

Introduction to the Expert Talk

“Gender and Conflict: Causes, Course and Strategies”

12 May 2006 at the Heinrich Boell Foundation, Berlin

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How can and how should external actors such as the Heinrich Boell Foundation promote democratization processes in crisis regions and fragile states?

How can crises and violent conflict be managed and overcome by civil means? What are their reasons and backgrounds?

When these questions are raised in political or academic circles of experts, an array of different factors that are seen as promoting or – with solutions in mind – minimizing violence are usually named, including: economic conditions, political relations, clashes of interest and power struggles among different political – as well as ethnically, culturally or religiously distinct – groups. In the context of the UN, poverty and disease are named as the main threats to international peace and security; in the EU, international terrorism is listed as the number one threat and risk, followed by the spread of weapons of mass destruction, regional conflicts, state failure in certain world regions and finally, the growth of organized crime in those regions.¹

The following aspect and question, however, are regularly overlooked: What significance do gender relations have for the peace within a region, for the security of individuals, for the emergence and progression of conflicts? To what extent can shifts in gender relationships within a society pose a risk to security? Likewise, gender perspectives are not addressed when developing strategies for conflict resolution or the promotion of democratization processes in post-war regions and other unstable states. At best, the participation of women is considered, yet whether women will actually – and above all, equally – participate is another question entirely.

In reality, women play a fundamental role in reconstructing societies, in restoring, or rather, developing democratic conditions. For example, in peace negotiations in which women actively participated, the negotiations took on a different character and achieved sustainable results more rapidly. This realization, stemming from UN studies et al., has nevertheless made its way into national and international political concepts as women’s initiatives and regional infrastructure projects that include women are promoted in post-war regions.

This does not change the fact that the main decisions about war and peace are still made almost exclusively by men. Be it from peace negotiations or conflict prevention, women still

¹ European Security Strategy, I., pps. 3-5

remain largely excluded from the highest, decision-making levels. Security policy is still a largely male domain. Currently, we can observe this in the Kosovo negotiations, which have – thus far without results – entered the fourth round. Here, women are completely left out, despite existing solutions by active women's groups.

Still, women's greater or equal participation – simply based on democratic considerations – would not automatically mean the inclusion of gender relations as factors in the analysis of and solutions for the development of crises, conflicts, or democratization processes.

Unfortunately, a common mistake is equating the inclusion of women with a gender perspective.

A gender perspective, however, means a lot more. It means considering the relationships and dynamics among gender groups in a society and taking these into account when analyzing the emergence and progression of conflicts.

We know from gender research in the social sciences and for a long time from feminist peace and conflict research that gender relationships, dominant male and female stereotypes and especially, changes in these relationships accompanied by changes in gender identities influence crises and conflicts within societies.

For example, societies with massive male unemployment rates where men are no longer able to fulfill their traditional roles while women continue to meet their traditional family and household responsibilities, undergo shifts in gender relationships and constructions, as well as threats to existing gender identities, increasing the risk of crisis and conflict. This has been analyzed in the former Yugoslavia, for example. Certainly, for such situations to escalate into violent conflict a set of other factors plays a role and it is important to analyze how these factors stand in relation to one another. How do they affect each other? And how can the recognition of a developing crisis be included and implemented in crisis management and democratization processes?

We still know very little about all this. To a large extent, this area is lacking systematic studies and analysis. Indeed, a gender-sensitive perspective makes it easy to imagine that it has significant effects when for instance, ex-combatants carrying weapons in Afghanistan or in Kosovo, whose traditional male role includes the possession of weapons, are forced to give up their weapons, on top of that under the supervision of foreign military personnel who carry a weapon themselves. However, there are no studies or investigations on the long-term effects that such instances have on the identity of an Afghani or Kosovar ex-fighter and how negative effects can be prevented. Or, how these traditional and patriarchal men are affected when their wives are supported by aid programs and encouraged to become more independent. Up to

now, these problems are hardly addressed in civil or military conflict management. In this context, there is an overall lack of approaches and programs,

Are all those who are responsible and who make decisions in this area not occupied and led to new questions and approaches by the known fact that normally five years after a peace deal violent conflicts start anew?

Following September 11th, 2001, and the intervention of Afghanistan, the Feminist Institute in the Heinrich Boell Foundation made peace and security policy from a feminist perspective the main focus of its work. Peace and security policy is also an important issue in the overall work of the hbf – even if the significance of gender relations is not always considered.

What does it mean for international peace, security and security policy – both nationally and internationally – if the female half of society remains excluded from key political decision-making and strategy building? What does security from a gender perspective mean in and for politics and for political action? How must and how could security be defined from a new and different perspective? How are gender relationships intertwined with other conflict factors? What role do they play in the progression of crises and violent conflicts, as well as for conflict management?

These questions are the focus of our workshops, conferences and symposia. We also initiated a doctoral fellowship – the 2nd Gunda Werner Doctoral Fellowship – on “Gender Dynamics in Violent Conflicts,” which is led by Dr. Christine Eifler and is based in Bremen.

Together with a group of experts, we developed a position paper, in which we opened up our critique of current peace and security policy, as well as our political perspectives on the issue, for public debate. The second version of the paper will be published in September 2006.

Within this context, we also work together with the Steering Committee of the German Women’s Security Council, whose goal is to enforce UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in Germany but also in a European context. The resolution requires all states to guarantee the equal participation of women at all levels of decision-making on peace and security and the inclusion of gender perspectives in this area.

In the process, we are guided, amongst others, by the words of Mary Kaldor:

“Exclusionist policy must be countered by alternative, future-oriented cosmopolitan strategies

that bridge gaps between global and local concerns and re-establish legitimacy on the basis of democratic, inclusion-oriented values.”²

Translated by Stefanie Fahrion

² Kaldor 2000, p. 22