

The why and how
of women's political influence
in fragile contexts



Introduction

In recent years, recognition for the **importance** of women's political participation and influence has grown. **Why** is this? Generally speaking the evidence shows that democracies with a **higher female participation** are stronger and **better performing democracies**. When it comes to **fragile settings**: one of the causes of fragility is failing, non-responsive and non-inclusive governance. Gender inequality and the exclusion of marginalized women are often deeply entrenched in these settings and both contribute to and are exacerbated by poor governance. Yet, it has become clear that even in these challenging circumstances, the profound **political change processes** associated with crisis situations can **offer a window of opportunity** to dislodge deeply engrained gender inequalities and actually strengthen women's rights and participation in new political settlements and thus improve governance. Moreover, it has been found that if **women can genuinely influence peace processes, the outcomes are often better** and more fully implemented, because of the issues they bring to the table, **strengthening inclusive governance and thereby political legitimacy**. Women often play an important role in building peace at family and community level, thereby providing a solid foundation for national peace processes.

All of these insights have found their way into an **international framework**, consisting of the ground-breaking UNSCR 1325 (2000), the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States (2011) and the Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDGs 5 and 16 (2015). This has also led to an increase in international funding for the issue. However, a global review of UNSCR 1325 implementation shows that the international community is still failing to effectively support women's political participation in FCAS. This is partly because of lack of capacity and commitment, but also because there is too little knowledge and evidence about **how to do this well**. This policy brief will offer both general recommendations based on a global literature review and three case studies and more specific recommendations geared towards the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other European donors.

The Netherlands has always had strong policies on gender equality and has been a vocal advocate for the full implementation of **UNSCR 1325** (which was adopted when NL had a seat on the UNSC). Similarly, investing in security and stability has long been a focal area of Dutch foreign policy. The new Dutch policy on foreign trade and development cooperation, **'Investing in Global Prospects'** (April 2018), has made advancing gender equality and improving the position of women and girls, particularly the most disadvantaged (marginalized women), into a cross-cutting goal. Preventing conflicts and instability on the one hand and reducing poverty and social inequality on the other are two of the new policy's four objectives. Budget increases are foreseen in these areas, and this offers an opportunity to further improve on the existing investments and efforts. A new policy framework to succeed the **Dialogue and Dissent** strategic partnerships is being prepared.

Dutch policy should always also be seen through the lens of its membership of the **European Union**. As a member state, The Netherlands has a dual responsibility, both in influencing and creating EU policies and budgets and in implementing them. The **Gender Action Plan II** (2016-2020) is the key framework and it includes enhancing women's voice and participation as one of its four objectives. The EU is currently in the process of finalising a EU Strategic Approach to Women Peace and Security, to complement the EU Comprehensive Approach to UNSCR 1325 and 1820. The recommendations in this policy brief will address the EU as well.

CARE Netherlands is heavily engaged in supporting women's political participation in FCAS. One of its primary vehicles for this is the **'Every Voice Counts'** (EVC) programme in six countries, funded from the Dialogue and Dissent strategic partnership. EVC is built on the conviction that **governance can only be truly effective when it is inclusive**, i.e. making sure that marginalized women and youth have access to the public sphere, that their voices are heard in decision-making processes and that they have economic independence. Political participation of women at national level does not necessarily increase inclusive governance. It is therefore imperative to link women's political participation at local and national level.

In order to provide guidance for the EVC programme, CARE commissioned a literature review on the political participation and influence of marginalized women in FCAS which was complemented by three country case studies in Afghanistan, Burundi and Rwanda. This policy brief is based on these documents as well as some interviews with CARE staff, Ministry of Foreign Affairs staff and the Netherlands Institute for Multi-Party Democracy (NIMD).

For starters: a few observations

The subject of women's political participation and influence in FCAS is very wide. It is useful to distinguish between women's participation during conflict resolution and the overhaul of legal and institutional frameworks and more overall governance in post-conflict settings or situations of protracted fragility. This policy brief will touch on both.

It is important to always be alert to the **different levels of participation** and not mistaking access for participation or influence. Mere access/presence is a necessary but insufficient condition for participation, defined as the ability to actively raise voice and interests. The highest level is that of influence, i.e. actually having an impact on political and public decision-making.

Broad and deep patterns of gender discrimination, inequality and insecurity form the context within which work on women's political participation should be placed, both in fragile and non-fragile settings. In fragile settings gender inequality is often even more outspoken and challenging. Gender inequality affects women's socio-economic status, her assets and her (bodily) autonomy and these in turn have a great impact on her political participation. Gender discrimination also intersects with other aspects of women's lives, such as race, disability, ethnicity and this needs to be taken into account for effective programming. It is important to acknowledge that the personal cost of political participation can be extremely high, including stigma and moral judgement, political or even physical/sexual violence and harassment and undue public scrutiny.

Golden opportunities: Women in peace and political change processes

When a country is trying to work its way out of conflict and create political institutions that will serve a more peaceful future, this can offer an opportunity to advance women's interests within the new political settlement. The three case studies confirm this: in Afghanistan, Burundi and Rwanda women have indeed managed to bring about constitutional and other legal changes and structural reforms in policy and institutions. However, there are big implementation gaps, partly as a result of lack of both real political support and funding and tacit resistance among male political elites. Often, newly established institutions responsible for gender issues are weak and politically isolated.

'It's party time': political parties and governance institutions

Both in times of transition and in more steady states, political parties in FCAS are the main gatekeepers of women's political participation. Unfortunately, they act more as a barrier than a supporter, as women are excluded by both structure and culture. Sidelining women in women's wings or leagues without real power is an example of structural barriers. The cultural barriers spring from the fact that political parties are often personalised around male individual leaders, who do 'business' in informal clientelist networks in spaces that women cannot access. As a result, even if women are formally present, they can often not convert this presence into influence.

Quotas for women have definitely helped to challenge stereotypes, but they have not translated into substantive influence. This is due to limited access to decision-making roles, the fact that often the male elites deliberately select conservative candidates, informal decision-making processes and a legitimacy gap of women who enter politics through quota systems. Once in office, women politicians are often incentivised to support the party agenda rather than promote gender equality.

Moreover, the case studies show that it is mostly women from elite backgrounds who enter national level politics and that women are far less well represented at local level. Often quotas do not extend to that level and there is, unlike at parliament level, no remuneration for political participation at the local level, creating an extra barrier for women living in poverty. Yet, the decisions at this level are very relevant to women and local level politics can be a good place for building political capacity.

Meanwhile, in the corridors: informal power

Women's political influence in FCAS is particularly restricted by two different types of non-formal power: the informal networks within formal institutions that we alluded to above and the power of customary institutions.

Customary institutions tend to be very powerful in FCAS and have extensive control over women's lives as they often play a central role in maintaining societal gender norms. Customary leaders also fulfil a gatekeeper function between community interests and formal state actors and there are often complex linkages between formal and customary power. When engaging with such customary leaders one needs to understand the gender implications of customary power, which can be either positive or negative. In its EVC programme, CARE has seen powerful examples of mullahs in Afghanistan supporting social norm change. This is an important reminder to challenge assumptions about drivers of change.

Claiming space: civil society and women's movements

Given the significant barriers to formal political participation, mobilising through civil society is a **critical alternative route**. How do women mobilise and how can that best be supported?

The experience of conflict often causes women to mobilise in unprecedented ways in order to **campaign for peace** and promote their interest in post-conflict political processes. In such contexts international support can create 'new democratic spaces' for women to **pressure policy processes from the outside**. This type of activism can serve as an alternative route for women to build up a political profile. However, for this route to be effective, developing collective strength is crucial. **Effectively supporting** women in this regard, involves fostering **broad coalitions** of women across civil society, politics and public institutions, recognising plurality, connecting them across levels, linking them to political processes and supporting them to build platforms and capacities. At the same time, one always has to recognise that the ideological differences that affect broader society can also play out in women's civil society. Women are not a homogeneous group. Recognising this and providing long-term and strategic support, can help build advocacy coalitions across ideological differences in support of gender equality.

A major challenge is that mainstream women's CSOs in fragile states are often elite dominated and unrepresentative and local level women's organisations are less visible and do not have the connections and institutional capacity to receive international support. Intermediary organisations, such as women's funds, are often better able to reach the whole spectrum of women led organisations. In addition to core funding (rather than project-based, short term funding), they can be enablers of building coalitions.

Recommendations

Connect support for women's participation to broader work on conflict and fragility

Women's political exclusion does not exist in a vacuum. Wider aspects of fragility have an impact on women and their ability to influence political life and women's political influence can improve governance and reduce fragility. Perspectives on the role of women can even play a central part in the conflict.

Work in support of women's political participation therefore needs to be based on **a thorough and regularly updated gendered political analysis**, so that opportunities can be seized and unintended negative impacts prevented or mitigated. It is particularly important to build more knowledge and evidence about how to influence informal institutions and power structures.

For the Dutch Government:

- As part of its commitment to applying a conflict-sensitive approach, reintroduce the systematic use of instruments for political economy analysis with a strong gender component and use these as living instruments to deepen understanding and improve programming. Given internal capacity constraints, engage external expertise for this.
- At country level, share such analyses with EU partners as part of their commitment to the EU GAP II, and insist on the consistent use of gender analyses as the basis for joint programming and ensure that these gendered political economy analyses inform the political dialogue.
- Insist that all its partners working on peace, security and governance apply a gender lens to their work and ask them to report back on it based on clear gender indicators.
- Because capacity in this field is relatively scarce, optimise cooperation with UN (e.g. peacebuilding fund), EU and INGOs.

Working on norms and attitudes

The importance of social norms cannot be underestimated: time and again norms and attitudes show up as major drivers of exclusion. Fragility can exacerbate such exclusion and vice-versa, but conflict situations can also offer a window of opportunity for a shift in gender norms. Quite often these positive shifts are followed by a pushback when conflict has ended, leading to an implementation gap.

The only way in which lasting change can be achieved is if activities to build women's capacity and reform institutions, is accompanied by efforts to **address discriminatory social norms and attitudes**. Given the importance of customary leaders, including religious leaders, in both maintaining and changing social and gender norms, their involvement in programming should seriously be considered.

Changes in norms and attitudes take time and are non-linear. This requires support with a long-term view and preferably **longer funding cycles**.

For the Dutch Government:

- Informed by a good political economy analysis and contacts with well-informed CSO activists and others, always keep an eye open for opportunities to shift norms. Don't assume that things will always be the way they are.
- At the same time, in view of the size and complexity of the challenge of supporting social norm change, insist on realistic levels of ambition of programmes, with theories of change that show a good understanding of social norm change. Incentivise this by accepting and appreciating intermediate and qualitative results in this area, with a focus on sustainable change.
- Continue and strengthen the cooperation with partners from the South, including women's funds that provide core funding and accompaniment of organisations that cannot otherwise access funds. The programme 'Leading from the South' is a good example of such programming.
- One of the challenges of GAP II is that its funding mechanisms do not favour working directly with CSOs. The Netherlands has a strong comparative advantage and it is recommended that (a) it continues its partnership approach with CSOs, particularly those that work on grassroots level change, (b) at country level encourages other EU member states and the EU Delegation to work more with CSOs in the implementation of the GAP II and (c) advocates for inclusion of work with CSOs in the next EU funding framework.

Adopt a multi-sectoral approach

As we have seen, there is a wide range of structural and practical barriers to women's political participation and influence. Women's lack of economic and social rights limits their access to political rights and vice versa. Because of this interdependence of dimensions of inequality, a two-pronged approach is necessary: **combining work on the practical and structural constraints to women's voice and leadership with gender mainstreaming in sectoral programming**. Only in this way can possible post-conflict gains on paper be consolidated and turned into concrete and lasting gains.

For the Dutch Government:

- What gets measured gets done. In order to ensure optimal impact of the two-pronged approach (mainstreaming plus targeted support), develop a framework of indicators to track progress on gender, shared among the thematic divisions of the MoFA. The result frameworks of major programmes, such as the successor of the current Dialogue and Dissent, should be explicit about the gender aspects of inclusive governance.
- The three-pronged approach towards gender equality of specific action, mainstreaming and political dialogue, which lies at the foundation of the EU GAP II is the right one. The Netherlands should hold the EU accountable for implementing it.
- The Netherlands should advocate for a next EU budget (2021–2027) that sets appropriate targets for gender specific action and mainstreaming.
- A qualitative review of the GAP II implementation shows that there is scope for enhancing impact by making efforts more mutually reinforcing. At country level, the Netherlands should actively contribute to coordination with other member states and CSOs and encourage the EU delegation to take on this role.
- Stimulate for the successors of the FLOW and Dialogue and Dissent frameworks a multi-sectoral approach by encouraging more integration of the dimensions of economic empowerment, bodily autonomy and political voice and allowing some of the funding to be used for practical activities.

Work with a range of stakeholders

Limiting support for women's political participation to women and institutions working on gender issues, is not effective. It is important to find allies at all levels and build coalitions with decision-makers and others in a strong position to promote women's empowerment. At local level this includes both formal and customary institutions and leaders. It is also very relevant to work with men and boys – from community level upwards - to address harmful gender identities, including masculinities.

For the Dutch Government:

- The link between programming and change at local and national level is critical – continue to support programmes that build those links and that build coalitions with adequate space for grassroots perspectives.
- Supporting change from the bottom-up will also require more flexible funding for CSOs to encourage access to funding by a wide range of women's organisations from the South. Requirements such as elaborate Theories of Change and prescriptive log-frames and theme selection create a bias against smaller, grassroots oriented change agents.
- Embassies can use their convening role to, informed by a sound political economy and gender analysis, seek and exploit opportunities to find allies in support of women's political participation outside the 'usual suspects' and link them with programmes.
- Support programmes that work with political parties and female politicians with a long- term view (beyond elections and quotas).
- Continue to support organisations engaging men and boys to bring about change in harmful social norms about masculinities and be open to work with customary leaders.



**The why and how
of women's political influence
in fragile contexts**

This is a publication of:

CARE Nederland

Parkstraat 19

2514 JD Den Haag

+31 70 310 50 50

general@carenederland.org