

# Women and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Issues and Sources

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## Preface

Women's contributions to war and peace have long been underestimated. In fact, women often contribute to the outbreak of violence and hostilities — in many cases, they are instrumental in inciting men to defend group interests, honour, and collective livelihoods. Women also play a key role in preserving order and normalcy in the midst of chaos and destruction. In times of conflict, when men engage in war and are killed, disappear or take refuge outside their country's borders, it is women who are left with the burden of ensuring family livelihood. Women struggle to protect their families' health and safety — a task which rests on their ability to cope pragmatically with change and adversity.

It is therefore not surprising that women are also a driving force for peace. They are often among the first to call for an end to conflict and to strive for order and rebuilding. In post-war situations, whether in groups or individually, formally or informally, women probably contribute more than government authorities or international aid to reconciliation, reviving local economies and rebuilding social networks.

However, despite their active role in promoting peace, women tend to fade into the background when official peace negotiations begin and the consolidation of peace and rebuilding of the economy becomes a formal exercise. But it is not possible to return to pre-war mores; gender roles and social values have been deeply affected by the experience of war. Thus, the reconfiguration of gender roles and positions is an integral part of the challenge of rebuilding war-torn societies. It is important for policy-makers and operational actors in national governments and aid organizations to understand the complex ways gender and rebuilding interact.

The War-torn Societies Project (WSP) recognizes the value of analysing this interaction. However, as a facilitator of dialogue and consensus building, WSP has not imposed an examination of gender in its country projects. The project has therefore not specifically focused on the issue, although it has been raised and discussed in each country where WSP has been active, as part of consultations in which main actors of rebuilding attempted to define the legacy of war and prioritize strategic areas for rebuilding. In Eritrea in particular, the role of women in rebuilding was identified as a "cross-cutting" issue to be considered within all of the thematic areas selected for study.

As work progressed, the importance of more closely examining the impact of gender roles on post-conflict rebuilding became increasingly obvious, and **Women and Post-Conflict Reconstruction** was initiated at the central level in Geneva. The objective was to critically assess the literature available in this field and to assemble a source of experience and knowledge, thus contributing to raising awareness among the many actors involved at different levels in rebuilding war-torn societies. The resulting publication should be of interest to practitioners and scholars alike.

The study is based on data collected by the Geneva WSP staff over a two-year period. The material was analysed and synthesized by Birgitte Sørensen, a Danish anthropologist who was a WSP staff member from 1995 to 1997, and head of the project's research unit for part of that time. Before joining WSP, she carried out field research on refugee displacement and resettlement in Sri Lanka, leading to a Ph.D. in social anthropology from the University of Copenhagen. During her time at WSP, she gave much emphasis to the study of local-level initiatives and understanding the processes of integration and disintegration, not as theoretical concepts but as painful phases of adjustment lived by real people in real situations. Ms. Sørensen is currently an Associate Professor at the University of Copenhagen Institute of Anthropology. Christine Knudsen, a WSP research assistant, did much of the ground work for this publication. Shiho Yamagishi worked on the project as a WSP intern.

This study could not have been undertaken without the continued commitment of the many bilateral and multilateral agencies and foundations that support the WSP's work. Particular thanks go to the Carnegie Corporation of New York and to the International Development Research Center (IDRC) of Canada for providing special grants that enabled the completion and publication of this study.

Matthias Stiefel, Director  
The War-torn Societies Project

## Executive Summary

**Women and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Issues and Sources** is a review of literature dealing with political, economic and social reconstruction from a gender perspective. One of its objectives is to go beyond conventional images of women as victims of war, and to document the many different ways in which women make a contribution to the rebuilding of countries emerging from armed conflicts. Special attention is given to women's priority concerns, to their resources and capacities, and to structural and situational factors that may reduce their participation in reconstruction processes. A second aim is to shed light on how post-war reconstruction processes influence the reconfiguration of gender roles and positions in the wake of war, and how women's actions shape the construction of post-war social structures.

Following the brief Introduction is a chapter on political reconstruction. It raises questions concerning women's participation in peace-building and democratization. In order to illuminate women's expectations regarding their roles and status in post-war society, the chapter opens with a brief discussion of how and to what extent various liberation movements have addressed women's issues. While some movements considered women's issues to detract attention from the main goal of their struggle, many movements regarded women's liberation as an integral dimension of their overall struggle for social justice. The fact that women's issues were included on the political agendas and that women themselves were mobilized to participate actively in the fighting is demonstrated to have been instrumental in raising women's political awareness and their expectations of state and society today.

The ensuing discussion of women's participation in formal and informal peace-building activities shows that in most cases women are excluded from formal peace negotiations. Such high-level negotiations are identified as male domains, which means that they also employ discourses and practices that are closer to men's reality than to women's. As a result, women also lack direct influence in the identification of reconstruction priorities that are usually part of a peace agreement. Nevertheless, women are demonstrated to play an influential role through their work in grassroots organizations working for peace and reconciliation. From within these organizations, women constantly challenge the authorities and other members of society with demands for peace, non-discrimination, accountability, recognition of human rights, etc. While always positioned on the margins, these organizations show their ability to mobilize large numbers of women, and to translate individual grievances into legitimate social concerns. Moreover, many of them play a significant role in building a new culture of peace at the local level by organizing peace education and community-based reconciliation and social reconstruction activities.

Democratization processes are generally applauded, because they are assumed to guarantee accountability and to grant all citizens the possibility to participate in political life. However, studies on elections and decentralization demonstrate several flaws when it comes to women's position. Many countries emerging from armed conflict have adopted new constitutions that grant women equal political, social and economic rights, and many governments have developed new quota systems to ensure women equal representation in decision-making institutions at all levels. However, the implementation of these laws and good intentions often runs into major obstacles. At the government level the problems include a lack of financial resources and a lack of gender awareness or political will among staff. Other major problems are to be found at the social level, where the new discourse of gender equality may run counter to existing social norms regarding gender roles. The examples discussed show that, in some cases, local authorities and male members of society may discourage or prohibit women from participating in political activities. Moreover, the fact that the division of labour has not changed in favour of women, but rather added to their burden, also poses practical limitations on the possibilities for active involvement of women.

Despite these constraints, women have made remarkable contributions in many countries. In the context of elections women have organized civic education targeting women, and they have convinced women of the importance of their vote. Educated women have organized legal counselling to inform women about their rights and to help them exercise these rights.

Chapter three deals with economic reconstruction and the strategies that women develop to cope with war-induced changes in the economic environment and to meet the growing responsibilities for the survival and well-being of family and relatives. The focus is on the relationship between women's economic activities and their socio-economic position.

The first section of the chapter concentrates on women's involvement in agricultural production, which often constitutes a major source of income. In addition to problems of landmines, a lack of agricultural inputs and farm implements, a shattered infrastructure and the inaccessibility of markets, etc., which equally trouble male farmers, women face a number of particular challenges. First, women often lack legal rights to land and other resources which, in the context of social disintegration where a large number of women become single providers, may reduce their ability to survive on farming alone. In some countries, women are organizing themselves to lobby state and local authorities for increased access to such resources, but in many cases women are forced off the land and are compelled to seek other sources of income. Another problem facing women in agriculture is the dismantling of traditional work groups due to displacement, divorce, death, etc. This has often resulted in the creation of new co-operative associations and voluntary self-help groups which combine old institutions and current social conditions.

When cultivating the family land is no longer an option, some women join the casual agricultural labour force. While this opportunity enables women to employ their skills and to earn an income, recent analyses suggest that this may in fact mean that women come to occupy a marginal position in the new structure of rural social stratification.

Another area which proved to be of great importance to women's livelihoods was the burgeoning informal sector, with petty trade and small-scale businesses as major sources of income. The documentation of women's involvement in this sector showed a great variety in experiences. Some women took up activities in which they had also been involved prior to the war, but many engaged in innovative projects, even when it meant a break with existing social norms, as they took up jobs perceived to be male jobs. Some women established businesses on the basis of local resources and demand, while others established elaborate trading networks which cut across ethnic boundaries and national borders. Again, women's capacity to build and mobilize extensive social networks had a positive impact. But while women generally proved to be eager and capable entrepreneurs, the sustainability of their enterprises was often constrained by a lack of capital and marketing skills, not to mention the fact that the sector itself is highly insecure and fluctuating. Moreover, women's economic success would in some cases result in social stigmatization and exclusion, due to clashes with prevailing norms or jealousy.

Finally, the formal sector is discussed. For various reasons, societies emerging from war usually experience a high unemployment rate, and women are often particularly marginalized with regard to access to formal employment. In some cases this is a result of the fact that women generally have poorer educational qualifications, but research also suggests that discriminatory practices are still frequent. One of the few areas where women seem privileged is the social sector, but because this sector is often exposed to budgetary cuts, women's access to income and status from this field is reduced. Nevertheless, women continue to perform related tasks, but as semi-professionals or even as volunteers.

The fourth chapter focuses on social reconstruction, specifically on the rehabilitation of social services (health care and education) and wider issues of social integration. With regard to the

first aspect, the main questions are whether the social sector recognizes women's particular needs, and whether it seeks to build on women's skills and capacities. The discussion on social integration shifts the focus to how women are positioned in processes of inclusion and exclusion, and to how women's strategies and activities influence social integration.

Studies on the rehabilitation of social services suggest that even though women's needs and rights are increasingly recognized officially, women continue to be discriminated against with regard to access to education for social and cultural reasons. Health care and other social facilities also remain inadequate, with consequences not only for women's health, but also for their ability to participate in political and economic life. The material clearly demonstrates that social issues were generally given high priority by women themselves, and many women in post-conflict societies make a major contribution to their rehabilitation. In rural as well as urban areas, women have re-established primary education for children as a means to build local capacities and influence their socialization, and women are often involved in providing primary health care and socio-economic assistance on a self-help basis to people in crisis. However, as noted above, while such activities are generally welcomed, they are often considered but a natural extension of women's domestic obligations and hence are not remunerated or responded to with offers of training.

In addition to ordinary health care problems, intrastate wars produce a number of specific health problems known as psycho-social traumas. These traumas may stem from experiences of forced displacement, torture, rape, violence, witnessing killings, etc. In some cases, women have been particularly vulnerable to this kind of assault on mind and body. But women have also been very active in addressing the scars that such experiences leave, organizing voluntary organizations which offer medical and psychological treatment. Moreover, they have helped former victims to overcome their distress and reintegrate, by offering skills training and income-generating activities. Another issue which has been addressed by women's organizations is the growth of violence within post-war societies. Through classroom education and workshops, women have sought to raise awareness about violence against women and to change the attitudes that consider such violence acceptable.

As the discussion on social integration points out, there has long been a tendency to focus exclusively on the reintegration of returnees, internally displaced persons and demobilized soldiers, or of persons who have become marked and marginalized due to torture, disability, widowhood, etc. However, to the extent that any post-war society is inevitably undergoing profound changes in its socio-economic and political composition, the issue of integration is relevant to all members of society. This chapter focuses on this aspect from a gender and family perspective, and shows how integration often also has disintegrative aspects. Newly gained economic freedom and independence, long years of separation and exposure to new social environments and attitudes, new perceptions of the role of the family and its members, and forced migration in search of employment, all contribute to continued dismantling of

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