Introducing a Gender Perspective on Conflict Analysis

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On 11 February 2020, the MWMN held a webinar titled "Introducing a Gendered Perspective on Conflict Analysis" with **Isabelle Arradon**, Director of Research at the International Crisis Group (ICG).[1] ICG is an independent organisation working to prevent wars and shape policies aimed at building a more peaceful world. ICG's analysts live in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Europe in order to conduct field research in conflict areas. "A gender perspective" – explained Isabelle during the webinar – "is needed if you want to have a holistic approach to conflicts and give valuable solutions to decision-makers. Although today there is a recognition within think-tanks and institutions, we still have a long road ahead. Sometimes, decision-makers do not understand what you mean by a gendered perspective".

The webinar was attended by members from the MWMN, the Nordic Women Mediator Network, and FEMWISE.

At ICG, Isabelle is the Director of Research and is in charge of the monthly early warning bulletin *Crisis Watch*, a global conflict tracker that identifies trends in over 80 countries and alerts decision-makers about the risks of escalation and opportunities to advance peace. Before becoming Director of Research, Isabelle was the Special Adviser on Gender at ICG where she introduced a gender, peace and security work-stream within ICG in order to further integrate the gender dimension across the organisation's analytical work. "For more than 10 years I had worked for human rights organisations so when, in 2014 I joined ICG, I was very surprised that there was very little attention on issues related to gender. As you know, the human rights world works very much on implementing the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Coming from this field, I could not understand why an organisation that was dealing with deadly conflicts wouldn't try to understand the different perspectives of men, women, girls and boys. So, a few years ago we started to work on the development of a gender mainstreaming strategy within the organisation".

During the webinar, Isabelle explained the importance of bringing a gender dimension into conflict analysis, the challenges of implementing a gender-based work stream within ICG and its publications.

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1   See ICG website: *Isabelle Arradon*, https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/469.

The importance of a gender dimension in conflict analysis

The idea of incorporating a gendered dimension into conflict analysis came to Isabelle's mind when she realised that the organisations that were working on gender issues were completely separated from those dealing with conflict analysis. "It was as if there were two parallel worlds that did not cross each other" explained Isabelle. "So, in order to integrate a gender perspective in ICG's research, we developed a strategy based on three pillars: one internal and two externals. First, we made sure that all our internal policies were gender sensitive. Second, we made sure that our goals – policies, recommendations and analysis were more gender sensitive; and third we aimed at integrating a gender perspective in our advocacy work."

In order to integrate a gender perspective in their work, Isabelle and her colleagues adopted two different methods. First, they used the "general approach", which meant that all their field research necessitated a gender perspective from the start. This was done by differentiating the research project, identifying analysts, breaking up research questions and knowing where it would be best to interview respondents in the field. Second, we also wrote more cutting-edge pieces that specifically focused on gender analysis.

Even today people understand what gender issues mean in different ways. When we speak about gender analysis, people usually think about promotion of women rights or gender equality. For that reason, it was very important at ICG to clearly states from the beginning what they do by integrating a gender perspective in their work. "For us" – explained Isabelle – "it had to cover three dimensions: one was gender and militancy. Here the goal was to tackle stereotypes; to try to better understand the role of women and men in militancy and how gender roles have been manipulated by militants and politicians. The second dimension was participation. The idea was to try to better understand the role of women in conflict resolution. The third area of focus was very important to us as it focused on the differentiated impact of conflicts, where we tried to tackle the idea that there are only particular groups that are affected by conflicts. We wanted to add nuances within our research: for example showing how men could also be victims of sexual abuses. Conflict affects all, but in different ways, so in order to bring solutions we need to analyse them in a differentiated way."

Challenges

These last years have seen some progress in this field within organisations and institutions. For instance, the Council conclusions on Women, Peace and Security in December 2018[2] incorporated – according to Isabelle – "a useful language, recognising the importance of gender conflict analysis and stressing that we should have a simplified

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2   Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Women, Peace and Security*, 3662nd Foreign Affairs Council meeting, Brussels, 10 December 2018, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/37412/st15086-en18.pdf.
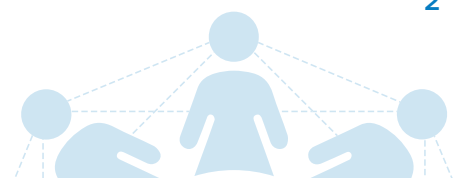
view". According to the text:

> Gender equality and Human Rights are at the core of European values and constitute stand-alone priorities mainstreamed across all European Union policies. The Council recalls the commitments of the European Union and its Member States to the full implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda [...] ensuring that it is fully integrated into all EU efforts in support of sustainable peace, security, human rights, justice and development, in the context of EU cooperation with other regional and international organizations as envisaged by the EU Global Strategy. This shall be done by integrating gender perspectives into all EU policies, including security, conflict prevention and resolution, as well as long-term peace building.

However, women rights are still under attack, and conflict analysis is still a very complex environment. "I think that people do not understand what it means to work on gender. It is difficult and I think that for analysts who have been trained in a certain way it is not an easy thing to do. For this reason, you need a lot of training and it requires the top leadership to be committed to ensure that the gender perspective is integrated. But the challenges also arise in policy prescriptions. Sometimes when you go to speak to policymakers, they may not understand what you are talking about. You must be very specific. Maybe in a world where gender is a taboo, you need to use another word in order to be heard, or people need to equate gender with more women in power, which is not the case. So, you need a lot of education and advocacy; and although there has been some progress, we still have a long road ahead."
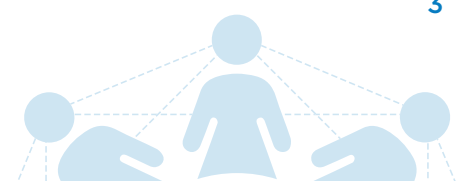
Reports

ICG's first gender-sensitive publication was on Nigeria. The report was published in December 2016,[3] two years after Boko Haram had abducted more than 200 schoolgirls near Chibok, a village in the Borno State. Since its emergence in 2002, the Islamist group has changed the life of thousands of women. As the reports argues:

> some joined to escape their social conditions; others were abducted and enslaved [...] While men have disproportionally been killed, women are an overwhelming majority among the estimated 1.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the North East. As former wives, slaves or fighters, many bear the stigma of association with the insurgents and are barred from reintroduction into their communities, in part because the lines between militant, sympathiser and forced accomplice are blurred.[4]

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3   ICG, "Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency", in *ICG Africa Reports*, No. 242 (5 December 2016), https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/4926.

4   Ibid., p. i.

As ICG's Director of Research, Isabelle realised that it was of utmost importance to tackle some stereotypes in the context of the report on Nigeria. The findings on the abduction of more than 200 schoolgirls in Chibok sparked outrage among the international community that used to consider Nigerian women only as victims. As the report explains, the role of women in Nigeria was more complex and, in some cases, controversial. Some of them became "recruiters, spies, domestic [workers], fighters and forced or willing suicide bombers".[5] Others, in the North-East, were part of a long legacy of non-violent female engagement movements for conflict resolution and, as the Boko Haram conflict grew, started to advocate to bring back abducted women and girls. "This is to say that if many women have been exploited and abducted by the Islamist group, others have played an active role in the insurgency and the counter-insurgency. That's why the different ways women engaged with the conflict need to be fully understood in order to directly inform decision-makers and find solutions that could alleviate their suffering and pave the way for reconciliation and to rebuild society. This particular work is a good demonstration that without an understanding of gender norms in a particular context, it is not possible to find the right solutions to the problems." According to the report, all decision-making should take into consideration the historical context of gender discrimination rooted in Nigerian law and cultural practice, and how the insurgency has further affected women in various ways, from sexual abuse to lost economic opportunities. In its conclusions the report argues that, "Federal authorities and their partners should recognise that although the State has a central role to play, religion too can be a resource for facilitating this process and for promoting positive change for women more generally."[6]

Another examples that highlights the importance of taking into consideration a gender perspective on conflict analysis is a report on the repatriation of Westerners affiliated with ISIS. The report was published in November 2019[7] and tackled the repatriation's issue by analysing the condition of thousands of non-Syrian women and children, detained in Syria's camps, affiliated with ISIS. The issue, as the report argues, has to be addressed by Westerner governments as soon as possible. The 2019 Turkish offensive into north-eastern Syria and the shifting balance of power in the region made the security of the camps more precarious. Field research was conducted in al-Hol, the largest of the camps for foreign women and children based in north east Syria. The analysis "reveals a picture of squalor, sexual abuse and endemic violence." "We highlighted the terrible humanitarian situation in the camps and the fact that these women were not a homogeneous group. Just in al-Hol there were 10,000 thousand people", explained Isabelle.

As in every war, a person can be both a victim and a perpetrator. In the case of former ISIS affiliated women, as the report points out, "there is no archetypal ISIS woman, but

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5   Ibid., p. 6.

6   Ibid., p. 20.

7   ICG, "Women and Children First: Repatriating the Westerners Affiliated with ISIS", in *ICG Middle East Reports*, No. 208 (18 November 2019), https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/12390.
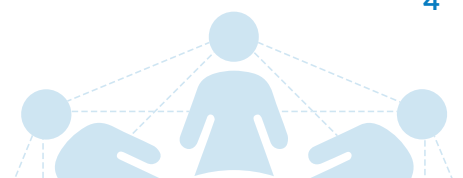
rather a complex spectrum of women and girls in the camps of north east Syria".[8] For this reason, the main recommendation of the report is the following:

> Detaining and repatriating Westerners associated with ISIS carries risks and challenges that vary for men and women, but the ongoing and unresolved presence of both in the region is a stark problem, and the unattended fate of their children an egregious humanitarian oversight. States should move out all of their nationals, starting with women and children.[9]

Isabelle concluded her intervention but saying that we need more and more examples of conflict analysis with a gender perspective. "Analysts must further understand through these publications what they are missing without interviewing women during their research."

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8   Ibid., p. 22.

9   Ibid., p. i.