



Women's Economic Empowerment in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States: *Roundtable Summary*

Background

With fragile and conflict affected countries becoming home to growing proportions of people living in extreme poverty,ⁱ the convergence of the security and development agendas prompts us to re-examine economic support and empowerment for women affected by conflict. Since 1993, Women for Women International has worked with almost half a million marginalised women survivors of conflict and we know that linking short-term economic support for women with their longer-term empowerment is critical to promoting their rights and reducing their poverty and vulnerability.

Building on recent research findings in Iraq,ⁱⁱ we brought together practitioners and researchers to delve deeper into the challenge of connecting short-term economic support for women affected by conflict with their long-term empowerment. This roundtable was held in November 2018 under Chatham House rules (except for the presentations). For more information please contact policyuk@womenforwomen.org.

We are extremely grateful to the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security; Hannah Bond (GAPS); Katherine Nightingale (CARE International); and all the presenters for their support.

Presentation Summaries

Josephine Roele (the UK Gender Action for Peace and Security networkⁱⁱⁱ) highlighted the wider context for this discussion and acknowledged the growing attention to women's economic empowerment (WEE) for women and girls affected by conflict. She highlighted that this focus on WEE, however, can not be pursued in isolation from women's other rights but form part of an integrated response.

The Women, Peace and Security Framework (WPS) is designed to support the different needs of women affected by conflict – including their economic needs. In WPS, WEE is explicitly linked to supporting women's participation. Both in terms of political participation (e.g. peace processes) as well as supporting survivors of violence to recover and support their social participation.

She also acknowledged how WEE can promote transformative norm changes and how it can become a key opportunity to engage men. Connecting short-term response with long-term progress under WPS is critical.

Carron Mann (Women for Women International) presented findings from recent research into displaced women's livelihood needs that was conducted in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), in partnership with GAPS and the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security.^{iv} The study was a qualitative research project, largely consisting of key informant interviews and focus group discussions with a range of women – those living in camps, those living in host communities, women with different backgrounds and statuses, as well as women's groups, other practitioners and some officials. Carron highlighted two key points from the research:

1. *Women's definition of WEE and their economic priorities:*

When asked to define WEE, women generally talked about their agency – particularly not needing permission to leave the house/tent, to work or choosing what to wear. Financial decision-making appeared to be key to their definition of WEE. Women’s work was seen as a means of coping with economic challenges and they did not consider their economic empowerment to be a priority. Whilst economic needs were acute, women’s perceptions around their displacement being temporary meant that they were not looking to settle or invest or practice saving. This was also affected by external barriers they faced e.g. lack of economic opportunities, documentation, etc.

2. *The economic crises or rethinking resilience:*

Assets and savings are also key to both businesses and weathering economic shocks. Yet women’s experiences during displacement mean that women reported selling most of their assets – either to flee violence or to pay rent in host communities. Women reported not being able to save due to economic burdens and shocks, such as healthcare bills, increasing rents, etc.

Carron concluded with three key points to help connect short-term economic support with long-term WEE:

- Short-term support has to be connected to a transformative approach - decision-making is a key part of this;
- Participatory approaches are key – avoid stereotyping and oversimplifying;
- Need more research into the area – should be action-based and participatory.

Suzy Madigan (CARE International^{vi}) presented findings from CARE’s recent research into women’s savings groups in Niger^{vi} to highlight how programming combining both humanitarian and WEE outcomes can pave the way for gender equitable recovery. She argued that confining WEE strategies to recovery or development contexts misses opportunities available in within emergencies in fragile and conflict-affected countries.

“What started as a gender-sensitive humanitarian response can transform into a gender equality movement.”

CARE began running Village, Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs)^{vii} in Niger in 1991. Today, there are 7 million VSLA members across 46 countries. In 2018, Suzy led research that looked at: how VSLAs were used 5 years after their intervention; their impact and link with protection; and the links between crisis/emergency and long-term recovery. The research found that:

- VSLA members were seen as more equal and able to influence decision-making;
- Integrating life-skills training and promoting solidarity between VSLA members positively affected their social standing;
- The models supported **positive protection outcomes**, including: offering a source of psychosocial support for members; enabling women to avoid risky income generating behaviours; and reducing rates of intimate partner violence.

However, Suzy highlighted that the impact was not infinite, prompting us to think more about the transition between emergency to recovery. Whilst women’s economic resilience had improved, three years of drought had prompted women to suspend their VSLA contributions to meet basic needs highlighting that short-term humanitarian support can be necessary to maintain resilience

Suzy noted that CARE facilitates VSLAs in 31 out of the 50 countries ranked highest on the 2017 Fragile States Index,^{viii} and in six states ranked in the top ten.^{ix} Savings groups have been able to deliver not only protection outcomes, but also those related to governance and greater gender equality. In Niger, VSLAs – with capacity building support - have formed and connected to local and national networks to influence electoral process and laws.

Daphne Jayasinghe (The International Rescue Committee – the IRC^x) noted that, whilst we are seeing growing interest in international efforts and policy agendas around women’s job and leadership opportunities for women displaced by conflict, we need to think more broadly about the barriers to women’s economic empowerment. This includes barriers to women genuinely using, choosing, controlling resources and having

the freedom to do that without suffering violence or discrimination. She further noted that growing attention in policy discussions has not been matched for programming support for WEE in FCAS.

Daphne highlighted that IRC's theory of change builds on 5 necessary preconditions for WEE:

- 1) Overcoming legal barriers (property ownership, access to the labour market and positive social norms);
- 2) Freedom from violence
- 3) Knowledge of rights and skill development;
- 4) Acceptance in the community – ensuring that risks are identified and mitigated (do no harm);
- 5) Social and personal skills – particularly to support women to build confidence.

IRC's work has focused on building gender equality training into economic support. In Northern Uganda, for example, IRC has supported women farmers (from displaced and host communities) to gain access to higher value chain activities as well as gender equality training in violence against women, division of labour and property rights. Thus targeting barriers in both the household and community.

She also highlighted the report [Choices, Chances and Safety at Risk: A Model for Women's Economic Empowerment](#) that includes case studies from IRC's work illustrating the model. For example in South Sudan. IRC found that women were not adequately included in cash programming design and did not feel safe enough to participate. In response to the feedback, IRC changed the format to more effectively facilitate women's participation, including by introducing a complaint mechanism (fair and open).

Daphne concluded that cash transfers are vital but that there are challenges in terms of sensitivity and lack of other services that women need (e.g. VAW). She further noted that the evidence base for women's economic empowerment is mixed and limited with different approaches working for women at different points in their lives and tendency to use negative economic coping strategies (e.g. missing meals, transactional sex, selling assets, etc.).

Discussion Summary

Through an engaging discussion, the following key themes emerged for follow up:

- **The need for a more intersectional approach:** As the debate continues, we must push for a more nuanced approach to supporting women's economic empowerment (in FCAS), specifically ensuring that we take a more intersectional approach. This means looking at what works for the most marginalised/different vulnerable groups of women (not just 'women'). Avoiding stereotypes (e.g. assuming older women are not economically active) is key.
 - **Comprehensive approach:** The discussion also highlighted interest in further exploring: different elements of WEE in FCAS (e.g. financial inclusion); the links between WEE and broader empowerment (e.g. political participation) or barriers (e.g. VAW).
- **'Conflict-affected' also needs to be further unpacked within the emerging debate.** This was discussed in relation to women's different experiences in conflict and different context and statuses e.g. women refugees, IDPs, women combatants, women living in active conflict or women 'on the move.' Further gender analysis around how conflict affects women (e.g. rising social status as mothers of martyrs, widows, etc.) needs to also be considered as well as how conflict affect women's perceptions re: economic participation and their own gender attitudes. These different statuses and contexts come with different external politics and forces, e.g. pressures to return.
- **The critical need for conflict analysis:** The discussion highlighted the need for the debate to stay rooted in nuanced conflict analysis to better understand what works in different contexts, e.g.: countries with conflict-affected areas (and other functioning/stable areas); countries hosting women affected by conflict (e.g. with large refugee populations); and countries in acute crises vs. countries in prolonged conflicts.
 - The discussion also highlighted that that there seem to be more commonalities between **WEE in non-FCAS** and FCAS that may be easily assumed and therefore a lot that we can learn. However,

we must be aware that conflict contexts are often marked by: higher discriminatory gender norms; higher levels of VAWG; absence of functioning institutions (including social protection) and services; higher carer burdens for women; etc.

- **The need to build the business case:** the roundtable felt that there was more we could do to map evidence and test assumptions. Particularly looking at evidence across humanitarian, peacebuilding and development.
- **Connections with policy frameworks:** This was identified in a gap in the discussion (one that was dropped for time) and something that warranted a follow-up discussion.

About Women for Women International

Since 1993, Women for Women International has worked with more than 479,000 marginalised women survivors of war in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the DRC, Kosovo, Iraq, Nigeria, Rwanda and South Sudan. We were founded on the belief that stronger women build stronger nations.

Our core work is centred on a holistic, rights-based programme to address the needs of marginalised women in conflict-affected countries around the world. We have tested and evolved our approach to fit the needs of women who have been denied access to education and other opportunities, have been affected by conflict and who seek inclusion and recovery. Our programme equips women with skills and resources to earn and save money, learn about their health and human rights, regain their confidence and actively participate in their communities. www.womenforwomen.org.uk

Resources:

- *Who cares? Why older women's economic empowerment matters for the Sustainable Development Goals*, Age International (2018):
<https://www.ageinternational.org.uk/contentassets/b73c56b5662f44c2988f4018f1acb679/who-cares--age-international---nov18.pdf>
- *Between work and care: older women's economic empowerment*, ODI and Age International (2018):
<https://www.odi.org/older-women/empowerment>
- *Aid in Support of Gender Equality in Fragile and Conflict-affected States*, GENDERNET (OECD DAC):
<http://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/aid-gender-fragile-conflict.htm#>

ⁱ The World Bank, for example, estimates that by 2030 the majority of people living in extreme poverty will be living in conflict-affected countries: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/overview>. Similarly, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development estimates this could increase to 62% (or half a billion people) with women disproportionately and overwhelmingly affected by both poverty and conflict: <http://www.oecd.org/publications/states-of-fragility-2015-9789264227699-en.htm>

ⁱⁱ This was a key finding of our recent research into women's livelihood needs in Iraq: <https://www.womenforwomen.org.uk/who-we-are/our-delivery-partners/womens-economic-empowerment-kri>

ⁱⁱⁱ GAPS is a network of development, human rights, humanitarian and peacebuilding NGOs: <http://gaps-uk.org/>

^{iv} <https://www.womenforwomen.org.uk/who-we-are/our-delivery-partners/womens-economic-empowerment-kri>

^v CARE International works around the world to save lives, fight poverty and help women and girls fulfil their potential: <https://www.careinternational.org.uk/>

^{vi} This research is available on CARE Insights: <https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/>

^{vii} <https://www.care.org/vsla>

^{viii} <http://fundforpeace.org/fsi/>

^{ix} See CARE Global VSLA Reach 2017, December 2017. P.7 for VSLA membership by country in FY2017.

^x The IRC responds to the world's worst humanitarian crises and helps people to survive and rebuild their lives: <https://www.rescue.org/>