



WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY: BUSINESS AS USUAL?

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The Unrecognized Economic Role of Women during and after Conflict

By Tamara Kool

As long as discrimination and inequities remain so commonplace everywhere in the world, as long as girls and women are valued less, fed less, fed last, overworked, underpaid, not schooled, subjected to violence in and outside their homes - the potential of the human family to create a peaceful, prosperous world will not be realized.
- Hillary Clinton



Discussing Women, Peace and Security, we often focus on political participation, access to justice, and gender and sexual based violence (GSBV). The role women play as economic participants during and after conflict, however, is often overlooked - or, in a best-case scenario, treated as part of a separate development dialogue. But as highlighted in the Clinton quote, excerpted from her speech, then as US First Lady at the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, the issues are interrelated. In short, inequality and violence hamper women's potential to contribute to a developing economy. This paper's aim, therefore, is to look into factors enhancing and obstructing economic participation by, women, and make an argument for why we must consider them when we talk about Women, Peace and Security.¹

While the Women, Peace and Security resolutions are applauded for strengthening the awareness of women as actors in reconciliation and peace processes, the value of women as economic participants during and after conflict was not recognized until the 2009 adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1989. That said, to this day, women's value is usually only mentioned as an afterthought.

To understand the underlying factors that determine women's participation during and after a conflict requires a comprehensive perspective. It has been estimated that following a conflict, about 30% of all households are led by women (Brück and Schindler 2009). Not only do women face violence from the prevailing circumstances, but their responsibilities also increase, particularly in cases when they must take over a partner's tasks, such as earning enough income to ensure the family's survival. With women inevitably maintaining their role as caretakers, this creates a double burden.

Analyzing various factors believed to affect the position of women, Buvinic et al. (2013) developed a framework to capture how such factors may influence the coping strategies various actors may take up. The first-round effects they identify consider how direct and indirect impacts of conflict affect both men and women. They may stem from, among others, conflict-caused deaths and long-term health effects due to violence and lack of access to health facilities, displacement effects, and destruction or loss of private assets and financial reserves.

These circumstances, in turn, determine which coping strategies households undertake to ensure survival. Accordingly, they produce second-round effects, for example, a woman's rise in standing through political and civic participation or a household's additional source of income through a woman member's increased economic participation.

Buvinic et al.'s model, however, misses some crucial elements that determine the context in which women's coping strategies are shaped. To even-handedly evaluate potential impacts, we must consider the reciprocal link between first- and second-round effects, and remember that any interaction between elements takes place within a sociocultural environment, which shapes interactions and opportunities. The model also fails to consider how coping strategies are impacted by more practical matters such as electrical and water infrastructure, access to financial resources and social safety nets, and literacy.

To understand the economic position of women, it is important to consider their role or roles during and after conflict. While opportunities may arise in the formal sector during a conflict - because a war economy needs to be maintained or positions open as men leave to fight - women are often the first to be let go when the country reaches a post-conflict status (Brück and Vothknecht 2011). Thus, even on the economic market, there may be a shift back to pre-war gender roles tends to occur. The formal market as such is not necessarily a suitable alternative.

Alternatives to the formal sector are the informal and the primary sectors. Studies indicate that petty trade and engagement in the illegal sector may be additional sources of income. Yet, case studies have also indicated that participation in such activities may result in further marginalization (Sørensen 1998).

By contrast, the primary market - agriculture - is highly susceptible to volatility. Agrarian production is affected not only by drought and flooding, but also looting by roaming bandit groups, who may destroy crop fields or livestock. Further, female cultivators face violence from armed groups and other actors they may encounter on their way to the fields, compelling some women to refrain from certain activities, such as fetching water (e.g. Brück and Schindler 2009).

Besides the threat of violence, women-led households must depend on existing landholding and inheritance rights. Often, the legislation favors men. That leaves these households to rely on the goodwill of male relatives. Widows are restrained in their access to land, though often they are primarily engaged in the agricultural sector. Combined with the fact that widows are often marginalized following a conflict (Sørensen 1998), the outcome may be a decision to remarry, provided the widow is not socially ostracized for doing so.

Another disadvantage to working in the informal and primary sectors is employees' lack of eligibility in social protection programs. Generally aimed at the formal sector, these programs neglect the large segment of the female population that is engaged in agrarianism. The women are consequently left to depend on community-based safety nets or self-help organizations (ibid.) when they encounter adversity. Yet, the social structures of the safety nets tend to be torn apart during conflict. Even at the level of market engagement, we notice that some aspects of persistent inequality are related to society and legal frameworks. It should be noted that even if legislation promoting equality gets put in place during the small window of opportunity presented in the transition phase, the legislation is not necessarily implemented. As such, the ruling norms and values prevail.

The GSBV legislation proves to be an interesting example in this regard. While violence against women, such as rape and sexual harassment, has become punishable by law, after a conflict, the violence often tends to continue and move inwards. In other words, violence in full view during conflict becomes violence behind closed doors.

The phenomenon is attributed to circumstances such as ineffective judicial institutions, increases in poverty, and ineffective integration of former combatants (see e.g. Dijkman et al. 2014). Lack of economic growth and unemployment may further affect the position of men. For example, they may doubt their own dignity when they return home to see a woman has provided for the family during the male's absence, since the prevailing societal mentality states that men should be the breadwinner.²

This is a concerning trend as GSBV is also associated with ill health, another factor preventing women from participating economically. GSBV is one of the indirect health factors associated with economic participation, but it is a contributing factor to the spread of HIV/AIDS and overpopulation. These elements could be addressed by raising awareness on sexual health, sexual rights, reproductive health, and reproductive rights (SRHR). By addressing these matters, the sociocultural pressure that prevents double-burdened women from economic participation may decrease over time. Women may then also be able to attend, if not complete, secondary education, especially as unwanted pregnancies are kept at bay. A change like this could improve women's economic position, as high fertility rates can contribute to a poverty trap (Klasen 2003).

GSBV is only one of the many factors affecting women. On another level, women's ability to borrow money is hardly straightforward. Macro-economic and geographical factors influence the availability and, more crucially, affordability of certain products, such as seeds and fertilizers. Having to rely on suboptimal products affects the ability of household to be self-sustainable.

The lack or destruction of infrastructure, health facilities, and education facilities due to a conflict further burdens women as they become additionally tasked with the provision of healthcare. The likelihood that the state will address problems of this nature in the wake of a conflict is slim. During conflict, money is reallocated to the defense department. In its immediate aftermath, issues such as increasing poverty and weak government structures are not prime concerns (Iqbal 2006; Sørensen 1998).

As this paper has endeavored to show, economic participation is influenced by a multitude of factors. Each of the sectors in which women engage comes with its own opportunities and impediments. Creating space for women happens on various levels, and civic voices must also be included in any discussion that seeks to understand how societal norms and values become obstacles to women's economic participation.

Political empowerment is one way to bring about policy changes (Bouta et al. 2005). Fulfilling female political quotas are sometimes seen as a way to achieve this, though the "add women and stir" approach has not necessarily proven effective.³ Success depends on various factors, such as the extent to which a patriarchal mindset prevails in government institutions and in how far women adhere to their party line. Moreover, the potential efficacy of quotas can be dulled by politicians - male or female - who lack education, understanding of their own function, or insight into women's issues. Here training and awareness programs can help, encouraging political leaders to discuss issues, such as land rights, institutional structures, and the sharing of economic and domestic responsibilities to create a more gender-sensitive environment.

On a local level, participation in community groups, for example, regular meetings within development programs, permits a rebuilding of trust. It enables women to address daily issues and share stories to process traumatic experiences. Through participation, women may empower themselves socially, politically, and economically. This highlights the importance of engaging at all the various levels that influence the extent to which women are able to participate economically.

The restrictions and inequalities women face in society, on the market, and within institutions (see also Buvinic et al. 2010; Kabeer 2012) are crucial determinants of their ability to participate. Low participation rates in the formal and the public sectors tend to reflect society's gendered norms, rules, and values - above all, placing women in the position of family caretaker. Further, the norms perpetuating the state and the market, such as financial institutions, also restrict opportunities for women.

The power of civil society voices is therefore linked to - and will impact - the various coping strategies women pursue during and after conflict. A holistic approach is needed to address their various obstacles and, in so doing, to prevent the "marginalization of women [which] can delay or undermine the achievement of durable peace, security and reconciliation" (UN Security Council 2009).

Notes

¹ This paper is based on the literature overview and Burundi case study dealt with in Tamara A. Kool, "Moving beyond the UNSCR 1325 Framework: Women as Economic Participants during and after Conflict," UNU-MERIT Working Paper, 2015, <http://www.merit.unu.edu/publications/working-papers/abstract/?id=5812>.

² Idea also conveyed by a Burundian interviewee. Interviews were conducted by the author in Burundi in 2014 with various actors in the field of Women, Peace and Security. These talks formed a crucial part of the in-depth case study discussed in Kool 2015; see note 1.

³ See note 2.

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