

# Women as a Victim of Conflict

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Conflict arises due to a complex set of variables coming together and reinforcing each other at multiple levels and at critical junctures of a country or region's development. It leaves in its aftermath significant development and humanitarian challenges. Conflict is an inherent and legitimate part of social and political life, and is often a precursor to positive change. While conflict inflicts suffering on everyone, women are particularly affected by its short and long term effects. Sexual assault and exploitation are frequently employed as tools of war; victimization leads to isolation, alienation, prolonged emotional trauma, and unwanted pregnancies that often result in abandoned children. As culturally-designated the caregivers, women must struggle to support their families and keep their households together while the traditional breadwinners – husbands and sons - are caught up in the fighting and are unable to provide livelihood for their families. Women and girls are equally affected in a fragile environment where social services they once depended on degrade or disappear.

The escalation of violence usually coincides with an increase in violence against women and girls. This violence takes many different forms - including rape, intimate partner violence, and sexual exploitation and trafficking - and continues long after conflict has officially ended. It is estimated that close to 90 per cent of current war casualties are civilians, the majority of whom are women and children, compared to a century ago when 90 per cent of those who lost their lives were military personnel. Although entire communities suffer from the consequences of armed conflict, women and girls are particularly affected because of their status in society and their sex. Parties in conflict situations often rape women, sometimes using systematic rape as a tactic of war. Other forms of violence against women committed in armed conflict include murder, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy and forced sterilization. Despite this, women should not be viewed solely as victims of war. They assume the key role of ensuring family livelihood in the midst of chaos and destruction, and are particularly active in the peace movement at the grassroots level, cultivating peace within their communities.

## **Cultural Context & Sensitivity - Status & Role of Women in Society**

While the United Nations and many in the international community recognize equal

rights and status for women as a legitimate goal to pursue globally, the speed and manner in which this goal can be attained will vary according to the cultural setting. Just as each country has its own unique culture and traditions, each society views the role of women differently. This will vary by country/region and can be influenced by such factors as education, religious and cultural norms, the legal status of women, and the degree of exposure to western ideas and culture. Programme options will therefore need to be adapted to particular settings, even in emergency and humanitarian responses.

Understanding the culture and currently prescribed role of women in a society is absolutely necessary when working on gender-specific programmes. This remains true during conflict and in its aftermath. Women's role and status in society will determine best practices and the appropriate means of intervention in order to empower - rather than endanger - women. While in some cases women's position in society is relatively strong, in other cases religion, tradition, legal status or other issues may present substantial obstacles to programme implementation.

### **Women as Agents of Change and Peacemakers**

Women must be involved in conflict prevention, resolution and management efforts at all levels. When they are not active participants, the views, needs and interests of half of the population are not represented, and therefore interventions will not be as appropriate or enduring. Because the consequences of war weigh so heavily on the lives of women, they naturally show great interest in peace processes. Women often play decisive roles in negotiating the peace process. To do so effectively, they must be empowered politically and economically, and must be adequately represented at all levels of decision-making. Women's peace organizations and coalitions have played a crucial role in helping to bring about peace. Nevertheless, women are usually left out of formal peacemaking activities unless they exhibit remarkable determination to seat themselves at the peace table. Despite notable progress for women over the past decade, even when they manage to play a role in peace negotiations, women tend to fade into the background when it comes to rebuilding social networks or are viewed as tangential to formal mechanisms, and women do not receive their deserved recognition. In most cases, women's efforts towards peace go unrecognized and are under-reported, as data collected on peace processes is often not disaggregated by gender. The efforts women make are not without many obstacles and risks. For example, the National Democratic Institute has developed a women's political party programme called "Win with Women" that allows women to partake in roundtable discussions, attend campaign skills training for female candidates and conduct meetings with political party leaders. The programme works to assist women to overcome the many difficulties they face when they try to join the political process due to the lack of a forum for discussion, training, or buy-in from existing political leaders. The roundtable discussions give women a venue to discuss the difficulties they encounter and identify possible solutions, and the consultative meetings allow women to demonstrate to political leaders the importance of including women in the political process.

### **Positive Effects of Conflict on Women :**

While the negative consequences of conflict are widely accepted, the disturbance of

established norms can also have unintended positive effects on the status and role of women in their societies, and therefore on their role in development. For example, women's social and economic responsibilities may increase when women are obliged to take over the responsibility of supporting their households. Often that requires learning new skills that enable women to perform jobs previously held by men or that prepare them for entrepreneurial income-generating activities. This can help women achieve greater financial independence and lead to long-term changes in the gendered division of labor. The argument that conflict may bring net positive changes for women, however, is strongly contested by some scholars who point to the huge price women pay in pain, suffering, and loss for the new found gains. Regardless of the debate, assistance to war-affected communities should recognize the positive and negative ways in which conflict may affect women, and programs should capitalize on positive changes by providing support where needed.

#### **Prevention of conflict :**

##### **1. Prevention through awareness - raising and training**

**(a) Changing attitudes that perpetrate violence against women :** Deeply entrenched social beliefs regarding the subordinate roles of women constitute a strong barrier to preventing violence against women. It is necessary to take positive action to change attitudes that perpetrate violence against women through systematic and comprehensive education and awareness programmes, including educating women and girls about their right to live free of violence.

**(b) Effective training for all actors in society :** Specific education and training should be given to all public actors regarding the nature of violence against women, its criminality and how to prevent and respond to violence against women. In particular, training should target the military, law enforcement personnel, the judiciary and other security sector actors, who are often the 'front line' protecting women. Training materials should be developed at community, national, regional and international levels, as appropriate. For example, trafficking - being a form of violence with distinctly international dimensions - requires internationally coordinated anti-trafficking action.

##### **2. Prevention through research**

**(a) Effective collection of gender-disaggregated data :** Reliable and consistent data on violence against women is imperative in order to formulate responses and strategies. However, deficiencies exist in the systematic collection of gender-disaggregated data by state and other agencies. Medical, law enforcement, social services and humanitarian workers should have specific procedures to identify and document violence against women.

**(b) Furthering research on causes, consequences and solutions :** Research on the root causes and consequences of violence against women helps us to develop effective solutions. Research should examine methods to rehabilitate perpetrators, prevention of violence in armed conflict, and the role of women in conflict resolution. Governments should lead and support this type of research at local, national and international levels, and use it to formulate government policies.

**(c) Effective monitoring and assessment :** To facilitate effective monitoring of violence against women, there must be international agreement on indicators. Effective follow-up

mechanisms should include reporting on progress towards the attainment of women's rights at the highest levels.

**(d) Promote Community-Based Participation :** Community-based participation is the key to successful programme interventions, as it draws on those best informed about what is needed and what will work. It also addresses the vital issue of cultural understanding by involving both men and women from the community to explain their needs and capacities. Local men and women must be identified to participate in programme design and implementation; those lacking experience in these areas can be guided through the process and taught management and monitoring techniques. Strong community participation makes the difference between success and failure.

**(e) Increase Women's Participation in Decision-Making :** Bringing women into the decision-making process can be a daunting task given cultural, political, and often practical constraints (such as lack of a pool of women with formal education). When women have a voice in the decision-making process, they can often assist in mitigating conflict even before it starts. Programme options in this area can be cross-cutting and easily fit into larger objectives, including targeting information campaigns on voter education for women, promoting community-based and/or grassroots organizations that include roles for women, working with state lawmakers to draft laws that guarantee women's participation in parliaments or other decision-making bodies, etc.

#### **Conclusion :**

Women are rarely mere passive victims of conflict and should not be treated as such because women can play active roles in the events that lead to fighting and instability, and even in combat itself-yet they have also served as the forerunners of peace movements that have ended conflict. However, the determined efforts of women to bring an end to fighting are usually behind the scenes. Women represent an untapped resource in peace building. Stereotypical images of women as passive victims of war overshadow their agency and contributions to peace building, and belie the complex reality of women's experiences in conflict situations. Women are victims, but they are also fighters. Women are survivors and are also protectors. Women are largely active in the informal spheres, at community and civil society levels, beneath the radar of the international community and the traditional peace and security framework.

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