

MICROCON Policy Briefing 15

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Men and women attend a peace project evaluation meeting in northern Uganda.  
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- **How can different levels of gender research be used for policy-relevant conflict analysis?**
- **What can we learn about the policy implications of conflict from MICROCON's gender research?**

## Conflict through a Gender Lens

**Summary:** This brief suggests that those seeking an in-depth understanding of the social and political world need to apply a feminist curiosity – that is, a curiosity about the roles gender plays at all levels of human life, including politics. In other words, since gender is central to all inter-personal relationships and influences much of human activity, it clearly needs to be integral to all attempts to understand these. This includes not only situations on the ground but also at the top level of global politics. Finally, the brief demonstrates the important policy implications of using a gender lens in conflict analysis and suggests the penalties for failing to do this may be severe.

### Introduction

It is rare to find gender a specific focus in conflict studies. For many conflict researchers, gender is seen as either irrelevant or a minority issue. This stems in part from the conflation of women and gender. It may also arise from an (unarticulated and probably unconscious) fear of what a well-aimed gender analytical lens might expose, both of men and masculinities and of the internal workings of global power relations.

MICROCON's policy has been that gender should occupy a central position within all its projects, not merely through the collection of sex-disaggregated data but also

by using a gender analytical lens wherever possible. This brief reviews a range of MICROCON papers to reflect on different ways in which gendered research can play a role in conflict analysis, and what applying a 'gender lens' can contribute to conflict studies.

### What Can Applying a Gender Lens Contribute to Conflict Studies?

Gender is fundamental to politics and inseparable from conflict. Yet, it is usually ignored in conflict studies. This brief starts from Enloe's recommendation that all scholars cultivate 'a feminist curiosity' – about the roles gender

categories play in political debate and action – and suggests this should be reflected in scholarship. Neglecting this produces a distorted image of the world, leaving us blind to what is occurring beneath the surface. Using a gender lens helps us understand aspects of nationalism, militarism, industrialisation, and even climate change, and the global problem of waste disposal, that otherwise would remain invisible (Enloe 2007; Hollway 1989).

### What do we mean by gender? The MICROCON Gender Framework

Gender can be understood and used at different conceptual levels:

i) Gender and sex-disaggregated data. At the most basic level, projects collect sex-disaggregated data without attempting to engage with gender theory. This approach is mainly used by economists and others carrying out statistical analysis.

ii) Gender as a proxy for women. This level is chiefly concerned with issues related to women's rights and needs, often seeking to incorporate them within a policy framework. Writing at this level also tends to pay little attention to gender theory with little or no consideration of gender identities and/or power relations.

iii) Gender and identity. Here analyses address different ways in which male and female identities, and the roles they play shape what they do and how they are conceptualised and treated in social relationships in their particular settings. This encompasses conventional gender studies as well as masculinity studies, from a range of disciplinary approaches. In the gerontocratic societies of Asia and Africa, where gender issues regularly overlap with age, the multiple femininities and masculinities this produces need also to be taken into account.

iv) Gender and global politics. At the highest conceptual level, gender is shown to play a significant role in politics. Using a gender lens here produces quite different revelations about the underpinnings of politics from any other approach. There is now a growing body of work that attempts to do this mainly generated by feminist political scientists, of whom Enloe is one of the most prominent.

**Gender in MICROCON research**  
A selection of MICROCON papers

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**For many conflict researchers, gender is seen as either irrelevant or a minority issue.**

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show what can be gained by using a gender lens at each of the above levels. The papers chosen are written from distinct disciplinary, ontological, epistemological and methodological perspectives, using a variety of approaches to data-analysis and focusing on conflicts at different levels and on different continents.

#### **Gender and sex-disaggregated data**

Calderón and Ibáñez (2009) use sex-disaggregated data to study the impact of conflict-related forced rural-urban migration on the urban labour force in Colombia. The data suggest it may be considerably more difficult for male migrants to access employment opportunities than for females. Moreover, their presence produces a differential impact, with urban and rural women tending to compete for income opportunities,

largely in informal activities, thus driving down women's wage rates, while male immigrants' lack of relevant skills leaves the urban male population much less affected.

#### **Gender as a proxy for women**

Two papers are reviewed in this category - Benoit Challand's paper on the Israeli-Palestine Conflict (2010) shows women as activists, while Kindi's (2010) paper on the land rights of Acholi women in northern Uganda after the end of the civil war (1986-2006) depicts women as victims.

The focus of Challand's paper is EU aid for civil-society organisations focusing on the Israel/Palestine conflict. He shows that women's organisations play a significant role in peace-related activities, while no men-specific organisations exist. Feminist groups play a major role



Women selling fish in Pabbo IDP Camp in Gulu, Northern Uganda © John and Melanie Kotsopoulos, 2005

here, addressing women's position and gender relations, bringing together women from both sides of the conflict, and working in practical ways to improve well-being. This informs the paper's policy recommendations that suggest where the EU might best provide support to make the most significant impact.

Gender is central to Kindi's (2010) paper, since it belongs to MICROCON's gender work package. The paper addresses the cultural, political and economic obstacles keeping women and often their male offspring too from obtaining title to land. Its main arguments are framed in terms of the responsibility of the Ugandan government as well as of the international community to help women gain their rights.

### **Gender and identity**

The papers in this category encompass a wide range of conceptual approaches but all of them treat gender as having direct bearing on interpersonal relationships because of its effect on human identity.

In a study of conflict over water usage in Tanzania (Lecoutere, d'Exelle, and van Campenhout, 2010), the gender-age hierarchy is shown to have a strong influence on water-usage behaviour. Identities emanating from this hierarchy play a crucial role in the propensity of individuals to enter into conflict. The paper thus provides an empirical basis for deeper probing into gender issues.

The importance of focusing on masculinities in studying religious extremism is explored through two

papers on Muslim radicalisation in Europe: Briggs and Birdwell on the UK (2009) and Malashenko and Yarlykapov on Russia (2009). Lindley's (2009) paper on Somalia shows gendered identity to be crucial to how individuals are treated in this war zone. While the gender aspects are incidental to the main focus of this paper, the data provided make a useful addition to exploring the differential treatment of the sexes in conflict situations.

My own papers on the northern Uganda conflict put gender at their very heart. Their aim is to produce theory that adds to our understanding of the role gender plays in social relations and culture, and its imbrications with both religion and other kinds of power structures. They also demonstrate the important role gender plays in producing violence in conflict settings as well as how using a gender lens in community development projects can help reduce post-conflict violence (Harris forthcoming).

### **Gender and global politics**

Jennings and Nikolić-Ristanović's (2009) paper from the MICROCON gender work package analyses the sexual economy established around the UN and other international forces. Examining gender at both global and local levels, it shows how practices generally conceptualised as purely local or as intrinsic to organised crime may be embedded in notions of gender that derive from masculinist attitudes inherent in global politics. The research shows the work that gender analysis can do to unravel the underpinnings of global economic

and political systems, demonstrating the consequences of sets of gender norms fundamental to contemporary political ideology and the global market system.

### **Policy Implications**

While the two papers that treat gender as a proxy for women provide explicit policy recommendations, all these papers have some relevance for policymaking. Using a gender lens for conflict analysis often produces surprising revelations with important policy implications. This is particularly evident in the papers at levels one and four. The findings of Calderón and Ibáñez (2009) that it is rural women who more easily find urban employment after migration is counter-intuitive until the skills issues are considered. This suggests several important implications for policy around both the labour market and probable repercussions at domestic level.

The Jennings and Nikolić-Ristanović (2009) paper reveals very serious long-term and widespread damage resulting from the deployment of the UN and other international organisations in conflict zones and makes it clear that this is unlikely to change without radical re-education of all involved, from those on the ground to those occupying the highest political positions. My paper on psycho-social education argues that the international community needs to re-evaluate its priorities for dealing with post-conflict situations if it wishes to reduce violence on the ground and with it the chance of the conflict restarting (Harris forthcoming).

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**Gender is fundamental to politics and inseparable from conflict.**

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All these papers show the significant role that gender plays in attitudes and behaviour in conflict and post-conflict zones. They show that the kinds of revelations that only gender scholarship can produce are crucial to understanding what lies behind surface manifestations, with the implication that the advantages of taking this seriously could be substantial and the failure to do so correspondingly harmful. We learn from the Jennings and Nikolić-Ristanović (2009) paper as well, that gender strongly influences not only situations on the ground but also at the top level of global politics, suggesting the benefits that would accrue to policymakers as well as scholars from using a feminist curiosity and applying a gender analytical lens.

### Credits

This Policy Briefing was prepared by Colette Harris, School of International Development, University of East Anglia. The views expressed in this briefing are the author's alone. For more details on the ideas expressed here see MICROCON Research Working Paper 41.

### Further reading

- Briggs, R. and Birdwell, J., 2009. Radicalisation among Muslims in the UK. MICROCON Policy Working Paper 7.
- Calderón, V. and Ibáñez, A-M., 2009. Labour Market Effects of Migration-Related Supply Shocks: Evidence from Internally Displaced Populations in Colombia. MICROCON Research Working Paper 14.
- Challand, B., 2010. Coming Too Late? The EU's Mixed Approaches to Transforming the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. MICROCON Policy Working Paper 12.
- Enloe, C., 2007. Globalization and militarism: feminists make the link. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Harris, C., 2011. Gender and religion in conflict and post conflict: the cases of Tajikistan, Northern Uganda, Northern Nigeria. Paper presented at the EADI/DSA Conference, 'Rethinking development in an age of scarcity and uncertainty', York University 19-22nd September.
- Harris, C., forthcoming. The importance of post-conflict psycho-social education programmes: a case study from northern Uganda. (Unpublished manuscript).
- Hollway, W., 1989. Subjectivity and method in psychology: Gender, Meaning and Science. London: Sage
- Jennings, K.M. and Nikolić-Ristanović, V., 2009. UN Peacekeeping Economies and Local Sex Industries: Connections and Implications. MICROCON Research Working Paper 17.
- Kindi, F. I., 2010. Challenges and Opportunities for Women's Land Rights in the Post-Conflict Northern Uganda. MICROCON Research Working Paper 26.
- Lecoutere, E., d'Exelle, B., and van Campenhout, B., 2010. Who Engages in Water Scarcity Conflicts? A Field Experiment with Irrigators in Semi-arid Africa. MICROCON Research Working Paper 31.
- Lindley, A., 2009. Leaving Mogadishu: The War on Terror and Displacement Dynamics in the Somali Regions. MICROCON Research Working Paper 15.
- Malashenko, A. and Yarlykapov, A., 2009. Radicalisation of Russia's Muslim Community. MICROCON Policy Working Paper 9.



MICROCON, or 'A Micro Level Analysis of Violent Conflict' is a five-year research programme funded by the European Commission, which takes an innovative micro level, multidisciplinary approach to the study of the conflict cycle.

Almost one third of the world's population lives in conflict-affected low-income countries. At a fundamental level, conflict originates from people's behaviour and how they interact with society and their environment - from its 'micro' foundations. Yet most conflict research and policy focuses on 'macro' perspectives. MICROCON seeks to redress this balance.

For more information on MICROCON, please visit our website:

<http://www.microconflict.eu>

Or contact us at

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