

Intrastate Conflict And Gender

armed conflict today is more likely to occur within states than across national borders. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the number of intrastate conflicts has proliferated worldwide. Economic disintegration, political upheaval, and competition for scarce resources have opened a Pandora's box of long-suppressed ethnic, religious, and regional tensions that have erupted into violent conflict.

Intrastate conflict has deep and long-lasting effects on a country and its people.

A key characteristic of intrastate conflict is the deliberate targeting of violence on civilians (men, women, and children): approximately 95 percent of all casualties in intrastate conflict are non-combatants. Second, intrastate conflict results in massive displacements of populations fleeing from violence and economic disruption. Third, women's participation in war contributes to a social transformation of identity and roles within the society. Fourth, intrastate conflict destroys the physical infrastructure of the economy as well as the institutions that defined the country's political and social infrastructure. Finally, these conflicts are fought within the boundaries of a country. The peace agreement that ends intrastate conflict is only a cessation of the violence. Unless there is a partition arrangement, citizens return to their communities to live side by side with former adversaries.

Post-conflict societies are shaped to a large extent by the response of civilian populations to the challenges presented by the violence, displacement, and breakdown of political, economic, and social institutions. During conflict, traditionally defined roles and responsibilities are transformed as people develop survival strategies to cope with new realities that emerge from the conflict. Gender relations, in particular, are affected by conflict as women and men assume new roles and responsibilities during and after the conflict.

The international community is increasingly interested in understanding the impact of conflict on gender relations. Donors and their partners are looking more carefully at the impact of war on women; the rise of women's organizations during and following the conflict; and the ways donors can contribute to the growth, activities, and survival of women's organizations in war-torn societies. With effective international assistance during post-conflict transitions, women's organizations can play a significant role in promoting gender equity during the transition and contributing to the country's long-term growth and development.

USAID's Investigation of Post-Conflict Societies and Gender

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), a major donor agency in providing humanitarian and post-conflict assistance worldwide, has conducted a two-year investigation of gender issues in post-conflict societies. Led by USAID's Center for Development Information and Evaluation (CDIE), with technical assistance provided by USAID's Office of Women in Development, the study focused on three sets of questions:

- What has been the impact of intrastate conflicts on women? How did these conflicts affect their economic, social, and political roles and responsibilities? What are the major problems and challenges facing women in these societies?

- What types of women’s organizations have emerged during the post-conflict era to address the challenges that women face and to promote gender equality? What types of activities do they undertake? What has been their impact on the empowerment of women? What factors affect the performance and impact of women’s organizations?
- What has been the nature and focus of assistance provided by USAID and other donor agencies to women’s organizations? How has it affected their performance and impact?

The purpose of the investigation was to generate a body of empirically grounded knowledge that could inform the policy and programmatic interventions of USAID and other international donor agencies.

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CDIE carried out an extensive review of the literature and conducted fieldwork in six countries—Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, El Salvador, Georgia, Guatemala, and Rwanda. CDIE analyzed the impact of conflict on women and gender relations, the emergence and contributions of women’s organizations, and the role of international assistance. The resulting report concludes with policy and programmatic lessons and recommendations for donors and lessons and recommendations for women’s organizations.

On December 12-13, 2000, CDIE and the Office of Women in Development will host a joint conference, “Intrastate Conflict and Women,” to discuss the findings and recommendations of this assessment. The conference also will provide a forum

for other international agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and experts to share their own experiences on this important subject.

Impact of Conflict on Women And Gender Relations

CDIE examined the impact of conflict on women and gender relations under three broad categories—social and psychological, economic, and political—and the challenges that emerged for the donor community in providing effective assistance to mitigate these impacts.

In all case studies, physical security in post-conflict societies was a critical issue for women. Formal peace agreements end overt hostilities between combatants but do little to contain the overflow of violence into communities. Women are especially vulnerable to low-level violence during the early stages of post-conflict transition. Fear

of violence and sexual abuse traps women in their homes and prevents them from engaging in important economic activities. This stress exacerbates the trauma experienced by women during the conflict. Recent conflicts also have highlighted the use of rape as a tool of warfare. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Rwanda, women were raped as a means of ethnic cleansing, serving not only to terrorize individual victims but also to inflict collective terror on an ethnic group. In some countries, such as Angola and Mozambique, combatants kidnapped women to use as sex slaves—a tactic for terrorizing and dehumanizing young women from particular ethnic groups.

The social and psychological impact of conflict transformed gender

relations both during and after the conflict. In the face of extreme hardships, traditional roles were adapted to meet the new realities imposed by the conflict. Women assumed greater economic responsibilities as heads of households. Women took on the responsibility of caring for the many children left orphaned or abandoned during the conflict. Domestic violence against women increased as a result of the stress, trauma, and social disorder that emerged during and following the conflict. Ethnically mixed families experienced especially difficult problems as ethnic cleansing forced people to make untenable choices for survival.

The economic impact of intrastate conflict on women was severe. Compounding the general poverty and hardship caused by war was women’s lack of access to the means of production, particularly land. In Rwanda, for example, women had no right to the land owned by their dead husbands or parents. In countries where women did have access to land, they often lacked the resources needed to farm. In all case study countries, women’s participation in the labor force increased during the course of the conflicts. However, when ex-combatants returned home to their communities, women were often the first to lose their jobs during the post-conflict transition.

The consequences of the post-conflict economic collapse were predictably worse for women, given the cultural, social, and economic context of gender relations. Women’s nutritional status declined disproportionately, as did girl’s health and education levels. Women-headed households, women refugee returnees, and socially vulnerable women all experienced marked economic declines during the post-conflict transition.

The political impact of conflict many times actually created opportunities for women to increase their public roles and responsibilities. In the absence of men, women took on leadership roles in both civic and political institutions. Women took an exceptionally active and visible role in peace processes and reconciliation efforts. Following brief periods of disenfranchisement after the signing of the peace accords, women dramatically increased their participation in the post-conflict political arena. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, El Salvador, and Georgia, the number of women parliamentarians increased, along with the number of women holding positions in national ministries.

Women's Organizations In Post-Conflict Societies

The CDIE investigation looked at the emergence of women's organizations during the post-conflict transition and analyzed the factors affecting their performance and impact. Moreover, the study examined the nature and impact of international assistance to women's organizations and discussed the problem areas in these interventions.

"Women's organizations," according to the study, refer to all voluntary women-run organizations that promote women's welfare and gender equality. CDIE cites four broad factors that contributed to the growth of women's organizations: (1) collapse of the traditional social order and increased participation of women in public life; (2) disillusionment with the return of the status quo despite formal commitments to gender equity; (3) political space created by the transition government; and (4) international donor assistance.

Women's organizations during post-conflict transition periods engaged in activities across every key sector. Moreover, women's organizations played key roles in promoting democracy and human rights for all citizens. Women's organizations expanded their agendas to address

the challenges of rebuilding war-torn societies—from reconstituting national political institutions to reconciling former adversaries in local communities. For example, in Rwanda, Pro-Femmes/Twese Hamwe Collective is an association of 35 organizations. Pro-Femmes made significant contributions to opening a dialogue between Tutsis and Hutus—a formidable challenge in post-genocide Rwanda. Pro-Femmes promoted communication among government agencies, women's organizations, and donor groups to facilitate expanded and more effective targeting of assistance to women. Pro-Femmes also played an important role in influencing national policies and programs across sectors.

Women's organizations made significant achievements in spite of numerous constraints. These constraints included cultural and social factors, economic problems,

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absence of effective administrative and management skills, and lack of communication and cooperation across organizations.

Despite these obstacles, the emergence of women's organizations during the period of post-conflict transition enhanced women's empowerment as individuals and as groups. Women's organizations provided assistance to women across sectors to help them rebuild their lives, their families, and their communities. Economically, women's organizations developed income-generating activities that enabled women to become self-reliant and self-confident. Politically, women became empowered through civic education and participation in government at various levels. These efforts raised gender awareness at the community level and in national political life.

The Role of International Assistance

The international community played an important role in contributing to the growth and development of women's organizations. International donors provided material and technical support to a broad range of women's organizations—building human resource capacities in management, accounting, and technical skills. Of equal importance is the legitimization donor funding gave to women's organizations. By recognizing and funding these organizations, donors lent credibility and legitimacy, expanding the political space for women's groups to operate and be successful.

At the same time, international donor assistance suffered from limitations that impeded the effectiveness of outside assistance during the crucial period of post-conflict transition.

Shifting donor priorities and the short duration of funding forced organizations to hastily adopt agendas that may not have suited their skills and capacities. A significant problem for women's organizations was the administrative and financial requirements for donor assistance, such as proposals, budgets, reports, and monitoring and evaluation. CDIE's report notes the high opportunity costs associated with the lack of skilled personnel to take on the reporting requirements. Another problem is that often a few, highly visible organizations received the majority of funding. Little or no donor coordination contributed to this problem, along with limited dissemination of information about available resources. Finally, the international development community has yet to develop a coherent policy framework for

assisting women's organizations in post-conflict societies.

Lessons and Recommendations

CDIE concludes its study with eight important recommendations for donors to support women and five recommendations to strengthen women's organizations. To improve the lives of women in post-conflict societies, the study recommends that USAID and other donor agencies:

- Build on women's economic and political gains;
- Pay greater attention to civilian security;
- Emphasize cost-effective indigenous approaches to treat traumatized women and men;

- Make concerted efforts with the rest of the international community to prevent sexual abuse of women;
- Promote microcredit;
- Support the implementation of property rights reforms for women;
- Promote greater women's participation in post-conflict elections; and
- Promote women's political participation.

Recommendations for strengthening donor support to women's organizations include:

- Continue to foster women's organizations;
- Review funding requirements for women's organizations;

- Consider multiyear funding;
- Promote sustainability of women's organizations; and
- Integrate women's organizations in large-scale development initiatives in post-conflict societies.

USAID's Center for Development Information and Evaluation, in cooperation with the Office of Women in Development, is holding an international conference, "Intrastate Conflict and Women," on December 12-13, 2000, in Washington, D.C., to discuss the findings and recommendations of this assessment and to provide a forum for other international agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and experts to share their own experiences on this critical subject.