

The political participation and influence of marginalised women in fragile and conflict affected settings



*Executive Summary*¹

Introduction

Recent years have seen a growing recognition among the international development community of the importance of supporting women's political participation and influence in fragile and conflict affected settings (FCAS). This is in part due to a strengthened international normative framework on this issue. This strengthened framework is also reflected in increased international funding for gender equality in FCAS. However, a recent global review of the implementation of UNSCR 1325 (Coomaraswamy, 2015) found that the international community is still failing to effectively support women's political participation in FCAS. There are a number of reasons for this failure, one major obstacle is limited knowledge and evidence about why women's political participation matters in these contexts and how best it can be supported. A literature review by Clare Castillejo, summarized here, seeks to contribute to developing the knowledge base in this area. In the spring of 2018 this review will be completed with field research in a number of fragile contexts, supported by CARE Nederland under the *Every Voice Counts* programme.

In supporting women's political participation and influence it is critical to distinguish between women's **presence** within political processes, their **active participation** in these processes, and their **ability to actually influence** decision making. For the purpose of this study **women's political participation** is defined as their ability to actively raise their voice and interests within political and public debates. **Women's political influence** is defined as their ability to have an impact on political and public decision making. Participation and influence can take the form of marginalised women engaging directly in political processes or with political institutions, as well as successfully holding to account power holders within these institutions and processes. Critically, women's mere access to or presence within political processes and institutions should not be understood as equalling meaningful participation and influence, although these may be an important pre-requisite.

The problem

The reality is that in most such contexts women continue to be excluded from formal political processes. This is unsurprising given that key processes such as negotiating peace agreements and drafting constitutions are mostly controlled by male elites that strongly resist women's demands for inclusion. Indeed, the review of women's participation in peace processes (Castillo Diaz, 2010) concluded that "women are conspicuously underrepresented". Even in contexts where women have played a significant role in ending conflict – as in South Sudan or Sierra Leone – they have been marginalised within subsequent discussions over the nature of the state.

Fragile contexts – particularly those in transition from conflict or authoritarian rule – often undergo democratisation or governance reform, which can potentially provide new opportunities for women's political participation and influence. In most cases political parties are the main gatekeeper to access these opportunities, whether at local or national level. However, parties in FCAS tend to be highly exclusionary of women. Indeed, they act as a major barrier to women's political participation and

¹ This is an executive summary of a literature review written by Clare Castillejo (consultant) that was commissioned by CARE Nederland in 2018.

influence, given that they control the selection of women candidates at elections, the promotion of women into decision-making roles in party and government, and the development of policy agendas. Faced with these barriers to formal political participation, women have campaigned successfully for the adoption of parliamentary quotas, often with international support. However, quotas cannot be assumed to deliver gender equality policy outcomes, and in many contexts women's increased presence through quotas has not translated into substantive influence. There are a number of reasons for this:

- despite increased numbers within the legislature, women are often not given decision-making roles in the executive or key committees;
- political parties deliberately select socially conservative female candidates or because new female parliamentarians are unwilling to challenge party leaders;
- informal institutions and unequal capabilities mean that women in office do not have genuine power.

Informal rules and institutions in FCAS often play a more important role than formal frameworks, while women typically have very little influence over this informal arena. These rules and institutions frequently discriminate against women, and particularly women from marginalised groups such as low caste or minority women, young women, or female household heads. As a result, even where women are able to influence formal political processes, this may not be matched by a real shift in power relations.

According to Castillejo (2012) women's political influence in FCAS is particularly restricted by two different types of non-formal power. These are:

- a) The power of informal networks within formal institutions, which disadvantages women in multiple ways (exclusion from male patronage networks that control decision-making; situations where formal rules do not apply and patronage relations or informal payments are required to gain access or receive services; situations where policy influence heavily relies on informal relationships, dominated by male elites, rather than on formal citizen-state engagements).
- b) The power of customary institutions, which tend to be very powerful in FCAS and have particularly extensive control over women's lives. These institutions often play a central role in maintaining societal gender norms and have authority over issues of importance to women, such as personal status laws and access to community resources. Customary leaders often represent community interests in dialogue with formal state actors. Given the patriarchal nature of most customary institutions, this can result in women's interests being inadequately represented and their needs remaining unmet.

International development actors supporting peacebuilding and reform in FCAS often fail to prioritise or effectively promote women's participation. As Castillejo (2012) describes, international actors tend to:

- prioritise short-term stability over genuine inclusion;
- focus heavily on centre and formal institutions and processes while overlooking the informal and local realms where women often mobilise;
- fail to address structural barriers that marginalised women may face in accessing formal spaces;
- are reluctant to work on sensitive issues related to tradition and identity that women's political participation throws up.

Critically, programmes that do promote women's political participation and influence are often disconnected from key decision-making spaces and processes.

Women's political mobilisation and empowerment

There is a small but growing body of evidence regarding effective ways to support women's participation and influence within change processes in FCAS. Firstly, women should be supported to participate in the most crucial foundational moments of peacebuilding and state building (peace

negotiations, constitutional reform etc.), as these processes establish the future framework women's rights, power and access to resources (OECD, 2013). Moreover, a multi-pronged approach to promoting women's participation and influence is required, including advocating for formal commitments to inclusivity within political processes; supporting women to demand inclusion; establishing appropriate channels for women to engage with change processes; incentivising male leaders to include more women; including gender experts in technical work around political processes and reforms; and providing gender training to all those involved (UNIFEM 2010).

Advancing women's formal political influence in FCAS must involve supporting political parties to become vehicles that both channel the interests of women citizens and support the participation of women political actors at all levels. This requires moving beyond a limited programming focus on quotas and elections and seeking to enhance women's influence and ability to promote gender issues once in office, as well as working with male party leaders to demonstrate the value of women's participation and incentivise them to meaningfully include women in party, parliamentary and government business. It also requires greater engagement on issues related to party democracy and reform, including by supporting women party members at local and national level to build cross-party alliances and to push for internal party reforms such as more democratic decision-making, internal quotas, and gender-responsive structures and bylaws. Given the significant barriers to participation and influence that women face within formal processes in FCAS, mobilising through civil society is a critical alternative route for women to influence political decision making and public life. International support for civil society in FCAS can create "new democratic spaces" for women to pressure the policy process from outside. Civil society activism can also provide an important route for women to build up a political profile and enter formal politics without having to progress through political parties.

Women's political marginalisation means that collective strength is crucial to amplify their power. Hence support should seek to foster broad coalitions of women across civil society, politics, and public institutions, and should encourage these coalitions to develop a common political agenda, to become effective political actors, and to engage with political and institutional change processes. A major challenge is that mainstream women's CSOs in fragile states are often elite dominated and unrepresentative. Therefore, fostering both professional and grassroots women's organisations and helping build long-term relationships between them is critical to ensure poor women's everyday concerns inform national advocacy by elite women. Funding should be targeted to supporting relationship building between different types of women's organisations, particularly national and grassroots, in order to overcome challenges of legitimacy and representation. Equally important is to invest in promoting the political role of CSOs and strengthen their lobby and advocacy capacities as well as their legitimacy to represent women's needs and interests, especially in contexts where risks to women groups and women CSOs are relatively high.

Women in FCAS – particularly poor or marginalised women – may have very limited capacity or confidence to engage in public life. Support for **women's capacity development** is therefore critical. This support needs to take place at multiple levels recognising the linkages between individual and collective empowerment.

At the individual level, women's household level power can be supported through a range of measures, and women's leadership skills and political capacities need to be built among young and non-elite women, to enhance their future participation and influence in both civil society and formal politics. But this it is not enough. System capacity requires individual competencies *and* collective capabilities appropriate for their respective contexts. Such systems capacity building could include a focus on strengthening the institutional systems and structures of women's organisations, linking them to one another and strengthening their relationship to key actors, processes and institutions beyond the women's movement. In particular, an emphasis on building networking capacities can help smaller grassroots women's organisations link to bigger women's CSOs and have their interests

represented in national level advocacy. And to achieve influence women require the capacity to work in politically and socially strategic ways to advance their objectives.

As to informal networks within formal institutions, support for women's political participation must engage with the way informality shapes formal institutions and the gendered impact of this. This can include enabling women to challenge the informality they encounter in political, judicial and administrative institutions. For example, by supporting women to form professional associations that can speak out about practices of informality and exclusion, by strengthening mechanisms for women to raise concerns through institutions such as ombudsmen, human rights commissions or anti-corruption commissions, and for development actors by applying a gender lens to their broader work on corruption, patronage and accountability in FCAS, recognising that these governance challenges have specific implications for women.

And finally, influencing the power of customary institutions, which have authority over issues of importance to women. Deep rooted and powerful discriminatory gender norms play a central role in sustaining gender inequalities, and act as a major barrier to women's political participation and influence in FCAS. It is critical that support for women's political empowerment includes efforts to address these norms. However, an OECD review found that gender programming in FCAS focuses heavily on building women's capacity and reforming institutions and services to be gender sensitive, without recognising that such activities will have limited impact if not accompanied by efforts to address discriminatory social norms and attitudes. As Wright (2014) argues, working to shift culturally engrained attitudes requires engaging with a wider range of stakeholders and particularly with men and boys. Informal, religious and traditional institutions and actors often play an important role in perpetuating discriminatory norms and attitudes. According to Domingo et al (2013) engagement with such non-state actors and informal institutions, can therefore be an effective entry point for addressing discriminatory social norms.

Broadening and deepening support for women's political participation and influence

1. Connecting to broader work on conflict and fragility

Gender programming frequently fails to seize the opportunities presented by broader strategies that address conflict and fragility, including international support to peacebuilding, statebuilding, institutional reform or economic recovery. Gender programming in FCAS usually takes into account the direct impacts of conflict or violence on women, but largely neglects the impacts of wider aspects of fragility – such as identity politics, clientelism and corruption, weak institutions, or unstable political settlements – on gender equality and specifically the ability for women to influence political and public life (OECD, 2017). Those supporting women's empowerment in FCAS need to ask both how different aspects of conflict and fragility impact gender equality *and* how women's empowerment in political and other spheres can help advance transitions out of fragility. This means that programming must be based on a holistic understanding of how women's political exclusion relates to broader political-economy dynamics in a given context.

2. Working on gender norms and attitudes

It is critical that support for women's political empowerment includes efforts to address deep rooted discriminatory social norms, as mentioned above. Moreover, it is important to note that changes in norms and attitudes about gender are inevitably slow and non-linear, whereas donor funded gender equality programmes often have a relatively short life span, making them unsuited to fostering such long-term change or to learning about what contributes to gender equality progress over time. Recent evaluations (e.g. NORAD, 2015) have found that long term support to gender equality - beyond typical 3-4-year programme cycles – has been useful in supporting a shift in social norms.

3. Adopting a multi sectoral approach

There are a wide range of structural and practical barriers to women's political participation and influence in FCAS, including barriers related to poverty, insecurity, or human capability. A holistic understanding of women's rights can reveal the ways in which women's lack of economic and social rights limits their access to political rights. Effective support for women's political influence must therefore involve combining targeted support focused on advancing gender equality with mainstreaming of gender into sectoral programming. It must also involve multidimensional approaches that address both the practical and structural constraints to women's voice, decision-making and leadership.

4. Working with a range of stakeholders

There is increasing recognition of the importance of working with a much wider range of stakeholders at every level to advance women's political participation and influence, wider than working with women or with actors / institutions that engage on gender. This ranges from building coalitions and networks with key decision-makers and stakeholders at the national level to engaging with both formal and customary institutions at the local level. And there is a growing body of evidence on the importance of working with men and boys to address harmful gender identities – including masculinities - that contribute to gender discrimination and women's political exclusion.

5. Working politically to advance women's participation and influence

Recent research suggests that work on gender in FCAS, including on women's political participation, is rarely based on solid analysis of how gender inequalities relate to broader political economy factors, power dynamics and contestations (Koester, 2015). This is problematic as it means that such programmes are frequently based on weak or unrealistic theories of change that are not grounded in local political realities. A failure to understand the political economy of gender inequality also results in programmes focusing on the outcomes of gender inequality rather than its determinants.

Strong analysis and evidence generation are required to inform a more politically smart and contextually relevant way of working on gender issues – including women's political participation - in FCAS. Politically smart support for women's political empowerment must be tailored to countries specific institutional, social and political environment and to the societal actors involved. They must be based on an understanding of how reform takes place and is sustained, and the opportunities for doing so, as well as drivers of resistance. This involves working with a wider range of actors and institutions to identify common interests, and developing flexible programmes that can adapt to changing circumstances or lessons about what programme activities work well or less well. It is particularly important to build more knowledge and evidence about how to influence the informal institutions and power structures that play such a large role in perpetuating gender discrimination and excluding women from political influence in FCAS – an area about which still relatively little is known.