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Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Processes (DDR): The Gender Asset

The Potentials of Changing Gender Patterns

Both genders – female and male – can be actors as well as victims in armed conflict, depending on the context.
Changed gender roles among ex-combatants of armed groups constitute a potential source of change towards more balanced gender relations in the larger post-conflict society.
It is necessary to take into account the particular needs of victims of armed conflict, but it is equally important to bear in mind that female and male conflict actors also represent resources that bring their new skills and experiences into the post-conflict situation.

Brief Points

- Changing gender roles during armed conflict can be an asset in a post-conflict situation.
- Skills acquired by female and male ex-combatants during conflict should be documented and acknowledged during the DDR process for constructive use in peacetime.
- Family ties constitute a pull factor of male demobilization and should be actively used in efforts to change violent models of masculinity.
- Soldiers of both genders with a long history in an armed group tend to develop a common identity and to benefit from reintegration programs that allow them to stay together in post-conflict communities.

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A New Perspective on Gender in DDR Processes

This policy brief is based on a study of academic literature on the gender dimensions in DDR processes. The literature on this topic spans a variety of sub-themes, but its main character is that it tends to portray gender as a difficult challenge – nearly as an additional burden – in DDR processes. This policy brief provides a different perspective. It views gender as an asset in DDR processes.

Regrouping of ex-combatants in Nepal. Photo: Chiranjibi Bhandari

Women and Men – Actors and Victims

In armed conflicts there is a tendency to focus on women as victims rather than as actors. Such an image has consequences for the way DDR processes are organized. The tendency is continuing, although most armed conflicts now have female combatants. The focus on women as victims – not least as victims of rape and other types of gender-based violence – is important in order to put justice and reparation on the agenda through transitional justice processes. However, women are also active combatants, and many female fighters come out of armed conflicts with new skills acquired during conflict, and with more self-confidence and independence. Male combatants have also become used to working together with women in new roles, and to adjusting to changes in the division of labor. This change in gender roles can become an asset, particularly in societies where women have few rights and a low level of economic independence and possibilities, as it could potentially bring new models of gender relations into such societies. Men – on the other hand – are almost never portrayed as victims. Acknowledging male victims and including this into DDR processes will be important for the healing of both genders, as well as for a good gender balance in post-conflict societies. Women's low participation in peace negotiation processes is part of the reason why female combatants are often not included in DDR programs. It is therefore necessary to increase the female participation in peace processes. In cases where female participation in the peace process has not been possible, external mediators should at least facilitate the inclusion of female combatants into any list prepared for the demobilization and reintegration process. Policy-makers and practitioners should also attempt to learn from the cases that have employed best practices – so far, these are mostly found in Latin America.

Masculinity

In any conflict or post-conflict context, dominant perceptions of masculinity affect women. The more these perceptions lean towards a violent-macho ideal of masculinity, the higher the tendency to create female victims. This line of development continues the victimization of women both during and after war. The consequences of this for women are beginning to become well-known, but the implications of dominant violent masculinity perceptions for men have been less in focus. Men can also become victims of violations by other men, and sometimes by women, and men conducting obligatory military services in a violent context are also often victims of repressive regimes where the price of refusal to conduct military service is high, sometimes lethal. Often their militarized masculinity results from combat training, which includes bodily and emotional indoctrination. The motivations for men to take up arms or become violent may also be found in a context that has deprived them of their dignity and the ability to support their family economically in accordance with societal expectations. As stated by Kimberly Theidon, in this reality "their bodily capital – and the high premium placed on physical force and prowess with a weapon – may be all that they have to trade on the labor market" (2009, p. 23).[1]

Security Council Resolution 1325, which was adopted in 2000, calls for a gender perspective to be applied on all efforts at bringing about peace and security, including DDR processes. In the follow-up of this resolution there has been a tendency to primarily focus on women to the exclusion of men. This has weakened the sustainability of implementation efforts. Therefore, incorporating the perspectives and roles of men has gradually become a more important part of the women, peace and security agenda. The challenges of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) processes are therefore also to contribute more to the "disarming of masculinities". Several types of programs have been successful in helping and assisting male victims, developing healthier, non-violent behaviors and male identities and engaging men in a positive way. Women's economic empowerment in a post-conflict setting is also important to establish the ideal of a shared burden of responsibilities between the two genders.

Finally, research has shown that male soldiers often disarm and demobilize for family reasons. The family is thus an important asset that should be actively used for the rehabilitation of both genders in the DDR process.

Securitization and the Political Economy of DDR

In post-conflict demobilization and reintegration processes there is a tendency to give high priority to security, and often at the cost of other issues, such as the social and economic well-being of ex-combatants. In this area, male combatants become the winners, because when they are unemployed they tend to be considered a security threat. The general thinking is that idleness among men may lead to new recruit-

ment to gangs and armed groups, and to criminality and violence. Unemployed, female ex-combatants are not in the same way considered a security threat and are therefore given less attention. Donors and NGOs often consider that female ex-combatants will fare better, since they have a space in the private sphere for taking care of children and as housewives. This is seldom considered a possibility for male ex-combatants by those who organize the DDR process. Because female combatants are seldom included in peace processes, often they are not even registered or included in the reintegration packages. A serious example of this can be observed from the DDR process in Aceh, Indonesia, where the women's wing of the armed opposition group GAM, *Inong Balee* – comprised of approximately 500 women – was not even included in the reintegration program.[2]

For those female ex-combatants that are included in DDR programs, the vocational training is seldom adapted to their former skills or their own priorities, and sometimes not even to the labor market in the country. This last point is of course equally troublesome for male ex-combatants. Often, during armed conflict, female combatants achieve new skills, such as communication, organization and leadership, international networking and health services, including dentistry, and sometimes also a considerable level of computer skills. These new skills are seldom formalized or documented during DDR processes. Instead, the ex-combatants are given vocational training, mainly through very short courses, and in types of work they are unfamiliar with. Thus they start out with a great disadvantage in a competitive labor market.

What has proved important through various types of research is the level of education of the female ex-combatants, and the possibilities they are given for further education during the DDR process. The educated female ex-combatants are almost always the winners with regard to social and political participation in a post-conflict context. Two other issues that also tend to strongly affect female ex-fighters' situations are the regulation of land and property rights and the existence of the informal labor market. Agriculture is often characterized by a strong gender-bias in favor of men, and women have difficulties in achieving formalized land rights. Post-conflict efforts on property rights regulations and regulations of the informal labor market need to take into account the "do no harm" principle, and at least go through these regulations ensuring that they do not become a barrier for women's employment – but rather the opposite.

Justice and Reconciliation

The focus on transitional justice is relatively new and the academic literature on this topic mainly started to spread during the 1980s. The debate and literature on gender and transitional justice has had its main focus on institutional dimensions, particularly on the work of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Although some progress has been achieved, for example through the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, these processes have also revealed several weaknesses and much remains to be done. The problem is that women most often do not participate in negotiation processes, and are therefore less able to influence transitional justice frameworks and agendas.

Ex-combatants in Nepal during the Cheque distribution process. Photo: Chiranjibi Bhandari

General lack of security, support and protection during juridical processes has also led some researchers to question whether or not women really benefit from these processes. This was for example the case with the process in Jakarta against perpetrators of gendered violence in the East Timor conflict. The female victims in this process were treated without respect or support during the court procedures, and they experienced new humiliations in addition to the atrocities they had endured during the war.[3] In the process that took place in Dili, in East Timor, the women fared somewhat better, but the examples from the East Timor case point out difficult dilemmas in transitional justice. The main perpetrators are often protected from juridical prosecution by political actors. The government of Indonesia thus protected the main military perpetrators from participation in the process. A question raised in this debate is therefore how to strike a balance between realism and legalism, so that the victims – mainly women – at the very least do not end up worse off as a result of these processes. Actually, the literature tends to lift up more positive examples from the work of truth commissions, where models that offer more protection to women have sometimes been used. However, although women constituted the majority of witnesses for acts of violence committed against others in South Africa, only a few of these women initially spoke out about acts of violence committed against themselves. Only after pressure from female activists did the Truth and Reconciliation Commission try to create a more enabling environment, with the result that a few more women eventually came to participate.[5] Finally, some hearings where only women participated were more successful. This illustrates the complexity of the problem.

Identity

The identity of ex-combatants is a crucial issue that so far has attracted very little attention. It is particularly important in long-lasting wars, where the combatants – both female and male – have spent many years of their youth and early adulthood in isolation, often in rural and mountainous or forested areas well suited for guerrilla warfare. The experiences they had during these years will be decisive for their future identity. In the cases where the female fighters have become more independent and have acquired new skills,

their combatant identities tend to be more positive, and the reintegration back into a society where gender roles have not changed remains a big challenge to them. This can be seen for example in Guatemala, where the female fighters in general have positive experiences from their time as guerrilla soldiers during the 36 year long war that ended in 1996.[5] In such cases, the option for female ex-combatants to reintegrate into communities together with fellow male and female ex-combatants may be an important alternative, in order to ease the transition and help them to make use of their new skills in the post-conflict situation. Challenges related to identity are also very much linked to context, as can be seen in the section below.

The Importance of Context

The context of a DDR process is important in many ways. The political context influences both the possibilities for political participation of ex-combatants and the possibilities to have a successful transitional justice process, with particular repercussions for the majority of female victims.

The socio-economic context influences the possibilities for post-conflict employment of both genders of ex-combatants. However, cultural and religious contexts in particular tend to affect female ex-combatants that often have acquired new skills and independence during the war, but that upon reintegration are confronted with a society that has not changed and that does not favor the women's aspirations for political participation and economic independence. The level of exclusion or inclusion – and acceptance – of the reintegrating ex-combatants by key social and moral gatekeepers of the society, not least at the local level, is thus particularly important for female ex-combatants.[6]

However, as a part of this debate, it is also important to acknowledge that women's identities are complex and influenced by the particular context. For example, African feminists recognize international feminism's protests against gender inequality, but at the same time they have developed particular African approaches that represent a balance between universal normative principles and traditional values such as *Ubuntu*, which means "interconnectiveness of each human being, consensus-building and solidarity".[7] It is important that international actors bear this need for balance in mind during the planning of DDR processes. ■

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