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Park**



**Report: Maximising our influence and response
to conflict: should gender matter in a crisis?**

Monday 22 – Wednesday 24 April 2024

**In association with
UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

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Maximising our influence and response to conflict: should gender matter in a crisis?

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Executive summary

Introduction

- 1 The global context is rapidly evolving - with a significant increase in violent, protracted, and recurrent conflict, alongside increasing polarisation, nationalism and militarism, and a 'roll-back' of internationally agreed norms and the rights of women and girls. From 22-24 April 2024, representatives from governments, civil society, international organisations and academia came together with grassroots peacebuilders and women's rights activists to explore the complexity of taking a gendered approach to enable an improved response to global conflict and prevent doing harm in conflict settings.
- 2 Discussion examined how and why gender is often traded away or seen as a separate and secondary consideration to political and security interests, and generated ideas on promoting a peace that is grounded in equalities. There were four broad themes of discussion: 1) Political, economic and international context

including 'rollback'; 2) Transforming culture and leadership; 3) Policies, Systems, structures and processes; and 4) Crisis response.

- 3 This report captures the main points and recommendations of the discussion, with supporting quotations from participants in blue. It does not represent agreed policy from HMG or any of the participants.

Key points

- 4 During the discussions, three key points stood out:

i) Conflict is fundamentally gendered: malign actors are using gendered approaches and understanding of gender norms to fuel conflict, violence and radicalisation among men and women. To provide an effective counter response, international actors need to consider gender dynamics across all decision-making and move beyond the idea of gender as a “soft topic” that is unrelated to “hard security” or a second order priority that can wait. The evidence shows that gender equality continues to be associated with peace and stability.

"Conflict is not a male preserve. There are women on the front lines – from Female Kurdish battalions and Ukrainian fighters and female insurgents in Boko Haram, to women in key roles in defence and intelligence."

ii) Competing priorities must be identified and discussed to improve our conflict interventions: conflict and crisis actors need to unpack and negotiate perceived tensions and binary thinking between inclusion and getting the job done as quickly and simply as possible, **to prevent gender from automatically being de-prioritised in the initial stages.** There are no easy answers, but we should consider perceived tensions between: the speed vs inclusiveness of ceasefires; scale vs an inclusive humanitarian response; food and shelter vs

Gender Based Violence (GBV) and sexual and reproductive health services; and raising sexual violence, and other atrocities, in our public communications vs raising privately on diplomatic channels, and/or preserving operating space and political capital.

iii) A more effective approach in conflict requires concerted action from governments including HMG to embed gender in a continuum of conflict prevention, early warning and crisis preparedness, response and post-conflict recovery including transitional justice. This includes: reframing how we think and talk about security to include women and girls' perspectives and priorities; engaging men and all senior leadership in the discussion; institutionalising incentives, requirements and accountability mechanisms to promote a gendered approach; resourcing and building partnerships between governments and civil society including women's and girls' rights organisations and movements; and refocusing discussion and resourcing from conflict response to conflict prevention.

“How little we talk about peace. A sustainable peace is grounded in equalities”

Theme 1: Political, economic and international context including 'rollback' on the rights of women and girls

- 5** The ability of the multilateral and rules-based system to uphold rights, and to contain and resolve conflict is being challenged by geopolitical shifts. The global challenges of exclusion and inequalities impact our collective effectiveness to prevent and resolve conflict sustainably. Authoritarian regimes deny rights and try to exploit gender fault lines to undermine social cohesion and justify aggression. In this context, international rule of law and the rules based international system are key to both maintaining gains (and doing no harm) and driving further progress.

- 6 In a changing peacekeeping landscape, where western governments are engaging more closely with new partners, it will be important to ensure gender equality remains on the discussion table and support policy coherence by governments between foreign and domestic policy. It is more important than ever for us to work across boundaries to put women peace and security back on the agenda - linking this across key international structures (UN Security Council, Human Rights Council, NATO, OSCE, African Union, ECOWAS, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Commission on the Status of Women).

“International actors like the UK have a key role in upholding international rule of law as a set of values and a lifeline for the disenfranchised.”

“In this changing context some things hold strong: Gender is still seen as a sideshow in international security, and women continue to be told that their concerns and their participation will be dealt with later.”

Recommendations:

- a) **Include gender considerations at the hard end of national security discussions** on state threats, enforcing the point that Women Peace and Security is not a 'nice to do' and it is not 'women's work'. Gender and power are at the heart of authoritarian regimes and conflict.
- b) **Adjust gender policy framing to focus on security outcomes** (the strategic and effectiveness case) without losing hard-won language on gender and women and girls. Concepts of security should include human security, informed by what justice, peace and security look like to women, girls, survivors of sexual violence and civilians suffering from conflict. Governments should be ready to test policy approaches, and ideally co-create them with those impacted by the conflict.

- c) Maintain a **consistent position and message on participation**, empowerment and protection, moving beyond binaries of men as perpetrators and women as victims and inherently vulnerable. The differing gendered roles in conflict need to be understood and addressed in our responses.
- d) Widen the focus on **protection to include a wider set of gendered harms** beyond conflict-related sexual violence, including forced marriage, displacement, and trafficking. This includes recognising that not all harms are perpetrated directly by armed actors - some are caused by international criminal networks that are enmeshed and enabled in conflict economies.
- e) **Use funding requirements for a gendered response in partnerships with multilaterals** - particularly UN humanitarian agencies, to incentivise and hold implementers to account.
- f) **Begin gendered analysis and advice in the planning and prevention stages**. The rapidly changing global context means that both planning for and prevention of conflict is increasingly important. These stages offer time to carry out gendered analysis in a way that means it is ready to inform policy and practice if conflict breaks out.

Theme 2: Transforming culture and leadership

- 7 Resistance continues to show up in different ways across all institutions - whether it is a request for more evidence before acting, or the argument that the gendered dimensions of a conflict must wait as a second order priority. Progress in many organisations remains personality driven, rather than institutionalised. Political will at the highest levels remains a powerful lever to drive an agenda within government.

- 8 How the agenda is communicated matters in building buy-in to gendered approaches as an enabler rather than an add-on, particularly in military and security spaces where language and cultural incentives differ. Creating space to understand concerns and explore perceived/ actual risks and trade-offs is important, as is building a critical mass of male and female senior leaders who understand and can advance the agenda.

“Gender is being delegated to the working level. There is not enough buy-in from senior leadership to see it as a contributor to security objectives.”

Recommendations:

- a) **All actors should reframe the conversation with a military/security audience** by underlining that: gender is an essential and operational consideration in ending a crisis effectively; key to reaching and sustaining desired outcomes/end state; and by framing protection as a human security concern.
- b) **All institutions should normalise gender as a relevant consideration for everyone and bring senior men and women into the conversation by:** creating psychological safety for men to air concerns in a way that they can be discussed and addressed; moving towards gender being promoted by men as well as women; and open discussion on masculinities.
- c) **Institutions should incentivise senior engagement and ability to apply gender into conflict decision-making** by appointing senior gender envoys / positions that have influence within the most senior decision-making spaces.
- d) **Governments should bridge peacebuilding (civil) and security (military) approaches by:** bringing actors together in conversation; and within governments, considering shared policy making, decision making, submissions, and secondments across departments.

- e) **Governments should develop a culture of learning and listening: training and coaching policy makers and future leaders on gender;** investing in impact assessments and data and evidence on what works on gender in conflict; and sharing this internally and externally so that lessons translate into learning and practice.

Theme 3: Policies, systems, structures and processes

- 9 At a policy level, reductionist thinking is still prevalent in many institutions, although this may be unintentional. **This replaces “gender” with “women and girls,” in a way that is not intersectional, and fails to recognise masculinities, gender and sexual minorities, and the differentiated needs of women and girls including those with disabilities.** It also replaces “security” with protection from conflict-related sexual violence. These cognitive shortcuts detract from the holistic and wider understanding that is needed - on gendered issues and norms that drive and sustain conflict, of the differentiated impacts of conflict and of the role that women play as active agents in conflict, peace building, and emergency response.
- 10 This wider understanding requires the concept and provision of security to be shaped by a gendered understanding and analysis which includes the experiences and priorities of women and girls. This includes the ability to exercise basic rights and freedoms (e.g. of movement) without threat or fear of harm due to gender identities. It also requires enabling a broader base of decision-makers around the table, including women.

Recommendations:

- a) Reframe policy in the ways set out above, increase policy coherence across government, and other organisations, and increase accountability for policy through a new proposed index for conflict response.

- b) Establish mechanisms to: systematically engage with **Women's Rights Organisations (WROs) and wider civil society** to bring ground truth, diversity of perspective and early warning systems into analysis and policymaking; protect human rights defenders; resource WROs with core, flexible and multi-year funding in peace time and crisis to support their role as first responders; support two-way due diligence assessments so that governments are incentivised and held to account on proportionate and effective funding partnerships.
- c) **Feed politically relevant technical advice** directly into key decision-making groups/ individuals during crisis response and throughout the humanitarian response.
- d) **Institutionalise behavioural incentives as well as crisis response systems and structures that require** a consideration of gender dynamics.
- e) Use **Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Analysis** done by HMG or civil society as a way of revealing systems of power that lead to exclusion, vulnerability to radicalisation and readiness to use violence. These and other analysis tools need to better consider and understand the risks posed by climate change and technology.
- f) **Build internal institutional memory** and support transfer of knowledge in between staff rotations.

Theme 4: Crisis response – peace processes and negotiations

- 11 In a crisis context, limited resources and competing pressures can incentivise international actors to engage in ways to stop violent conflict as quickly and simply as possible. This seemingly “common sense” approach is reflected in the UN-led track one model of two parties, one mediator, held largely behind closed doors. However, evidence tells us that ceasefires and peace processes which

engage an inclusive and representative cross section of interest groups – including women and young people – are significantly more likely to last.

- 12 These include national dialogues and more complex and mosaiced approaches with different levels of mediated compromise happening with different groups of people – including the most marginalised and sidelined. Meaningful participation of women requires empowered women who can take up political space once they are given access, and new genuinely inclusive structures for engagement to avoid the expectation that a minority of individual women can fundamentally change a system.

“Track 1 processes and the old way of doing things is not working, space is opening for UK and others to legitimise other more inclusive models.”

- 13 A survivor centred process requires gender and women and girls to be included. Within this remains the ongoing challenge of how to make space for accountability, transitional justice and reparations without preventing actors from coming to the table or leaving the question entirely to the end. Conflict and crisis actors also need to unpack, negotiate and move beyond other perceived tensions and binaries, to find ways of working that meet the needs of warring factions as well as those impacted and impacting on conflict dynamics.

Recommendations:

- a) **Move beyond binary thinking and choices towards an effective gendered approach:**
 - i. **from speed and simplicity vs inclusion of ceasefires/peace agreements towards building effective approaches that include and meet the needs of different interest groups beyond only violent actors;**

- ii. **from scale vs inclusion of a humanitarian response towards a targeted and quality approach to meet differentiated needs of vulnerable groups;**
- iii. **from life-saving humanitarian services vs meeting the needs of women and girls towards operationalising the international standard of the Minimum Initial Services Package (MISP)** for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) as a set of priority lifesaving SRHR services and activities to be implemented at the onset of every humanitarian emergency to prevent excess morbidity and mortality.
- iv. **from raising sexual violence through diplomatic channels vs preserving operating space and political capital, towards a discussion on what to raise, with whom, and when,** to have greatest effect. This includes considering whether to raise in public communications or privately on diplomatic channels.

“Impunity thrives when trauma is not addressed.”

b) Governments and other organisations to have Crisis preparedness and response plans and systems/ structures that institutionalise and ensure:

- i. **good, gendered analysis and data and knowledge management** before and during crisis including integration of early warning systems, and intelligence that considers human security and human terrain analysis for crisis planners.
- ii. **gender considerations in all training, guidance, roles and responsibilities and protocols,** with clear examples of what good looks like.

- iii. **gender and inclusion adviser/expertise in all crisis teams from crisis onset with both geographic /contextual understanding and the ability to apply thematic expertise in crisis .**
 - iv. **systematic engagement with trusted civil society partners** to inform, co-create and help monitor policy effectiveness including by: bringing ground truth and early warning systems into risk assessments; carrying out/ contributing to rapid gender and inclusion analysis; and understanding how women perceive security and their priorities.
- c) **Governments and other organisations to work with security actors (police and military) before and throughout crisis** to be more responsive to needs of women and girls, to protect human rights defenders where possible and do no harm.
 - d) **Governments to develop and communicate the modality to uphold commitment to protect women's rights defenders and activists,** setting out who will be eligible for what support.
 - e) **Additional standardised resourcing to women's rights organisations** for prevention and response to GBV in all crises.
 - f) **All actors to support a pipeline of empowered and upskilled women** in fragile states to take up political space in negotiations and as mediators and negotiators.

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Wilton Park | June 2024

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