

# Women and fragile states: Empowered women must be active participants in decision-making

Progressio policy briefing for the post-2015 discussions

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## 1. Women's participation and poverty in fragile states

Half of the world's poor already live in fragile and conflict-affected states – and the proportion is increasing.<sup>1</sup> Fragile states often lack the structures and capacity to carry out basic governance functions.<sup>2</sup> This in turn means that poverty cannot be addressed and the poorest stay poor: according to the OECD, “The fight against poverty is slower in fragile states than elsewhere.”<sup>3</sup> In more concrete terms, as of 2011, no fragile state had yet achieved a single MDG goal.<sup>4</sup>

It is a well-known fact that poverty affects mostly women. 60% of the world's hungry are women.<sup>5</sup> Women work two-thirds of the world's working hours, produce half of the world's food, but earn only 10% of the world's income and own less than one percent of the world's property.<sup>6</sup> Women's rights are often neglected and ignored – and this is particularly the case in fragile states. Women in Yemen, for example, have one-fiftieth of the level of political empowerment of men; and overall, Yemen is ranked last (out of 136 countries) in terms of women's levels of education, health, political and economic participation compared to men.<sup>7</sup>

Poverty and state fragility are caused, or made worse, by unjust and ineffective structures and practices. Progressio therefore focuses on the barriers that keep women poor and prevent them from realising their rights.

In fragile states, governance structures are commonly weak, ineffective, or even non-existent; and in a post-conflict setting, if women have not been involved in peace agreements, their needs are usually forgotten.<sup>8</sup> Excluding women from discussions concerning nation-building creates serious governance challenges. In order to change the status quo, more women's voices must be heard and included when major political reform or transformation is undertaken.<sup>9</sup> Within the overall institutional setting, social institutions and cultural practices – laws, norms, traditions and codes of conduct – are often the main sources of persisting discrimination against women in developing countries.<sup>10</sup> A stronger civil society can play a key role in challenging the underlying factors that perpetuate discrimination – as Progressio's country programme in Yemen has noted:

In the absence of effective civil society to influence government policies and decisions in favour of poor and marginalised groups, most government plans and programmes fail to make lasting changes in the lives of these people. Young people, especially young women, do not have any legitimate participation in political decision-making processes, governance and civic bodies since government policies and programmes fail to support their involvement. Deep-rooted cultural and traditional practices and beliefs undermine and discourage women from participating and opinion-making in public spheres.<sup>11</sup>

In order to take a big leap towards change, **the post-2015 framework should give additional focus on the enormous challenges faced by women in fragile states** – and on the factors that cause and perpetuate their marginalisation. This empowerment will only be achieved if the structures, policies and attitudes that actively disempower women are dismantled. The gender target therefore needs to be bold and strong, moving away from measuring average progress towards focusing on the most marginalised groups, such as women living in fragile states.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. The role of culture and religion: constructively addressing 'the elephant in the room'

For many, faith is a source of strength, solace and learning. In many non-Western societies, faith is inseparably intertwined with other aspects of life, including politics and development. Religion plays an important role in shaping and influencing societal values, thus putting religious and faith leaders in positions of considerable authority and power. Separating religion and development is therefore both unproductive<sup>13</sup> and unrealistic.

In particular, faith directly influences societal attitudes and behaviour towards women. Through centuries, women have played a significant role in furthering their faith with many women becoming martyrs and thinkers. However, women's role in society is still undermined by the abuse and violence exercised against them. Instead of being part of the problem, faith can, and should, be part of the solution:

It is impossible to say you are committed to the poor and not know that two-thirds of the hungry of the world are women who get only the leftovers after their husband and children have eaten; two-thirds of the illiterate of the world are women enslaved by their lack of education as the chattel of men; two-thirds of the poorest of the poor, according to UN statistics, are women. And all of them ignored, rejected and omitted even from the language and the official theological development of the church. So much for life, so much for baptism. It is simply impossible to be really committed to the poor and not devote yourself to doing something to change the role and status of women in the world.

– Sister Joan Chittister OSB<sup>14</sup>

Given that half of religious followers are women, faith leaders have a responsibility to take a proactive position on issues such as violence against women and girls, encouraging the education of women and girls and ensuring that their rights are protected. Sister Joan Chittister insists that a patriarchal system is a system that is helpful to neither men nor women.<sup>15</sup> In order to change the situation of women, it is important to change people's perceptions.

An example of a successful model for such work is one of Progressio's projects in Yemen, which works with organisations such as Half of Society in order to tackle the root causes of inequality and exclusion of women. The project advocates for women's rights among broad sectors of society targeting some 25,000 women in two districts. Hanan Omar, head of the Half of Society NGO, said:

We need to change the negative attitudes towards women that they are not only wives, mothers or sisters, but also partners in the development process... Islamic Sharia ensured all civil rights for women but customs and traditions prevented enjoyment of those rights. So we need to enforce laws and legislation guaranteeing both men and women's rights together, as opposed to the prevailing situation, and this includes addressing women's rights with regard to inheritance and rights in polygamous marriages... The absence of laws that protect women contributes to the further violation of their rights.<sup>16</sup>

Certain conservative religious sectors refuse to accept women's contributions to their own societies, outside of the household. In post-conflict societies, this becomes more apparent given the weakness of governance structures responding to the needs of the population and the lack of political participation of women in those structures.

Religion could play a transformative role in changing behaviour and stereotypes. Faith leaders could support efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls by denouncing and condemning harmful practices. And faith leaders can become a catalyst for change by openly acknowledging and appreciating the contribution of women to their societies in terms of development and leadership. They can also be very influential in pressing for legal and policy reforms that address women's inequality at local, national, regional and international level.

The ultimate goal is helping people to overcome barriers in order to enable them to speak with their own voice. Fragile states should support or adapt such methods which aim at overcoming structural barriers that keep women suppressed, given that there is a link between women, exclusion and poverty.

### **3. Inclusion of women in decision-making: facilitating women's social and political development**

The underlying cause of gender inequality on all levels (political, social and cultural) is the exclusion of women from decision-making processes at all levels – from households to national parliaments and other institutions such as courts.

Progressio has identified that giving women a voice in decision-making is a key factor to lift women and girls out of poverty. In states with weak governance structures, decision-making is often carried out in social institutions, which function according to certain rules. These can be either inclusive or exclusive to groups.

Research has shown that social institutions are hindering equal participation of women: "Social institutions have gained currency as a framework to explain what is stopping women and girls from achieving equal outcomes in areas such as education, employment, business, health and political participation."<sup>17</sup> Strategic, targeted investment in opening up social institutions to women and girls will be crucial in order to meet development goals.

Progressio envisions targets that support women to have a greater voice and influence in decision-making, which the Gender and Development Network (GADN) has summarised as transformative targets.<sup>18</sup> A gender goal needs to be action orientated and measurable. Political institutions, governments and governance structures have the power to help change the status of women and create an equal society in which everyone can participate in political and economic development. This is exemplified by a Progressio project in Somaliland, supporting NAGAAD, the network of women's organisations in Somaliland, through our development worker Edna Onyango:

[I was] conducting an action-oriented policy dialogue workshop with the three political parties of Somaliland that also saw the attendance of the Somaliland Women's caucus members, civil society organisations and youth. The outcome of this workshop was the expression of political will by the three political party leaders to further promote, protect and defend women's rights through the reservation of seats for women members and the support for gender mainstreaming in political party structures.<sup>19</sup>

The situation in Yemen is an example of the problems that many developing countries, but especially fragile states, face. Progressio in Yemen is calling for a gender-focused development framework based on maximum participation of women in planning, implementation and monitoring of development interventions.<sup>20</sup> Key to improvement is giving women a voice and a choice. What is needed?

To build a just and participatory society where citizens have the regular opportunity to play an active role in making decisions that affect their lives and in holding their government accountable, there is a need for participation of marginalised and vulnerable groups in political processes. This may be gained through civic education and awareness, promoting effective governance through better advocacy campaigns and participation, developing vibrant civil societies through capacity building, education and networking, and effective local governance through citizens' networks and involvement in policy and planning.<sup>21</sup>

#### 4. Progressio's recommendations for the post-2015 process

Progressio believes that including women and girls in the post-2015 framework will send a powerful message to the international community, especially governments, to tackle gender inequalities in terms of non-discrimination, equality, sustainability and rights. There should be universality in tackling exclusion and violence against women and girls, rather than this being an option, in order to encourage collective responsibility to changing outright the negative attitudes and societal values towards women. Moreover, supporting the building of inclusive governance structures with full participation of women embedded from the start is fundamental in achieving social and political transformation in fragile states. Particular attention should be given to support gender equality programmes in fragile states given the weaknesses in governance structures.

To tackle gender inequality and build an inclusive society, the post-2015 framework should include:

- A strong goal on women's empowerment which is action orientated and measurable;
- A bold goal on women's empowerment, calling for a new discourse on gender equality and end of stereotypes;
- An inclusive goal on women's empowerment, calling on governments and civil society to work together in building a society which fully respects both genders and acknowledges their mutual contribution;
- A special focus on building the capacity of women in fragile states, because this is where women are most marginalised and excluded.

These are all essential ingredients for embedding women's rights and empowerment in nation building and institutional strengthening.

As a member of the Gender and Development Network (GADN), a network of 70 UK leading development NGOs and gender experts, Progressio also calls for action to address structural inequalities:

A strong and well-resourced standalone goal on women's empowerment and gender equality, together with the mainstreaming of transformative gender targets across the framework, is the approach most likely to address the structural inequalities, which persist for women and girls. It is also the best way to foster the necessary political will, resources and national ownership to create sustainable and effective action on gender equality and women's rights.<sup>22</sup>

In their report, GADN conclusions included:

- The most effective way to achieve gender equality is through a 'twin track' approach, combining a standalone goal with mainstreaming throughout the framework.
- In the context of the current political debate, a standalone goal on gender equality is vital because of the political commitment and dedicated resources that a specific focus brings.
- Targets across the framework must be transformative so that they reflect a lasting change in the power and choices women have over their own lives and tackle the root causes of inequality.

Specific gender indicators, that are deliverable and measurable, should be adopted to ensure that the objective does not become a 'tick-box exercise'. This will require:

- A multi-sectoral, holistic and integrated approach to tackle violence against women and girls (eg media, education, donors, governments);
- Economic empowerment programmes to generate autonomy and independence amongst women and girls;

- Multi-sectoral coordination to ensure that all stakeholders work together to maximise resources and opportunities;
- Partnerships between developing and developed countries to maximise learning and opportunities.

The post-2015 goals should strive to achieve a degree of coherence with other processes and policies to avoid duplication and tensions. They must also overcome the real obstacles that undermined the MDGs and are still applicable today:

- Lack of consultation with grassroots organisations;
- Lack of implementation and enforcement;
- Lack of funding resources for women-focused programmes;
- Other priorities taking over and pushing women's rights to the bottom of the political agenda.

Therefore, Progressio is calling for the incorporation of support for women's empowerment projects in the post-2015 framework. Furthermore, priority should be given to strengthening gender equality in fragile states, which includes gender mainstreaming and capacity building programmes on gender equality and women's rights. The goal number 2 'Empower Girls and Women and Achieve Gender Equality', more defined by target 2d in the High-Level Panel Report ('Eliminate discrimination against women in political, economic, and public life'),<sup>23</sup> could be strengthened by the following proposed indicators:

- Number of projects which support women's empowerment, and especially women's participation on a local or national level (in states which have a gender inequality index below XYZ).
- Number of awareness-raising campaigns to support change agents with a vision for gender equality on a local, or national level.
- Funding increased for supporting initiatives which integrate women-friendly governance structures, especially in the context of fragile states and post-conflict societies.
- Number of programmes campaigning for the elimination of cultural practices and traditions that perpetuate discrimination or harm against women and girls.
- Number of programmes that champion religious leaders to challenge discrimination against women and girls.

## Notes

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All URLs accessed February 2014.

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

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