

## Women in conflict and post-conflict situations.

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Women are often portrayed as victims of conflict; and, of course in large part they are:

- targeted for rape;
- become widows;
- suffer most from decay of social sectors.

Yet women are also *agents*, active participants in war, directly or supporting rebels; take on new economic roles, often as heads of household.

But women are largely neglected once peace occurs: they rarely participate in formal peace negotiations; they are too often ignored in post-conflict politics and economics. And potentially they could greatly improve the peace process, the sustainability of peace and post-conflict society and make an important contribution to the economy.

### 1. *Women in situations of violent conflict.*

- a. *As victims*: this is what we most often hear about. Rape is a weapon of war. Women more often than men are subject to sexual assault. 94% of displaced households in Sierra Leone had been subject to sexual assault; and a quarter to half of women in Rwanda's genocide were raped. In addition, women often resort to prostitution to support their families. Women are abducted into the army itself, or as army 'wives'. The incidence of HIV/AIDs then is particularly high among female populations in conflict areas. They suffer loss of incomes, as men fight, and frequently become widows – in countries like Angola, Mozambique, Kosovo, widows accounted for as much as half of adult female population when conflict ended.
- b. *As participants*: women were active female combatants in Algeria, El Salvador, Eritrea, Mozambique, Namibia, Nepal, Nicaragua, South Africa, Sri Lanka. One survey of 55 countries found women as active in 38. Estimates suggest they form one tenth to one third of fighting forces; they generally play bigger role in supportive services (cooks, messengers etc.) than active fighting but they do fight too. In research we conducted in southeastern Nigeria, for example, women in the Umeleri and Aguleri Women's Development Associations donated money and food to support combatants, and some fought. Research in Kashmir showed that women have played a significant role in militant activities, contributing both materially and ideologically. It is widely perceived that the movement could not have been sustained without the participation of women. They helped armed separatists to escape during

crackdowns. Besides carrying out tasks such as feeding combatants and providing shelters, women in Kashmir acted as couriers carrying messages, arms and ammunition under their veils and they also played an active role, planting bombs, for example. Female extremist groups in Kashmir such as Dukhtaran-i-Millat also played a crucial role in indoctrinating other women into the movement.

Our research shows motives differ from men, somewhat; apart from general ideological or grievance related motives (which are shared across genders), women, e.g. in Guatemala, seek to escape from hierarchical family structures and roles.

- c. Women also contribute in major way to the identities and views of the next generation – not always in a peaceful direction. For example, in Serbia, feminine ideals of patriotism were bolstered to promote the militarisation of masculinity.
2. *Women in the war economy.* Women frequently take on new roles during war, as men join the fighting, leaving jobs unfilled and losses in family incomes, for which women have to substitute. In the formal sector, women often take on roles previously held by men – this was very marked in the two world wars in Europe. In developing countries, this happens too but it is more often a question of taking responsibility for family income, becoming head of household, taking up farming responsibilities, and new roles in the informal sector. E.g. in Cambodia and Sudan women-headed households increased by one third.
  3. *Women in post-conflict situations.* Despite their active role in war, women are too often neglected in the post-conflict situation, in terms of peace negotiations; demobilisation programmes; and post-conflict reconstruction.
    - a. Women *are* often very active in civil society, peace movements: e.g. in Colombia, women were responsible for complex networks of pro-peace movements; in Northern Ireland, Burundi, Liberia, there were female coalitions across warring partners. The Mano River Women's peace Network (MARWOPNET) brought together women from Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone were important in peace-making, e.g. bringing the heads of state to the negotiating table in 2001. Our research in Nigeria shows that women played an active role developing coalitions across fighting groups in the Aguleri and Umuleri conflicts in Southeastern Nigeria; conflicts within the Igbo community; and in Kaduna.
    - b. But they are much less active in *formal peace negotiations*: despite progress, often resulting from pressure from active women's groups, in 2008, UNIFEM estimated that women account for less than 10% of members in formal peace negotiations and less than 2% of signatories to peace agreements. A study of the Congo, Sudan and Uganda concluded that recognizing and supporting the role of women in preventing and mitigating conflict was in general a minor afterthought. In Southeastern Nigeria, women were neither represented nor consulted in peace negotiations.
    - c. *DDR programmes* tend to be heavily male, partly because they define 'combatant' narrowly, excluding any support roles; and also because women ex-combatants are regarded less as a threat to future security. Female soldiers in Sierra Leone and Eritrea, for example, were left destitute.

- d. But many *political settlements* have used the post-conflict situation as an opportunity to incorporate women into political processes. Constitution making following conflict offers new opportunities. E.g. Rwanda constitution requires 30% minimum female representation in parliament, and in 2003, women accounted for 49% of seats. Steps to advance position of women were also taken by Burundi, Mozambique, South Africa, Timor Leste.
  - e. It is in economic reconstruction, that women tend to be most neglected –
    - i. There is heavy emphasis on macro-stabilisation and pro market reforms – and gender issues are ignored.
    - ii. DDR including employment schemes are largely directed towards men.
    - iii. Economic infrastructure tends to be privileged before social.
    - iv. There are problems for women in formal sector employment – as men return from conflict; and pre-conflict gender attitudes often resume. In Eritrea, women who had been barefoot doctors, dentists, administrators, teachers during the conflict could often not take on these roles post-conflict. In other cases, however, women in post-conflict situations did find employment – e.g. textiles in Cambodia; tourism in Guatemala.
    - v. There is often discrimination against women in post-conflict land settlement – e.g. Zimbabwe; El Salvador.
    - vi. Farming assistance often bypasses women in extension, credit etc.
    - vii. Training and retraining is biased towards men
4. What is needed
- a. Formal recognition of what is needed in terms of peace-making and political systems is well advanced with many UN resolutions. It is a question of better enforcement.
  - b. But recognition is much less in relation to economic opportunities: assets ownership; employment; skills; formal sector medium sized credit.
5. The worst situation is among women in deprived groups. They face treble deprivation: -- (i) as members of a deprived group; (ii) through general gender-based societal inequalities; and (iii) particularly strong gender discrimination within the group.

For example, in Guatemala female indigenous mean years of schooling is just 1.3 years compared with 4.6 for non-indigenous females and 5.5 for non-indigenous males. Such massive deprivation encourages support for resistance and rebellion, and also is likely to perpetuate deprivation via the next generation.

*It is necessary to improve the position of deprived groups generally as well as of women if this problem is to be tackled. And this is essential for sustaining peace.*

*In so far as women are active in supporting conflicts, it is not enough just to say that women should have a greater role, politically, and assume peace will result; it is also necessary to address the underlying grievances.*