"Peace Missions and Gender Equality: Ten Lessons from the Ground", Donald Steinberg

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It's an honor to speak today on the topic of peace missions and gender equality. I want to begin by congratulating the OSCE and particularly the Gender Section of the Office of the Secretary General for organizing this series to raise the awareness of delegates of participating States and OSCE staff members on the key role of women in conflict prevention, drawing on experiences from around the world. I salute the dedicated and often courageous efforts by OSCE personnel throughout its 19 field missions.

The engagement of women in peace operations is an issue on which I've focused throughout much of my professional life. Frequently, these issues are addressed in the context of justice and fairness. The argument goes that women and women's issues should be in the forefront of conflict resolution and post-conflict stability operations because women are the main victims of conflict, because they make up more than half the population, or because they are inherently more peaceful and collaborative and less corrupt than men. For me, the real question is effectiveness: put simply, peace processes and peace building are more likely to work, to enjoy support from civil society, and to address the "make or break" issues if there is full participation of women.

A Cautionary Tale from Angola

In 1994, while serving as President Clinton's advisor for Africa, I supported negotiations to end two decades of civil war in Angola that had killed a half million people. When the Lusaka Protocol was signed, I boasted that not a single provision in the agreement discriminated against women. "The agreement is gender-neutral," I said in a speech.

President Clinton then named me as US ambassador to Angola and a member of the Joint Commission implementing the peace accords. It took me only a few weeks after my arrival in Luanda to realize that a peace agreement that is "gender-neutral" is, by definition, discriminatory against women and thus, less likely to succeed.

Consider the evidence. First, the agreement did not require the participation of women in the Joint Commission itself. As a result, at each meeting of this body, forty men and no women sat around the table. This imbalance silenced women's voices on the hard issues of war and peace, and meant that issues as internal displacement, sexual violence, human trafficking, abuses by government and rebel security forces, and the rebuilding of maternal health care and girls' education were generally ignored.

Second, the peace accord was based on 13 separate amnesties that forgave the parties for atrocities committed during the conflict. One amnesty even excused actions that might take place six months in the future. Given the prominence of sexual abuse during the conflict,

including rape as a weapon of war, amnesties meant that men with guns forgave other men with guns for crimes committed against women. The amnesties also introduced a cynicism at the heart of our efforts to rebuild the justice and security sectors.

Similarly, as we launched demobilization programs for ex-combatants, we defined a combatant as anyone who turned in a gun. The thousands of women who had been kidnapped or coerced mostly into the rebel forces were largely excluded, since most of them were exploited as cooks, messengers, bearers, and even sex slaves.

Male ex-combatants received some money and demobilization assistance, but were shipped back to communities that had learned to live without them during decades of conflict. The frustration of these men exploded into an epidemic of alcoholism, drug abuse, divorce, rape, and domestic violence. In effect, the end of civil war unleashed a new era of violence against women.

Even such well-intentioned efforts as clearing major roads of landmines to allow four million displaced persons to return to their homes backfired against women. Road clearance generally preceded the demining of fields, wells, and forests. As newly resettled women went out to plant the fields, fetch water, and collect firewood, they faced a new rash of landmine accidents.

We recognized these problems, and we responded by bringing out gender advisers and human rights officers; launching programs in maternal health care, girls' education, micro-enterprise, and support for women's NGOs; and insisting that women be planners, implementers and beneficiaries for our humanitarian and reconstruction programs.

But it was too little, too late. The people – and particularly women – came to view the peace process as serving the interests of the warring parties rather than civil society. When the process faltered in 1998, there was little public pressure on the leaders to prevent a return to conflict. The killing only ended four years later with the death of UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi.

Other Lessons from the Field

Similar problems occur writ large throughout the world. Courageous and talented women peace builders face discrimination in legal, cultural and traditional practices, and hostility from men in power, often translated into threats of violence. In a report covering Africa's three deadliest conflicts – Congo, Uganda, and Sudan – Crisis Group documented how these practices, combined with sexual violence during conflict, impose a stigma of victimization and a real danger that makes even the most impressive women think twice before stepping forward.

Many of the findings were indeed discouraging. Women were broadly excluded from peace processes and post-conflict peace operations. Even when official status was granted, as in the 2002 Sun City negotiations on the Congo and the 2006 Abuja talks on Darfur, men leading peace conferences shunted the women off to ante-rooms while "real" negotiations took place elsewhere. As noted above, this meant that key issues such as internal displacement, sexual violence, abuses by government and rebel security forces, and the rebuilding of social services received short shrift – or were ignored entirely.

The impact is particularly stark in the Congolese case, where women continue to be raped and trafficked with impunity, both by rebel movements and by the very government security forces charged with protecting them, despite the presence of 17,000 UN peacekeeping troops in that country.

The report documented, however, some possible signs of success.

In Sudan, talented women trained in conflict resolution and human rights promoted at the local level stepped forward to play important roles in the emerging National Unity Government and the Government of Southern Sudan. Afhad University for Women in Khartoum is training thousands of women to participate fully in political, economic and academic life. Women's participation in the 2006 Abuja negotiations to end the Darfur conflict improved the final agreement enormously, even if it remained fundamentally flawed and its provisions for women's empowerment were ignored.

In Congo, the participation of women in the Inter-Congolese dialogue, the development of principles on empowerment in the Nairobi Declaration, and the mobilization of women to register to vote and to run for office in the country's national elections encouraged the adoption of good provisions in the interim constitution. In particular, the constitution calls for elimination of discrimination against women; participation of women in all political, economic, and social life; and elimination of violence against women.

In Uganda, impressive local organizations are promoting women's rights, protection and participation in political and economic life, such as the Kitgum Women's Peace Initiative and the Teso Women's Peace Association. The Child and Family Protection Unit in the national police is addressing rights and protection issues, although it is under-funded and under-supported. The government's endorsement of the Convention for Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the invitation to the International Criminal Court to investigate acts of sexual violence in the north lay the groundwork for enhanced rights – even if government practices don't always match its rhetoric.

Some Good News from OSCE Missions

This corresponds with message from other areas, including countries with OSCE missions like Azerbaijan, Armenia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Kyrgyzstan. In these societies, women have stepped forward in their local communities – often with OSCE support – to play prominent roles in dispute settlement, protection and promotion of human rights, and combating domestic violence and trafficking in persons. A key challenge is to expand these networks writ large to regional and national levels, using such institutions as the Helsinki Citizens Assemblies.

OSCE missions have had a positive gender impact by addressing human trafficking, supporting greater participation of women in politics and helping to ensure gender equality in national law. In these and other gender projects, OSCE missions have drawn international attention and resources to potentially neglected gender issues. Missions have also effectively stressed the linkages of gender with other issues, for example, by recognizing that trafficking requires work in policing, judicial reform, anti-corruption, economic empowerment, and border security.

The OSCE can be proud of its work on anti-trafficking. Missions have responded to local contexts and have run programs which range from promoting an anti-trafficking helpline in the media in Kosovo, to developing an anti-trafficking website in Moldova, seconding staff to work with the State Coordinator on Trafficking in Bosnia and supporting the reintegration of trafficking victims through business development training in Albania. Missions have also worked at the policy level to advise governments on changes in the law to help tackle traffickers, as in Albania and Kosovo.

Another important OSCE focus has been national gender equality plans. The OSCE in Albania helped implement a national equality strategy and a new gender equality law. In Tajikistan the OSCE trained civil servants and parliamentarians on gender equality and mainstreaming. OSCE missions have also worked at local levels. In Skopje, for example, the OSCE supported gender equality commissions in partnership with local government and women's organizations. These resulted in agreements with local municipalities to ensure adequate support for women in health, education and employment projects.

OSCE programs have also pushed for a greater representation of women in the higher reaches of public and political life. Last year the OSCE Mission in Kosovo organized a roundtable of stakeholders on this theme. In Serbia, a high-profile election of a "virtual" women's government was organized by the OSCE mission.

Other innovative OSCE projects included support for the first shelter for victims of domestic violence in northern Tajikistan and a competition for the best and worst media coverage of gender issues in Armenia.

There are a number of important lessons from these examples. First, in situations where women's participation in peace negotiations and peace operations goes beyond tokenism and reaches a "critical mass" of 20 to 30 percent, women have had the confidence and peer support to address gender and other issues.

Second, while a principal partner for the OSCE has been ministries of women's affairs, the most effective programs have been in countries where gender is mainstreamed within government and civil society. It is vital, for example, that the health minister is a principal partner in the implementation of mother-child health programs and the justice minister is a key ally in the fight against trafficking and domestic violence.

Third, OSCE programs that promote education of women and girls have proven to be the single most productive investment in improving social indicators, promoting productivity in agriculture and small-scale industry, empowering women to defend their rights, and stabilizing local communities.

Finally, the most successful OSCE security sector reform programs have been those that bring women into the formal security forces, thereby enhancing gender-sensitive law enforcement, improving police relations with the population they seek to protect, and facilitating investigation of crimes of sexual violence.

A Dream Deferred

Regrettably, one further lesson is that various international instruments have proven ineffective in providing the framework for such efforts. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security; the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women; and OSCE Resolution 14/05 on Women in Conflict, Crisis Management and Post-conflict Rehabilitation are generally unknown or unused by governments and local populations, and to some extent even by women activists and international officials in these countries. These resolutions promised a systematic approach and concentrated energy to address issues of women in armed conflict and peace building. But thus far, the promise of this resolution has largely been a dream deferred, in large part because of the absence of monitoring, accountability, and enforcement mechanism.

Further, symbols are important. Again, I salute the important efforts of many OSCE missions in promoting women's rights, combating trafficking in persons, and strengthening women's organizations. But in the most recent survey of OSCE field operations, why do the words "gender" and "women" never appear in the descriptions of the principal tasks undertaken by any of the 19 OSCE field missions?

Ten Practical Steps Forward

To reverse this pattern, I would like to make ten practical proposals for OSCE missions in particular to bear in mind.

First, every OSCE mission should help safeguard and empower women peacebuilders. This priority, as others involved with the protection and promotion of women in peace operations, should be written into mission mandates and terms of reference.

Second, the heads of OSCE missions should help ensure that a critical mass of women – beginning at 20 percent – are full participants in peace talks, reconstruction conferences, and governance mechanisms, even if it takes quotas to do so. More than half of the world's nations have laws or regulations that specify quotas for gender fairness. These provisions are not undemocratic aberrations; they are standard practice.

Third, post-conflict reconstruction should rebuild social structures of particular importance to women, such as reproductive health care and girls' education, and all plans should be subjected to gender-impact analysis. In particular, OSCE participants in donors conferences should press for such analyses of all proposals.

Fourth, while the balance between peace and justice should be carefully weighed in each situation, OSCE officials should seek to ensure that the provision of amnesties and immunities, especially as they relate to sexual violence, should be extremely rare and drafted very narrowly. And when such actions rise to the level of crimes against humanity or war crimes, no amnesties can ever be justified.

Fifth, OSCE projects in security sector reform should insist on training in gender issues. Police forces should hire a minimum percentage of women and a separate unit focused on gender-related issues. This is particularly important to encourage women who have been abused to come forward with accusations. For the same reasons, the OSCE's own rights monitors and other units should also include substantial numbers of women in their ranks.

Sixth, the OSCE should look to identify local women's organizations to serve as local implementing partners for projects. Contracts for these organizations, including in areas such as local dispute resolution and election monitoring, can be of even greater support than programs directed specifically at institutional strengthening, especially if accompanied by mentoring programs.

Seventh, there should be thorough training and tested knowledge of the extremely impressive "Filling the GAPS" documentation for all members, not just heads of missions and gender personnel. Deployment to the field should be made conditional on proven familiarity with these documents.

Eighth, there should be mechanisms to measure compliance by individuals and missions with these provisions. There should be rewards for those taking extraordinary action – such as an award given annually by the Secretary General to the individual contributing most to these objectives. Similarly, there should be sanctions for those not meeting minimum standards, such as being passed over for promotion.

Ninth, there must be zero tolerance for any form of sexual abuse or sexual harassment by OSCE personnel. The Secretary General should create an ombudsman for this issue before problems that have befallen the United Nations and a number of NGOs occur.

Finally, the OSCE must show the way by upgrading the status of gender advisers in its missions and expanding the number of women serving as heads of missions and in other positions of leadership. In 2008, women constituted just 19 percent of mangers at the OSCE, a decline from 21 percent in 2007. This task should be accomplished not just by recruiting more senior women, but by bringing women into professional tracks at all levels, encouraging their success through training and mentorship, and reviewing criteria for appointment and promotion to eliminate subtle gender bias.

Hard Issues, Hard Answers

Again, I do not propose these steps simply as a question of fairness and equity. They are an investment in the success of peace operations. Even today, people within these halls refer to these gender issues as the "soft side" of peace negotiations and peace-building.

There is nothing "soft" about going after traffickers who turn women and girls into commodities. There is nothing "soft" about preventing armed thugs from abusing women in IDP camps or holding warlords and other human rights violators accountable for their actions against women. There is nothing "soft" about forcing demobilized soldiers to refrain from domestic violence or insisting that women have a seat at the table in peace negotiations and a prominence in peace operations.

These are among the hardest responsibilities on our agenda, and I am pleased that we are devoting time and attention to these challenges here today. Thank you.