

Women In International Security

POLICY**brief**

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1325 And Beyond – Essay Contest

HONORABLE MENTION

Promoting Women’s Rights: Creating Conditions for Post-Conflict Peace?

Gudlaug Olafsdottir

Since the ratification of UNSCR 1325 in 2000, ever more emphasis has been put on women’s empowerment in the wake of armed conflict, sometimes framed as a “window of opportunity” for women to enhance their formal standing amidst institutional reform.¹ Accordingly, many post-conflict countries have promulgated legislation and policies in support of female participation in various spheres.² These trends notwithstanding, such measures do not necessarily always appear to lead to the intended or anticipated outcome. Even where women gain legal rights in post-conflict countries, it appears insufficient to prevent a backlash against women in the aftermath of war.³ I thus propose that in the coming decade international organizations consider what can be learned from the past regarding the conditions that are most conducive to promoting women’s rights in the aftermath of conflict and how these conditions influence the prospects for peace.

Despite strong promotion of women’s empowerment and gender equality by policymakers and peacebuilding practitioners, little is yet known regarding when active encouragement of change in gender structures fosters the development of gender equality or when it leads to unanticipated outcomes in the aftermath of conflict.⁴ Gendered outcomes of conflict themselves often put a strain on gender relations, resulting in a tension between any gains toward female emancipation that were made during

the conflict and the post-conflict quest in many societies to reinstitute more traditional structures.⁵ These post-conflict tensions must be taken into account when proposing policies and programs pushing for women’s empowerment; knowing the conditions that help in overcoming such tensions is essential to the pursuit of sustainable peace.

While gender mainstreaming policies are widespread and programs to aid women are many, there is a need to focus on the most efficient strategies for attaining change and those that cause the least amount of harm. I propose that international actors do two things: Focus on assisting local civil society organizations in lobbying for change in legislation, and implement locally informed, inclusive programs fostering gender equality. By assisting local organizations in promoting women’s rights while simultaneously fostering normative change among men as well as women, women’s rights as well as sustainable peace can be more effectively pursued in years to come.

Gender equality and its impacts for promoting peace can be actively brought about (or entrenched) by legislation during post-conflict reconstruction. Building on lessons from past decades, I argue that adoption and enforcement of women’s rights is conducive to conflict risk mitigation if these rights are actively espoused by domestic civil society and promoted among men as well as women. Conversely, if prescriptively introduced from abroad or introduced without support

from local nongovernmental actors and promoted only among women, advocacy for increased rights for women is more likely to yield criticism of international intervention, globalization and the affront to traditional values.⁶ Such efforts risk further entrenching wartime gender relations that pose risks to the security of women and to society at large.

Gender Equality, Women's Rights and Conflict Risk Mitigation

Shifting norms toward lessened belligerence due to changing gender roles is one component of Pinker's argument that the global decline of war is a result of shifts in societal structures in which norms and institutions constraining the use of violence are developed.⁷

While gender norms play out in different ways across the world, traditional gender roles take on a similar aspect globally, with males depicted as protective warriors who are supported by yielding female figures. Femininity is generally associated with nurturing tenderness; men are ascribed more competitive, assertive traits. Such associations lead societies to associate dominance, leadership and sometimes violence with masculinity, particularly in relation to war.⁸ In communities where these gender constructions are strong, there is an implicit acceptance of dominance of one sex over the other and acceptance of violent assertiveness as an expression of masculinity.⁹ These norms tend to entail an acceptance for other norms that promote structural as well as direct violence.¹⁰

By denouncing violence as an acceptable expression of masculinity and condemning dominance of one group over another, the deconstruction of the above described socially constructed gender roles should be conducive to peace. Gender equality is an expression of a norm change that, in aggregate, should keep violence from spreading from the individual to the national level. If the population condemns violence, nonstate armed groups are less likely to garner support or recruit fighters. If gender-equal norms can be bolstered, the risk of war should decrease as women's emancipation increases. However, if promotion of women's rights is met with skepticism and discontent, it may produce a backlash against women and entrench wartime gender roles.

Women's security is central to the security of the state.¹¹ It is largely defined by laws. Not only do laws establish frameworks for crimes and punishment, they stipulate what is acceptable or desirable in a society. Societies that institute and retain laws that enshrine the dominance of men over women officially allow and accept such structures.¹² Regulations ensuring that women and men are equal, stipulating that neither has the right to exert dominance over the other in any sphere, and those that criminalize harmful

acts that mainly afflict one sex should facilitate gender equality. Given the prevalence of patriarchal structures, legislation aimed toward achieving gender equality generally translates into increased rights for women.

If such legislation is adopted and enforced, it should influence gender norms. First, laws have symbolic value, in that they set a normative structure to guide conduct within state institutions as well as in the broader society.¹³ Further, by establishing women's rights, proponents of gender equality gain a legitimate framework to call upon in support of the pursuit of gender-equal practices as well as to hold officials to account should they neglect to implement or adhere to such rights.¹⁴ Second, as policies that help women enter political, economic, educational and social arenas are put into place and where public institutions implement and enforce them, gender-equal practices should lead to a gradual change in the gender roles in society. By implementing women's rights, women should gain political agency, economic independence and control over their own reproductive rights and health. Their gains in these areas are likely to further promote gender-equal practices, enforce gender-equal norms, and in turn, foster a condemnation of violence.¹⁵

The Role of Civil Society

While the prevalence of laws protecting women and aiming to enhance their status may be an indicator of extant norms in a country, it is not a certainty. At times, external actors or in-country elites push for laws without the acquiescence of the broader society.¹⁶ In many places where women's rights have been legally established, social structures question their legitimacy and prevent their realization.¹⁷ When such hindrances are removed, rights are likely to be more accepted as well as enacted.

If post-conflict reconstruction is built entirely from the top down, it may not resonate in society at large. It may lead to resentment from the local population, feelings of disconnection to the decisions made, or opposition to reforms that appear to be in tension with their everyday lives.¹⁸ If changes are driven by grassroots demands, however, they are more likely to gain legitimacy and acceptance.¹⁹ Women's rights must be buttressed by the local civil society organizations in order to influence post-conflict peace. If mobilized groups within civil society demand adoption of women's rights, the public is more likely to view these reforms as legitimate.

Civil society support can have multiple effects on the relationship between women's rights and conflict. Beyond pushing for the initial guarantee of rights, civil society organizations can monitor implementation and ensure it is appropriate to the local setting.²⁰ Such groups are best placed

to assist in building local knowledge, raising awareness in the community and mobilizing resources so that citizens can exercise and demand their own rights.²¹ They may also be an important bridge between the international community and the local population, providing local networks and contextual knowledge.²² If local civil society groups that push for women's rights are strong and unrestricted, there is more likely to be a strong foundation for the promulgation and enactment of women's rights and a greater likelihood of internal legitimacy.

Importantly, such groups ought not focus only on women. While building women's knowledge of their rights is central, barriers to enacting such rights must be broken down. Otherwise, such efforts may be futile and even harmful. Particularly after armed conflict, it is essential to focus programs on women and men. In order to promote sustainable peace as well as mitigate a backlash toward women who assert their rights and nontraditional roles, it is essential to address "militarized masculinity."²³ If men perceive they are disadvantaged relative to women in aid to better their situation, they are more likely to oppose initiatives aimed toward gender equality. This opposition risks cementing the barriers to women's empowerment, as well as causing harm toward women who assert their rights.

In sum, prevalent, strong local civil society groups that promote women's rights and include programs engaging men as well as women will enhance the legitimacy and implementation of women's rights. The effect on gender-equal norms would be positive, given lower levels of local resistance and greater institutionalization. Together, changes in gender norms and increased acceptance of women's rights should lower the risk of armed conflict, as norms condemning dominance and violence become more widespread and the risk of post-conflict backlash against women is reduced.

Conclusion

The promotion of women's rights, beyond its inherent importance, can be successfully implemented and can contribute to peacebuilding in post-conflict settings if such efforts are supported by domestic civil society in an inclusive manner. Where support from civil society is strong, the legitimacy of women's rights promotion is greater, gender-equal norms are more likely to develop, and political violence is more likely to be condemned. These conditions in turn are more likely to contribute to sustained peace. Yet this outcome is contingent on civil society initiatives engaging men as well as women. Hence, international organizations promoting legislation to advance women's rights at the national level must ensure that their initiatives are rooted in local civil society, that work on the ground is done in close collaboration with these local actors, and that initiatives also raise men's awareness of the importance of women's rights and mitigating militarized masculinities.

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Author

Gudlaug Olafsdottir (Sweden) is a PhD candidate at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University in Sweden. Her focus is primarily on election-related violence and how it influences democratization trajectories. She holds an MSSc in Peace and Conflict Studies and a BSSc in Political Science and Economics. She has conducted two months of field research on the promotion of women's rights in the aftermath of conflict in northern Uganda, and has participated in a graduate-level course on Gender, Peace and Security at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). Gudlaug has previously worked at the headquarters of International IDEA.

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