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# Women's participation in peace and security
## Normative ends, political means

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**Key messages**

- Post-conflict and transitional settings provide real opportunities to renegotiate women's political power and advance gender-equality goals.

- Informal political and social norms, as well as the capabilities of women politicians and activists, shape their ability to win and act on new political access and rights.

- Support from international actors to women's political participation is limited by bureaucratic constraints, conflicting priorities and the difficulties of working in transitional settings.

- But innovative practices in these countries have facilitated women's political access and influence, and donors can learn from these experiences.

Gender issues are enjoying a renaissance within the international development community, with notable momentum around the threats to women posed by conflict and violence. How to promote the role of women in peace and security, and how to address violence against women and girls, are now two of the top priorities for the international community. The challenge gender advocates face is to transform international commitments into real gains for women at national level. This briefing draws on recent ODI research and evaluation (Domingo et al., 2012; 2013; 2014) to review opportunities to promote women's political participation and leadership in transitional and post-conflict settings, assess current international efforts to do so, and provide recommendations for policy and programming in this area.

## Background: why gender and politics matter for peace and security

Women's participation in peace and security has become more prominent in international debate in recent years. There is no one reason for this growing interest. The prioritisation of conflict-affected countries by international actors has re-focused attention on the role and rights of women in such contexts, even if 'hard' security concerns still dominate. Sustained advocacy by the global women's movement has resulted in UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) on women, peace and security, with six more resolutions joining the landmark UNSCR 1325 (2000) since 2008.[1] More recently, the Arab uprisings have shown the potential role of women in political transition, and their vulnerability when protest turns to violence, as in Egypt and Syria. These have spurred high-level engagement in developed countries on women, peace and security, such as Ministerial campaigns in the UK to end sexual violence in conflict, as well as female genital mutilation/cutting.

International commitments provide the normative basis for women's participation in peace and security: women have a right to participate on equal terms in political, civic and family life, including in conflict-affected countries. But women can only exercise this right in practice if they can alter the gender hierarchies that deny them power and choice. This normative objective is highly political and controversial, and aid agencies have a poor track record in treating gender as a political issue. Feminists have argued that the incorporation of gender into mainstream development has led to sanitised 'development' feminism that is the domain of bureaucrats, consultants and donor-driven NGOs rather than grassroots and trans-national feminist movements. They claim this has crowded out the views and needs of women in the global South, with technocratic mainstreaming and sound-bites leaving patriarchal gender relations intact (Arnfeld, 2001; Eyben, 2008; Harcourt, 2010).

Broader trends in development may help international actors avoid these shortcomings in their support for women's participation in peace and security. There is, for example, growing consensus that development is a political as well as technical endeavour and that all sectors must understand the political economy of gender relationships, how local institutions actually work and the obstacles to reform. This creates an opening for gender advocates to spell out the political causes of women's exclusion and the need to tackle gendered institutions and power asymmetries so women can participate in a meaningful way.

The past decade has seen much research on how social and political change happens, and on what enables meaningful political participation for women in particular, and including in transitional settings (see Cornwall and Goetz, 2005; Gaventa and Barrett, 2010; Unsworth, 2010; Castillejo, 2011; Booth, 2012; Pathways, 2012). This evidence base contains guidance for development agencies on how to nurture the conditions for women's political participation and leadership. This includes the importance of home-grown women's organisations, informal relationships and alliances, local interests and incentives, and of women having actual influence, not just formal access (Box 1).

## Post-conflict and transition: critical moments for women's political participation

There are few moments in a country's history when the formal rules of the political game can be rewritten, but post-conflict peace processes and other political transitions can be such moments. These periods of intense negotiation can offer a rare opportunity for women's groups and gender advocates to contest gender and other power hierarchies, advance women's rights and, notably, increase the odds that women will influence political decision-making in the future. There is a growing, if uneven, body of evidence on the nature and challenges of these opportunities (see Tripp, 2012; UN Women, 2012; Domingo et al., 2013 and 2014; OECD-DAC, 2013; Castillejo, 2013).

### Renegotiating the formal political settlement and institutions

Post-conflict transitions present a number of opportunities to renegotiate the formal political settlement. Peace negotiations and agreements are opportunities, as are

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**Box 1: Making women's political participation meaningful: key lessons on how change happens**
- Access matters, but women need presence and influence to shape the political agenda. Leadership requires the ability to bring a constituency along.
- Clientelist and personalist politics, and the nature of political parties and competition, often obstruct women's presence and influence despite formal claims to access.
- Social and political change is incremental and depends on the interests and incentives of local actors, and whether they can work collectively to reform institutions. Informal institutions and relationships are as important as formal ones.
- A vibrant women's movement is critical to get women's interests on the table and to sustain pressure on governments to implement formal commitments. But women and gender advocates must engage and ally with decision-makers and decision-making processes if they are to influence elite bargains and new institutional arrangements.

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1   These are UNSCR 1820 (2008) and UNSCR 1888 (2009) on conflict-related sexual violence, UNSCR 1889 (2009) on obstacles to women's political participation, UNSCR 1960 (2010) on sexual violence in conflict, and UNSCR 2016 and 2122 (2013) on implementation of previous resolutions.

constitutional reform processes, which aim to establish a new bargain between elites, and between elites and citizens, about the rules of future political, social and economic engagement. Since UNSCR 1325 (2000), peace agreements are more likely to refer to gender equality, even if most still do not (Bell and O'Rourke, 2010). While often declaratory, such statements matter, giving gender advocates leverage during subsequent political processes, including constitutional negotiations.

New constitutions overlay the existing political culture, social rules and legacies of conflict. Not surprisingly, therefore, the gap between provisions and realities is marked in a new political regime. Even so, gender equality and non-discrimination provisions and the recognition of women's rights, including the right to participate in public life and office, provide a legal platform for women's lobbies.

## Women's participation in post-conflict politics

Constitutional gains are important, but women and gender advocates must be active and effective in post-conflict politics if they are to influence gender relations and outcomes. At a minimum, this requires women to have access to public decision-making. There is a high correlation between recent post-conflict political transitions and measures that led to high numbers of women political representatives, as in Bolivia, Burundi and, most markedly, in Rwanda (Tripp, 2012).

Quotas, in particular, have increased the number of women in formal political institutions, including legislatures, political parties, local government and community forums. However, their presence does not mean influence. Many women politicians are side-lined, often because the legislature itself lacks real power and women Ministers are given token portfolios. The route women take into politics seems to shape their subsequent credibility and room for manoeuvre, and this relates not just to quotas but also to party and electoral systems (Cornwall and Goetz, 2005) (see Box 2 on Burundi). Despite such political-institutional constraints, there is evidence that the presence of women increases the likelihood of gender-sensitive policies (UN Women, 2011).

## Women must work with political realities

Women must be effective politicians and political entrepreneurs if they are to advance gender objectives. In transitional settings, this often means being able to work within clientelist, executive-dominant political systems, populated by personalised political parties, and where formal rules rarely dictate political outcomes. In short, women must gain access to, and influence in, the *real* decision-making processes, or they must have leverage over or alliances with those who are already in these forums. This is an even more onerous proposition in settings where legacies of conflict, precarious peace and institutional fragility create competing interests.

A record number of serving women Presidents and Prime Ministers, including the first three in sub-Saharan Africa (Joyce Banda in Malawi, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia and Catherine Samba-Penza in the Central African Republic), signals changing attitudes, but women still face entrenched sexism in politics, often reinforced by discriminatory customary norms. We also know that women with influence may not always advance gender objectives: they may fear violent backlash, be co-opted or simply have another agenda. Women are not a homogenous group, and essentialist narratives of women and their interests should be avoided. Gender interests that arise from women's common experience of gendered institutions and roles may well unite bitter opponents; they even provided common ground for women from the African National Congress (ANC) and the apartheid regime in South Africa's post-transition constitutional process. But identities and interests based on class, race, religion and ideology often dominate and divide women, and are heightened by conflicts.

In reality, beyond some common threads, socio-political conditions and conflict (and post-conflict) histories vary widely between countries.

## Women's movements and activism in political change

Women's movements and activism play a critical role in challenging gender inequality and contesting exclusionary political settlements, given the tenuous position and limited power of women within government itself. The evidence is clear that sustained pressure and influence on decision-makers by women outside government – through informal relationships and alliances, and through popular protest – has been vital in transitional contexts. While the formal presence of women in peace negotiations remains negligible, strategic advocacy and political lobbying by women's movements is known to improve the chances that gender will feature in the eventual peace agreement. The evidence also confirms the importance of women's organisations, often with international support, in negotiating gender provisions in constitutional processes, as seen in Burundi (2005), Colombia (1991) and South Africa (1996). In the latter two countries, activists were pivotal in follow-up work, including through litigation, to give substance to the normative content of new constitutions.

In Colombia, women's organisations have engaged effectively with the Constitutional Court on the situation of internally displaced people, among other issues. This included a landmark ruling in 2008 that established the disproportionate impact of conflict-related violence on women and called for special measures to protect displaced women and meet their need for basic services.

The support of male elites that have some initial interest in promoting women's rights often wanes early in a new regime, and it is sustained advocacy from women's organisations that has driven policy reform and implementation in many countries (e.g. Htun and Weldon, 2012). Women's organisations are also important incubators for women's leadership. As President Joyce Banda's ascent to power shows, they can even cultivate future presidents with activist backgrounds and an ideological commitment to women's rights.

## Donor support to women's political participation

In sum, women must be convincing politicians, activists and lobbyists to participate effectively in political processes in transitional settings. This means not only engaging in the rough and tumble of politics, but also doing so in contexts where informality, connections and patronage have a high premium. For their part, external agencies that wish to support women's political engagement need the staff, programmes and funding mechanisms appropriate to this task.

### Barriers in development agencies to working politically

Our research finds that international actors who support women's political participation are limited by factors common to bureaucracies – a technical logic, pressure to deliver concrete results and aversion to risk (Rocha Menocal, 2014) – and by the challenges of working in conflict-affected environments.

First, the evaluation of UN Women's peace and security portfolio, for example, found that programming under UNIFEM was often overly ambitious on paper, and out of step with organisational resources (Domingo et al., 2013). Uncertain and short-term funding streams further hampered strategic programming and long-term commitments. For the most part, programmes lacked *explicit* or logical theories of change that set out how inputs would enable women to have more power, choices and influence in practice, given the prevailing political economy conditions. In contrast, effective and implicit theories of change were applied in practice, relying more on individual knowledge and intuition than on institutionalised capabilities.

Second, donor support to women's political participation has aimed to increase their formal rights, get them to vote and get them into political office. Gender advisers seem mindful of structural constraints to women's *effective* political participation, including the social norms and political culture that deny them access to decision-making roles. In practice, there is more focus on awareness-raising and capacity-building activities (often training) with women's organisations, machineries or caucuses. What's more, these activities usually take place in isolation from each other and without consideration of the wider political environment, missing opportunities to broker strategic relationships and alliances.

Third, engaging women as decisions-makers *in all aspects of peace and security* – the spirit of UNSCR 1325 – requires collaboration between disciplines and policy areas. The bureaucratic norm of working in siloes within development agencies has meant insufficient cross-thematic engagement, however. For example, work on transitional justice or gender-based violence in Colombia or Haiti, while achieving important results from a justice perspective, remain focused on women as victims, and less on them as agents of change.

Fourth, regardless of formal commitments, donor governments and development agencies have many interests and gender is rarely a priority when security and economic interests are perceived to be at stake, as engagement over the years in Afghanistan demonstrates (Ní Aoláin et al., 2011). This is often reflected in internal (if not explicit) resistances to prioritising gender-responsiveness in practice.

Finally, donor engagement in post-conflict and transitional settings has a short-term orientation, often as a result of the need to react quickly to a crisis. This means that engagement is often framed within overly simple 'either or' dichotomies that are not borne out in reality – such as having to choose between prioritising gender justice *or* peace, institutional reform *or* support to social movements. Such reductionism obscures the opportunities to support women's political empowerment that exist even in the most unfavourable environments.

### Innovative practices in donor engagement on the ground

Despite these constraints, international actors can, and do, help to advance women's political voice and influence in conflict and transition settings. This is often the result of innovative practice of committed country staff with

- International agencies may be well placed to facilitate dialogue between strategic actors, including decision-makers, in conflict and post-conflict countries. Over time, this can help to build relationships of trust between actors. In Kosovo, UN Women has become a trusted broker, facilitating key relationships between women leaders and gender champions in ways that have shaped policy outcomes in favour of gender equality goals. This has included improved capacity within the Kosovo Police to address women's security needs, and changing attitudes among a range of security actors towards violence against women. In Colombia, UN Women channelled the experiences and inputs of women's movements into the Law on Victims and Land Restitution (2011), resulting in specific wording in the law to reflect women's experience of the conflict, and concrete measures to address this.
- External agencies can also play an important 'accompaniment' role in post-conflict settings, where women may face high levels of risk and retaliatory violence. Women's groups in conflict-affected regions in Colombia report that the support from UN Women provides a safer environment in which they can pursue their advocacy activities or engagement with local authorities that may be hostile.

political experience, connections and in-depth local knowledge. Their approach often focuses on process: spotting strategic actors and finding ways to build their capacity and reinforce the relationships between them (Box 3). However, their activities (and successes) tend to be poorly captured in standardised donor programme documents and log-frames.

Innovative practice seems to depend consistently on three factors. First, advisers and programme managers, both in-country and at headquarters, need political skills to identify key opportunities as they arise and to broker relations among the relevant stakeholders. This includes thinking outside the box and engaging non-traditional partners and allies. For example, collaborative work between UNIFEM and the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) in 2010 reveals that incentivising military peacekeepers to consult with women on security threats in refugee and other camps is good for women but *also has improved security and safety dividends* as it reduces the risks of sexual-based violence (UNIFEM-DPKO, 2010).

Second, if they are to identify opportunities at country level, staff need not only good knowledge of domestic context but also the ability to use that knowledge effectively. In the case of UN Women, effective recruitment of national experts into senior positions at country level appears to make a difference.

Third, technical skills and thematic expertise matter, but only if they are used to support political processes that are domestically driven and owned, rather than to promote external agendas.

## Normative ends, political means: recommendations for policy and practice

Women's political participation and leadership is key to achieve gender equality in peace and security. Yet this is often overlooked in international support intended to achieve gender equity goals. To facilitate women's empowerment, donors must work on the premise that this is a political agenda, in both objective and means – and one that must be led by domestic actors and processes.

### Reclaim the normative agenda
Gender equality is an inherently normative and political objective that requires explicit support. Legal entitlements and political commitments, including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), women's statutory rights and UNSCR 1325, are often an important basis for engagement in national and regional political processes and dialogues. A focus on women's equality and rights reduces the risk that bureaucratic or other competing interests will appropriate gender objectives and strip them of transformational content.

### Focus on what works in practice
Pragmatism is needed to identify how best to advance normative objectives at the national level. Normative and political ends can only be achieved through political actions addressing power relations. Gender advocates must have an appreciation of the ideology and interests of different actors, and of the strategies that been more and less effective under different conditions in generating incremental shifts in the structural and institutional constraints to women's empowerment. Evidence on what works in practice does exist and it should be used more proactively.

### Support strategic alliances and coalitions
Support to women movements is known to be effective so long as gender advocates do not operate in isolation and are able to build alliances in different spheres (political society, professional networks, activists, private sector leaders, etc.). It is often such capacity for collective action that can create incremental and progressive policy reform and changes in social norms. Building strategic alliances and coalitions requires a combination of sound political and negotiation skills, and an in-depth knowledge of the context, as well as the capacity to engage and adapt strategically to opportunities as they arise.

### Think big, programme small
Women's participation and leadership in peace and security processes is an ambitious and long-term political project. This should not translate into ambitious and unrealistic programmes and projects, however. If support for women's political participation is to be more realistic,

there is a need to strengthen the theories of change that underpin programmatic efforts. International and bi-lateral agencies need to recognise the limits of their potential influence in what are domestic political processes and work out their comparative advantage. International agencies such as UN Women, for example, should prioritise flexible and adaptive support for well-connected and locally grounded organisations at country level. Donor reporting requirements must facilitate rather than hamper local innovation, not least to capture effective processes, as well as outcomes.

Our research suggests that there is a clear role for donors in supporting women's political participation, if they work with the grain of domestic realities. This will require international agencies to move away from 'business as usual' approaches and focus on what evidence shows to be more effective ways of working.

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Front page image: UNAMID 2011. UNAMID in collaboration with the North Darfur Committee on Women organizes an open day session on the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security in Dar El Salaam, North Darfur.