

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

Progressio's position at the 58th meeting of the  
Commission on the Status of Women, New York,  
March 2014

February 2014



## 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 and society's expectations. 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 common 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'.<sup>1</sup>

The box below summarises some of the key impacts of governance fragility at both national and global level.<sup>2</sup>

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Poverty</b>                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Little or no progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals</li> <li>• Unable to deliver basic social services including water, education, and healthcare</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Conflict and humanitarian crises</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weak and unresponsive government can lead to civil conflict and inter-state wars</li> <li>• Particularly vulnerable to humanitarian crises caused by civil war, food insecurity, or natural disasters</li> <li>• Sources of chronic refugee flows placing strain on neighbouring states and international humanitarian response</li> <li>• Fuelling proliferation of conventional weapons and stoking regional conflict</li> </ul> |
| <b>Human rights violations</b>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unable to protect the basic human rights of their citizens, giving rise to unchecked opportunities for murder, rape, slavery, mutilation, extortion, theft, intimidation, and discrimination</li> <li>• Weak but repressive regimes may violate rights to stay in power</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Global security threats</b>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing safe havens for international terrorists and illicit arms trade</li> <li>• Lacking capacity to detect, investigate, and counter terrorist activity</li> <li>• Ineffective controls on biological, nuclear and radioactive materials</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Organised crime</b>                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Serving as bases for international criminal activity, including the trafficking of drugs, people, and illegal goods</li> <li>• Production sites for narcotics</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Reduced global prosperity</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depressing international trade and investment</li> <li>• Unable to provide the regulatory framework and basic security required to promote economic growth</li> <li>• Threats to global energy security where energy production or transmission is disrupted</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Weakened international systems</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unable to fulfil international obligations – to protect the global environment, counter infectious diseases, contain money laundering, and so on</li> <li>• Unable to fulfil international obligations to other states in protecting foreign nationals, maintaining effective diplomatic relations, and co-operating to address global challenges</li> </ul>   |

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

### Women can help make fragile states into stronger societies

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 increase.<sup>3</sup> The reasons for this are complex, but the bottom line is that state fragility makes people more at risk of poverty, and makes it harder for people to escape poverty.<sup>4</sup>

### **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 women.<sup>5</sup> 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, and women living in fragile states are even more marginalised and vulnerable to poverty, violence, and lack of rights. For example, the increased risk of gender-based violence in fragile and conflict-affected states makes women and girls even more vulnerable.<sup>6</sup> This is added to little or no efforts made at policy and legislative level in these fragile and conflict-affected states to ensure that women and girls' rights are upheld and protected.

### **Fragile states reinforce gender inequality**

In most developing countries, cultural practices, traditions, customs and social norms hold the keys to understanding the roots of gender discrimination.<sup>7</sup> 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. There are also specific difficulties faced by women and girls in becoming active participants such as traditional social structures, security and safety, and the negative impact of gender-based violence on women's participation, especially in fragile and conflict-affected states.

The success of national reforms heavily depends on the willingness of governments to challenge harmful traditions and cultural practices, which calls for a global, consistent and coherent approach<sup>8</sup> 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 men.<sup>9</sup> 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.

### **Progressio's expertise and focus**

Many of the countries in which Progressio works are fragile states where women are particularly marginalised and under-represented. Progressio's expertise is in supporting poor and marginalised people, especially women, to empower themselves:

Women, who make up the majority of people in poverty, will be at the heart of our work to strengthen the ability of poor and marginalised people to demand and defend their rights.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. What is special about Progressio's approach?

Many definitions of fragile states focus on the development of state institutions rather than its 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.

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. In fragile states, this approach will embed women's participation in emerging governance structures.

It will also put women's voices at the centre of tackling poverty. To achieve permanent, sustainable solutions to poverty, we must also 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. So, 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, for example through challenging machismo, promoting women's champions, and helping poor and marginalised communities, especially women, to respond to environmental degradation and the impacts of climate change. Women are typically responsible for small-scale domestic farming and for the collection and management of water. Yet women are less able than men to gain secure land tenure or loans and to compete for resources such as water – and are even more likely than men to be excluded from decision- and policy-making. The participation of women in decision-making is vital not just to reduce gender inequality, but in practical terms to improve natural resource management and boost food security.

### 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.

Progressio wants to bring the voices of women in fragile states to the debate, with the aim of increasing their political and social participation in decision-making.

The priority theme for the 58th CSW Meeting in March 2014 is *Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls*. Progressio's objective is to influence the 58th CSW to ensure that the final UN-CSW declaration shows a strong commitment to including, in the post-2015 development goals, a gender objective which also reflects the challenges faced by women living in fragile states.

Progressio is working alongside organisations and other allies such as the UK Gender and Development Network (GADN) and the National Association of Women's Organisations (NAWO). In addition, Progressio has an excellent track record of working with the Equality Unit and other key UK Government institutions. Progressio is also in a position to exercise some influence given its ECOSOC status and its clear focus and expertise on women in fragile states.

Progressio is also organising a side-event at the UN-CSW entitled "Is interfaith work empowering women?" (8.30am, Thursday 13 March 2014, at the 10th Floor of the Church Center of the United Nations, United Nations Plaza). Progressio's country representative in Yemen, Abeer Al-Absi, will be a key speaker as well as members of the NAWO platform and the National Board of Catholic Women.

## 5. Key messages

### 1. Representation

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.<sup>11</sup> 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.

### 2. Leadership

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.

### 3. Poverty

The majority of the world's poor will soon live in fragile and conflict-affected states if they do not already.<sup>12</sup> Six out of ten of the world's poorest people are women.<sup>13</sup> 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 employment.<sup>14</sup> The risks of poverty, and the implications of poverty, are even greater for women living in fragile states.

### 4. Violence

1 in 3 women worldwide are victims of domestic or sexual violence in their lifetime.<sup>15</sup> Women in fragile states are particularly at risk of being victims of violence.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, there is a higher level of societal violence and acceptance of violence in fragile and post-conflict states.

### 5. Inequality

Women perform 66% of the world's work, produce 50% of the food, but earn 10% of the income and own 1% of the property.<sup>17</sup> Gender inequality is about power imbalances and requires a multi-faceted approach (eg political, economic, social, environmental) that influences policy change. This approach will strengthen the capacity of women individually and collectively to become organised and built solidarity linkages.

### 6. Stereotypes

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 should be rooted in social transformation and behavioural change.

### 7. Development

Investing in women and girls – particularly in education – reduces poverty and promotes long term and sustainable development.<sup>18</sup> 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 girls must be a key focus of any development process.

### 8. Environment

Investing in women small-scale farmers and their participation in decision-making is not only vital in order to level the playing field, boost food security and improve natural resource management, but can be gender transformative as well.

## 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.gsdc.org/go/fragile-states/chapter-1--understanding-fragile-states/definitions-and-typologies-of-fragile-states](http://www.gsdc.org/go/fragile-states/chapter-1--understanding-fragile-states/definitions-and-typologies-of-fragile-states)
- 2 Taken from Torres, M, and Anderson, M, 2004, Fragile states: Defining difficult environments for poverty reduction, Poverty Reduction in Difficult Environments Working Paper, UK Department for International Development, p8, [www.ineesite.org/uploads/files/resources/doc\\_1\\_FS-Diff\\_enviro\\_n\\_for\\_pov\\_reduc.pdf](http://www.ineesite.org/uploads/files/resources/doc_1_FS-Diff_enviro_n_for_pov_reduc.pdf)
- 3 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](http://www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/7723.pdf)
- 4 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](http://www.post2015hlp.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Lockhart-Vincent_Ending-Extreme-Poverty-in-Fragile-and-Conflict-affected-Situations.pdf)
- 5 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](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/directory/women_and_poverty_3001.htm)
- 6 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](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmintdev/107/10709.htm)
- 7 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](http://www.oecd.org/dev/poverty/35155725.pdf)
- 8 See note 7, p23
- 9 See 'Women and democracy', United Nations Global Issues website, [www.un.org/en/globalissues/democracy/women.shtml](http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/democracy/women.shtml)
- 10 People powered development: Progressio's strategic framework 2010-2015, p6, [www.progressio.org.uk/sites/default/files/Progressio-Strategy-2010-2015.pdf](http://www.progressio.org.uk/sites/default/files/Progressio-Strategy-2010-2015.pdf)
- 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](http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/povertyreduction/focus_areas/focus_gender_and_poverty.html)
- 12 See note 3
- 13 See note 11
- 14 See 'Women, poverty and economics', UN Women website, [www.unifem.org/gender\\_issues/women\\_poverty\\_economics/](http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/women_poverty_economics/)
- 15 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/](http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/)
- 16 See note 15
- 17 Statistics from UN Women quoted in International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/World Bank, 2011, Women, business and the law: removing barriers to economic inclusion, p1, <http://wbl.worldbank.org/~media/FPDKM/WBL/Documents/Reports/2012/Women-Business-and-the-Law-2012.pdf>
- 18 See for example 'Adolescent girls in focus at the World Economic Forum', World Bank Gender and Development website, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTGENDER/0,,contentMDK:22059153~menuPK:336906~pagePK:64020865~piPK:149114~theSitePK:336868,00.html>

All URLs accessed January 2014.

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

February 2014

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Front cover photo: Women campaigning during elections in Somaliland, 2012 (photo © Kate Stanworth/Progressio)