



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

Global study report

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Acknowledgements

The author of the literature review and last chapter of this document is Clare Castillejo, independent consultant. The literature review was commissioned by CARE Nederland in 2018 as the first part of a global research into women's political participation. The global research also includes field studies in 3 countries: 1) Afghanistan (conducted by ASK training and consulting), 2) Burundi (conducted by Saskia Brand of MDF training and consultancy) and 3) Rwanda (conducted by A&G consulting). We would like to thank Dewi Keppy, Tess van Bommel and Judith van Neck for summarizing the case studies and Lori Cajegas, Kees van der Broek, Lenneke Kono and Berlinda Nolles for further support in finalizing the report. Special thanks also go out to the country office and partner staff in the three respective countries who coordinated the cases studies and assisted the consultants in their work.

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

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. Key elements of this international framework include UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, which requires "women's equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security"; the 2011 New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States, which states that "the empowerment of women ... is at the heart of successful peace-building and statebuilding"; and most recently the Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDG 5 and 16), which provide an integrated and universally applicable framework for linking up agendas related to gender and women's empowerment with those related to conflict, fragility and governance. Many multilateral, bilateral and civil society international development actors also now have organisational level policy commitments related to women's participation in FCAS, and knowledge and commitment across large sections of the donor community is undoubtedly increasing in this field.

Fragility can be defined as the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacity of the state, system and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks. Fragility can lead to negative outcomes including violence, the breakdown of institutions, displacement, humanitarian crises or other emergencies. Fragility is multi-dimensional and can be found across economic, environmental, political, societal and security dimensions.

(OECD, [States of Fragility Report](#), 2016)

This strengthened policy framework is reflected in increased international funding for gender equality in FCAS. According to OECD figures (OECD, 2015), aid to gender equality has grown at a rate of 10% annually since 2008, although from a very low base. However, the majority of aid for gender equality in FCAS goes to social sectors, with very little going to peace and security issues and only a tiny fraction going to support women's organisations. This implies that while gender issues in general are an increasing priority for donors in FCAS, there is still limited emphasis on supporting women to mobilise and advance their interests within political and public life.

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.

However, despite these improvements in policy and funding, 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, including lack of capacity and commitment on this issue within international development organisations. However, 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.

This paper seeks to contribute to developing the knowledge base in this area. It offers an overview of existing evidence and lessons from the literature on women's political participation and influence in FCAS.

Review of Existing Evidence and Lessons

1. Women's participation and influence within political processes and institutions

This sub-section discusses how women engage with formal political processes and institutions in FCAS. Drawing on a range of literature it examines the opportunities and challenges for women to participate in and influence these processes and institutions. It also provides some analysis of the way in which women have been supported to do this by international actors.

1.1 Women's participation and influence in political change processes in FCAS

Fragile contexts often experience profound political change processes, whether through peacebuilding, statebuilding, or wide-ranging reforms. Such processes frequently involve the renegotiation of the political settlement, the redistribution of power and resources, and the reform of state institutions. As Domingo and Holmes (2013) point out such changes can offer an opportunity to address gender inequalities, embed gender equality into the new political settlement and resulting institutions and rules, and strengthen women's rights and participation across different spheres. Hence, where women are able to influence such changes processes this can have significant positive impacts for them. Indeed, a review of women's participation in 24 peace processes (Castillo Diaz, 2010) found that the meaningful participation of women in peace negotiations resulted in peace agreements that are stronger in terms of women's rights and gender equality. One example is the Kenya National Dialogue and Reconciliation process, in which the participation of women at multiple levels led to the successful inclusion of women's views and interests throughout the process and in the reforms that followed (McGhie & Wamai, 2011). Of course, 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. All too often these three levels are conflated by those seeking to support women's political empowerment. Theories of change on which programming is based, as well as monitoring and evaluation that seeks to capture results, should be based on a context relevant understanding of the distinction between these different levels of women's engagement and how each relate to the other.

Not only does women's participation in these change processes in FCAS enhance gender equality, it also makes a positive contribution to peace outcomes. A comprehensive study of peace processes found that where women have the opportunity and capacity to genuinely influence such processes there is a much higher likelihood of peace agreements being reached and implemented (Paffenholz, 2015). Indeed, women frequently bring important issues to the table, including around the inclusivity and accessibility of processes and institutions, the plurality of citizens' voices, or the

importance of local and informal spheres. Moreover, there is evidence that women's engagement as civic leaders and public officials in FCAS encourages more inclusive governance and political legitimacy (UNSG, 2010). According to Cardona (2012) women play a particularly important role in building peace at family and community level, and should be supported to bring these skills to larger, national or subnational peace processes. Likewise, Womankind (2011) stresses the value of building linkages between macro-level processes such as security sector reform and the local level work of women's networks on issues such as disarmament and community peacebuilding.



However, despite the positive benefits of women's political participation for both gender equality and peace outcomes in FCAS, 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.

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 the structural barriers that marginalised women may face in accessing formal spaces; and 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. For example, programmes may build women's capacity and awareness of their rights but fail to connect them to political spaces where decisions are negotiated. For example, the OECD (2016) found that some women, peace and security programming in Nepal trained women in advocacy skills without linking them to peacebuilding processes.

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 statebuilding (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). Support for women only spaces can also be crucial in empowering women to engage with political change processes in FCAS, as can accompaniment of women engaging in politics (O'Gorman, 2014).

1.2 Women's participation and influence within political parties and governance institutions

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 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.

The findings of a multi-country study on women and statebuilding (Castillejo, 2011) indicate that women are excluded by both the structure and culture of political parties in FCAS. In terms of structure, women's participation in parties is frequently mediated through a "women's wing", which, as Cornwall and Goetz (2005) point out, is intended to harness women's support for existing male dominated leadership and party structures. In terms of culture, in post-conflict settings political parties are typically highly personalised around male leaders and do business through informal male clientelist networks and in informal spaces that women cannot access. For example, in Guatemala, political parties are effectively "owned" by male leaders, have no mechanisms for collective decision-making, and are continually reconstituted in response to new opportunities for power, while in Kosovo and Burundi, important party decisions are made in bars by small groups of male leaders (Castillejo, 2011). In Malawi a host of unwritten rules, traditions and exchanges govern proceedings and the exchanges between parties and politicians in the National Assembly in ways that disadvantage women, while women MPs are subject to more jeering and heckling than their male counterparts when speaking in plenary (O'Neil, 2016). Women are disadvantaged in multiple ways by such party culture which frequently prevents them from converting presence in parties, parliament or even the executive into actual influence.

The marginalisation of women in political parties in FCAS inevitably reflects broader patterns of gender discrimination, inequality, and insecurity that limit women's political participation. In many FCAS political violence is common and women are particular targets. For example, in Sierra Leone, female candidates for election are harassed by male "secret societies" that disapprove of their political participation (Kellow 2010), while in Afghanistan they face threats from both male candidates and insurgents (HRW, 2010). Women candidates and politicians are also subject to undue public scrutiny and often exposed to gender-based violence (O'Neil and Domingo, 2015). The corrupt nature of politics in many FCAS disadvantages women – and particularly poor women – who tend to have less financial resources to offer bribes and little ability to mobilise male-dominated patronage networks in order to get elected or to exert influence once in office. In some cases pressure comes from other female MPs who feel tarnished by outspoken women that attract a lot of criticism (O'Neil & Domingo, 2016b).

Faced with these barriers to formal political participation, women have campaigned successfully for the adoption of parliamentary quotas, often with international support. Quotas can have important benefits, such as challenging stereotypes about women's role in public life and encouraging the female public to engage with public institutions (UNSG, 2010). However, quotas cannot be assumed to deliver gender equality policy outcomes, and in many contexts – from Uganda to Iraq – women's increased presence through quotas has not translated into substantive influence. There are a number of reasons for this. It can be because despite increased numbers within the legislature, women are often not given decision-making roles in the executive or key committees. For example, women constitute a significant proportion of the Afghan parliament, but have very limited representation in the cabinet and the high-level policy-making bodies (Bochgrevingk et al., 2008). It can also be because political parties deliberately select socially conservative female candidates or because new female parliamentarians are unwilling to challenge party leaders. As Cornwall and Goetz (2005) point out, "winning and keeping office can be contingent on downplaying feminist sympathies". O'Neil et al (2016) reported that in Malawi, "In general, the women MPs appeared more comfortable talking about women's concerns and empowerment than about gender equality... In addition, only a minority of women MPs spoke

of concrete actions they had taken to support women and girls in their constituency". It can also be because informal institutions and unequal capabilities mean that women in office do not have genuine power. Feminist critics increasingly question assumptions about the impact of quotas. For example, Goetz and Musembi (2008) call for a realistic assessment of what quotas can achieve in contexts of patronage politics.

Advancing women's substantive 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. Such incentives can include making funding, capacity building, and participation in key spaces and processes being contingent on meaningful inclusion of women. 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 (Lukatela, 2012). Support for women's caucuses has been shown to have significant impact in some contexts such as Malawi, where the cross-party parliamentary women's caucus contributed to legislation improving women's rights, although its effectiveness as a collective entity varied between parliamentary periods due to intraparty leadership tensions and pressure on caucus members to retain their parliamentary seats (Chiwesa, 2016). Working across the entire election process is important, for example involving women in voter registration or as election-monitoring officials to reinforce their role in political life (Domingo et al, 2013). Critically capacity-building should be provided not just to leading female parliamentarians, but to grassroots, minority and younger female party members and activists. It may be particularly useful to work with dominant or larger parties that according to Carroll and Sanbonmatsu (2013) can set a model that shapes the behaviour of other parties, including in relation to women's representation.

Beyond electoral politics, it is important to promote the inclusion of women in the public sphere more widely and at every level, including national and local government administration, judiciary, trade unions, civil service, and oversight mechanisms. This can be done through affirmative action, mentoring, network building and skills. According to Lukatela (2012) decentralisation processes – which often form part of governance reforms in FCAS – can be an opportunity for women to engage with politics at a more accessible level over local issues such as services. However, this must take into account the fact that local power holders may be more regressive than the central state in terms of women's role and rights. Finally, UNIFEM (2008) argues that building accountability systems that work for women is critical, including through including different groups of women as participants in oversight processes, and having gender equality and inclusion in the mandates of oversight bodies.

1.3 Informal power: A challenge to women's formal political participation and influence

In fragile contexts informal rules and institutions 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. For example, in Guatemala, an inclusive peace process resulted in comprehensive rights for women and for indigenous populations, but these are made meaningless by the continued existence of exclusionary informal power relations and women – particularly indigenous women – continue to face extreme political, social and economic exclusion (Quintana, 2009).

According to Castillejo (2012) women's political influence in FCAS is particularly restricted by two different types of non-formal power. These are the power of informal networks within formal institutions and the power of customary institutions. It is therefore important that support for women's participation and influence within formal politics at every level – from community decision making bodies to national parliaments – takes into account and seeks to address these two different forms of informality.

Formal political institutions in FCAS tend to be dominated by informal power relations, which disadvantages women in multiple ways. Firstly, women in political institutions are frequently excluded from the male patronage networks that control decision-making. This prevents women from converting presence into influence. Secondly, women making claims on formal institutions are particularly disadvantaged when formal rules do not apply and patronage relations or informal payments are required to gain access or receive services. Thirdly, informality poses a challenge for women's movements in contexts – such as Egypt and Jordan – where “policy influence heavily relies on informal relationships rather than strictly formal citizen-state engagements” (Tadros, 2011: iii). Inevitably, these informal relationships are dominated by male elites.

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, supporting women parliamentarians, civil servants or lawyers to form professional associations that can speak out about practices of informality and exclusion. Likewise, strengthening mechanisms for women to raise such concerns through institutions such as ombudsmen, human rights commissions or anti-corruption commissions. In addition, development actors can apply a gender lens to their broader work on corruption, patronage and accountability in FCAS, recognising that these governance challenges have specific implications for women. As Domingo and Holmes (2013) argue, it is important to pay attention to informal rules of the game and how these can undermine new formal rights and opportunities for women in FCAS, as well as to address the disconnect between formal and informal rules.

Customary institutions 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. Evidence suggests that many – although not all – customary institutions discriminate against women. However, it must be recognised that customary institutions can sometimes deliver outcomes that benefit women, such as rapid and accessible dispute resolution (World Bank, 2012).

Customary institutions can play a key role in mediating women's engagement with the state and in public life. As Castillejo (2013) describes, 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. Customary institutions can also directly block women's access to state institutions. For example, in Liberia and Sierra Leone, some customary authorities prevent women from claiming their rights through formal courts, while in Afghanistan and Pakistan religious authorities sometimes prevent women from accessing education or health services. Likewise, a study in Indonesia found that during election campaigns it is common for community and religious leaders to publicly question the morality of women running for office (Hillman, 2017). While engagement with customary authorities is very important, this must be based on an understanding of the gender implications of customary power and should seek to promote women's rights and interrogate discriminatory narratives about “tradition”. Chopra (2007) gives an example of such an approach in a programme that works with traditional leaders in Kenya to establish new customary land rights for women.

There are often complex linkages between formal and customary power in fragile settings. Customary structures frequently dominate formal politics and in some fragile contexts customary institutions can determine who gets elected, in whose interests the law operates and how state resources are allocated. Customary authorities are also

sometimes delegated authority over certain areas or issues by the formal state. Such interdependency between formal and customary institutions can result in the customary exclusion of women being carried into the formal sphere and in discriminatory customary institutions being strengthened through state support. For example, in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas the central state's use of tribal leaders as an intermediary to maintain control over the population serves to reinforce customary power structures that are highly discriminatory towards women (Castillejo, 2013).

2. Women's political mobilisation and empowerment

Given the significant barriers to participation and influence that women face within formal politics in FCAS, mobilising through civil society is a critical alternative route for women to influence political decision making and public life. This sub-section examines evidence on how women mobilise through civil society in FCAS, and how such mobilisation can best be supported by international development actors.

2.1 Civil society as a route to political influence

The flourishing of civil society as a space for women's voice and leadership – particularly following conflict – often contrasts sharply with the exclusionary nature of formal politics. Indeed, Cornwall and Goetz (2005) argue that international support for civil society in such contexts 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. For example, in the Philippines women's civil society alliances have provided a stepping stone for women to get elected and bring a feminist agenda to parties, parliament and the peacebuilding agenda (UNIFEM, 2008). The experience of conflict often causes women to mobilise in unprecedented ways in order to campaign for peace and to promote their interests within post-conflict political processes. Such mobilisation can take a range of forms, including adopting a brokering role, as the Mano River Women's Peace Network did in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea (Steady, 2011), or lobbying during peace negotiations and constitution-drafting processes to influence the resulting texts, as women did in Kosovo (Qosaj-Mustafa, 2010). Critically, following conflict, women frequently mobilise to lobby for greater space in political and public institutions. Coomaraswamy (2015) found that the strength of women's organisations is a key factor in their ability to succeed in this lobbying. However, there is evidence that women's activism often decreases following the consolidation of peace, as the motivating factor of conflict has gone and because this activism becomes formalised into CSOs that compete for funds.

2.2 Supporting a vibrant and inclusive women's movement

As O'Neil and Domingo (2016) argue, women's political marginalisation means that collective strength is crucial to amplify their power. Evidence suggests that women's groups are most influential when they can overcome divisions and develop a joint position (Paffenholz, 2015). 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. This requires recognising the plurality of women's voices and interests in post-conflict settings and working with a wide range of women's organisations and women stakeholders; connecting them to one another across multiple levels in ways that would increase their collective impact; linking them to political processes and spaces; and supporting them to build a common platform and relevant capacities.

A major challenge is that mainstream women's CSOs in fragile states are often elite dominated and unrepresentative. While more rooted, local-level women's organisations also exist these tend to be less visible and attractive to international actors because of their lack of connections and limited institutional capacity. As O'Neil and Domingo (2016) argue, rather than working with locally anchored women's organisations, international donors often fund those that ostensibly share their values or meet pragmatic requirements such as speaking English or the ability to handle large grants. This risks further privileging the voices of elite women and undermining the development of a diverse and organic women's movement. Where international development actors partner with a wide range of women's organisations in FCAS, this can both support women's agency and lead to deeper and more contextually relevant programmes. Indeed, the OECD (2013) recommends that donors support women's agency and mobilisation at different levels and for different purposes, while recognising diversity of women's views. O'Neil and Domingo (2016) argue that 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.

Issues of representativeness are particularly complicated when women's civil society is divided along the identity or ideological cleavages that affect broader society. This creates challenges for international actors in negotiating diverse women's agendas. For example, women's CSOs in Sudan include those with a secular pro-democracy agenda, those with an Islamic pro-democracy agenda, and those with a conservative Islamic agenda. However, donors have largely failed to recognise the plurality of the women's movement and its relationship to wider ideological positions and have operated as if there were one unified women's voice (Domingo et al., 2011). Likewise, in Nepal, women mobilise primarily around community identity issues, with Dalit women mobilising around caste discrimination, ethnic Madhesi women around language and customary practices, and indigenous women around access to services. However, through long-term and strategic engagement, international donors have helped these diverse women's movements to build national-level advocacy coalitions (El-Bushra, 2012).

Myrtilinen (2014) points out that gender identities are complex and nuanced and that programmes need to engage with the intersections of various identity markers, as well as to deepen and broaden their understandings of how gender inequality and fragility interact. There are examples of strong programming that recognises the multiple identities and intersectional discrimination experienced by women in FCAS and take account of the resulting diversity of women's experiences, needs and interests. For example, the OECD (2017) cites a programme in Ethiopia that addresses women's exclusion in the context of other factors such as geographical location or livelihood opportunities, and prioritises support for girls in rural communities, pastoral women, and women and children in prison as particularly marginalised groups.

International funding for civil society is vital to enable women in FCAS to mobilise and have influence. However, the way in which such funding is provided can skew women's priorities, as informal women's networks become formal NGOs that respond to donor agendas and compete with one another for funds, rather than collaborate around common interests. Cardona et al (2012) argue that funding for women's organisations in FCAS is not only inadequate, but also far too short term, given that the objective is often to change deep rooted structural and cultural determinants of gender inequality. Indeed, project-based funding - as opposed to long-term core funding - for women's CSOs makes it difficult for them to build their organisational capacity or political agenda, undermines their ability to be responsive and flexible and undercuts the development of sustainable organizations and movements. It is important that funders find creative mechanisms through which smaller and more grassroots women's organisations can access international funding without having to meet unrealistic bureaucratic hurdles. Likewise, funding should be targeted not just at allowing women's organisations to develop and advance their own agendas, but to supporting relationship building between different types of women's organisations, particularly national and grassroots, in order to overcome the challenges of legitimacy and representation discussed above. Direct fund access by southern-led women groups can also be promoted, as well as "leading from the south" funding mechanisms.

It is important to recognise that in many contexts the shrinking space for civil society is having particularly negative impact on women's ability to mobilise, for example through the targeting of women's CSOs for harassment and closure and the use of patriarchal norms as part of a broader conservative, nationalist to justify repression (Bishop, 2017). As Bishop argues, funders should "take steps to understand the gendered enablers, narratives and impact of closing space for civil society in different contexts. Deepening our understanding of the gendered dimensions of closing space for civil society will help the funding community provide strategic and effective support that is responsive to the local needs of women's and trans groups and activists".

2.3 Building women's capacity for political activism

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.

Support to enhance individual women's capabilities and empowerment is important for women's collective action, as a woman's ability to participate in collective action is linked to her power at household level, including in relation to household income, assets and decision making. As O'Neil and Domingo (2016) argue, "A woman's domestic decision-making power shapes her public power – can she choose to go out alone, attend public meetings or challenge community norms? Education and employment outside the home can increase women's power and status within the family and community". According to the World Bank (2012) women's household level power can be supported through a range of measures including legal reforms and improvement of justice systems; reduction of domestic violence through reforms and awareness programmes; effective service provision; policy measures to reduce burden of unpaid care; increased control over fertility through improved delivery of quality family planning services; and economic empowerment programmes.

Support to build individual women's leadership capacities should take place at national, subnational and community levels. Moreover, given that women's civil society activism can provide an alternative route for women to enter formal politics, it is particularly important to build leadership skills and political capacities among young and non-elite women, to enhance their future participation and influence in both civil society and formal politics. Critically, as Domingo and Holmes (2013) argue, such support should help women to work effectively with existing systems and connect them to ongoing political processes. All too often leadership capacity building takes place in a vacuum, disconnected from the opportunities to actually exert influence and with a focus on the outputs in terms of numbers 'trained', rather than long term impact. As Coomaraswamy (2015) argues, offering capacity building as a road to inclusion – when this is not linked to meaningful processes – is often just a way of continuing women's exclusion in FCAS.

However, while individual level capacity building is important, it is not enough. A recent evaluation of EU Programming on gender equality (Universalis, 2010) found that the effectiveness of programmes was limited by a focus on building the capacity of individuals rather than systems and institutions. This evaluation argues that individual competencies do not equal system capacity, as this 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. As O'Neil and Domingo (2016) argue, to achieve influence women require the capacity to "work in politically and socially strategic ways to advance their objectives. They must build on accepted institutions and ideas, frame their issues in ways that neutralise opposition, make deals and at times accept second-best outcomes, and build alliances with others, including – crucially – male power holders".

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

This sub-section examines some of the key findings from the existing evidence base on how support for women's political participation and influence can be strengthened. In particular by taking a broader and deeper approach, linking work on women's political empowerment with other policy areas and actors, and working in politically smart ways.

3.1 Connecting to broader work on conflict and fragility

A number of reviews (OECD 2017, Coomaraswamy 2015 etc.) find that programmes to support gender equality and women's empowerment in FCAS are often insufficiently connected to broader strategies to address conflict and fragility, including international support to peacebuilding, statebuilding, institutional reform or economic recovery. This means that programming frequently fails to seize the opportunities presented by such processes to promote women's voice and advance their interests, or to understand and support women as agents of change within these processes.

While gender programming in FCAS usually takes into account the direct impacts of conflict or violence on women, such programming 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 conflict and fragility impact gender equality and how women's empowerment in political and other spheres can help advance transitions out of fragility. For example, Myrttinen et al argue that a gender-relational approach to peacebuilding can enhance understanding of how “gender relations and identities influence peace possibilities in a given situation, as well as facilitating transformational change based on that understanding (Myrttinen et al, 2014)

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. A clear example is Afghanistan, where women's rights have been caught up in contests between different political forces and their international backers – from the Soviet-backed regime to the Taliban – and where the issue of women's rights “continues to occupy a highly politicized and sensitive place in the struggles between contending political factions” (Kandiyoti, 2005). Where such links between gender inequalities and broader political contestations are not taken into account, the impact of support for women's voice is reduced. For example, in Nepal lack of attention to how struggles over women's rights related to wider contestations between elites over the nature of the post-conflict political settlement meant that many international actors did not recognise how tensions related to Nepal's relationship with India and the status of the ethnic Madhesi population along the border, undermined women's demands for equal citizenship status in the new Constitution (Desouza, 2015).

3.2 Working on norms and attitudes

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 important to note that while discriminatory norms can be particularly harmful in fragile situations, these situations also offer important opportunities to shift such attitudes. In particular, because experiences of conflict often change gender roles, with women engaging more in labour markets or in civil life (Justino, 2012). While after conflict ends there tends to be a push to return to previous gender roles, with effective support such positive changes can potentially be sustained and built upon.

It is critical that support for women's political empowerment includes efforts to address deep rooted discriminatory social norms. However, this is not always the case. An OECD review (OECD, 2017) 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.

It is important to note that changes in norms and attitudes about gender are inevitably slow and non-linear. However, 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.

3.3 Adopting a multi sectoral approach

Beyond the issue of norms addressed above, 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. As O'Neil and Domingo (2015) argue, "women's socio-political and economic mobilisation have been consistently found to be important to change the formal and informal rules

important for their voice, access to decision-making and influence." 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. For example, support for women's participation in formal politics needs to address violence towards women candidates, the economic cost of participation, logistical barriers to participation in terms of transport or time costs, barriers related to education and language, as well as stigma against women in public life.

Despite this need for a multi-dimensional approach, the study of SCR 1325 implementation (Coomaraswamy, 2015) found that funding and programming on gender equality in FCAS tends to be siloed by sector, overlooking the fact that both patterns of gender inequality, and gender equality gains, can be mutually reinforcing across a range of sectors (services, socio-economic, legal, political, security etc.). Domingo and Holmes (2014) argue that development actors must pay more attention to how change in one sector affects outcomes in another from gender a perspective. For example, access to assets, such as microfinance, is more likely to support women's political empowerment when provision encourages group interaction between women and is combined with technical, vocational and legal training.



3.4 Working with a range of stakeholders

Support for women's political participation and influence tends to still focus very much on working with women or with actors and institutions that are regularly engaged on gender, and often does not seek to reach out to a wider range of stakeholders. However, 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.

At national level O'Neil and Domingo (2015) argue that it is important to build coalitions and networks with decision-makers and other stakeholders in a strong position to promote women's empowerment, such as core government ministries, universities, and the private sector. They point out that ministries of planning or finance – that are not usually concerned with gender issues – can in fact be particularly receptive to evidence-based arguments in favour of including gender equality considerations in budgeting and planning.

At local level, engaging with both formal and customary institutions on the value of women's political participation is also key. This level is often the most relevant and most accessible for ordinary women, but yet exclusionary norms and practices can be stronger at local level. It is particularly important to engage with non-state actors and informal institutions, which can be very powerful in shaping gender norms and inequalities. Likewise, to identify and reach out to those institutions or groups that are most resistant to gender equality and women's political empowerment.

Finally, 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. As Wright (2014) argues, working on masculinities requires working from community level up to the level of the policies and institutions that reinforce patriarchal gender norms, thereby addressing the way in which gender identities can act as barriers to women's political participation at every level.

3.5 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. For example, a recent evaluation found that UN Women's programme results chains in FCAS are rarely underpinned by clear causal relationships between activities and expected results and that programmes lack of theories of change based on realistic objectives, appropriate activities and plausible linkages (Domingo et al, 2013). 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. For example, O'Neil (2016) points out that programmes often respond to the lack of women in politics with training and awareness raising to increase the 'supply' of women, without addressing the lack of 'demand' for women from male dominated parties.

Strong analysis and evidence generation are required to inform a more politically smart and contextually relevant ways of working on gender issues – including women's political participation – in FCAS. For example, international donors and their implementing partners need to adopt a political economy approach to gender analysis, and to meaningfully integrate gender into conflict, political, security, economic and other analyses, something that they are not doing at present (Koester, 2015). As O'Gorman (2014) argues that this common lack of rigorous analysis, significantly limits the development of good programmes and practices.



Politically smart support for women's political empowerment must be tailored to countries 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 programme 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. This is an area that requires long term study, given that any changes in these institutions and the norms that they perpetuate is likely to be slow.¹

Finally, strong monitoring, evaluation and learning is critical to capture and respond to lessons on what works in supporting women's political participation and influence in FCAS. However, various analyses find that monitoring and evaluation is mostly undertaken for administrative accountability, rather than learning. For example, the UN Women evaluation found that this "emphasis on bureaucratic accountability rather than learning from evaluation... [limits the] ability to assess the continuing relevance of programmes and adapt them as conditions change – an almost certain requirement in volatile fragile and conflict-affected settings" (Domingo et al, 2013). Moreover, monitoring tends to focus on input and output levels rather than outcome or impact, and to rely heavily on quantitative indicators. This makes it difficult to track the type of qualitative changes or meaningful progress in terms of women's political influence that are so critical in FCAS.

¹ For more on thinking and working politically in development practice see Rocha Menocal, A. (2014). *Getting real about politics: From thinking politically to working differently*. London: Overseas Development Institute.



The case of Afghanistan

Introduction

The overall situation of women in Afghanistan is still very difficult. After the Taliban's rise to power, women and girls have been systematically discriminated against and marginalized, and their human rights are still being violated. While gender equality is ensured on paper, reality has proved different and being a woman in Afghanistan is still more challenging than being a man. Women and girls continued to be severely restricted in their access to education, health care facilities and employment. This resulted in the deteriorating economic and social conditions of women and girls in all areas of the country, in particular in areas under Taliban control.

In the last decades, developments in the context of Afghan women's rights are undeniable, with a number of policies and plans codified. However, despite that, Afghan women's rights achievements are still very fragile, as women continue to face challenges in different fields and high rates of violence against women persist.

This case study aims to show the relation between marginalized women and political participation, with a main focus on women's needs representation by civil society and women's participation in informal structures at community, district and provincial level. The overarching question that this research project seeks to answer is: *"What are the enabling conditions for increasing the political participation and influence of marginalized women in fragile contexts?"*

To understand the relevance of this issue, the following figures give insight into the country context of Afghanistan:

Education

- Increased conflict resulted in lower primary school attendance. Attendance rates fell from 56% in 2011-2012 to 54% in 2013-2014.
- Girls have difficulty attending school due to conflict. For every 3 boys, 3 girls attend primary school.
- Children in rural areas are falling behind. Urban school attendance: boys 80%, girls 73%. Rural school attendance: boys 57%, girls 37%.
- Poor children are more likely to be out of school. School attendance non poor: 62%, school attendance poor: 48%. Attendance increased for non-poor by 1.8% from 2011-2012 to 2013-2014, but decreased by 6% for poor children.

Gender inequality (in education)

- According to the 2015 report of United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Gender Inequality Index (GII) value of Afghanistan in 2015 was 0.667, placing it at 154 of 158 countries.
- Afghanistan has the highest level of gender disparity in primary education in the world, with only 71 girls in primary school for every 100 boys, and only 21% of girl's complete primary education.

Women's participation in politics

- In 2015, in Afghanistan, only 27.4% of parliament seats were held by women, which can be seen as a quite direct consequence of the fact that only 8.8% of women have at least some secondary education.

Female employment

- In 2002, female employment only represented the 17% of the total share in the non-agricultural sector. In 2010, of the economically active female population of Afghanistan, 31,2% were employed in agriculture.
- The data also shows that 44% of women have some control over the money they earn. When it comes to urban areas, in 2007 on average the number of female full-time employees ranged from 3 percent in small firms (1-19 employees) to 4.2 percent in medium-sized enterprises (20-99 employees) and 1.6 percent in firms with 100+ employees. Only 0.7 percent of firms surveyed had women at manager level.

Women's participation and mobilization

Many Afghans, particularly those in rural areas, rely on local dispute resolution mechanisms known as Jirgas (among Pashtuns) or Shuras (among non-Pashtuns), which operate by consensus and deal primarily with community problems. A tradition of women's councils, known specifically as women's Shuras, also functions in some parts of Afghanistan. The Afghan Government is currently promoting the use of women's and men's Shuras as part of the National Solidarity Program to assist in rural development. Recent funding and support has enabled women's Shuras to be involved in the establishment of a range of community initiatives, such as the construction of girls' schools.

"Based on the population, we have 2 or 3 women representatives in each Assembly/Shura. And they are involved in high level decision making on a provincial level. Also we have two small committees for finding employment opportunities for women at town or village level. Regarding their effectiveness, through these informal entities we are implementing small projects of literacy, 10 days trainings, vocational skills trainings on tailoring and carpet weaving to enhance the skill of women. All these reflect the effectiveness of the informal institutions/entities."

UN Women Coordinator for the Ministry of Women Affairs

Even if women mobilization is still difficult, there are several examples where women have used their collective strength to claim their rights and protest against the gender divide. The below examples prove that, especially in urban areas, there is room for women to mobilize collectively:

- In 2005, hundreds of widows protested in Kabul against the kidnapping of a female aid worker.
- In 2007, in Kandahar, women came together at the Kherqa Sharif mosque, which are normally barred to women, to offer peace prayers. That same year, women in Kabul gathered in mosques to advocate against the use of religion as a justification for suicide attacks.
- In many Afghan provinces, in 2008, women wore blue scarves as a sign of opposition to violence and war.
- In 2012, women and men protested together in Kabul against the execution of a woman on charges of adultery by the Taliban in Qimchok, Parwan Province.
- Women also mobilized for elections: in 2004, women went out of their houses and queued to register for voting, especially in urban areas.

Moreover, women in Afghanistan have created associations, mostly informal, to discuss their conditions and how to participate in the life of the country, especially thanks to the support of donors such as CARE. Such associations and women's participation in it, rely on the approval of men in their family which limits some women. Their strategies are based mainly on what's in their power, so they try to participate in elections, and in other opportunities to advocate for their rights.

"In order to support women at the provincial and district level, we have to implement our policies and procedures for those areas. We have had a symposium for women empowerment that we have conducted in North Zone of Afghanistan and it was very useful and effective, than we tried to conduct the same symposium in other provinces and districts. This symposium had its specific goals, like women participation in government departments, education for women and economic, so we have had a lot of discussion about these issues."

Spokeswoman of Ministry of Women Affairs

Barriers for women's political participation

The main barriers women face in relation to their political participation are:

- **Illiteracy** remains one of the major obstacles for women's empowerment. Particularly in rural areas, education is not seen as a priority and, based on tradition, women are not encouraged or even allowed to get education. According to the interviewees the access to (higher) education is fundamental in order to build both the confidence that women must gain to try to exit their marginalization and to gain the capacities to improve their social and economic living conditions. Improving the access of girls and women to education is not sufficient without a mindset change towards a more gender sensitive learning experience. What is important, is that the curriculum reform should include religious concepts, as gender relations will only improve when supported by religious arguments.
- **Security** is another main reason that pushes women away from politics. The overall security situation is still very critical in Afghanistan. Women are among the most affected. Despite the efforts of the Government to ensure a safe environment for women to participate in the political life of the country, conditions are still dangerous, especially because of the Taliban forces.
- **The patriarchal nature** of Afghan society is one of the reasons that prevent women from being active in society. Afghanistan is a patriarchal society where all the major institutions are controlled by men. Although, since 2001, there have been many endeavors to elevate women and improvements have been observed, the foundations of discrimination against women have not been uprooted.

Women leaders

The Minister of Women Affairs is probably the political body that has the highest power to represent the interest of women, especially the most marginalized ones. At the same time, Ministers of Women, along with other women politicians, can play an important role as role models for women who want to improve their condition and claim their rights.

When it comes to women leaders in particular, there are several issues that prevent a smooth representation process:

- Despite an increasing number of women in positions of authority in the country, those women might be perceived as symbolic figures, lacking decision-making power. According to one of our interviewees from Kabul University, the Afghan legislative body is mostly in the hands of the people who have economic power, thus the women, who tend to be economically marginalized, are on the fringes of the decision making bodies, and tend to be underrepresented.
- Also, increased participation of women in politics has not translated into sufficient gains for women as a gender group. Women leaders tend to be perceived as more inclusive than representative. Even if women's presence in politics is often equated to the representation of women's interest as a gender group, this is not always true. One of the reasons is that women leaders are not immune to those power relationships that pervade Afghan politics, such as patronage and personalized competition; at the same time, those power relations are often more penalizing for them than for their male counterparts.
- Even if women hold real power, some women leaders may lack relevance to women in marginalized situations because of their socio-economic status and background: in fact, most of the women leaders in positions of national significance belong to the upper middle class and thus might be seen as distant figures with no connection with the reality and challenges faced by women in rural areas or from poor economic backgrounds.
- Finally, when talking about the role of leaders, we must remember that the executive power remains firmly in the hand of male politicians: for example, in the 2004 presidential election, there was only one woman candidate (Masooda Jalal) against 17 male competitors; in 2014, Khadija Ghaznawi was again the only woman candidate, and was disqualified by the Electoral Commission for failing to provide all the required ID cards in support of her candidacy.

Strategies and activities by external actors

Quota

One of the actions that have been taken is the introduction of quotas for women in the Parliament and the creation of the Minister of Women Affairs. The quota system, despite its drawbacks- especially in the long run, represents a good opportunity not only to have more women in Parliament, but more generally to increase the participation of women in politics: over the years, women's share of the total number of candidates running for parliament has increased, going from 12% in 2005 to 16% in 2010. However, the quota system doesn't seem to bring a real change in voters' perception of women as trustworthy politicians.



PROMOTE program

Women have received all kinds of support from NGOs and other organizations such as donor agencies or UN institutions, whereby several interviewees have cited the PROMOTE program as a prime example. This is a five-year program targeting the education, promotion, and training of Afghan women. PROMOTE strengthens women's participation in civil society, boosts female participation in the economy, increases the number of women in decision making positions within the Afghan government, and helps women gain business and management skills.

The PROMOTE program was launched in 2015 and will end in 2020, and it consists of 5 axes: the Women's Leadership Development (WLD) Program, the Women in Government Program (WIP), the Afghan Women in the Economy (WIE) Program, the Women's Civil Society Organizations and Coalitions (Musharikat) Program and the Scholarship program. As we can see from the objectives and structure of the program, it is mainly focused on strengthening leadership skills of Afghan women and having more women in key leadership positions, both in public and private sectors.

This approach, despite having shown some good results in the first evaluations, has also been raising some criticism. Here we have to consider the role of leaders and their capacity to use their power to generate gains for all the women as a gender group. One expert thinks that the PROMOTE approach reflects the obsession of donors with putting more women in senior positions, and the training courses offered are based on the idea that power can be gained by convincing potential followers to agree with a leader's own vision, without much scope for adapting the leader's vision to their followers' system of beliefs. The interviewees argue that an authority-driven model cannot generate real social change in the Afghan context.

Despite the efforts done by external actors to provide effective aid in Afghanistan, security and geographical concerns make it very difficult to design a widespread intervention that targets all the areas in need. In fact, from our interviews it appears clearly that the interviewees working or living in rural areas tend to answer that external actors are not playing an active role in their community; sometimes they mention religious organizations as the only actors working for women.

Priorities external actors to women's political participation

When asked what should external actors do in order to improve women's conditions, the interviewees from rural areas of Parwan province are not sure about what actions should be undertaken: some of them suggest that women should be helped in order to start income-generating activities, especially in farming or tailoring. An interviewee from Multani, a village in Paghman District recognizes that civil society organizations were effective in conducting this kind of training programs, especially in tailoring and poultry farming, but here again the interviewee refers to the past and not to the current situation in the village.

A spokesman of an NGO says that the main strategy used by international organizations to increase women's political participation is to conduct focus group discussions and create safe places where women can gather and discuss the issues that are most relevant to them. UN organizations often help women in fundraising activities; while his organization also provides legal assistance to them.

Analysis key lessons and recommendations

Below is a summary of recommendations for improving gender balance in the public life of the country and to empower women.

Recommendations for Government:

- Seek to achieve gender parity in all decision-making bodies, by establishing incremental time-bound targets for increasing women's representation, quotas or reserved seats;
- Draft legislation on a zero-tolerance policy towards sexual harassment in the workplace, in public spaces and in educational institutions;
- Promote women's participation in civil service through the adoption of special training programs, recruitment drives and financial incentives;
- Develop gender-sensitive curriculum and teacher training, especially in relation to gender equality and women's rights, with a specific focus on teaching boys;
- Design specific policies that include a "gender transformative" approach to gender issues, that is focusing on transforming the power dynamics and structures that serve to reinforce gendered inequalities;

Recommendations for donors or other actors of the civil society:

- Increase women's access to education, especially in rural areas;
- Promote the creation of networks in which women and men can elaborate strategies to increase women's participation in decision-making;
- Design strategies to increase the representation, participation and decision-making power of women in formal and informal structure;
- Create synergies between the different actors working on women's empowerment, through for example gender forums, collective actions and project design activities;
- Design aid strategies that reach vulnerable and marginalized segments of the population in rural and isolated areas, especially in coordination with local authorities;
- Create a network of trained religious leaders that preach specifically on women's rights according to the Islamic religion.



The case of Burundi

1. Context

Since 2005 an increasing number of women in Burundi have been successfully elected during the general elections. CARE has noticed though, that the number is still very low at the community level (less than 10%), positions that were initially secured by women tend to be now occupied by men. The EVC team in Burundi was therefore specifically interested in understanding barriers and enabling factors for increased women political participation at community level and how women can be supported to stay in their elected positions and how replacement by other women can be ensured when they leave.

After having gained independence from Belgian rule in 1962, Burundi's monarchy was transformed into a republic in 1966. Its post-independence history is one of on-going ethnic conflict between the Hutu majority (85%) and the Tutsi and Batwa minorities (respectively 14 and 1% of the population), preventing the country from rising from poverty.²

A representative democracy since 1993, the Republic of Burundi is currently divided into 18 provinces, 119 municipalities and 2,638 *collines* ("hills"), the smallest administrative unit, which corresponds in most cases with a village. Provinces are headed by a governor and a three-member council, appointed by presidential decree. Municipalities are governed by democratically elected mayors and councils, the sizes of which depend on the number of inhabitants. The (also democratically elected) *colline* council consists of five members, irrespective of the size of the electorate, and is headed by a chief.

Although, a quota was introduced in the 2005 Constitution to ensure that at least 30% of the parliamentarians, senators and ministers would be female, when elected women withdraw from their positions, the authorities pro-actively replace women by men. In particular at the local level, women experience difficulties caused by low educational levels, lack of economic resources and time, prejudice (due to cultural issues) and resistance. Grassroots women experience a gap with the higher level elected women and would like to benefit more from their support. A true representation of women's interests is hampered not just by a lack of connectivity between the levels, but also because party dynamics tend to dominate political choices of men and women alike.

² United States Institute of Peace, *Making peace after genocide: Anatomy of the Burundi process*, 2011, p.6

2. The Context of Gender

The study took place in the context of an approaching referendum about a constitutional revision, an increasing monopolisation of power by the ruling party, tense relations between the current government and, notably, the European Union, adverse economic conditions, and shrinking space for civil society. Amidst all of this, gender is not particularly high on the agenda, even though the Government of Burundi is making efforts to structurally improve the position of women.

2.1 Social norms

Social relations in Burundi are characterised by patriarchal rule and patrilineal descent, leading to male dominance and persistent conventions about gender roles. Although the constitution says otherwise (c.f. Article 25), convention demands that women ask permission from their husbands (or fathers) to move and speak in the public space. Their access to resources is weak, since they have no formal right to inherit. The scarcity of land makes any advocacy for the inheritance rights of women a sensitive topic, which is therefore mostly avoided. Gender based violence (GBV) is common practice. Although men have started to speak up about physical, economic and sexual violence; their numbers are still limited.

Women were initially denied access to the official peace process taking place in Arusha, so they set up the All-Party Burundi Women's Peace Conference. In this space women had the opportunity to exchange ideas and formulate joint recommendations towards the Peace process. The immediate post-conflict period brought some opportunities to renegotiate gender relations, resulting in amongst others quota on women's participation.

2.1 Election quota

A quota was introduced in the 2005 Constitution to ensure that at least 30% of the parliamentarians, senators and ministers would be female³. This instrument has so far been successfully applied in the sense that the past two elections indeed resulted in the required number of women representatives.

The impact of the quota can be appreciated when experience with the general elections is compared to the *colline* elections, where no rule determines the male/female balance. Chances to become a council member were higher than to become chief: 17 versus 6% on average, although there is some variation between provinces. Interesting too, is that the odds for a male candidate to get elected are more than twice as high as for a female candidate (68% against only 29% for women). This reflects the difficulties that women experience in campaigning: fewer resources, less mobility, and a less well developed political network result in less exposure to their potential electorate and fewer moments to influence.

A revision of the electoral code is expected, which gives an opening to advocate for the quota extension to the *colline* level. Although more measures are needed to ensure equal political participation of women, the rule will surely further women's role in local politics.

Furthermore, the weak representation of women in party leadership contributes to their under representation in both elected and appointed positions, because of the dominance of party politics in both spheres (COCAFEM/CARE 2017: 7-9).

³ The Constitution also includes a quota for the ethnic composition of the parliament (60% Hutu and 40% Tutsi).

3. Political Participation at the Grassroots Level

From the research it can be concluded that women feel that they receive little support from men when they try to get politically engaged. Women tend to meet with resistance at home and in the council.

In the council, resistance is associated with women moving and speaking in the public space and women touching subjects that are considered to be not their business. Extreme sensitivity exists around inheritance issues and land rights.

3.1 Family honour

At home, resistance relates to men's fear of being dominated by their politically active wives, and the connected apprehension for rumours spreading about dominant wives and neglecting mothers, whose sense of morality gets tainted through politics. This is about more than simply the relationship between husband and wife. Family honour is critical in patriarchal societies, and it is a man's job to protect it. Any behaviour by women that is considered immoral or irresponsible reflects upon the family as a whole. Conversely, this is also true for the opposite: exemplary behaviour by women contributes to the family reputation. The weight this carries makes change in this domain sensitive and complex, though not impossible.

3.2 Dispute settlement

An area in which women's interventions are undisputed is that of marital or family conflicts. Female council members are often greatly appreciated for their wisdom and impartiality in solving matters.

Although settling disputes may seem rather trivial, it represents a good deal of the work of a *colline* council, since higher level policy issues are dealt with and budgeted at the municipal level.

3.3 Logistical challenges

Women face other difficulties when they seek to participate in local politics. Campaigning efforts are often hampered by budget constraints, stemming from their lack of economic independence. Financial difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that none of the *colline* council work is remunerated. Not helpful either is their limited mobility and the volume of their workload. Many women mentioned how difficult it is to find the time and the resources to attend critical meetings. As one might expect, it appears that female council members are often not married or beyond child bearing age. Low levels of education entail many practical difficulties, but they also affect women's self-confidence⁴.

⁴ Although adult literacy rates are increasing again since the end of the civil war, women's literacy still compares unfavourably to that of men (62% against 70% for men in 2014) and secondary school attendance is still below 11% (UNESCO Institute for Statistics).

3.4 Cabaret

Another rather critical constraint is formed by the habit of men to meet informally in bars, in Burundi indicated as the *cabaret*. This is where votes are won and council decisions prepared over beer. It is an “old boys network” from which women are mostly excluded. Female members miss out on the opportunity to access information early, to massage opinions through shared drinks and companionship, and to prepare their argument on the basis of known opposition.

It takes courage for a woman to present herself as candidate. Women mentioned that the case was discussed before an extended family council, where they would hear that they would have to bear all the consequences on their own. This would imply taking the criticisms, the extra work, the administrative procedures, and the cost. All of this is not so easy, particularly considering the low degree of self-confidence that women admitted to have.

3.5 Male support

Yet, when women do get elected, and manage to effectively exert their function, the experience is often very positive. Both men and women shared experiences of female chiefs and councillors whose work was greatly appreciated by the community.

4 Strategies

4.1 The ‘ten household’ route

Given their important role in elections and the exertion of the function of elected representative, a critical strategy for women is to get their husbands on board. A good entry point seems to be the “ten household” route: a rather low key position, a role as chief of ten households allows women to gain experience and their environment to develop trust in their political participation. Gaining trust from their environment about their political capacities is very important to be supported by their husband. From this lower position, women are able to show their ability as participants in a political field.

4.2 Village saving and loan groups

Because the lack of funding and independent revenue has proved an important obstacle for women to engage in politics, CARE has been working on financial autonomy through the creation and support of saving and loan groups. The groups seen in the communities of Giheta and Bwoga in Gitega Province appeared to successfully contribute to income generation, but also provided a platform to share experiences and build life skills.

4.3 Radio

Another interesting strategy is women's use of the very successful community radio *La voix de la femme*, the "Women's voice". Through its extensive network of volunteer correspondents, the radio actively contributes to conflict resolution and awareness raising around many sensitive and taboo subjects.

The *colline* based reporters actively investigate household and neighbourhood conflicts and thereby contribute to mediation and sensitisation. The radio discussions are supported by experts, while they invite contributions by listeners. Debates on the work done by council members contribute to transparency in governance and exposure of women's realisation to a wide audience.

5. Higher Level Leadership & Support to Grassroots Women

5.1 National Level Political Leadership

"As long as the executive bodies of political parties, where decisions are made that include the positioning of women on the electoral lists and the appointment of public offices, do not incorporate women, for sure, their preoccupations will not be taken into account." (COCAFEM/CARE 2017: 40)

If it is difficult for vulnerable women to engage in local politics, national politics are entirely beyond reach for most.

The quota as an instrument, though necessary at this moment, is of limited value. It tends to be used as a maximum rather than a minimum, it provides opponents arguments to create doubt about quality and fairness of competition, particularly where women are co-opted, and it does not in itself pave the way to political participation for all women.

When women do get elected or appointed, the representation of women's interests is not self-evident. The general sentiment expressed in interviews is that party politics tend to outweigh these. Elected women⁵ are more inclined to support the general (male dominated) party line than to put gender equality on the agenda⁶. This means that defending general women's interests can be in direct opposition to the personal interest of elected and appointed women. Conversely, female elected representatives who fail to defend women's interests may give a false sense of legitimacy to adverse measures.

Within political parties, the organisation of women into leagues does not help their ascension to power: being confined to their own department, access to meaningful leadership positions becomes difficult.

Women at high-level political positions appear to be disconnected from their constituencies and do not seem able or interested to bridge the gap between Bujumbura and the rest of the country.

⁵ And men for that matter; there is no reason why gender equality should not be on the agenda of men in public offices.

⁶ The practice of voting by hand (as opposed to blind voting) discourages women from taking a position other than the one proclaimed by the party.

Differences in women's participation between the 2010 and 2015 elections, according to several interlocutors and the COCAFEM/CARE 2017 study, point to yet another factor of importance. While in 2010 women successfully negotiated positions on the electoral lists that allowed them to get elected without co-optation, the situation reversed with the 2015 crisis. In part this was due to women's own reticence in the face of reduced political space and heightened tension; in part women from the municipal to the cabinet level were consciously replaced by men because they believed the crisis "demanded" this (Ibid: 57). The general political crisis thus thwarted the earlier attainments with regard to women's political participation.

5.2 Women's movement

Some of the key players in the women's movement in Burundi are COCAFEM, MIPAREC, and AFRABU. These organisations have been instrumental in key achievements such as the elaboration of the UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan, the mainstreaming of gender in the PRSP, and the development of the National Gender Strategy. These efforts, achieved in close collaboration with the Gender Ministry, multi- and bilateral partners (notably UNIFEM) and with the support of INGOs, have led among others to the revised constitution in 2005 and the SGBV law. They continue to advocate for parity in elections and nominations, effective political participation by women and the reduction of gender based violence.

At the local level, the organisations support women in improving their access to land, voluntary saving and lending, income generation, skills development and advocacy. Although certainly relevant, in view of enabling women to increase their effective political participation, the scale of this support appears to be limited, both geographically and in terms of budget.

5.3 Bridging the Gap: Opportunities for (Support to) Grassroots Women

Opportunities of two sorts can be distinguished here: those provided by the national political context and opportunities to scale up efforts and multiply their impact.

5.3.1 Taking advantage of the lower levels of political participation

The *colline* councils are in fact a modern democratic replacement of the traditional courts, which used to be ruled by men only.

Although it is of course critical that women gain access to decision making posts at all levels, the value of local level positions is not to be underestimated. They provide an accessible opportunity for women to build political skill and stamina, allowing them to gain self-confidence and catch up with the experience that men have been able to develop for many years. They can thus convince others of their skills and gain strength in numbers, in due time making the quota a redundant measure.

5.3.2 A new electoral code

The renewal of the constitution, of having a quota for women, during the upcoming referendum is an opportunity to subsequently renew the electoral code. The Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) might be a strategic ally in this. Having experienced first-hand the difficulties of respecting the quota in the light of the disadvantageous positioning of female candidates on the electoral lists, CENI could be interested in proposing a system of alternation, whereby every other person on the list should be a woman.

5.3.3 Making use of numbers

The demographic composition of the country is such that the female electorate is bigger than the proportion of male voters by 1-2%. Unlike some other countries, men and women in Burundi vote individually and not in line with the family preference. This suggests that if all women would vote for female candidates, they stand every chance of winning. It does require those female voters to be aware of the stakes though and to feel confident to cast their own vote, rather than transferring it to a male family member.

5.3.4 Structures and networks with national reach

Burundi has a number of organisations and networks that could help to bridge the gap between the local and the national level. On the side of the authorities this would be the Family and Community Development Centres (CDFC) of the Ministry of Gender, found in each municipality, and the Gender committees from each ministry, and finally the National Women's Forum (FNF), with members at every administrative level, down to the *colline*. Although both are notoriously under-funded, the CDFCs have the staff capacity to contribute to civic awareness raising and skill building, while the FNF could play a role in conveying concerns from the *colline* to the national level. The latter will only work though, if the forum can stay clear from influencing by the ruling party.

Another network with national reach is the Burundi Association of Municipalities ABELO. It comprises a network of female and male elected representatives, whose ambition it is to contribute to women's capacity building and to mainstream gender into communal development plans. Collaboration between ABELO and NGOs specialised in income generation and advocacy, such as Miparec and COCAFEM, could lead to a multiplication of results. The community radio mentioned earlier might help to strengthen this effect.

The options are somewhat limited by the general political climate and the current shrinking of space for civil society. In spite of these limitations, a constructive dialogue with government is still possible, provided that contributions are evidence based and confrontations are avoided.

6. Recommendations

Taking into account the above, the following recommendations may be considered.

1. **Where gender norms are addressed, the patriarchal context and the wider family relations need to be included.** The EVC programme is already working with the husbands of elected women. Exploiting such cases by showcasing them through the community radio might eventually cause a tipping point in the general opinion.
2. At the same time, **it might be useful to look towards the next generation.** Gender norms take root in childhood, and could be changed **by addressing parenting styles and sexual/gender education at school.**
3. **Women at the *colline* level expressed a desire for coaching by more experienced women and men.** This could very well be organised in collaboration with ABELO, since a partnership between EVC and the latter is already taking shape.
4. The same collaboration could be used **to develop a better awareness among female politicians of their role in representing the interests of all women and girls.**



The case of Rwanda

1. Context

Rwanda is considered to have a favorable legal framework on gender equality. Nonetheless, qualitative findings in this study have revealed that although women have made steps in participating in decision making, there is still a long way to go to achieve actual influence on these processes.

Rwanda's patriarchal social structure and cultural beliefs have been at the base of existing gender imbalances in the country, which have resulted in inequalities between men and women and have led to unequal socio-political power relations, with women not being considered as active citizens in governance processes and spaces.

There is political will to increase citizens' participation in policy making, coherent with the 2003 Rwanda Constitution as amended to date and the country's Vision 2020. There are other mechanisms that have been introduced to enable citizens to participate in local development planning processes and action, and through which they can theoretically hold local leaders and service providers to account for the services they deliver.

Despite the strong legal framework in place and the political will, a major policy implementation gap continues to exist between the rights that women enjoy in theory, and those they are able to claim in practice. This study aims to understand profiles of women in Rwanda and how these women have been participating and influencing decisions taken at both national and grassroots level in relation to GBV prevention and response.

2. Context of gender

Women's and girls' participation is an important factor for inclusive development. However, as far as direct participation is concerned in Rwandan society, women and girls are still not participating as well as men. They mainly participate through their representatives in various organs such as citizens councils and national women councils at all levels.

2.1 Social norms

Cultural and social norms have an impact on women's political participation and inclusion in decision-making. These norms include beliefs about gender roles, with the man often being seen as the head and the decision-maker of the household, as well as ideas that women's place is not in the public sphere. On a local level, there is stigma and moral judgment regarding women who do seek a public role, due to the importance of a woman's reputation being reflected on her husband and her family.

2.2 Gender based violence

Gender based violence (GBV) is still very prevalent in Rwandan society. 35% of women aged 15–49 years have experienced physical abuse at least once⁷. The most commonly reported perpetrator of physical violence is the husband or partner, indicating a high level of spousal violence.

The Rwandan government adopted a law against GBV in 2009 and has had a national policy on GBV since 2011, yet this policy has not been clearly translated to a local level and its influence on local budgeting and planning processes has been limited.

Although national policies and laws are implemented to protect and promote women's rights, in the communities unequal power relations between men and women remain persistent and lead to harmful consequences such as gender based violence.

2.3 Electoral quota

Women representation in decision making is primarily guaranteed by the Rwandan Constitution of 2003, revised in 2015, requiring that at least 30 per cent of decision making positions are filled by women⁸. This is generally adhered to and the quota is frequently exceeded especially at the national level, although according to this study women are not represented in the same numbers at decentralized and community levels.

3. Women's political participation at grassroots level

Over 80% of men and women respondents in the study testified that in general, women and girls do participate in decision making at grassroots level. Most of them, as revealed by the research, attend meetings at the grassroots level and give their opinions during these meetings. Yet only a few of them revealed that, as a sign of participation, they are members of women and girls organs or become a leader in local entities.

3.1 Imihigo

In Rwanda, local and central government activities are planned through a home-grown performance contract known as "Imihigo". Imihigo is one of the mechanisms developed to help local government fulfill its developmental mandate. Through this approach, local governments articulate their own objectives which reflect priorities of the local population and develop realistic strategies to achieve these objectives. Two important parts of the preparation phase of the Imihigo process are the planning stage and the budgeting stage.

The study found that participation of women and girls in Imihigo planning was a lot higher than women's and girls' participation in Imihigo budgeting. Only 25.7% of women have participated in budgeting, whereas 60.1% indicated that they had participated in planning.

⁷ Rwanda Demographic and Health Survey (RDHS) 2016,

⁸ Art 10 (4) of the Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda of 2003 revised in 2015, p.34

Women's participation in the preliminary steps of Imihigo is not yet satisfactory. Lack of information is revealed as one of the reasons for women to not participate in Imihigo planning. Women have indicated that they don't receive adequate information on the Imihigo process. Little interest, although not as important as the lack of information, is another reason. Women state that they are not always interested to play a role in the Imihigo process. The same reasons are mentioned for narrow participation in Imihigo budgeting.

Men play a significant and considerable role in supporting women and girls' participation. Lack of one's husband's support to participate in decision-making or low self-confidence resulting from this can also inhibit women to participate in the Imihigo planning and budgeting processes. Additionally, women have less time to participate because they generally carry the sole responsibility of unpaid housework, such as caring for the children and doing household chores.

3.1.1 Male support

However, the majority of men in the study considers women's and girls' participation in the decision-making process as a right. This positive stance might be a result of massive awareness and education campaigns organized by state and non-state actors towards gender equality and family promotion in Rwanda.

3.1.2 Indirect participation

Indirect participation forums are also perceived as avenues that help women and girls to participate in Imihigo. Through local leaders representing their interests, women at grassroots level can also indirectly participate in Imihigo planning and budgeting.

Indirect participation is a frequent way for women at grassroots level to express their views and opinions through their elected representatives, such as village leaders or women council members. In her words, a female participant in Muhanga District argues as follows: "We participate in decision making at village level and our opinions are usually taken to higher levels through our representatives who are in various levels of the country's leadership".

3.2 Barriers

The main barriers women in Rwanda face in relation to their political participation are:

- **Lack of support at household level.** As cultural and social norms prescribe, women are responsible for taking care of the household and the children. This leaves limited time to participate in local decision-making processes.
- **Insufficient capacity and ignorance of rights.** The lower the level of education, the lower a woman's perception of her rights to participate. Women and girls engage in the denial of their own rights and the denial of the opportunity to participate.
- **Not being consulted by local leaders.** Women's participation in the Imihigo planning phase is limited, as male leaders often do not consult women as a particular group. This could affect the effective implementation of Imihigo, as not all interests are taken into consideration.

4. Fora, institutions and individuals fostering women's political participation

Effective women and girls participation in decision making implies awareness about institutions, structures, and organizations that are involved in fostering their participation. Leaders at the local government structures have facilitated women's and girls' right to decision making. At the national level, the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotions uses its power to represent women's interest, for instance through the adoption of the GBV law and policy. Other important actors and fora are discussed below.

4.1 Parents evening meetings

Parents Evening Meeting commonly known as “Umugoroba w’Ababyeyi” is one of the fora used to foster women and girls’ participation in decision making. This is a forum that gathers all parents in the village with three main objectives: 1) prevent and resolve conflicts with an intent to strengthen social cohesion of family members, 2) promote children education and rights and 3) promote socio-economic development within families.⁹

Through Umugoroba w’Ababyeyi, women have been playing a key role in creating an environment where citizens feel free to express themselves. The forum takes place at the village level and the majority of participants are women who mostly prefer to voice their concerns in a forum perceived as homogeneous. However, these meetings are still mostly considered as channels to resolve intra-house and family conflicts, rather than being used for planning purposes on a local level.

4.2 Civil society organisations

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a pivotal role in fostering women's and girls' participation in decision making at the grassroots level.

Among other things, CSOs provide civilians with knowledge about Imihigo and other governance processes. CSOs aim to increase advocacy efforts and to build women's and girls' capacity to engage in meaningful political participation.

4.3 National Women Council

The National Women Council (NWC) is an institution representing women's interests. The NWC's members are elected from the village, cell, sector, district and national level. As a women organ structured from national to the smallest administrative entity, the national women council is expected to connect women from the village to those representing them at central level. However, the NWC does not always succeed in fulfilling this role. The organ faces financial constraints to effectively achieve its mission and sometimes experiences limited willingness and capacity amongst its representatives at village and cell levels.

⁹ MIGEPROF, (2016), *Guidelines for the Parents' Evening Meeting (Kinyarwanda version)*, Kigali

5. Strategies

5.1 Quota

Rwanda has the greatest proportion of female parliamentarians worldwide. This is partly due to quotas stipulating that women must make up 30% of parliamentarians, which is exceeded by the actual number of women in parliament. Although the quota might have played an important role in fostering women's political participation on a national level, these are usually women from elite backgrounds who have easier access to governance structures. Grassroots women are still excluded from political participation due to the lack of effectiveness of the quota on the local level.

5.2 Every Voice Counts

The study also specifically looked at the impact of the Every Voice Counts programme. Recognizing the need for citizen participation and women participation specifically, CARE international Rwanda in partnership with Pro-Femme/ Twese Hamwe has implemented the Every Voice Counts (EVC) project in Rwanda. The programme aims to build the capacity of excluded groups, civil society organizations (CSOs) and public authorities to strengthen inclusive governance processes.

Through the programs, women and girls participate in trainings, aimed at capacity-building, fostering understanding of decision-making processes and addressing the social norms constraining participation.

5.3 Network between external actors and grassroots women

The network between various external actors, such as CARE, the councils and civil society organisations, and women and girls at the grassroots level has yielded considerable results in terms of women's and girls' political participation. The connection with external actors lead to increased confidence and a feeling of empowerment.

One result is the increased women's economic development due to the sensitization of women and girls to engage into paid activities, impacting their capacity to participate in various decisions making forums.

Another important milestone has been the establishment of various laws that promote women rights. As noted by Mrs. Rubagumya Emma, the Executive Secretary of PF/TH: *"women advocated for a number of laws in the parliament and thanks also to political will available in Rwanda, these laws have passed and are being implemented at both national and local level"*.

6. Recommendations

Taking into account the above, the following recommendations may be considered for the respective actors:

- **MINALOC and districts: Incorporate women's view into Imihigo planning and budgeting:** Establish working guidelines of other forums where women participate (such as Umugoroba w'ababyeyi) to include in planning and budgeting sessions on Imihigo.
- **MIGEPROF and CARE: Address cultural and social norms constraining women's political participation:** Organize sensitization campaigns targeting men and boys in grassroots levels to ensure redistribution of unpaid care work that limits women and girls participation.
- **MINALOC, MIGEPROF and Care: Improve the connection between grassroots women and local leaders:** Train local government leaders to be gender sensitive while organizing and conducting meetings, especially when important decisions are to be taken in these forums.
- **MIGEPROF and NWC: Strengthen the National Women's Council's role:** Deploy considerable efforts to utilize NWC's bottom up structure as a channel for women and girls participation in decision making, especially incorporating GBV in Imihigo planning and budgeting. Revisit NWC's accountability and reporting strategies to ensure that every elected council member is aware of the tasks, roles and responsibilities and is held accountable if he/she fails to comply with them.
- **MIGEPROF, MINALOC, RGB, and NNGOs: Increase the capacity of external actors:** Revisit collaboration strategies among NGOs. The Rwandan national government is encouraged to join NGOs' efforts to make a greater impact for grassroots women and girls' participation in decision making. "Silent" but influential stakeholders (such as the church and media) should also be brought on board to contribute to women's and girls' participation in decision making.
- **MINECOFIN: Incorporate women's interests in budgeting processes:** prioritize social activities by all districts and ensure that gender mainstreaming and GBV related issues are incorporated in Imihigo planning and budgeting to ensure sustainability of all other aspects of development.

Conclusion

Dynamics of women's political participation and influence

The Afghanistan, Rwanda and Burundi case studies provide an illustration of some of the key findings from existing literature on women's political mobilisation in FCAS. They highlight the barriers women face in participating in and influencing politics, as well as suggest entry points for strengthening this participation and influence, including for the most marginalised women. Moreover, the cases provide evidence of the way different aspects of gender inequality and fragility interact to create both opportunities and challenges for women's political voice.

It is widely recognised that the political change processes that follow conflict or form part of peacebuilding and statebuilding can offer an opportunity to advance women's interests within the new political settlement and its resulting institutions and rules. In Afghanistan, Burundi and Rwanda the renegotiation of the political settlement following conflict has clearly provided such opportunities for strengthening the legal and policy framework for gender equality and in all three countries women have mobilised to take advantage of these opportunities, with support from international actors. In Burundi this mobilisation resulted in the adoption of constitutional commitments to equality, parliamentary quotas for women, a UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan, a new SGBV law, the mainstreaming of gender in the PRSP, and the development of the National Gender Strategy. In Afghanistan, mobilisation by women to seize the opportunity of political settlement renegotiation resulted in the inclusion of equality provisions in the constitution, a 1325 National Action Plan, ratification of CEDAW, parliamentary quotas for women and the EVAW law. Rwanda tops the global list of the number of female parliamentarians, partly thanks to quotas, put in place following the genocide, stipulating that women must make up 30% of parliamentarians. Rwanda also ratified and adhered to a number of international and regional conventions, charters and declarations, including the CEDAW and UNSCR 1325. Local and central government activities are planned through a home-grown performance contract known as "Imihigo". Although Imihigo, as a mechanism developed to help local government fulfil its developmental mandate, does enhance civic participation, it does not include specific provisions for women's participation.

These strengthened policy frameworks provide an important advance in terms of women's formal rights, although in all countries there is still much further to go. However, there has been weak implementation of these frameworks, meaning that the extent to which they result in substantive rights or greater political voice for women is very limited. For example, constitutional provisions for equality have not been translated into areas such as family and personal law, nor have gender related policy initiatives been effectively financed and rolled out. For example, in Burundi, sector-based gender entities have been established in each ministry, however, except for in the Ministry of National Security, these entities lack funding and are unable to implement their action plans. This experience reflects the wider evidence base, which indicates that gender equality policies in FCAS often suffer from a significant implementation gap.



A key factor behind this implementation gap is lack of political support and funding for gender initiatives, both because these are seen as a low priority and because of tacit resistance among male political elites to advancing gender equality. For example, in Burundi funding allocated for the implementation of gender policy in 2018 represents just 0.06% of the overall national budget. Implementation challenges can also be due to the weakness and political isolation of government institutions responsible for gender issues. Afghanistan provides an example of this, with the Ministry of Women being particularly weak and the Minister for Women having little power or political support from the broader government. In Rwanda the main institution recognized for representing the interests of women is National Women Council (NWC) which is organized from village to national level. Yet it is debatable whether the members of the NWC are able to represent the women at grassroots level, since the study found that they have little capacity, funding and even in some cases willingness.

There has been extensive research and discussion about the role of quotas in promoting women's political participation. The experience of Burundi, Rwanda and Afghanistan in this regard mirrors that of many other FCAS. In all of the countries quotas have helped to get women into political institutions from which they would otherwise have been largely excluded, as well as to challenge stereotypes about women's role in public life. However, in all contexts quotas only apply to some political institutions and roles, meaning that there are important layers of political life where women remain largely absent. For example, in Burundi there is a 30% quota for parliamentarians, senators and ministers but no quotas for appointed offices or local councils (*collines*). Meanwhile in Afghanistan 27% of seats in parliament are reserved for women, but there are no quotas for positions in the executive, other appointed positions or in local governance structures. In Rwanda, the Rwandan Constitution of 2003 was revised in 2015, and requires that at least 30% of decision making positions are filled by women. This is mostly at national level, at decentralized levels, for example at the community level, women are less well represented. Inevitably it is mostly women from elite backgrounds who are able to enter national level governance structures through these quotas, while grassroots women's exclusion from formal politics is exacerbated by the lack of quotas at local level, the level to which they might potentially have greater access. For example in Rwanda, this implies that as long as women in local government are not substantively represented, issues related to gender equity, including curbing Gender Based Violence (GBV), remains underrepresented and not prioritised.

In neither country have quotas enabled women to convert presence into significant influence or delivered much in the way of gender equality policy outcomes. There are a variety of reasons for this, which closely mirror those found in other FCAS where quotas have been introduced. In all countries democratic institutions are weak and power is frequently practiced in other ways and brokered in other spaces. For example, through the group of 'wise men' personally appointed by the President in Burundi, or through informal patronage networks in Afghanistan. In such contexts, the insertion of women into these weak democratic institutions is inevitably unlikely to have much policy impact. Likewise, once in office women politicians are incentivised to support the party agenda rather than promote gender equality because they rely on the patronage of party leaders - for example to be well positioned on electoral lists or to get access to appointed positions. In all countries it appears that because women have accessed political institutions through quotas they are seen as lacking political legitimacy, which also reduces their influence. In Afghanistan, lack of economic power was also a reason why women who gain political office through quotas are often unable to wield political power, showing the close interrelation between the two.

Evidence suggests that in many FCAS political parties are the main gatekeeper for women seeking to enter politics, whether at local or national level. Parties in these contexts tend to be highly exclusionary of women, as well as personalised around individual leaders and lacking in internal democracy. They can hence act as a major barrier both to women's political participation and influence and more generally to the advancement of gender equality policy agendas. In Burundi this appears to be the case, with women's limited access to party leadership roles restricting their ability to shape party agendas or access other important decision-making roles. Moreover, as the Burundi case illustrates, where women are side-lined into women's leagues - as often is the case with political parties in FCAS - this effectively marginalises them within party structures.



One area that is just beginning to be explored in current research is the way in which gender and women's rights relate to the broader power dynamics at play in FCAS. Interestingly, both Burundi and Afghanistan provide examples of how gender inequalities can get caught up in wider struggles over the nature of the post-conflict political settlement. In Burundi land is the basis of power but increasingly scarce, and this has become a major reason for elite resistance to women's demands for equal inheritance rights in line with equality provisions in the constitution. In Afghanistan the extent of women's inclusion or exclusion from the public sphere is central to ideological differences between the Taliban and current regime and hence to conflict over the very nature of the Afghan state. The Burundi case also provides an example of the way in which when elite interests come under threat and politics becomes 'high stakes', women face greater exclusion. The case study documents

how during the 2015 political crisis women were replaced by men at every level of political institution, because in this emergency context it perceived that men were required. Both the Afghanistan and Burundi case studies demonstrate the importance of gender programming being based on a holistic understanding of how women's political exclusion relates to broader political-economy dynamics especially in conflict and post-conflict settings.

As has been documented elsewhere, local level, informal and traditional governance structures can frequently be the most relevant for marginalised women's day to day lives and concerns and women's participation in these structures can potentially help shape local rules, practices and resource allocations in ways that promote their interests. Yet the often highly discriminatory nature of these structures can limit women's access to them and ability to promote their rights through them. In this regard the three case studies offer quite distinct experiences. In Burundi women have low levels of participation in '*collines*', as these are not covered by quotas and also do not involve any financial remuneration. Moreover, even when women are *colline* members they are excluded by practices of informality as decisions are often not made in formal meetings but by *colline* members in informal spaces such as bars that are hard for women to access. Despite this the Burundi case study found that this was an important level for women's political participation and offers opportunities for political apprenticeship, and that there should be a focus on increasing women's presence within it. Indeed, possible upcoming revisions of the electoral code could be an important opportunity to expand quotas to the *colline* level. In Afghanistan the local level Shuras appear to be almost entirely male dominated institutions which offer almost no space for women's participation, while attempts to set up parallel local governance institutions (e.g. community development councils) that do offer space for women have little local ownership or legitimacy, and in some districts, continue to be side-lined by the parallel existence of the Shuras. This means that women are effectively locked out of this local level political decision making. In Rwanda women often only participate in Imihigo on household level. Their participation in the planning phase is limited, as the men in the communities rarely consult them as a particular group. Which, according to some of the respondents, affects the effective implementation of Imihigo.

In Afghanistan and Burundi, the nature of women's activism and the ways in which women have mobilised through civil society to collectively raise political voice and promote their interests reflects broader findings from other FCAS. In particular, the pattern of national level women's CSOs in fragile states being led by elite, urban women who are largely disconnected from grassroots women and their concerns. In Afghanistan and Burundi the studies found that women leaders and women's organisations at capital level had little engagement with rural and grassroots women, did not necessarily understand their priorities and concerns, and generally were not representative of or accountable to them. This suggests that support for women's organisations should be targeted not just at enabling these organisations to develop and advance their own agendas, but also at specifically encouraging relationship building between different types of women's organisations, particularly national and grassroots, in order to overcome such challenges of legitimacy and representation.

Constraints on women's political participation

There is significant evidence in the literature regarding the range of structural and practical constraints to women's political participation and influence in FCAS. The three case studies illustrate some of these. Indeed, there are strong similarities between the three countries in this regard, although some of the constraints appear to be more severe in Afghanistan, which may be due in part to ongoing conflict and insecurity as well as extremely restrictive gender norms in some parts of the country.



Gender discriminatory norms and attitudes are a central constraint to women's political participation and influence in all three countries, as in many other FCAS. These include beliefs about gender roles and women's place being within the private sphere; ideas that women lack the ability to be effective political actors; stigma and moral judgement of women who do seek a public role; and – particularly in the case of Afghanistan – religious interpretations that restrict women's rights, autonomy and freedom of movement. In all three countries the importance of a woman's 'reputation' for male family members' social status results in tight control over women's access to the public sphere.

Closely linked to norms and beliefs about gender roles is the issue of how much autonomy women have within their household, including their ability to make an independent choice to participate politically, and the levels of support or opposition they encounter from family. These household level factors are critical, as evidence suggests that a woman's ability to participate in collective action is linked to her power at household level, including in relation to household income, assets and decision making. In Burundi and Afghanistan it was difficult or impossible for women to participate politically without the permission or support of male family members. The Burundi case study provides positive examples of how women can convince husbands and fathers-in-law to give them this support and even how families have come to see women's political engagement as bringing prestige to the family. In contrast, in parts of rural Afghanistan women are entirely confined to the domestic sphere and lack autonomy to even enter public space, making the political participation of many such women – even through the most basic political act of voting – virtually impossible.

The wider evidence base suggests that women's lack of economic rights have significant implications for their political rights. This is borne out by the findings from the two studies, which show that women's limited economic independence and access to economic resources is a major barrier to their political engagement at all levels. The Burundi case found that this lack of economic autonomy is exacerbated by unequal inheritance laws, illustrating how denial of women's rights in one area negatively impact their rights in another. In Afghanistan, marginalised women report that their main concern is economic survival, and as long as this remains the case then political engagement is neither a priority or realistic. Linked to these economic issues are the constraints related to women's ability both to spare the time for political engagement and to travel away from home.

Women in FCAS – particularly poor or marginalised women – frequently lack the education, knowledge, skills and confidence to engage effectively in public life. In Afghanistan, Burundi and Rwanda this is the case and these cases provide a clear example of why multi-level support for women's capacity development, which links women to political change processes, is critical. In Afghanistan in particular, women's lack of education seems to be a major challenge for their political empowerment, with problems both in terms of access to education and the way in which educational content transmits discriminatory gender norms. Meanwhile the Burundi study shows that there is a demand from grassroots women for political capacity building, including by national level women's organisations. It also suggests

that women's involvement in the lowest level of local governance, as a 'ten household chief', could offer opportunities for meaningful political apprenticeship, allowing women to build their skills, confidence and reputation, while engaging with a governance institution with relevance to their lives.

It is widely accepted that insecurity at multiple levels severely constrains women's ability to participate in political life in many FCAS. The Afghanistan case provides a demonstration of the multiple ways in which this happens. Conflict related insecurity prevents Afghan women in many parts of the country from participating in public space, as well as prevents programmes intended to empower and support women from being implemented in insecure areas. Meanwhile, political violence and intimidation is often directed at those women who do become politically active. Sexual harassment and the threat of sexual violence also limit women's access to the public sphere. In addition, violence in the domestic sphere undermines women's capabilities and autonomy to engage in political activities. This very clearly illustrates that support for building security in FCAS must understand and engage with the specific security needs of women.

International support for women's political participation and influence

As the review of existing evidence showed, current programming on women's political empowerment in FCAS often suffers from significant limitations, although there are also important examples of successful work in this area. The findings from the Afghanistan and Burundi studies broadly chime with existing evidence about programming. They found that support for women's livelihoods can be a crucial first step in advancing women's political voice, as relevant and sustainable livelihoods programmes can help women develop the financial autonomy, life skills and networks they need to engage in political and public spaces. This illustrates the need to adopt a multi-sectoral approach, understanding how advancing women's empowerment in one area can strengthen their empowerment in another.

All three studies also emphasise the importance of programmes that address the norms and attitudes that constrain women's political participation, and the Burundi case provided examples of positive ways of doing this through information and discussion in the media. All cases highlight the need to work with communities, households and male family members to build support for women's political participation. It is important that such work runs alongside support for women's political empowerment, in order to make this as effective as possible and to avoid backlash. The case studies also highlighted the importance of work with young people – including in schools – to change discriminatory gender norms and attitudes. The Afghanistan case highlighted the importance of working with religious leaders, who have the greatest legitimacy at community level, and who play a critical role in shaping community norms.

In terms of the extent to which programming connects elite and grassroots women, the cases found that there is still a significant gap in this area. Filling this gap is important, as the evidence base suggests that this is critical for meaningful political voice, representation and accountability for grassroots women, and can also help build their political capacities. The case studies found that more could be done to connect elite, urban women activists who have higher levels of education, skills and information and greater autonomy, with rural and grassroots women who have very limited opportunities to raise their voice or act politically. Indeed, greater engagement with national women's organisations was a demand of some grassroots women in the Burundi case. In Afghanistan, the study identified some concerns that programmes supporting women's political participation focus heavily on inserting elite women into senior positions with little regard for the extent to which these women listen to the voices of grassroots women or develop an agenda that represents a wider set of women's interests.

Finally, concerns about sustainability, especially in the Afghanistan study, reflect a common limitation of gender equality programming in FCAS. In particular, that projects with short-term funding do not support the political empowerment of marginalised women over the long timeframe that is required for change, meaning that their impacts are neither sustainable nor empowering. This is especially critical in contexts such as Afghanistan where women's capacities and autonomy may be very limited, while gender discriminatory norms are both deeply engrained and highly restrictive, meaning that change in these dynamics is likely to be slow.

Recommendations

Based on the review of existing evidence and the details that have emerged from the case studies it is possible to identify several key recommendations for international actors seeking to support the political empowerment of marginalised women in FCAS. These are as follows:

1. Connect support for women's participation to broader work on conflict and fragility

Programmes to support gender equality and women's empowerment in FCAS are often insufficiently connected to broader strategies to address conflict and fragility, including international support to peacebuilding, statebuilding, institutional reform or economic recovery. This means that programming frequently fails to seize the opportunities presented by such processes to promote women's voice and advance their interests, or to understand and support women as agents of change within these processes.

While gender programming in FCAS usually considers the direct impacts of conflict or violence on women, such programming largely neglects the impacts of wider aspects of fragility – such as identity politics, clientelism and corruption, weak institutions, informality of power or unstable political settlements – on gender equality and specifically the ability for women to influence political and public life.

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. For example, a gender-relational approach to peacebuilding can enhance understanding of how gender roles and relations intersect with other identities (ethnic, urban/rural, religious etc.) in ways that influence society's propensity for violent conflict or potential for transformative change, as well as the way in which these roles and relations are themselves shaped by violent conflict.

This means that programming must be based on a holistic understanding of how women's political exclusion or resistance to women's demands relates to broader political-economy dynamics in a given context – for example to issues of land scarcity and access in Burundi. Where links between gender inequalities and broader political contestations are not considered, the impact of support for women's voice is reduced.

2. Address discriminatory norms and attitudes

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 – as clearly illustrated in the case studies. It is important to note that while discriminatory norms can be particularly harmful in fragile situations, these situations also offer important opportunities to shift such attitudes. In particular, because experiences of conflict often change gender norms and roles, for example with women taking on a greater public role in labour markets or in civil life during conflict, or becoming household heads or even soldiers.

It is critical that support for women's political empowerment includes efforts to address deep rooted discriminatory social norms. However, this is not always the case. Gender programming in FCAS tends to focus 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.

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. Engagement with such non-state actors and informal institutions, can be an effective entry point for addressing discriminatory social norms and in sustaining change over time. As the Afghanistan case shows, work with religious leaders can be crucial in changing both attitudes and practices that constrain women's political participation. All three case studies suggest that working with young people to change norms and attitudes is also critical.

It is important to note that changes in norms and attitudes about gender are inevitably slow and non-linear. Long term support to gender equality – beyond typical 3-4-year programme cycles – are most useful in supporting a shift in social norms.

3. Adopt a multi-sectoral approach

As the evidence review and case studies illustrate, there are a wide range of structural and practical constraints 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 involve combining targeted support focused on advancing gender equality with mainstreaming gender into sectoral programming and ensuring synergy between gender institutions and sectoral agencies. It must also involve multidimensional approaches that address both the various constraints to women's voice, decision-making and leadership. For example, support for women's participation in formal politics needs to address insecurity and violence towards women candidates, the economic cost of participation, logistical barriers to participation in terms of transport or time costs, barriers related to education and language, as well as stigma against women in public life. As the cases found, addressing the specific security needs of women and strengthening women's independent access to economic resources can be key to facilitating their political engagement.

Despite this need for a multi-dimensional approach, funding and programming on gender equality in FCAS tends to be siloed by sector, overlooking the fact that both patterns of gender inequality, and gender equality gains, can be mutually reinforcing across a range of sectors (services, socio-economic, legal, political, security etc.). Development actors must pay more attention to how change in one sector affects outcomes in another from a gender perspective.

4. Work multiple stakeholders and across multiple levels

Support for women's political participation and influence tends to still focus very much on working with women or with actors and institutions that are regularly engaged on gender, and often does not seek to reach out to a wider range of stakeholders. However, 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.

At national level it is important to build coalitions and networks with decision-makers and other stakeholders in a strong position to promote women's empowerment, such as sectoral, planning and finance ministries, universities, and the private sector. As the Burundi case study highlights, working with political parties and party leaders, given their gatekeeper role, is very important.

At local level, engaging with both formal and customary governance institutions on the value of women's political participation is also key. This level is often the most relevant and most accessible for ordinary women, but exclusionary norms and practices can be stronger at local level.

It is particularly important to engage with non-state actors and informal institutions, which can be very powerful in shaping gender norms and inequalities. Likewise, to identify and reach out to those institutions or groups that are most resistant to gender equality and women's political empowerment.

It is important to work with men and boys to address harmful gender identities – including masculinities – that contribute to gender discrimination and women's political exclusion. Moreover, as all case studies illustrate, it is critical that efforts to promote women's political participation are combined with engagement with families and communities, to build household and community support for women and avoid / manage backlash.

Critically, it is important to partner with a wide range of women's organisations at multiple levels. In particular, to support both national and grassroots women's organisations, helping them to develop their own agenda, as well as fostering the development of long-term relationships between them. This can help ensure that the diversity of women's experiences and interests are expressed within national level women's activism. It also contributes to more contextually relevant programming that takes account of the needs and interests of different groups of women.

5. Work 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. 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 ways of working on gender issues – including women's political participation – in FCAS. For example, international donors and their implementing partners need to adopt a political economy approach to gender analysis, and to meaningfully integrate gender into conflict, political, security, economic and other analyses. In doing so, donor funding and interventions can support multi-dimensional and multi-sectoral approaches to addressing gender equality and supporting women's voice and political participation.

Politically smart support for women's political empowerment must be tailored to countries' institutional, social and political environment and to the societal actors involved and based on an understanding of how change takes place. 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 emerging lessons. 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 in FCAS.

Strong monitoring, evaluation and learning is critical to capture and respond to lessons on what works in supporting women's political participation and influence in FCAS, with a focus on outcomes and real change, rather than just measuring outputs for administrative accountability.

About CARE

CARE works around the globe to save lives, defeat poverty, and achieve social justice; focusing on the underlying causes of poverty. CARE Netherlands is one of fourteen member organisations of CARE International. It focuses its work on the specific needs and opportunities of women and girls and supports CARE Burundi, Afghanistan and Rwanda in achieving results on the ground.



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Global study report

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