Gender and Security – Moving beyond clichés toward a useful tool for early warning and the prevention of violent conflict

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1. Introduction and Key Message: Conflict, security and gender are closely inter-related

I am honoured of being asked to speak about gender aspects in security at the Human Dimension Implementation meeting of the OSCE.

I am here today to discuss the **importance of a gender perspective in security** in general, and early warning and conflict prevention in particular. I hope that I will be able to demonstrate that the utilization of a gender perspective for security issues is not about some politically correct cliché (compounded by the fact that this message is delivered to you by a woman), but can actually contribute to an **early recognition of conflict, work toward preventing the outbreak of large-scale violence, and also improve our responses in the aftermath of conflict.**

I realize that for many of you I am possibly making a big leap by putting forth the argument that all (violent) conflicts are in some form gendered. This means that collective (as much as individual) violence is tightly knit to social orders, including the gender order between men and women. A gender perspective can provide a better understanding of oppression and unequal social hierarchies, including gender hierarchies, which are often characteristics of societies that are prone to, or embroiled in conflict.

Hence, my main contention is that using a gender perspective in early warning and conflict prevention has **far-reaching benefits that go beyond the protection of vulnerable groups** for the following reasons:

First, incorporating gender-sensitive indicators into information collection and subsequent analyses allow us **to pick up on previously overlooked signs of instability and insecurity** that are usually ignored in a state-security context. Focussing on a grassroots level enables us to anticipate conflict before it spreads to high politics – hence making "early warning" earlier.

Second, incorporating gender analysis and perspectives into the formulation of response options **ensures that discriminatory policies are not perpetuated in post-conflict situations, or newfound freedoms reversed**. It also ensures that responses at the political, humanitarian, social and economic level address the **vulnerabilities specific to both men and women**.

Due to the short time available to me I will not be able to provide detailed arguments for all assertions made, but will instead focus on the most important ones. I am currently working (with my colleague Anna Mateva) on a **Handbook for Practitioners on Effective Conflict Prevention and Early Warning - Gender and Women's Rights** commissioned by the OSCE Human Rights Department (ODIHR), which should be available next year. It will provide more details and examples about today's topic, and I hope by the end of my presentation you will be keen to anticipate its release, as the aim of the Handbook is precisely to provide **practical** guidance on how gender perspectives can be built into the development of strategies for conflict prevention and early warning.

2. A Brief Note on Gender

Before going into further detail, I want to counter a widespread prejudice that gender means a sole focus on women. Gender understood as "women" generally means that one tries to include women in processes, get women's 'input', meet particularly women's needs, and protect women. This is partially due to the fact that gender approaches indeed have used a strategy to highlight (single out) women, partially in order to make up for past discrimination and exclusions of women.

While a "true" gender approach does emphasize women and their rights, it does so mainly *vis-a-vis* their relation to men. Gender helps us to understand societal processes, including conflict. Specifically

- It can highlight power-imbalances between men and women function, and what they look like

- It can explain how our definition of masculinity and femininity influences our decision-making processes and actions, sometimes consciously but very often actually unconsciously.

- It can help us identify and deconstruct negative discourses that lead to violence and offer alternative and more positive ones that can enhance peace and security.

3. How does a gender perspective concretely influence peace and security?

Allow me to highlight the area of early warning and conflict prevention as an example of the need to integrate a gender perspective into security promotion.

Early warning systems are developed to ensure that political strategies are equipped to prevent violent conflict or limit their destructive effects. So far, a gender perspective has been largely absent from conflict analyses, post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation processes, and it has not formed part of early warning and preventive response systems.

<u>**Point 1**</u>

As I have argued earlier, **by incorporating gender-sensitive indicators and carrying out gender analyses, we can shed light on a broader range of factors that cause conflict, including those that might be overlooked by a traditional focus on security.**

First, for a society to move into violent conflict, there will necessarily be a build-up of aggression, as killing and destruction require a certain level of violence and force. Thus, aggressive behaviours at all levels (against people and things – vandalism) might be reinforced and even rewarded.

- While there is not a single country in the world that is free from violence against women, **studies have shown that domestic violence increases as an initial outlet for aggression prior to going to war.**

- **Violence may also affect those men who choose not to participate in war mongering** or promote alternative, more peaceful strategies. Such men can be subject to verbal harassment, physical beatings (e.g., bar fights) or forced recruitment into fighting forces.

Second, when gearing up for violent conflict, groups and states want to assure that OUR side will be the winning one. This requires on the one hand, an **establishment of strong in-group cohesion in order to present a united front against the "enemy."** On the other hand, we would try to **demoralize the "opponent" by all means necessary in order to give ourselves an advantage in combat**.

- Sexual violence (especially rape) has been systematically used against women and girls during nearly every armed conflict in recent years. Sometimes the sexual violence is purely opportunistic; but frequently, as we have become painfully aware of in recent years, **it is used more often than not as a deliberate military and political tactic in war to demoralize opponents and weaken resistance** (a symbolic defeat of the enemy).

- Men, on the other hand, run the risk of being killed or imprisoned in order to pre-empt opponents from building a strong resistance force. This has been observed at the forefront of past wars. In extreme forms, this may also mean a targeting of pregnant women in order to decrease the chances of a slowly growing opposition group.

Third, a gender perspective can also help to highlight the structural factors that can foreshadow war.

- **Sex-specific (forced) migration (refugees)**

  - In some cases, men migrate or flee first. This is either to test out migration routes or to avoid imprisonment or forced recruitment in armed forces. In these cases, women and children are often the last to move during conflict; hence their movement may actually be a late warning of imminent or already on-going conflict.

- But in other cases, women and children move first. This is when male refugee-warrior communities "park" their wives and daughters in the safe haven of refugee camps, thus the absence of men in such situations can mean continued struggle at home.

- **Sex-specific unemployment**. Recent studies suggest that a youth bulge, specifically a larger percentage of unemployed young men, are an indicator of potential instability, as they are easily recruited into militia groups. The continued growth of the private security sector can also capitalize on this factor.

Point 2

As men and women are differently affected by conflict, our responses need to address this. A gender perspective can again aid in this respect and address the specific vulnerabilities of men and women.

First, **a gender perspective allows us also to reflect on the different ways in which conflict escalation and violence affects different members (men and women) in a community**. Prior and in war, a narrowing of gender roles usually occurs. These stereotypical views of men as aggressors, fighters and protectors, and women as vulnerable victims that need to be protected, often do not correspond to actual changes in gender roles that occur in societies entering or undergoing conflict and re-emphasizes an unequal power relations between men and women.

- **Women are not just victims of armed conflict**; they play a diverse set of roles such as survivors, caregivers, educators, leaders and peacemakers.

- **Women and girls are now recruited by armed groups** in many countries and actively participate in conflicts, either against their will or voluntarily, as combatants, but also in support functions as nurses, cooks, or sex workers.

- A very extreme example of changed gender roles is the emergence of female suicide bombers, playing on the social stereotype that war is a "man's world"

- Similarly, **not all men are the aggressors in conflict**, but often are in vulnerable positions for being recruited into armed groups.

- Peaceful and stable societies usually offer much wider definitions of what constitutes a man and masculinity vs. what constitutes a woman or femininity. Men are not simply measured by physical strength and aggression, but also by other factors such as economic, political and intellectual performance. As a result, societies with long histories of peace and stability tend to also demonstrate more equal (inclusive) relations between men and women. War-prone societies on the other hand tend to exemplify a greater marginalisation of low-status groups, including women.

Second, a gender perspective allows us **to study the relationships between men and women and thus avoid the perpetuation of old pre-conflict norms that render women even more vulnerable by stripping them of new-gained freedoms.**

- During war, for example, women often enter into non-traditional roles, especially in the economic sector and/or as sole caretakers of their families. This can given them newfound freedom and positions in society. Too often, post-conflict responses emphasize traditional norms of women returning to the homestead and men returning to the labour force (it needs to be acknowledged that some progress in this area has been made).

- **International engagement** in the area of conflict prevention and peacebuilding **is too often still gender blind**, perpetuating gender stereotypes or even increasing women's vulnerabilities (including cases of sexual exploitation and abuse committed by UN peacekeepers). This is often due to the fact that many institutions dealing with these issues are still male dominated (such as the military, but also foreign politics).

- **Gender perspectives can help to go beyond addressing immediate needs** (such as food, water and health services) and focus on women's longer-term strategic needs, including equal representation in decision-making processes and leadership roles. This means a removal of uneven power balances in post-conflict interventions.

Third, **despite women's active roles during conflict their voices are hardly heard when conflict is over**. This is often due to the fact that women operate in support-functions of men, hence in far less visible roles. Their voices should be heard especially in the context of peacebuilding and the untapped potential of women, women's networks and women's organisations as actors for peace should be explored.

Much advocacy work has already occurred in this area by UNIFEM, numerous non-governmental organizations, and selected governments. But, the **UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (2000)** is possibly the most well known (and ground-breaking) framework that tries to remove barriers to the equal participation and full involvement of women in the maintenance and promotion of sustainable peace. **The challenge for states now is to turn this framework into concrete policies and political action.**

4. Conclusion

I would like to **conclude** by stressing again that **gender perspectives matter a great deal for security**, possibly nowhere as much as prior, during and after conflict. The integration of a gender perspective into current early warning practices should generate more **practical, accurate** and **realistic**

results on which to base the formulation of strategies**.** By becoming more **comprehensive**, the systems could also become more effective by providing both **truly** *early* **warning,** and offering a **wider range of response options** for addressing violent conflict.

The question of what practitioners can do concretely to ensure that gender perspectives are integrated into conflict prevention and early warning strategies, are addressed in the forthcoming *Handbook for Practitioners on Effective Conflict Prevention and Early Warning* by ODIHR. This means you will have access to a practical instrument on **how** to integrate a gender perspective into your ministries, policies, and strategies; **by providing tools** for **gender analysis**, developing **gender-specific indicators** and **gendered response options**.

This handbook is only one of two practical instruments that ODIHR is currently developing in the area of women and security in an effort to support OSCE participating states in implementing a gender-sensitive focus on security issues. **The second tool focuses on gender and Security Sector Reform.**

These are both important new tools **to advance the understanding of what gender perspectives in security mean** as a first step toward **the actual realization of a more comprehensive approach to security** in the OSCE region.

On a final note: OSCE, as a security organization with *a comprehensive approach to security,* certainly possesses the necessary policy framework for a systematic integration of gender perspectives in security related areas of concern. They are capable of a **cross-dimensional approach**, which includes a focus on **human security.**

The development of practical tools by ODHIR, as just mentioned, is an indication of a growing need for new research and guidance on how to translate policy into practice. It is my hope that key points raised by me here today are taken further by you and translated into practical and concrete action, possibly as an inspiration for an **enhanced focus on implementation.**

Thank you for your attention.

I look forward to your questions and an engaged discussion.