

Gender in Peace Building

A report which was the conclusion of a piece of research has identified Gender as a key component of peace building and conflict resolution. Carried out by international Alert, a 26-year-old independent peace-building organisation that works with people who are directly affected by violent conflict to improve their prospects of peace. They seek to influence the policies and ways of working of governments, international organizations like the UN and multinational companies, to reduce conflict risk and increase the prospects of peace.

The starting point for the research was international Alert's belief that a gender approach, as a key component in the understanding of power dynamics, is critical to successful peace-building. The research hypothesis was that gender dynamics form a resource for peace-building which use of, but that examples of projects and research do exist from which to draw lessons, and thereby improve peace-building practice.

The research found that women's peace-building activities encompass a wide range, and indeed what women do for peace is sometimes said to expand the view of peace-building itself. For example, reconciliation figures high in what women's peace building organizations do, yet it receives little attention from formal donor-supported

Peace-building initiatives. Women's work in reconciliation includes mediating in localized conflicts within families (such as husbands rejecting their wives after rape, or disputes between siblings over inheritance), bringing estranged communities together, and supporting mechanisms to resolve inter-communal conflicts. Women engaged in formal peace negotiations often bring a non-partisan, process-oriented approach to bear, ensuring that the needs of a broad range of stakeholders, rather than just the previously violent protagonists, are on the agenda. Many women's organisations which promote the role of women in community-level reconciliation and dialogue view their work as having a secondary but important outcome of enhancing popular perception of women's potential contribution, leading to greater acceptance of women's empowerment generally.

Questions raised included: Do gender relations change as a result of violent conflict?

Further assumptions are often made about the potential impact of violent conflict on gender relations. On the one hand, a "backlash" against women is often thought to exist in the immediate post-conflict period. On the other, the "post-conflict moment" is often believed to be one where windows of opportunity present themselves for radical change in women's status. The literature suggests that both assumptions may be justified. Whereas gender roles adjust quickly to new circumstances, gender identifies

are not so much changed as thwarted, as both men and women are prevented by circumstances from living up to their own and other people's expectations (a development which may trigger interpersonal violence on a wide scale). Changes in the gender division of labour (gender roles) are a society's practical and immediate response to managing crisis. However, they do not in themselves alter the institutional or ideological underpinnings of gender relations. If things are not to go back to how they were before, change may need to be institutionalized through active policy. However, institutions (that generate policy) are themselves gendered, in that they are both products and shapers of existing gender relations in the society from which they draw their individual members. The nation-state, for example, is made up of male and female citizens, and at the same time shapes their gendered identities through promotion of ideals such as patriotism and citizenship, which may have different meanings for men and for women. Global institutions, too are gendered, and significantly influence local processes—as classically evidenced by the way global military-economic alliances impact on gender relations found in societies located around military bases.

Another question was: Under what circumstances do conflicts turn to violence? Do gender relations themselves contribute towards violent conflict?

Sociologists have suggested that violence (most notably but not exclusively by men) is the result of gender identities being “thwarted”, i.e. conditions (e.g. of poverty, conflict, disaster, political oppression) prevent gendered aspirations from being fulfilled. The idea of a “continuum of violence” is another conceptual offers a framework for describing how different types and levels of violence interact with each other, showing how the behaviour of individuals is conditioned as much by structural as by individual factors. Some scholars suggest that gender relations have changed as a function of changing patterns of violence, although opinions differ as to the direction of causality – does reduction of violence lead to gender equality, or the reverse?

While academics (especially feminist academics) have grappled for some time with the issue of where men fit in an understanding of gender, policymakers and activities have tended to focus instead on advancing women's protection and participation, as evidenced by the passing of UNSC Resolution 1325. The latter group has tended to view men as either perpetrator to be excluded, as “gatekeepers” whose support has to be sought, or as potential active champions of women's cause. There is a small but growing stream of work acknowledging the potential vulnerabilities of men, and seeking re-interpretations of mainstream thinking on specific topics such as sexual violence as weapon of war.

It concluded that the international policy framework around peace-building is currently dominated by donor concerns with state-building in fragile and conflict-affected states.

The state-building, governance and fragile states agenda has in the past been dominated by the technical approaches of international donors; however, these approaches have been challenged as being donor-driven, top-down, technicist and divorced from reality. As various civil society organizations have argued, one of the starting-points for reconstruction must be the re-establishment of peaceful interaction and equitable resource management at the community level, building up from there. Gender critiques of state-building have argued it to go beyond “add women and stir”, instead aiming to ensure women’s full participation in post-conflict recovery. State-building approaches should aim to create “a state fit for women” as well as for men, and to take advantage of the opportunities state-building offers for advancing women’s political involvement.

A gender approach to state-building would bring it down to earth—for example, by helping to ensure civilian oversight of security sector reform, making interventions locally relevant, prioritizing state-civilian relations, and supporting local, rather than external, drivers of change.

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