



CONFLICT PREVENTION AND DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION IN AFRICA: A POLICY WORKSHOP

SESSION 5 ADDRESSING EMPLOYMENT, YOUTH AND GENDER DIMENSIONS

Gender, conflict and development

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Introduction

The presentation takes as its starting point three issues addressed in the conference background paper, namely 1) conflict as impacting on development, 2) the socio-economic factors which contribute to 'root causes' of conflict, 3) the policy implications of these linkages. The presentation seeks to explore the gender dimensions of these issues and therefore seeks to explore the following questions:

1. What have been the impacts of war on gender relations?
2. To what extent have gendered identities contributed to structures which generated or perpetuated violent conflict?
3. What are the theoretical and policy implications?

1. Impacts of war on gender relations

Empirical evidence from a wide variety of contexts indicates that violent conflict impacts on gender relations in different ways at different levels of analysis. In terms of the division of labour, men have less work and less responsibility, while women have more of both: these changes are pronounced, and largely consistent across different cases (though not universal). This is partly because women who stay behind during war have to fill the gaps left by enlisted, killed or injured men, but more fundamentally because many conflict contexts result in loss of major resources and livelihoods which men previously tended to control. Fairly consistently, there is a psychological impact of this depletion which results in women rising to the challenge of making an enhanced contribution, while many men appear to sink into indolence and despair.

However women's increased responsibilities do not necessarily result in increased access to decision-making power, either at household, or community, or national levels. Where such changes are found, they are isolated examples, and do not form a consistent pattern. This suggests that change in the way institutions modulate gender ideologies happens at a much slower rate than the practical adjustments to everyday survival strategies represented by the division of labour. Indeed, it is notable that war on its own rarely affects the ideological basis of gender relations, hence the often-observed phenomenon of women being 'sent back into the kitchen' at the end of a war. There is some evidence however that gender ideology and the institutional mechanisms for shaping it can shift under specific circumstances, namely a combination of popular organising and pressure, and political will.

2. Gender identities as contributory factors in violent conflict

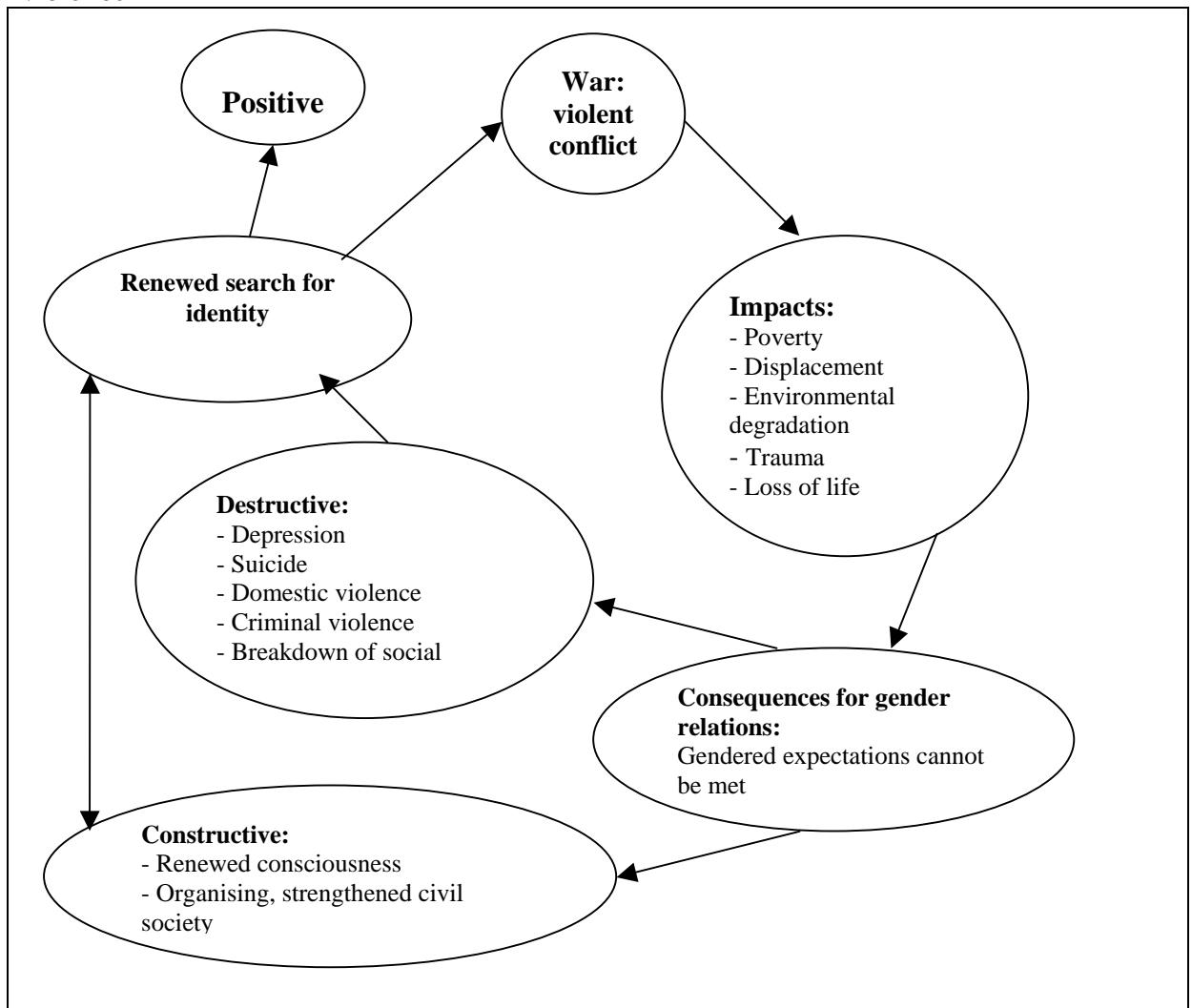
This second question – standing the first on its head – is more difficult to answer since little empirical evidence, or analytical interest, has been documented. What we can say with reasonable confidence, however, is that:

- Men and women both contribute to violent conflict in a variety of ways. While the general tendency is for men to be the main actors in violence (as combatants for example), they are by no means the only ones and many armies and militias are composed of substantial numbers of female fighters. At the same time, women often provide moral, practical and financial support to organised violence when they consider it to be in their interests, and the interests of their identity group, to do so.

- Men and women both contribute to the socialisation of children through the family, and of adults through other institutions such as the school, the state, etc. Socialisation is a key mechanism for shaping identities in ways which facilitate, or militate against, organised violence. Gender identity is an integral part of these identities
- Gender identities provide potent symbols around which acceptance of, or incitement to, violence can be mobilised

More speculatively, it can be reasonably hypothesised that gender identities are a contributory factor in **cycles** of violence, as depicted in the table below.

Gender impact flowchart: ‘how gender identity can contribute to cycles of violence’



The diagram above depicts how violence leads to, and is in turn generated by, destructive impacts including poverty, humiliation, frustration, loss of livelihood, failures of governance, political manipulation, breakdown of inter-communal relations, and others. The situation becomes a breeding ground for a wide variety of manifestations of violence, including domestic and sexual abuse, risky sexual behaviour, alcoholism and drug abuse, depression, suicide, armed criminality, and adherence to militias. A major factor which enables these manifestations to occur is

the ‘thwarting’ of men’s and women’s aspirations, i.e. the impossibility of living up to the ideals represented by their gendered identities. The frustration generated in this way leads to people turning the violence they have experienced inward towards themselves and those close to them. This ‘secondary’ violence in turn undermines the possibility of shared social, political and economic capital.

3.1 Implications for theory

Thus the conditions which perpetuate war are reproduced, and gender is a key element within the complex of factors that enhances a propensity for violence. However, there is some evidence (for example from Rwanda) that gender identities can be turned round, to provide a new and more constructive set of relationships. The diagram suggests that there are points in the vicious circle where public debate, a renewed consciousness and commitment to active non-violence can turn the situation around, by emphasising socially constructive identities and values rather than destructive ones. Thus vicious circles can be turned into virtuous ones, provided that the complex strands and linkages can be unpacked, understood, and dealt with.

However, aspects of current discourse can be an impediment to gaining this understanding. The language of ‘root causes’, while helpful in focusing the mind on key problems, also blinds analysts to some of the complexities of cause and effect in charting the evolution of mass violence. At the same time, the policy discourse around gender often tends to oversimplify the concept; it frequently conflates ‘gender’ with ‘women’, obscures the importance of contextual analysis in favour of prescriptive policy statements, and overlooks the essential interrelationship between gender and other forms of difference. While some progress has been made in the international community’s use of official language (for example, the IASC handbook on gender-based violence in emergency settings addresses ‘women, men, boys and girls’ as the targets for support), the day-to-day discourse is generally polarised – areas of work traditionally associated with men, such as DDR, are often assumed to concern men only, so that women are essentially excluded from consideration. At the same time, areas of work associated with women, such as sexual violence, tend de facto to exclude men.

3.2 Conflict prevention: key elements

What does this mean in terms of strategies for conflict prevention? Clearly gender equality is an important constituent in the righting of horizontal inequalities and the restoration of shared social capital. The above analysis suggests that women’s participation in decision-making, and the enhancement of men’s self-esteem through gainful work, are both key to gender equality. Useful strategies which the international community might adopt could include:

- Providing people with access to inclusive forums of public debate around gender equality, to develop consensus on what sort of values they wish to live by, and how the practical implications of these values might need to be adapted to changing circumstances
- Encouraging political commitment at the highest levels
- Ensuring that a variety of ‘decent work’ opportunities are available, to ensure that all people, especially the younger generation, feel able to aspire to a satisfying life
- Governance strategies should promote the concept of citizenship (defined as the practice of mutual rights, responsibilities and respect between state and people, and

among the constituent peoples of the state) and ensure that all citizens – men and women – have the knowledge and capacities to engage in the political arena

3.3 Implications for post-conflict reconstruction

Conflict is often thought to offer a window of change in gender relations; this is not unrealistic, but change will not happen of its own accord. As we have seen above, the institutional and ideological dimensions of gender relations are slow to adapt to new conditions; reform requires focused effort at all levels and in all sectors, by civil society, governments and the international community. Consequently, dismantling gendered disadvantage requires a combination of short-term measures (such as security sector reform, establishing the rule of law, and the restoration of a dynamic economy) to remove the most critical and urgent threats, and long-term consolidation of stability through dialogue, education, and the encouragement of inclusive participation in the political arena.

Further reading

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