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Women and Post-Conflict Political Stabilization: The Case of Elections

Pia Chouayfati

Abstract

This paper discusses women's involvement in post-conflict political transitions. The paper focuses specifically on post-conflict elections and the various strategies used by international and local actors to mainstream women. After discussing the importance of democratic elections in post-conflict settings, including the use of quota systems to ensure women's participation, the paper analyzes two international frameworks—the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and the 7-Point Action Plan—and their strategies for empowering women in post-conflict settings. The paper then makes a number of recommendations that can ensure the efficacy of these strategies and interventions in future post-conflict settings.

Introduction

Women are not strangers to leadership during conflict: they often thrive in traditionally male-dominated roles such as breadwinners, political leaders, fighters, or mediators. This has been clearly observed in the Kurdish Peshmerga, Algerian National Liberation Front, Nicaraguan FSLN, and Soviet brigades, among other examples of women with significant leadership positions in conflict. However, when the conflict ends, a return to social and democratic order often signals a return to the patriarchal systems that oppress women.

While women's roles in the (conflict-free) electoral process, both as candidates and part of the electorate, continue to receive widespread attention, the issue of women's participation in post-conflict elections remains unexplored. After a period of internal conflict in a country, a ceasefire

or peace treaty only indicates the end of fighting. Rebuilding, restructuring, and rehabilitating war-torn states comes after the arms are dropped, in the form of a transitional period, where, more often than not, elections take place. Elections in general are of paramount importance in any state; they confer legitimacy to the elected parties and serve as a way to select and change governmental systems. In post-conflict states, however, elections have an even more significant role: they lay the blueprint for the entire post-conflict reality, and often, their failure may lead to a return to conflict. However, even in cases where they are deemed “successful” in restoring stability and bringing forth a novel democratic and political order, measurement of their actual “success” is often flawed, and the international community is often satisfied and self-congratulatory when achieving the bare minimum. This bare minimum oftentimes excludes pillars of international standards, including, but not limited to, women’s rights, especially when it comes to political representation and elections.

This paper will shed light on an unexplored dimension of post-conflict democratization: women’s roles and inclusion in elections and governance in a sustainable and effective way that extends beyond the transitional period. Stakeholders and their roles are first defined, followed by an overview of the specificities of the post-conflict transitional period, the significance of elections in promoting gender equality and some common barriers. The paper continues with a discussion of the quota system’s effectiveness in this context and ends with a survey of existing proposed policies, their shortcomings, and suggested improvements.

Defining the Actors

Before discussing the issue of women’s participation and representation in post-conflict electoral processes, I will highlight the actors and stakeholders frequently mentioned throughout this paper.

The term “local players” includes belligerents in the conflict (militias, armies, resistance/rebel groups), or political parties with significant influence on the conflict. They often share/struggle over power during the conflict and transitional period.

The term “governmental actors” refers to the governing body of a sovereign state whose prerogative is to define and create laws that outline the scope and framework for citizens’ political activities. Where government is absent, as commonly observed in post-conflict states in transition, the term “governmental actors” refers to the temporary transitional governmental or administrative structure in place. In the context of elections, the electoral organizational body is the penultimate governmental actor.

The term “civil society” is defined here as national and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that include women’s political interests in their agendas. This includes but is not limited to human rights groups, youth organizations, feminist groups, trade/labor unions, academics and research institutions, indigenous and minority groups, and political parties.

The term “international actors” is an umbrella concept that includes international and intergovernmental organizations (UN Department of Political Affairs, Peacekeeping missions, UNHCR, UNDP, etc.), international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), and foreign governments, including observer states, donors, and monitoring committees.

In each of the above definitions, there is a large variability in the scope of involvement, jurisdiction, and influence of each actor depending on the specific context of the conflict, country, and social and political climate. Specific to post-conflict electoral processes, governmental actors are as good as the transparency and autonomy of the administrative authority they fall under. While civil society is not directly responsible for organizing and conducting elections, it plays a key role in mobilizing the electorate, in addition to being a source of pressure for governmental actors. Finally, the role of international actors varies greatly, depending on their responsibilities vis-à-vis the conflict. For example, they may have a paramount role to play if they are mandated to organize

and officiate the electoral process, or they may have a far more reserved role if they are tasked to simply observe the electoral process. Additionally, international actors can provide logistical assistance or they can encourage local actors to consider adopting more gender-inclusive strategies and processes. All the aforementioned actors exist and interact as part of the delicate reality of the transitional period.

The Political Reality of Transitional Periods

To be able to develop solutions that cater to the peculiarities of women's situation in elections in post-conflict contexts, it is useful to examine the political reality shaping this kind of context. "Reconstruction" is a loaded term that carries with it questions of whether it signifies the reconstruction of infrastructure, a return to the previously established status-quo, or the beginning of change (Lynch & Yehya, 2018). Reconstruction in Syria, for example, is the slow but progressive re-legitimization of the Assad regime (Heydemann, 2018). However, reconstruction in Iraq left a blatantly inefficient and crippled government in its wake (Parker, 2012). Reconstruction in Libya and Yemen has not had any substantive effects on the conflict (Kuperman, 2015), and reconstruction in Gaza sustained and reinforced the Israeli occupation and the never-ending blockade (Stefanini, 2018), and failed to prevent the inevitable return of Israeli aggression that occurred in 2021. These examples illustrate the different ways that "reconstruction" can produce unfavorable outcomes. Ultimately, the results of post-conflict reconstruction depend on the distinct funding and intervention process offered. Foreign governments, the international community, and non-governmental actors along with local players may have different roles in the reconstruction effort depending on the context. The "state-building model" is one such example of a standardized post-conflict formula implemented by the international community in the 1990s and early 2000s. Reconstruction efforts in Sierra Leone, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, and others all followed a version of state-building that emphasized the bolstering of governmental and economic institutions as a segue towards peace and prosperity (Goenaga, 2017).

The reality is that post-conflict transitions are a costly and often highly publicized venture undertaken by international actors. Often, significant resources, money and manpower are invested. Additionally, local actors may not want to end the conflict, much less work with international actors (Ellis, 2004). Local actors with little to no interest in democratization, and whose non-compliance often means a return to war, can impose their own terms on the transitional period. International actors often must accommodate these local actors otherwise, their “peacebuilding” efforts might fail. Most of the time, peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts by the international community are deemed successful using superficial markers of “peace and stability.”

When international actors provide post-conflict support, electoral or otherwise, anything short of a return to chaos might be considered a successful venture. This means that what might normally be considered “acceptable” democratic processes are often overlooked in favor of “peace” (Rondinelli, 2007). For example, there are numerous definitions of “free and fair elections.” Thus, although the Civil Liberties Union for Europe lists eight conditions that must exist in order for elections to be considered free and fair, these criteria rarely exist in post-conflict settings. This is especially true in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Unlike more traditional situations, political actions and decisions taken during post-conflict periods have long-lasting effects. This is precisely why elections are a key consideration, and they can either further entrench inequalities and bolster patriarchal systems, or make way for a clean slate and new beginning.

Significance of Elections for Gender Equality & Some Barriers

Feminists understand democracy as a primary mechanism through which women’s influence and participation in decision-making is bolstered (Baden & Milward, 1997). The process of democratization defines resource allocation and power distribution, and is of paramount importance for women. Especially after years of hardship, conflict, and violence, the first elections

represent a ritual of peace for some, and the first chance to vote by ballot for others (Sorensen, 1999). Prominent Egyptian feminist scholar Mozn Hassan calls feminism an “inherently political movement” (MEPI TLS Webinar, 2021). Political movements use democratic elections to achieve their goals. As such, elections serve as a means for gender equality to become the status-quo. However, unlike other political movements, gender equality is not “optional.” Therefore, elections must serve as a means to integrate gender equality into society in a permanent manner.

One important democratization mechanism, decentralization, refers to the change from central administrative structures to provincial or zone-level organization. Decentralization is often considered to lead to better political representation for marginalized communities, including women. However, in post-conflict contexts, decentralization does not always lead to more representation, as there is a risk that resources and administrative power will be hijacked by local elites or former belligerents, making it counterproductive to women’s participation (Baden & Milward, 1997). In Sierra Leone, for example, despite decentralization providing women with local political experience, intimidation from existing informal players with power and influence in the area reduces women’s ability to exercise their political rights (Lahai, 2015).

Transitional periods present an important dualism for gender equality. On one hand, they present an unprecedented opportunity for gender mainstreaming in the nation’s post-conflict reality and pave the way for more women in decision-making positions. With women in positions of influence, gender mainstreaming and progressive policies can be included in legislation which will pave the way for more women representatives and improve the state of women in the country in general. On the other hand, that must exist in order for elections to be considered free and fair, these criteria rarely exist in post-conflict settings. This is especially true in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (Kellow, 2010).

Quota: A Simple Solution?

Establishing a quota system and including it in the constitution is one way to ensure women's representation in power. Rwanda is one success story, where the post-genocide implementation of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (UNSCR 1325) saw the inclusion of a 30% women's quota in the constitution in 2003 (DPI, n.d.). Today, the Rwandan government is one of the most gender-progressive in the world, with women consistently holding far more than 30% of seats in all government institutions, reaching 70% in the high court (Grönberg, 2011). In the case of Rwanda, this representation is substantial and quantitative, as women are active participants and contributors to all legislative efforts, and this has culminated in the establishment of significant laws based on UNSCR 1325 that have greatly improved gender equality in Rwandan society (DPI). However, as was the case in Rwanda, quota systems that are established following existing integration and mobilization efforts that include women in all fragments of society are more likely to succeed than those established without this supportive environment (Dahlerup, 2002). In post-conflict transitional periods, this is often the case. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, women secured fewer than 15% of seats in parliament in the first set of post-conflict elections. And while in both countries political parties have voluntarily committed to nominate at least 30% women on their electoral lists, they have failed to meet this self-imposed number (Kellow, 2010). While quotas can be effective, they can only be effective in a receptive environment. For that reason, quotas cannot be the only mechanism that various stakeholders implement to ensure gender equality in post-conflict settings.

Policy Recommendations

Concretizing the Abstract

Post-UNSCR 1325, the most significant UN publication pertaining to women in post-conflict situations that discusses elections in some capacity is the 2010 7-Point Action Plan on Women's Participation in Peacebuilding (A/65/354-S/2010/466) published by the UN Secretary General. The

seven points in the Action Plan are conflict resolution, post-conflict planning, post-conflict financing, gender-responsive civilian capacity, women's representation in post-conflict governance, rule of law, and economic recovery. Among these seven categories, there are key considerations for women's representation in post-conflict governance. However, there are several issues with this action plan. First, it is important to note that women's political participation is a long-term process (Ellis, 2004), and the suggestions presented in the action plan fall under the category of "short-term" assistance that the international community tends to provide in a one-time-package. Thus, the scope of what can be achieved given the nature of these suggestions is limited.

Second, concrete liability mechanisms that would measure and support the implementation of these suggestions are lacking. Third, in the UN Secretary General's proposed action plan, no distinction is made between quantitative and qualitative participation and representation of women. Quotas and "tokenism" cannot ensure women's equal representation and participation in decision-making positions. Women's participation in power should be endemic and effective, not just symbolic.

The three shortcomings of the 7-Point Action Plan are a key starting point for future policy. The lack of women's participation in post-conflict governance and elections will not be remedied by temporary measures and emblematic gestures. Women's empowerment must be a core consideration in the very fabric of how the international community structures its post-conflict electoral assistance. Gender-mainstreaming should be a key concern for foreign policy, including political, humanitarian, and especially, electoral assistance. Therefore, making women's inclusion a pillar of post-conflict assistance, putting in place metrics and evaluation criteria based on data collection and analysis, and considering assistance that will have long-term impact are key considerations when thinking of this issue from an assistance standpoint.

Actions with Long-Term Impact

For any action plan to have tangible and long-term effects, it needs to be catered to the context, society, and political climate to which it is assigned. There can be no one-size fits all policies, especially in unpredictable and sensitive post-conflict settings. Accordingly, international actors must confer with local, grassroots women leaders and must include women who are actively defending human and women's rights. Women should be consulted about their specific needs so that assistance efforts can include these considerations in monitoring, logistical planning, legislation drafting, and any other form of assistance. Moreover, economic recovery and reform assistance, especially in election budgeting, must include women's empowerment initiatives. Any electoral assistance effort must include voter training for marginalized communities that would provide information on the electoral system, importance of voting, and voter rights, especially for marginalized communities. In this area, international actors providing assistance can take advantage of women-led organizations' strong community ties and ask leaders/active participants to host workshops or perform community outreach, as they are often very close to their local communities and can communicate more effectively with them than with foreigners.

It is also imperative to provide marginalized communities, especially women, with aid in retrieving/reissuing identificatory documents that may have been lost during the conflict to ensure that they are able to register to vote. As it pertains to campaign support for women candidates, there should be frameworks in place to assist emerging women leaders and candidates with campaign planning, including fundraising, budgeting and message development efforts including public speaking, press and media outreach, and activity scheduling.

Collectively, these measures will empower women in post-conflict settings. These measures can ensure that a greater number of women are able to vote, make informed choices, and are able to participate in and run for elections.

Accountability: Data, Data, and More Data

In a day and age when data collection is ubiquitous and less costly than ever before, the lack of data about post-conflict initiatives is troubling. Post-conflict interventions must use data collected on the ground to ensure the success of their programs and strategies. Further, interventions must be monitored and evaluated using clear, well-defined metrics. While quantitative metrics often fail to capture context, they can be captured in bulk and then analyzed. The importance of collecting data cannot be overstated, and this process is now more feasible and scalable than ever. Collecting data via social media applications is an important example. In 2021, more than 70% of the eligible world population (users aged 13 and up) used social media (Datareportal, 2021). People in post-conflict situations can be reached through their smartphones, despite connection and infrastructure challenges. The definition and scope of “digital literacy” expands and evolves every day, as more people who would not be considered “digitally literate” are fully capable of using smartphones and most forms of social media. Simple user-friendly forms can be designed to conduct opinion-polling and to identify issues of importance for women to better develop and plan the electoral assistance approach. Additionally, it can be a great way to gauge progress and achievement of set goals, given the appropriate metrics. This would supplement traditional approaches such as focus groups and provide more insight into the female population at large. Moreover, it provides a more concrete way to measure the success of electoral assistance missions given clear metrics.

Conclusion

To conclude, the post-conflict transitional period is a key determinant of the future socio-political landscape of a country, and elections serve as a democratizing force that may be a chance to completely reform gender policies through women’s engagement as both voters and candidates. Substantive and long-term measures must be taken to empower women in post-conflict periods. Quotas are remarkable drivers of representation, but a suitable climate must be ensured for their effectiveness, and this is a key consideration given the often-erratic situation of post-conflict

states. Beyond UNSCR 1325, the 7-Point Action Plan proposed by the UNSC must be optimized for implementation. Specifically, the 7-Point Action Plan must be strengthened using measures that will ensure the long-term political involvement of women. Additionally, the plan must prioritize thorough and inclusive data collection to inform policy decisions and to gauge the effectiveness of post-conflict assistance. Beyond quantity and quality, longevity and sustainability should be the metrics used to judge the effectiveness of post-conflict interventions and assistance.

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