

Women and fragile states: Why women's voices must be heard

Progressio's position at the 59th meeting of the
Commission on the Status of Women, New York, March 2015

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1. What are fragile states?

The most widely acknowledged definition of the term is the fundamental failure of the state to perform functions that are necessary to meet citizens' basic needs. Limited state (or government) capacity and weak political legitimacy are understood to be key characteristics of fragility: governments cannot meet the expectations of their populations and, in some cases, may not even be perceived as legitimate representatives.

Fragile states are also deficient at establishing links with their civil society and in creating plausible binding social contracts. The Centre for Research on Inequality and Social Exclusion defines fragile states as 'failing, or at risk of failing, with respect to authority, comprehensive service entitlements or legitimacy'¹.

2. Why is Progressio focusing on women and fragile states?

Women can help make fragile states into stronger societies

The past decades have brought real change for some women – for example, attention has been paid to child marriage in the UN General Assembly, and excellent programmes have empowered women and girls and helped to lift them out of poverty. However, how can a fragile state realistically provide a strong legal framework and implement legislation for women? Often resources are missing or not prioritised for investing in institutional mechanisms that would strengthen women's rights and gender equality. It is necessary to focus attention to the poorest and most marginalised, who are often women living in fragile states. Supporting grassroots women's NGOs can however have a positive impact on their life.

Against some of the worst odds in the world, women in fragile states like Somaliland, Zimbabwe and Yemen are organising to improve lives by tackling the political, economic and social structures that keep them poor and marginalised. Suad Abdi, Progressio's country representative in Somaliland, says women are "a driving force in society", championing change that will benefit everyone:

If women are not represented, who will raise and discuss social issues? What about maternal mortality? What about the problems with water, both rural and urban? These are the issues that women encounter in everyday life, but social issues are not considered important because those in power are not coming into contact with them and so they don't get discussed.

In fragile states, women can be agents of change, leading the way in promoting development and achieving social justice.

Fragile states make people poor

Internationally, poverty is increasingly concentrated in fragile and conflict-affected states. In 1990, four-fifths of the world's poor lived in non-fragile states. Now, around half of the world's poor live in fragile states – and the proportion living in fragile states is likely to continue to increase². The reasons for this are complex, but the bottom line is that state fragility increases poverty, and makes it harder for people to escape it³.

Women are particularly affected by state fragility

In a world where more than 1 billion people live in unacceptable conditions of poverty, the great majority are women⁴. And in fragile states, the factors that marginalise, discriminate against and impoverish

women are even more marked.

Women and girls throughout the world face significant development challenges including lack of access to basic services (health, education, etc.) and access to natural resources (eg. water). These challenges are even more extreme in fragile states, as women living in fragile states are more marginalised and vulnerable to poverty and violence and often experience a lack of rights. For example, the increased risk of gender-based violence in fragile and conflict-affected states makes women and girls even more vulnerable⁵. This is compounded by a lack of efforts at policy and legislative level to ensure that women's and girls' rights are upheld and protected.

Fragile states reinforce gender inequality

In most countries, cultural practices, traditions, customs and social norms hold the keys to understanding the roots of gender discrimination⁶. This is especially the case in fragile states, many of which readily turn to traditional, religious and customary law because of ineffective state institutions and weaknesses in state-building. Deeply rooted social institutions based on a patriarchal world view – societal norms, codes of conduct, laws and tradition – cause gender discrimination. For example, cultural and religious reasons have been given for the persistence of pernicious traditional practices such as Female Genital Mutilation and forced marriage, which have created a brutal circle of violence against women and girls. Traditional social structures, a lack of safety and security, and the negative impact of gender-based violence present barriers to women's participation in society.

The success of national reforms heavily depends on the willingness of governments and religious leaders to challenge harmful traditions and cultural practices, which calls for a global, consistent and coherent approach⁷ by all: donors, national governments, multilateral institutions and other key international players.

Democracy requires women's participation

Most importantly, there cannot be democracy without equal participation of women and men⁸. Fragile states by definition lack democratic accountability. For women living in fragile states, this represents not just a challenge but also, potentially, an opportunity. Strategies to address and improve governance and accountability must build in and embed women's participation right from the start.

3. What is special about Progressio's approach?

Many approaches to strengthening fragile states focus on the development of state institutions rather than the state's people. By focusing on the role of civil society in state-building, Progressio aims to put people and communities at the centre of social transformation in fragile states.

Most countries in which Progressio works are fragile states. Progressio's key area of expertise is in promoting people's – especially women's – participation in order to achieve effective governance. Taking this approach in fragile states will enable poor and marginalised women to be active participants, creating change from within rather than imposing it from the outside.

This approach will embed women's participation in emerging governance structures and put women's voices at the centre of tackling poverty. To achieve permanent, sustainable solutions to poverty, we must tackle the structural barriers (political, social and economic) that keep people poor. If poor communities don't have a meaningful say in the decisions taken at local, national or international level, the problems that they face will not be taken seriously. Progressio works at all of these levels to help the voice of poor and marginalised communities to be heard and acted on.

We back this up with specific empowerment initiatives. These include promoting 'women champions' who act as change agents in their communities to combat discrimination, and by working with men to challenge machismo. At the local or national level, women are often not recognised as partners in development planning and programming while they are often exposed to gender based violence in the household. Our programme in Yemen therefore works with the local council and the police to recognise and address these issues and supports women in advocating for their rights.

Women in Africa are responsible for producing a significant amount of the world's food, but due to discriminatory social norms they don't own the land. This means that in cases where this land is required for large-scale commercial plantations or mining, women lose out without receiving adequate compensation, while most of the jobs created go to men. Progressio is supporting women to voice their development priorities to ensure they are addressed.

4. Why is Progressio attending the CSW?

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is the principal global policy-making body dedicated exclusively to gender equality and the advancement of women. Every year, representatives of member states gather at United Nations Headquarters in New York to evaluate progress and formulate concrete policies to promote gender equality and women's empowerment worldwide. This year, the CSW reviews the progress made in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 20 years after its adoption at the World Conference on Women in 1995. It will also seek to address opportunities for achieving gender equality in the Post- 2015 development agenda.

2015 is therefore a critical year, presenting us with a unique opportunity to evaluate which policies and practical actions lead to women's advancement and understand the challenges that still persist. The lessons learned from this global review can be used for strengthening gender equality in the currently negotiated post-2015 framework, including the goals, gender mainstreaming, indicators and the financing for development process. The review can also contribute to the national action plans on implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) after September 2015.

Additionally, governments are aiming to make a political declaration on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women at the CSW and agree on a working methods resolution for the commission. This will have an important impact on how women's rights and gender equality are discussed at the global level.

Progressio wants to bring the voices of women living in fragile states to the debate, with the aim of increasing their political and social participation in decision-making processes at the highest levels. In addition, Progressio works alongside organisations and allies such as the UK Gender and Development Network (GADN) and the National Alliance of Women's Organisations (NAWO). We have an excellent track record of working with the Government Equalities Office and other key UK Government institutions and are in a position to exercise some influence given Progressio's Economic and Social Council status and clear focus and expertise on women in fragile states.

Progressio's objective for Beijing plus 20 review

Progressio's programmatic work has brought to light many positive examples of how empowering women to tackle structural barriers to participation and discrimination has helped them escape poverty. Therefore, Progressio will raise awareness on social transformation as a key element for achieving gender equality. As many of the structural barriers to change are the result of unequal power relations between men and women, it is crucial to work towards shifting these.

In order to highlight some of these issues, Progressio is organising a side-event at the UN-CSW entitled "In a world of social norms, religious beliefs and human rights, how can we advance women's girls sexual health rights?"

10.30am, Wednesday 11 March 2015, at the Y Hall of the Armenian Convention Center 630 2nd Avenue (at 35th street). Speakers include Progressio's partners from the UN Populations Fund (UNFPA), the Zimbabwean Women's Lawyer Association (ZWLA) and the National Alliance of Women's Organisations (NAWO).

What follows are our key messages with respect to key strategic objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action:

5. Key messages

Strategic Objective A. Women and poverty

The majority of the world's poor will soon live in fragile and conflict-affected states if they do not already¹⁰. Six out of ten of the world's poorest people are women¹¹. Systematic discrimination in education, health care, employment and control of assets impoverishes women, leaving many without even basic rights such as access to clean drinking water, sanitation, medical care and decent employment¹². The risks of poverty, and the implications of poverty, are even greater for women living in fragile states.

Strategic Objective C. Women and health

In most developing countries, especially fragile States, cultural practices, traditions, customs and social norms hold the keys to understanding the roots of gender discrimination. Many fragile States readily turn to traditional, religious and customary law because of ineffective State institutions and weaknesses in State-building and a lack of trust in these structures. On a whole, states have shown commitment to the Platform for Action in form of policies and strategies. However, with little progress on challenging discriminative social norms, it is time to prioritise working with faith and traditional leaders on advancing all women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights. Women and girls often do not have the power to make free decisions about family planning and other issues relating to their sexuality and reproductive system. They are vulnerable to harmful practices which are forcing them to marry early and undergo Female Genital Mutilation.

Strategic Objective D. Violence against women

1 in 3 women worldwide are victims of domestic or sexual violence in their lifetime¹³. Women in fragile states are particularly at risk of being victims of violence and less likely to access justice as the structures may not be in place to enable them to do so¹⁴. Moreover, there is a higher level of societal violence and acceptance of violence in fragile and post-conflict states. The threat of violence can also hinder women's participation in political processes.

According to a 2013 global review of available data, 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence. However, some national violence studies show that up to 70% of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime from an intimate partner¹⁵. These statistics on violence against women and girls are sad reminder of the harmful treatment towards women and girls throughout their lifetime, and continues to be one of the main development challenges¹⁶.

A number of reasons have been given for the pervasiveness of such violence and different approaches

have been pursued; but at the heart of the problem, it is the unwillingness to openly challenge prejudicial cultural and social attitudes that perpetuate gender inequality. The tragic reality is that stereotypical views of the role of women and men in society continue to permeate discussions on gender equality, which are subsequently reflected on policy making and attitudes towards women and girls. Therefore, any future work on violence against women and girls should be deeply rooted in social transformation and behavioural change. The challenge is to reconstruct the social fabric where gender violence becomes so revolting for society that it becomes altogether eliminated.

Strategic Objective F: Women and the Economy

Women are significantly overrepresented in the bottom 50% of earners worldwide due to gendered social norms. This is partly due to work that's stereotypically considered female (such as care work) being less valued and remunerated than work that's stereotypically performed by men.

As fragile states usually have weak formal economies, most women work in the informal or agricultural sectors with low remuneration in addition to performing most of the care work. African countries are increasingly considering the extractive and agribusiness sectors as key drivers of their economic development. As both are land-intensive sectors, there is a danger that women smallholder farmers in fragile states may lose their livelihood if policies are not put into place that explicitly ensure that women benefit and participate equitably. Investing in women small-scale farmers and ensuring their participation in decision-making is not only vital in order to level the playing field, boost food security and improve natural resource management, it can be gender transformative as well.

Gender is learnt through processes of socialisation and cultural practices with gender stereotypes deeply entrenched from a young age. Men and women are gendered from birth where social constructs are shaped to suit the society within which they live. Therefore, any future work on this issue must be rooted in social transformation and behavioural change.

Strategic Objective G: Women in power and decision making

Women are particularly marginalised and under-represented in fragile states and post-conflict societies. Despite greater parliamentary participation, women are still outnumbered four-to-one in legislatures around the world.⁹ If the need to promote women's representation is not structurally addressed early on in the rebuilding of a nation as a matter of priority, rather than as an add-on, women's participation and contribution in political and social processes will be severely undermined. Women and girls must be supported to take up leadership roles in their communities and countries. In fragile states, where leaders have a key task in strengthening society, the presence of women leaders can in itself help to change attitudes and promote equality. Women leaders can also push for improvements in women's rights, as well as working for societal change that benefits all.

6. Conclusion

Investing in women and girls contributes to long term and sustainable development – studies by the World Bank¹⁷ and the UN¹⁸ offer strong evidence that education for women and girls is the single best investment society can make. These studies show that educating girls and women delivers numerous economic benefits for individuals and communities and leads to healthier and better educated families, reduces child mortality rates, and fosters greater political participation.

Investing in women and communities is not only the right thing to do but it adds value to any development process. Women and girls must have a voice taking up leadership roles in their communities - studies show that a woman is likely to reinvest about 90% of her earnings into her family's wellbeing, bettering the lives of those around her. She will also marry and have children later in life and have

gained knowledge that allows her to keep her children healthy and educated. These immediate effects contribute to slowing population growth, which in turn impacts everything from health to climate change to the economy. In this way, investing in girls can be a key factor in breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty¹⁹.

Notes

1. See Mcloughlin, C, 2012, Topic guide on fragile states, governance and social development, Resource Centre, University of Birmingham, UK, p9 (from the section 'Definitions and typologies of fragile states'), www.gsdr.org/go/fragile-states/chapter-1--understanding-fragile-states/definitions-and-typologies-of-fragile-states
2. Kharas, H, and Rogerson, A, 2012, Horizon 2025: creative destruction in the aid industry, Overseas Development Institute, pp7-8, www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/7723.pdf
3. See also Lockhart, C, and Vincent, S, 2013, Ending extreme poverty in fragile and conflict-affected situations, Technical Paper for the UN High-level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, www.post2015hlp.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Lockhart-Vincent_Ending-Extreme-Poverty-in-Fragile-and-Conflict-affected-Situations.pdf
4. See Women Watch: Women and Poverty, online directory of UN resources on gender and women's issues, www.un.org/womenwatch/directory/women_and_poverty_3001.htm
5. See International Development Committee of the UK Parliament, 2013, Second report: Violence against women and girls, Section 4: Prioritising violence against women and girls in humanitarian and conflict settings, www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmintdev/107/10709.htm
6. Jütting, J, and Morrisson, C, 2005, Changing social institutions to improve the status of women in developing countries, OECD Policy Brief No.27, www.oecd.org/dev/poverty/35155725.pdf
7. See note 6, p23
8. See 'Women and democracy', United Nations Global Issues website, www.un.org/en/globalissues/democracy/women.shtml
9. People powered development: Progressio's strategic framework 2010-2015, p6, www.progressio.org.uk/sites/default/files/Progressio-Strategy-2010-2015.pdf
10. See note 2
11. See 'Gender and poverty reduction', United Nations Development Programme website, www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/povertyreduction/focus_areas/focus_gender_and_poverty.html
12. See 'Women, poverty and economics', UN Women website, www.unifem.org/gender_issues/women_poverty_economics/
13. World Health Organization, 2013, Violence against women: Intimate partner and sexual violence against women, WHO Factsheet no. 239, www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/
14. See note 13
15. UN Women: Violence against women and girls <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/end-violence-against-women/violence#sthash.AzgyJiUm.dpuf>
16. Changing social institutions to improve the status of women in developing nations (OECD, 2005) Policy Brief No.27 <http://www.oecd.org/dev/poverty/35155725.pdf>
17. Adolescent Girls in Focus at the World Economic Forum: <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTGENDER/0,,contentMDK:22059153~menuPK:336906~pagePK:64020865~piPK:149114~theSitePK:336868,00.html>
18. Investing in Women, Girls — Especially Education — Drives Development, Makes Good <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/dsgsm541.doc.htm>
19. Adolescent Girls in Focus at the World Economic Forum: <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTGENDER/0,,contentMDK:22059153~menuPK:336906~pagePK:64020865~piPK:149114~theSitePK:336868,00.html>

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Progressio is an international development charity supporting poor and marginalised people, especially women, to empower themselves

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