

Aiming High, Reaching Low

Four Fundamentals for Gender-Responsive State-building

Current external state-building strategies encounter severe difficulties in implementing policy commitments to gender-responsive engagement with fragile states. Because certain areas for intervention are stereotyped as gender-relevant at the expense of others, gender considerations are too often sidelined to subordinate parallel tracks and thus isolated from priority areas for intervention. Cognisant of the many challenges involved in state-building, this policy brief identifies and discusses four building-blocks for the implementation of a gender-responsive approach to state-building in fragile contexts.

*Steven Schoofs
Rosan Smits*

Introduction

By adopting a series of resolutions dealing with the importance of addressing gender dynamics during peace-building processes and in situations of fragility, the UN Security Council (UNSC) has established a political framework to integrate gender into the international peace and security agenda¹. However, despite the formal recognition that gender matters for international peace and security, the UNSC has recently voiced its concern over the inadequate attempts made so far to integrate gender into peace-building programmes.

When it comes to translating these high-level commitments into concrete gender-responsive policies and programmes with impact on the ground, other multilateral policy forums such as the OECD/DAC, the European Commission and its individual Member States constitute the centre of gravity. In their programmes in so-called fragile contexts, the area of state-building in particular presents them with considerable difficulties when they seek to transform their commitment to gender-equality into pragmatic gender-responsive strategies.

State-building in fragile contexts: gender falling through the net

State-building and improving weak governance systems in fragile states have rapidly become a central element of international engagement in fragile states. However, due to the complexity and operational limitations posed by fragile contexts, a growing sense of realism about the likely achievements of externally driven state-building programmes has begun to temper international ambitions. As a result, the dominant tendency among international donors is to define a limited set of strategic priorities for their engagement in fragile contexts, such as the establishment of minimum conditions for security and delivery of basic services. On this list of priorities, 'gender' is generally seen as a luxury to be left aside until the supposedly gender-neutral objectives in the domains of security and governance have been achieved. Even when there is a commitment to integrate gender into state-building programmes, actual implementation often involves 'cherry-picking', manifested as a predisposition for interventions in gender-stereotyped programme areas such as health, education and sexual violence. The result is that problematic gender dynamics within the domains of security and governance are generally addressed in an ad-hoc and superficial manner (if at all). This has significant implications for the effectiveness of the current state-building agenda.

¹ UNSCR 1325 (2000) was the first and most high-profile resolution on women, peace and security. It was followed by e.g. UNSCR 1820 (June 2008), UNSCR 1888 (September 2009) and UNSCR 1889 (October 2009).

Given this emphasis on pragmatic realism in fragile contexts, there is a considerable risk that gender considerations will fall through the net of international state-building efforts. Therefore, the fundamental challenge is to dovetail high-level commitments to gender-equality with the need for realistic strategies in situations of fragility. At the very least, this requires international stakeholders to identify and capitalise on opportunities to make their pragmatic approach to state-building more gender-responsive.

Adopting a gender perspective can optimise state-building programmes

A critical first step in that endeavour is to avoid the trap of framing gender as an exclusively normative issue which merely complicates the already difficult task of building more effective and accountable states. Attention to gender during the design and implementation of state-building interventions can enhance the impact and effectiveness of international state-building interventions. Security Sector Reform (SSR) is illustrative in this regard. SSR support programmes tend to suffer from an excessive focus on strengthening formal state structures, notably in the areas of military infrastructure and operational capacities. This typically includes building barracks, prisons and courts, downsizing the army, demilitarising the police and restructuring lines of command. Yet in SSR programmes important issues such as building trust between security institutions and the population, and civilian oversight tend to be neglected – with the risk that the rather technical and institution-oriented SSR approach will fail because it does not address the underlying power dynamics that erode citizen security.

The corollary of such a technocratic approach is that gender-specific objectives for SSR are likely to be reduced to increasing the total number of women in the security sector, under the assumption that that sector will consequently become better equipped to respond to the specific security needs of women in society (e.g. protection against gender-based violence). However, increasing female participation in the security sector entails more than the creation of opportunities and incentives for women to enter the security forces: it should also involve an assessment of additional obstacles to female participation (see example of Burundi in box 1). In addition, building a truly gender-responsive

security sector requires a sound analysis and comprehensive addressing of the gender-specific security needs of intended beneficiaries (see example DR Congo in box 2).

The implication of the foregoing is that adopting a gender perspective during policy analysis, programming and implementation can help to bring programmatic interventions in the security and governance domains more in line with local opportunities and with local perspectives and needs². In addition, attention to the less tangible aspects of gender dynamics can provide a counterweight to an oftentimes overly strong focus on institution building in fragile environments. Interventions aiming to promote development and security will be more realistic and sustainable if they are adapted to local needs and concrete realities on the ground. Gender analysis is a critical tool for optimising state-building interventions in fragile contexts, as it helps to generate context-specific and evidence-based policies and programmes.

Burundi: Gender is more than just numbers.

The case of Burundi demonstrates that ticking the gender box by encouraging women to join the police does not necessarily lead to a more gender-balanced and gender-responsive police force. A comprehensive gender analysis explains why. First of all, cultural prejudices prevent women from applying to join the security forces. Secondly, female police officers encounter daily harassment and mistreatment from their male colleagues, as separate living quarters and sanitation are not provided. The security forces are therefore not a conducive environment for women to work in. Thirdly, as women in Burundi have an educational arrears compared with men, after they join the police force they find they are less qualified to participate in the supposedly gender-neutral police training programme and therefore remain in the lowest ranks. (Based on research conducted by a women's organisation in Burundi 'Dushirehamwe' in 2008 and by International Alert in 2009).

Box 1: Gender analysis as tool to optimise SSR in Burundi

² An ambition expressed in, for instance, *The OECD/DAC Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States* (April 2007).

DR Congo: Women's security needs as a human rights issue instead of key concern for SSR.

The key security concern for Congolese women in particular and Congolese communities in general is widespread sexual violence. However, this issue is still hardly addressed through SSR programmes to which a significant amount of donor money has been pledged; action is, however, being taken by smaller human rights programmes, many of which are non-governmental. Despite formal commitments to a comprehensive strategy on combating sexual violence from security forces, little progress is perceived on the ground. This does not make Congolese men and women confident that the security sector will actually be reformed in order to serve their needs.

Box 2: Gender analysis as tool to optimise SSR in DR Congo

Finding the margins for gender-positive change: Looking beyond the state

As in other areas of peace-building and state-building, the challenge is to join up analysis to concrete interventions. Too often, gender issues are considered but not followed through in actual programmes. To move from gender analysis to actual implementation of a gender-responsive approach to state-building requires that international actors ground their interventions in a broader historical and socio-political understanding of fragile contexts. A shift in thinking is indeed underway, as one of the emerging insights is that to be effective, state-building must pay much more attention to state–society relations. This evolution in thinking about state-building is to be welcomed, as it provides an opportunity to make international state-building efforts more responsive to problematic gender dynamics in fragile contexts.

One important issue that needs to be considered further in the context of state–society relations is that focusing exclusively on the state as an entry point for gender-positive change but ignoring the gender dynamics of state–society relations is likely to yield very few results. This is first of all because in societies with deeply-rooted gender asymmetries, the institutional domains of governance (both formal and traditional) are not insulated from the women-unfriendly socio-cultural attitudes in society. As a consequence, women are likely to have less contact with and access to male-dominated

state institutions, which means that they have little recourse to formal governance mechanisms for empowerment. Secondly, the reach of formal state institutions in fragile contexts is often shallow or may be contested by competing claims to power made by non-state actors. The result may be so-called ungoverned spaces, especially in peripheral areas, where the formal state is largely absent. In addition, formal governance institutions, even those at national level, may operate *de facto* according to informal and often neo-patrimonial rules. In the absence of a fully functioning formal state, traditional authority structures and informal power networks are most likely to mediate governance processes. It is particularly in societies with a strong patriarchal culture that non-state structures are just as likely as formal state institutions to function as an impediment to women's participation in governance

The foregoing suggests that there is a very real risk that attempts to make formal state institutions more responsive to women's concerns will not succeed as long as obstacles within society to women's empowerment remain unaddressed. Moreover, if international actors do not actively seek to understand the gender politics at work within the formal and informal domains of society, their efforts to enhance governance and development risk provoking the consolidation of existing gender inequalities. Thus, while building and reinforcing formal governance institutions are indispensable activities for long-term gender equality goals, there is a need to look beyond formal state institutions as well as traditional authority structures and consider the gendered dynamics of the interaction between the state and society at large. The adoption of a broader conception of state-building in fragile contexts, which involves addressing state–society relations in addition to building or rebuilding state institutions, provides a crucial starting point for gender-responsive state-building.

At the same time, this observation touches on the question of the extent to which social changes, including gender equality, can be engineered by the international community. Recent assessments of peace-building efforts undertaken in the last two decades point to the limitations of external 'social engineering' in fragile contexts. Instead, local drivers of change – whether social processes or actors – have proven to be a necessary precondition for lasting change. As such, external actors also need not to overestimate their own capacities to radically

re-shape deeply-rooted patriarchal structures in fragile societies. Yet, providing external support and protection at the right time and place to local drivers of gender-positive change that are too weak in the face of strong vested interests can be a realistic and effective strategy. This, however, requires external actors to actively integrate a gender perspective into broader context analyses of state–society relations in order that they understand the margins for change and subsequently support local capacities and opportunities for gender-positive change in fragile contexts (see example Afghanistan in box 3).

Improving local governance in Afghanistan in a gender-responsive manner. In order to secure some of the gains made in terms of governance reform in Afghanistan, both the Afghan government and international donor community have been investing in local governance. However, the complex reality of local governance in Afghanistan poses a significant challenge to the implementation of a gender-responsive approach to state-building.

Because of the historically limited presence of the Afghan state in peripheral areas, the population in the provinces relies heavily on informal and traditional governance mechanisms such as the shura (an ad hoc gathering of the adult male members of a community) to resolve community problems. Given that shuras enjoy much more public confidence than formal government, a strategy of linking shuras to formal local governance structures could endow local government with the necessary legitimacy. This is therefore considered to be a pragmatic and context-specific approach to building a functional and legitimate state in Afghanistan.

However, such a strategy would entail the risk of the gendered power dynamics of traditional authority structures being neglected. The predominance of male elders and customary law in shuras works to the disadvantage of Afghan women, as customary law throughout Afghanistan tends to grant women fewer rights. If national and international actors do not take this reality of local governance in Afghanistan into account, they run the risk that traditional gender divisions in the domain of local governance will be reinforced.

The Government of Afghanistan, in consultation with international donors, have set up a nationwide programme of community development

(the National Solidarity Program), in which villages have been given access to funds for small community projects. One of the conditions for villages to access funds is that they have to create a Community Development Council (CDC), a new community-level institution that resembles the traditional shura model. Communities have been actively encouraged to engage women directly or indirectly in these CDCs and in project formulation and implementation. CDCs effectively have more women's representation than the traditional shuras, and could thus potentially evolve into more gender-appropriate mechanisms of local governance. In this case, national and international actors effectively identified an opportunity to create more space for women in local governance (even if the results can only be modest so far). Combining 'traditional' elements with 'modern' elements could make newly established governance institutions at the local governance more legitimate, but more research is needed to better understand its impact on women's participation in local governance.

Box 3: Understanding the gender dynamics of local governance in Afghanistan

Towards implementation: Balancing intervention strategies

Ultimately, the consistent application of a gender perspective to policy and programming should be a means to an end: a gender-responsive state-building process. One important precondition for its success is that international actors work towards a more balanced and integrated approach to state-building. Whilst the awareness of the need for a reappraisal of fundamentals of the international state-building agenda is increasing, it goes against ingrained routines and structures and is therefore difficult to establish.

In actual practice, four clusters of intervention strategies based on the type of support and terrain of intervention can be identified (*see illustration 1*). Looking at the two axes, international donor programmes still predominantly involve interventions that target formal state institutions and exhibit a bias towards technical assistance, whereas society as an important intervention terrain is often pushed out of sight. As argued in the previous section, merely integrating gender objectives into

a state-oriented intervention strategy will not effectively contribute to rendering state institutions more responsive to women's concerns. An effective alternative is to complement state-oriented interventions with intervention strategies that seek to mobilise gender-transformative capacities at the broader level of society, reaching beyond the state and traditional non-state governance structures. It is hugely important to pursue this approach, to allow gender-sensitive state-building to materialise.

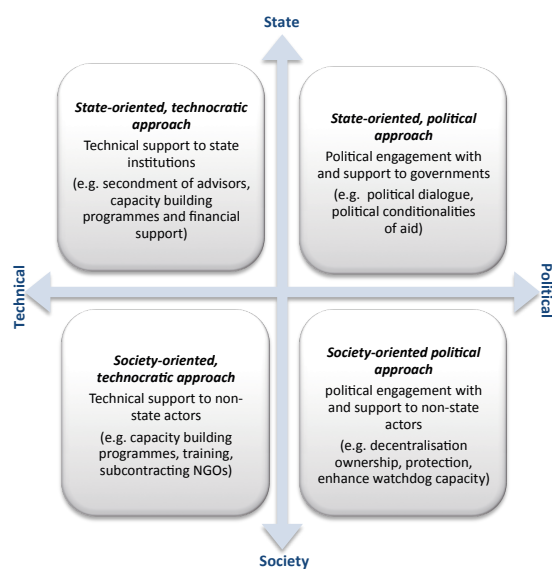


Illustration 1: Intervention matrix

But balancing support to state and civil society actors is not sufficient, since both may have a woman-unfriendly bias. A look at the horizontal axis of the intervention matrix (technical versus political assistance) confirms that technical support to building gender-responsive governance institutions should be counterbalanced by a more political approach to gender. Improving the position of women in fragile societies is essentially a socio-political question and should therefore be addressed accordingly. It involves addressing issues of power imbalance between men and women, and inequality in access to political, economic and social resources. By taking an assertive stance in support of women activists and addressing gender within frameworks for political dialogue, international donors have an important political role to play in actively defending the room to manoeuvre for women and men who are striving to change societal power relations from within.

In short, a tremendous asset to the international state-building agenda would be a concrete shift towards a stronger political focus and deepened understanding of and engagement with the powers

at play within the societal domain. To this end, a pragmatic and strategic entry point could be to support those who can actually bring about gender-responsive change within the realm of the state: women themselves and progressive men.

Women's Agency

Perhaps paradoxically, fragile contexts may represent a major window of opportunity to address structural gender inequities. In conflict-affected societies in particular, years of conflict and the struggle for survival may have blurred traditional concepts of gender relations, thereby enabling women to reorganise themselves, to acquire additional skills and to occupy typically male positions within households, communities (of refugees/internally displaced persons), the local economy and the armed forces. Having capitalised on opportunities to break out of traditional gender roles, women are often deeply committed to consolidating these changes. Therefore, a crucial starting point for gender-responsive international engagement in fragile contexts is to put the views and priorities of intended beneficiaries as well as their skills and capacities more prominently at the centre of policy-making and programming (see example DR Congo in box 4).

DR Congo: L'Union des Femmes pour la Développement.

Since its inception in 1997 in Bunia, l'Union des Femmes pour la Développement (UFD) has been at the forefront of the women's emancipation movement in Ituri. This small group of women demanding equal public and political participation has been nicknamed 'l'Union des Femmes Difficiles' by male authorities and their own husbands. Though the initiators' families were disrupted and displaced during the civil war, none of the women gave up their feminist endeavours. In the refugee camps, women from different regions joined the cause, with the result that when they dispersed to their homes, UFD became a widespread women's network, working to improve the position of women and girls within society and to identify and support vulnerable women who fall outside the scope of international assistance. UFD representatives participated in the Ituri Peace Talks (2004) and the Goma Peace Talks (2008), defending the interests of women in Eastern Congo.

Box 4: Women's Agency in DR Congo

Unfortunately, one of the major shortcomings of the dominant institution-oriented approach to state-building is that it often renders the capacities of local women's organisations and groups invisible. The activities of women's groups and organisations generally take place at the local community level, which remains insufficiently explored as a vital entry point for gender-responsive state-building. By ignoring this, external actors may not only overlook an excellent opportunity for improving their engagement, but also risk contributing to narrowing down existing opportunities to further enhance women's capacity to address gender inequities. However tempting it may be to ignore these capacities for change of local women groups under the banner of 'strategic priorities' or 'cultural sensitivity', international donors should avoid that by so doing they contribute to a reversal of traditional gender patterns. Hence, the real issue at stake for the international community is how it can support rather than undermine the efforts of women and men to change gender inequities within their own societies.

Towards a gender-responsive approach to state-building in fragile contexts

It is not easy to achieve international commitments to gender equality in the challenging settings of contexts marked by poorly functioning governance systems. Nevertheless, this policy brief identifies four fundamentals of a gender-responsive approach to state-building in fragile contexts:

- **Apply gender analysis consistently.** International efforts to build gender-responsive state institutions require gender-sensitive context analysis that is attuned to formal and informal societal processes and power dynamics in society. International actors must ground their state-building interven-

tions in this broader socio-political understanding of the fragile context.

- **Balance intervention strategies.** Applying a gender perspective to state-building interventions points to the need for a thorough reappraisal of the dominant focus on building or rebuilding state institutions in fragile contexts. It is fundamental to balance support to existing governance institutions and structures (whether formal or non-state), stimulate transformation of the often woman-unfriendly elements within these institutions and strengthen local drivers of gender-positive change.
- **Consider society as an intervention terrain and align with women's organisations.** Another missing link to implementing high ambitions in the area of gender, peace and security is to be found at the level of society. The onus is on the international community to foreground the capacities of women's groups and organisations and manoeuvre itself into a position where it can better capitalise on capacities for gender-positive change. Instead of framing women as passive victims and subsequently diminishing women's role in fragile contexts, international actors need to actively look for ways to deploy women's agency and capacities as a vital entry point for the building of inclusive and stable societies.
- **Politicise gender-responsive state-building.** Implementing an effective, i.e. gender-responsive, policy agenda within state-building strategies is not a technocratic undertaking. It is ultimately a political question, which requires the total commitment of a full-fledged diplomatic apparatus that is willing to devote its diplomatic skills and instruments for the benefit of gender-responsive state-building.

ABOUT...

The Clingendael Conflict Research Unit

The Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael' is a training and research organization on international affairs. The Conflict Research Unit (CRU) is a specialized team, focusing on conflict-related issues in developing countries.

THE AUTHORS

Steven Schoofs previously worked as a research fellow at the Conflict Research Unit and is currently working as Gender Manager at International Alert.



Rosan Smits is a research fellow at the Conflict Research Unit working on gender issues and civil society involvement in state-building processes in post-conflict environments.

