dimensions of international cyber security to shape policy and practice.

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