Focus: Women, Gender and Armed Conflict

> *It is crucial that women's voices are heard and their work on the ground is recognised, valued and supported. Decisions should be made with them, not for them.*
>
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The end of the Cold War in 1989 did not, as had been expected, bring about a reduction in armed conflicts. More than two thirds of the poorest countries in the world are in conflict regions. The nature of armed conflict has changed. In the past, wars used to be waged almost solely between two sovereign states, but so-called modern wars are fought in quite different ways. The international community faces a completely new situation, an immensely complex nexus of diverse causes and warring parties. Today, warfare is increasingly taking on intranational forms (domestic or cross-border armed conflicts among disintegrating states, civil wars or rebellions), now exceeding international conflicts in terms of absolute numbers but also of intensity. The former demarcated fronts between two well-trained national military forces are being superseded by new actors, such as warlords, rebels, mercenaries and child soldiers. Nor is warfare a purely male domain any more; we can no longer ignore the role of women in hostilities. Besides voluntary female combatants, thousands of girl soldiers are forced to fight. Women and girls are abducted and coerced into marrying warlords or held as slaves or prostitutes. Rape is deployed as a strategic weapon and method of torture.

These very brutal, prolonged and disorderly conflicts afflict many civilians (up to 90 per cent). This is also why there has been a huge rise in the number of refugees and internally displaced persons. Uprooted population groups, particularly women and children, live for years in camps, dependent on humanitarian aid and with limited access to vital resources. Discrimination against women in the distribution of food, the lack of recognition of their particular needs, attacks and acts of violence or extortion in the camps perpetuate their insecurity.

Peace and stability are prerequisites for development and vice versa

The United Nations Millennium Declaration (2000) clearly stated that peace and stability are the prerequisites for development and prosperity and vice versa. A decrease in armed conflicts, poverty reduction and peaceful co-existence are essential if the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are to be achieved. Only if women have equal access to political, social and economic institutions and if there is a change in cultural attitudes away from violent confrontation to non-violent conflict resolution will sustained peace be possible. To ensure lasting peace not only the direct causes of conflicts but also and above all the root causes must be addressed.

The structural causes, although often diverse, are frequently complementary:

- absence of human security and security in the country or region
- poor governance, disregard for human rights, absence of democratisation, corruption, abuse of power, etc.
- unequal access to resources, systematic exploitation of natural resources, marginalisation of disadvantaged groups and increasing socioeconomic disparities and the resultant poverty
- These structural causes, which are related both to security and to political, economic and social aspects, make it more difficult for women to participate in social, political and economic life because of gender inequality and discrimination.

Among the structural causes are gender-specific role attribution. If because of poverty or unemployment men can no longer play their traditional role as providers and protectors of the family, they often have no alternative but to earn their living in the military, in paramilitary groups or in the armed security sector. Access to arms combined with a traditional attitude to masculinity can easily express itself in violence against women.

The role of women in the three conflict phases

Women and men play different roles as social actors and also have different needs and interests. In the three phases of a conflict (before, during and after) women can play different roles and work proactively to secure peace. The various conflict phases often overlap, which makes peacemaking measures very complex. Very often too, the activities of women span various phases. Conflicts and wars do not proceed in a clear linear direction.

In the **pre-conflict phase** the latent and structural causes of conflicts already exist: they include lack of participation in political life, suppression, discrimination and exclusion of all kinds, violation of human rights, little access to land and resources, and the absence of security.

Women can encourage societies and political groups to take early preventive measures:

- By strengthening and promoting activities, local women's organisations and initiatives and by supporting the formation of networks (peace alliances) women can promote cooperation and trust.
- By strengthening women (empowerment) they can work actively to ward off conflicts by undertaking measures to prevent exclusion and discrimination and can draw attention to other preventive measures through peace-building awareness campaigns (particularly among endangered groups such as potential women soldiers).
- Through their various individual contacts and observations women can be important informers to provide early warning of conflict potential.
- By encouraging advanced training in public life and by providing access to knowledge, e.g. on human and women's rights, women can play an important role in local politics and government and hence also in conflict prevention.
- Through their improved economic status, women can free their families from poverty and with their larger say make a contribution to stemming militarisation and radicalisation.

During an armed conflict the threat of violence is extremely high: fear and insecurity, the destruction of livelihoods, expulsion, loss of family and death are just some examples of the problems to be confronted. The proactive role of women to ensure survival and settlement of the conflict could not be more challenging:

- Women take the responsibility and strain of keeping the family together during an armed conflict. As female heads of households, they often face great difficulties in patriarchal societies.
- Local women's peacekeeping organisations can step up their role as negotiators and mediators between the warring parties and encourage dialogue between them.

- In refugee camps women have responsibility for avoiding existential hardship (e.g. fair food distribution, allowance for the special needs of women and girls, prevention of harassment by male refugees).
- Through targeted actions, consciousness-raising and training in the fields of peace-building and human rights in the camps women can raise the awareness of those affected and encourage them to demand their rights.

In the post-conflict phase women play a particularly important role both during the peace process and also in the rehabilitation and reintegration phase. Of particular significance here is that pre-conflict and post-conflict phases above all share marked parallels. The requisite measures are often similar, since peacebuilding and conflict prevention are essential before and after a conflict.

- Women can play a significant role in decision-making functions through their full participation in conflict settlement and peace processes. Women can also act in this phase as negotiators and mediators to encourage dialogue between the parties.
- By highlighting the needs of women in the demobilisation and reconstruction phase, women's groups and networks can make an important contribution to a sustainable peace process.
- Former women soldiers, survivors and refugees can foster reconciliation through their experiences.
- The support of women by other women in psychosocial care, trauma management and reintegration of widows and combatants helps to prevent social and economic isolation.
- During the return or resettlement of IDPs or refugees, the women affected can be given support in the choice of settlement by activists or women's groups.
- During the reconstruction of the justice and administrative systems qualified women can help in the formulation of laws and regulations to ensure gender equality in public life and fair access to economic resources (e.g. land and property rights).
- Particular attention must be paid to decisions regarding compensation for suffering caused by (sexual) violence. Special account needs to be taken of the predicament of rape victims, women sex slaves and returning, perhaps pregnant, so-called bush wives. Renewed stigmatisation in the community can thwart their successful reintegration.

International agreements

UN level

There are several international agreements that form a basis for peace-building with allowance for gender equality.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly and has been since that time the base for all international equality policies. It also demands affirmative measures for the preferential promotion of women and active political and legal steps for gender equality.

In 1995 the **Beijing Platform for Action** adopted at the UN World Conference on Women contained the following strategic goals in a special chapter on women and armed conflicts:

For one thing, measures must be taken to bring about broad institutional changes, reducing military expenditure, and the general promotion of human rights and non-violent conflict resolution strategies. Others must explicitly aim at women and their contribution to fostering a culture of peace. This includes the leading participation of women in conflict resolution, their security in conflictive situations and the provision of assistance and training opportunities for refugee and internally displaced women entitled to protection under international law.

Based on these two important documents, the UN Security Council adopted **resolution 1325** on **women, peace and security** in the year 2000. This is the first Security Council resolution dealing with the impact of armed conflicts on women and girls and with their active role in all phases of peace processes, which has contributed to raising international awareness, as evidenced by three follow-up resolutions.

UN Security Council Resolution 1325

Main points:

- Protection and respect of the human rights of women and girls
- Equal participation of women in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security
- Full participation of women in decision-making functions in conflict settlement and peace processes
- Mainstreaming a gender perspective in all areas of peace missions
- Particular protection and allowance for the needs of women and girls in IDP and refugee camps
- Allowance for the different needs of female ex-soldiers
- Support of local peace initiatives by women
- Training peacekeeping soldiers in the human rights of women

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In 2008, the UN Security Council adopted **Resolution 1820 on Sexual Violence in Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations** to halt acts of sexual violence against civilians in conflict zones, which specifies certain points already cited in Resolution 1325 in more detail but also extends it. Greater stress is placed on the prevention and punishment of sexual violence. This has elevated sexual violence to the status of a separate security theme with a direct bearing on peacebuilding, reconciliation and lasting peace. Rape and every other form of sexual violence can therefore be treated as a war crime, a crime against humanity or a constitutive act of genocide.

UN Security Council Resolution 1820 (2008)

- Sexual violence excluded from all amnesty provisions
- Specific training of peacekeeping forces and implementation of a zero-tolerance strategy in UN peacekeeping missions
- Strengthening or reconstructing national institutions (justice, health)
- Government obligation to criminal prosecution of acts of sexual violence
- Equal protection by law and equal access to justice for all victims of sexual violence, particularly for women and girls
- Taking account of social causes: debunking myths and traditions that fuel and legitimise sexual violence
- Improving information through annual reporting

Another two resolutions were prepared and adopted in 2009 on the basis of these two documents: **Resolution 1888 on the Protection of Women and Girls from Sexual Violence in Armed Conflicts and Resolution 1889 on the Protection of Women and Girls in Post-Conflict Situations**

UN Security Council Resolution 1888 (2009) calls for the appointment of a special envoy and expert teams to expedite the implementation of Resolution 1820 and provide the UN strategy with the necessary leadership. In addition to human rights observers and gender advisers in the course of UN peacebuilding and peacekeeping operations, women-protection advisers (WPAs) are also to be assigned. It provides for raising the number of women in peacekeeping operations, stepping up training for the protection of the population against sexual violence and ensuring full accountability for offences by personnel. It also places general emphasis on improving the means of sanctioning sexual violence.

UN Security Council Resolution 1889 (2009) calls for greater representation of women in mediation processes and peace negotiations. In active gender mainstreaming, it demands that all

country reports to the Security Council contain special gender information. For the first time, it also attaches a central role to the education of women in the promotion of women's participation in post-conflict decision-making. Another point where the resolution gives clear practical pointers is evaluation. To be able to devise adequate, specific strategies, data and analyses must be systematically collected and processed. Indicators for use at the global level to track implementation need to be developed as a common basis for reporting.

EU level

A study prepared for the Slovenian EU Council Presidency, co-financed by Austria, deals with the EU strategy on women in armed conflicts: *Enhancing the EU Response to Women and Armed Conflict with particular Reference to Development Policy*. The findings of this study revealed some shortcomings. The theme was implicitly accorded certain significance, but there was a lack of priorities and strategic planning to effectively channel resources and expertise. It also pointed to an insufficient appreciation of the complexity of this issue and a lack of clear indicators for the coherent supervision of European strategies.

Based on that study and with the intention of improving the European strategy, the **Comprehensive EU approach to the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and 1820** was adopted in December 2008**.** This will improve exchange among the various EU members, but also with non-EU states. It also contains a pledge by the EU to adopt a tripartite approach:
- Policy dialogue: integration of women, peace and security issues
- Gender mainstreaming: above all in crisis management and long-term development strategies
- Specific activities to protect support and empower women

At annual meetings, experience gained from carrying out national action plans will be communicated to ensure a coherent approach to implementing UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820 through joint prioritisation, verification indicators and targets.

Gender and the promotion of peace in ADC

The aims and principles of Austrian Development Cooperation and Cooperation with Eastern Europe (ADC) include the safeguarding of peace and human security and gender equality. In 2006 ADC organised an international symposium entitled ***Building Peace – Empowering Women: Gender Strategies to make UN Security Council Resolution 1325 work,*** which took a critical look at the resolution and its implementation. The discussions resulted in recommendations calling for the promotion of women's rights in general, more responsible justice and the strengthening of political processes at all levels with the inclusion of women's organisations.

Following this symposium, an **Austrian National Action Plan** to implement UN Security Council resolution 1325 was drafted with the involvement of ADC. The plan calls for specific measures in the framework of Austria's humanitarian, diplomatic, peacekeeping and development activities. Implementation progress in the action plan is documented and evaluated at annual meetings. The results are then submitted to the Council of Ministers.

Approximately 20 countries now implement these action plans.

Selected ADC projects

CARE programme Austria

A programme in Uganda, Nepal and Burundi seeks to make a **specific contribution to the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1325**. In three individual projects, women and their families are taken in hand in three conflict regions and given the necessary support to enable them to use their capacities and social competences to demand their rights. The target groups are women survivors of acts of violence (Pader district of northern Uganda), marginalised women with no access to resources (Churia region of Nepal) and women who have become heads of family as a result of the civil war but have no right of co-determination within the community (Burundi).

As a way of linking the individual projects the experiences and best practices are documented, the existing international legal framework to protect and promote women's rights is studied and the advocacy required to implement UN Security Council resolution 1325 is provided. (1980-02/2007, Rahmenprogramm CARE Österreich)

Combating Violence against Palestinian Women through the Empowerment of Community-Based Organizations

The project supports local women's organisations engaged in stemming violence against women. Sustainable assistance is given to their work by building institutional, programmatic and personnel capacities and through networking. The project's thematic focus accounts both for UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the recommendations of the Vienna women's conference, Networking for Peace and Security in the Middle East, by demanding the equal participation of women in decision-making processes and mainstreaming the gender perspective in efforts towards peace and security. Based on a study, a training manual is being prepared in Palestine on the practical application and manageability of Security Council Resolution 1325. Specific target groups of the subsequent training measures are women working in the social and health sector. Media campaigns will also communicate the women's activities to the general public and political decision-makers. (2589-00/2009, MIFTAH)

Integrated approach to protection against GbV and promotion of victims' access to justice

The project is aimed at providing the Palestinian civil police with support, primarily expertise, the general concern being to strengthen rule of law. The measures focus on stemming violence against women, which is not just a serious health risk for the victims but also poses a general social and legal problem. Domestic violence often remains unnoticed, undocumented and therefore unpunished. On the one hand, the police are trained in courses and workshops to deal properly with gender violence and on the other awareness is raised among the civilian population. The aim is to wrest violence against women from the seclusion of the private sphere and to denounce it as a criminal offence. The multisectoral approach will help bring about change in the judicial system but also in social attitudes as a whole. (2587 – 00/2009, EUPOL – COPPS)

Broadening the debate on transitional justice in Uganda

Owing to setbacks in peace negotiations with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), the Ugandan Government faces complex issues of transitional justice. The prime objective is therefore to sharpen the substantive profile of the insufficient dialogue on transitional justice to date and pay greater attention to neglected but essential issues for the victims, such as accountability, reconciliation, reparations, truth, remembrance or memorials. The active participation of the civilian population is particularly vital here. The project seeks to give the local population and representatives of civil society (primarily women, children, ex-LRA combatants) a greater say in

dialogue with government. Special attention is paid to the needs of women as required by UN Security Council Resolution 1325. (2603-00/2008, ICTJ)

Contribution to the justice, law and order sector - Peace, Recovery and Development Plan for Northern Uganda (JLOS-PRDP) & Strategic Investment Plan II

Together with other donors since 2006, Austria has been supporting the justice sector reform programme of the Ugandan Government involving eleven law and order institutions and bodies (police, interior ministry, etc.). A central concern is to increase the number of judicial and law-and-order institutions to meet the express need for security of the population returning home from the camps after the civil war. Austria is primarily engaged in the following justice, law and order sectors: (a) Police Enhancement Programme, (b) Prisons Enhancement Programme and (c) Judicial Services Enhancement Programme, since the costs of installing the necessary infrastructure and for personnel resources are considerable. The Strategic Investment Plan II now attaches priority to commercial, economic, criminal, land and family law. The foremost goal is to safeguard people and property and ensure access to justice so as to improve the conditions of life for the population at risk of poverty and advance economic development as a result. Gender and women's rights are incorporated as a cross-sectoral theme in the Strategic Investment Plan II. Key importance is accorded family law with a view to advancing the legal equality of men and women in the social and private domain (marriage, adultery, land rights, law of inheritance, domestic violence, etc.) in a society heavily influenced by patriarchal values. The general intention is to improve the access of women to rule of law and raise their social status. (1831-02/2008; JLOS I - 1831-03/2009; JLOS II)

Outlook

As a result of UN Security Council resolution 1325 increasing attention is being paid to the role of women in conflict prevention and peace-building and women are being involved in peace processes. Although this process is difficult, committed women's organisations are ensuring that it is kept up. Major progress has been made in participation and recognition, but the discussion on gender and conflict continues.

While UN Security Council resolution 1325 focuses on women, activists and researchers are now looking at the issue of "gender" as a whole – men as victims and women as perpetrators – and seek to dismantle the gender stereotypes of the "warrior man" and "peace-loving woman". As a general trend over the last few decades, it has become increasingly difficult to draw a clear dividing line between perpetrators and victims. In addition, acts of violence with an ethnic, racist or religious motivation and a gender-related component aimed at degrading the "other" are becoming more common. Particularly when it comes to this kind of motive for violence, gender is often instrumentalised as a strategic weapon for degradation and stigmatisation.

Another issue is the question of alliances and solidarity among women themselves, which are extremely important for the role they play in peace negotiations. Can women in opposing groups find a common basis for their shared interests and thus help to build a more peaceful society or are allegiances to different religious or ethnic groups or communities more important?

Finally, there is the question of the degree to which changes in **gender roles** during an armed conflict, which often result in the empowerment of women, can bring about lasting changes in **gender relations**. If the human rights of women in a community are not recognised, empowerment in conflict situations could remain a special case that is quickly replaced by traditional gender hierarchies as soon as the conflict is over. The establishment of gender equality and equal rights is a task that will require attention for a long time to come. To bring about sustainable social development, there is a need to change the deep-rooted social and cultural conditions that give rise to sexism, racism, authoritarianism, hierarchies and gender stereotypes.

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