

## Women in war

A summary of take-aways, by *Clodagh Quain* and *Christian Dietrich*

### **Undervalued**

- Women play central roles in agriculture, the care and education of children, and household management in many developing countries. However, they are frequently suppressed members of the societies in which they live. The confinement of women to traditional roles limits their engagement in political life and prevents inclusiveness.
- A combination of cultural and socio-economic factors further constrains their room for manoeuvre, especially in conflict situations. Traditional norms, societal tasks, limited economic autonomy, and domestic violence all risk undermining gender equality.
- Dealing with women in war requires a contextual understanding of the conflict and the main drivers of instability, as well as a thorough investigation of women's needs through direct contact with them.

### **Victims**

- Sexual violence has a number of negative effects: it burdens communities, stigmatises individuals, lessens the social value of women, and causes long-term economic harm.
- Full care for cases of sexual abuse is hampered by dysfunctional justice systems during conflicts, the limited provision of services, and competing resource allocation in the field. Medical staff are also faced with legal barriers and scarce resources. Victims of sexual violence must overcome a number of cultural taboos and trade-offs before visiting a clinic, which often limits medical care to life-threatening conditions.
- Beyond general medication and psychological care, livelihood and social support are central to recovery. Women offered with economic support and engaged in projects are more likely to successfully deal with the trauma of sexual violence.
- However, crises are also opportunities to change gender views. In addressing issues of sexual violence in terms of empowerment, education and development, women can undertake a more proactive role and shape their own future. Yet the widespread assumption of female vulnerability conceals women's resilience to conflict.
- International humanitarian law protects women in war. These efforts, however, may be undermined by national laws – which vary significantly according to religion and tradition.

### **Empower – not victimise**

- While men are often leaders in their community, women tend to have less visible societal roles. Increased political participation and economic autonomy, however, can help tackle the prevailing narrative of women as victims. Empowering women to activate their full rights as citizens is a vital building block for conflict-resilient social structures.
- Documentation of sexual violence is an important tool to hold perpetrators accountable and counter the damaging effects of impunity after conflict.

## **Mind – and fill – the gaps**

- Although the negative impact of gender narratives and conditions for women is well known among Western development and security policymakers, there is still a considerable implementation gap. Bridging that gap requires well-functioning channels of communication based on trust in order to engage with women and fully assess their needs.
- It is not enough to implement gender-sensitive policies: mindsets also need to be gender-sensitive. Gender equality is not the same as gender awareness. While constructive handling of gender issues is crucial to a durable resolution of conflicts, policies must not be limited to regulating behaviour – mentalities matter, too.
- Gender equality is an item often excluded from or marginalised on the political agenda. Gender balance among peace negotiators must thus be supported, and their gender expertise strengthened.
- The overall state of gender equality and efforts to promote women's social, political and economic integration is indicative of a country's stability. The frequency of impunity may well increase during conflict and must be countered through transitional justice and the rule of law.
- Women's empowerment necessitates getting men on board for lasting change. The EU has promoted women's political engagement in conflict resolution, included more women in decision-making, and provided training and funding to boost gender expertise.

## **Design – for and by women**

- Both the political tools and the development assistance at the EU's disposal can target structural drivers of conflict affecting women. The European External Action Service is working closely with DG DEVCO in this regard. There is further scope for the international community to tap into women's knowledge.
- The enduring impact of war on victims can be partly resolved by a systematic approach to social support. Ensuring protection throughout the process will create a sense of ownership for women.
- A transformative political agenda that protects and empowers women in conflict will need to account for pre-existing conditions and be mindful of women's needs: for instance, specialised facilities for women and girls are often lacking and/or inaccessible.
- Gender issues should be taken into account when planning CSDP missions and drafting peace-building agendas.