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SDG 16

Governing for gender equality and peace? Or perpetual violence and conflict?

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Realizing SDG 16 on peaceful, just, and inclusive societies requires a power shift that re-centres work on equality, development and peace around the voices, human security and rights of women and those most marginalized. This requires not just technical fixes, but structural transformation that moves from institutionalizing a form of governance that enables domination and violence to institutionalizing a form of governance that enables equality and peace for people and planet.

According to a 2018 Institute for Economics and Peace report, the economic cost of violence globally was US$ 14.7 trillion (12.4 % of global GDP or US$ 1,988 per person) in 2017, a 16 percent increase since 2012.The single largest contributor to this cost was military expenditure (37 %), followed by internal spending on security (police, judicial, and prison system) (27 %).

The current crisis-response approach to conflict and violence is not sustainable. The number of forcibly displaced people increased by over 50 percent between 2007 (42.7 million) and 2017 (68.5 million) as a result of persecution, conflict or generalized violence. Meanwhile, support for gender equality and women's rights remains marginal and at risk.

The research is compelling: A 2015 global study found that gender equality is the number one predictor of peace,[1] and feminist movement building is the number one predictor of policies on reducing violence against women.[2] Yet total world military expenditure rose to US$ 1,822 billion in 2018,[3] and just the 26 richest people owned the same wealth as the poorest half of humanity.[4] Meanwhile, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom calculated in 2016 that the global feminist movement had the approximately the same budget (US$ 110 million) as one F-35 fighter plane (US$ 137 million).[5]

The fact that the world is spending such sums on violence and war reflects more than bad funding priorities: our governance systems are also structured for violence. In 2018, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism found that counter-terrorism laws and practice constitute de facto and permanent states of emergency which undermine and violate human rights globally. This ties up human rights activists in red tape due to the burdensome regulations and risk criteria determined by the intergovernmental Financial Action Task Force, initiated by the G7 as a way to prevent money laundering. Meanwhile, before the 2013 Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), international trade in bananas was more regulated than was the global trade in arms. Today, thanks to the ATT, we have a legally binding treaty that

1 UN Women (2015).
2 Weldon and Htun (2013).
3 See www.sipri.org/publications/2019/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-world-military-expenditure-2018.
4 Oxfam (2019), p. 12.
5 WILPF (2016).

requires arms not be transferred if there is an overriding risk of gender-based violence or humanitarian harm. Yet arms exports continue to be facilitated and subsidized directly and indirectly. Furthermore, the international community fails to hold to account those States whose continued financial transfers violate the ATT and other international law.

Root causes of violence

A key hazard to peace is militarism[6] as a way of thought, which heroizes violence and devalues nonviolence. Militarism affirms the idea that we live in a dangerous world and that we need masculine protectors to protect feminine victims. It creates a climate of political decision-making in which resorting to the use of force becomes a normalized mode of dispute resolution. It relies on fear and intimidation of being 'feminized' (socially-subordinated) to catalyse militant action. It institutionalizes force and creates a climate of fear, which particularly impacts women and at-risk communities. Further, militarism grooms societies for war by normalizing violence as culturally heroic and economically prioritized.

Shifting away from militarized approaches to peace is a critical challenge. This shift requires addressing institutions with power, prestige and resources which benefit from these systems, including military and corporate power. It also requires addressing current social, economic and legal systems that institutionalize relationships of coercion and control.

Opportunities for structural change

Opportunities for structural change must be evaluated in two different situations: 1) post-conflict countries and 2) non-conflict countries.

1. Post-conflict countries

In the wake of conflict, post-conflict countries have at least the opportunity to re-set legal, political and social systems based on gender equality, non-discrimination and peace. Of course, countries can may instead return to – or further regress within – patriarchal institutions based on exclusion of the voices and rights of women and those most marginalized. However, steps toward transformation are possible. In Rwanda, for example, systems reforms in the wake of the genocide based on the 2003 constitution, which mandated 30 percent women's representation, resulted in the country becoming the first country in the world with a majority-female legislature in 2008. While continued pressure remains critical for action, in Colombia, mobilization by women-led civil society organizations resulted in a peace agreement with over 100 gender provisions, including on zero tolerance for sexual and gender-based violence.

Acting on the opportunity that post-conflict reconstruction provides to re-set the baseline requires joined-up and inclusive peace processes and economic reconstruction, with women at the table and a human rights and peace agenda. Rather than the segregated and gender-blind approaches that tend to dominate in peace and reconstruction today, this means designing democratic systems for non-discriminatory participation, investing in reparations for harms suffered during the conflict, and prioritizing social protection floors that ensure economic, social and cultural rights, rather than austerity measures that undermine and re-institutionalize discrimination and violence.

Too often, however, donor countries undermine peace by exporting arms and supporting neoliberal economic policies that undermine social protection and re-institutionalize gendered discrimination and violence. Leveraging post-conflict spaces for transformation requires a global governance system that holds arms exporting and developed countries accountable for so-called 'spill-over effects', including arms exports and illicit financial flows. It also requires supporting human rights based policies by International Financial Institutions, particularly the International Monetary Fund, to support social protection and women's economic, social and cultural rights.

6 See http://peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/Fact%20Sheet%20Militarism.pdf.

2. Non-Conflict Countries

For countries that are not in formal conflict, structural change requires strategic government action. One example is Sweden, where political leadership by Minister for Foreign Affairs Margot Wallström resulted in the country becoming the first in the world to launch a feminist foreign policy in 2014; this aimed at systematically integrating a gender perspective into the foreign policy agenda by "strengthen[ing] all women's and girls' Rights, Representation and Resources, based on the Reality in which they live".[7] Another is Costa Rica, which has managed to finance a universal health care system – in part owing to the non-existence of a military since 1949.

Feminists have pointed out how unpaid care work subsidizes economies of societies while perpetuating social, economic and political discrimination against women. The corollary to this is that purveyors of violence are being subsidized by communities. Making explicit the global cost of violence and identifying and accounting for (redistributing) responsibility to the source is critically needed. Strategies should include: 1) demilitarizing defense, 2) demilitarizing society, and 3) investing in gender equitable and resilient societies. For example in Colombia, in the run-up to the peace agreement women activists launched a "Mas Vida, Menos Armas" ("More Life, Less Arms") campaign in 2015, calling for not just demilitarization of the major guerrilla organization, but demilitarization of society as a whole.

Why can't we give up the war system?

Four years after Member States endorsed the SDGs, we are not on track to realizing the 2030 Agenda. Conflict-affected countries remain some of those furthest behind. Achieving "the world we want" for people and planet that creates peaceful, just and inclusive societies requires moving from technical solutions to structural change that shifts systems of governance from power and privilege to justice, nonviolence and peace.

Three key challenges require particular attention:

1. Domestic resource mobilization and military accountability

The 1992 Rio Declaration and Agenda 21, and the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action both contained commitments on innovative finance, including reallocating military resources toward sustainable peace. The SDGs means of implementation should support this principle.

However, military budgets are too often a black box, and military lines are treated as sacrosanct. Beyond this, the governments of top arms exporting States are often in bed with arms producing companies: Arms exports continue to be facilitated and subsidized directly and indirectly, through export financing schemes, marketing subsidies, operational support and payment of initial research and development costs. For the USA, whose military expenditure is more than the next seven highest spending countries combined, military production is even more enmeshed. For example, US military funding to projects like Google's Project Maven have fuelled the science and technology sector, yet also direct tech towards warfare technology; the US government's E3 Visa allowing Australians to migrate for professional jobs may also have been a reward for Australia's contribution of troops to the Iraq war.

Regulating and reducing runaway military budgets requires strengthening civilian control over security and increasing transparency, accountability and anti-corruption. It also requires a re-evaluation of priorities to stop subsidizing violence, and regulate, reduce and eliminate harms. Uruguay is a case in point: after the dictatorship, governments were able to shift certain positions from military to civilian control and reduce and control military budgets.

2. Universality and extraterritorial accountability

The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs are universal. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' new disarmament agenda (2018) affirmed that States should refrain from authorizing exports of arms and ammunition if there is an overriding risk of gender-based violence,

7 Government Offices of Sweden, Ministry for Foreign Affairs (2018), p. 11.

in line with the 2013 Arms Trade Treaty, as a contribution to SDG target 5.2 on gender-based violence.

Yet, many countries of the global North are actively undermining peace outside of their borders. Civil society organizations have found that arms sales from Germany, Spain and Sweden were linked with gender-based violence and violence against women in Brazil, Cameroon, Colombia, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Namibia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. They have also found that arms transfers from the UK, Sweden and France violated obligations on economic, social and cultural rights in Yemen, including on health (SDG 3), education (SDG 4) and housing (SDG 11). Yet, Ireland was one of few States to recognize its extraterritorial obligation for realizing peace and sustainable development in its 2018 SDG Voluntary National Review (VNR), as well as to prioritize investment in conflict prevention.

Development assistance cannot substitute for development justice: this requires structural changes, including regulating illicit financial flows, changing unfair trade rules, addressing debt unsustainability, and obliging corporations to pay taxes and refrain from predatory practices. Furthermore, too often donor aid masks parallel action that undermines development and peace: for example, although the UK is providing aid to Yemen, it is also transferring arms to Saudi Arabia which are fueling the conflict. Funding civilian relief cannot make up for fueling unbearable human suffering.

3. Policy coherence and cherry picking

Sustainable development, as is well known, has three core dimensions: economic development, social development, and environmental protection: it is development for people and planet. This framework should essentially require States to conduct a gender, peace, and environment audit of everything they do. Yet, despite commitments on policy coherence, coordination remains ad hoc. Countries such as Germany, Sweden, Netherlands and South Korea have high-level coordination bodies that oversee planning and implementation of the SDGs. However, realizing a 'whole of government' or 'whole of society' approach continues to face substantial gaps. For example, despite the gap on addressing extraterritorial obligations of arms transfers, the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) has expanded its scope to include some military expenditures (e.g., training of partner country military employees and use of the military as a last resort to deliver development services and humanitarian aid),[8] without addressing problems of militarizing development. For another, despite the existence of existing instruments, such as the Arms Trade Treaty and Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons, a fractionation of the disarmament agenda (i.e., de-linking of how legal transfers contribute to illicit flows) has resulted in the identification of SDG indicator 16.4.2 on illicit arms imports with no indicator on arms exports.

Realizing the transformative intent of the SDGs will not be possible by continuing siloed approaches that perpetuate patriarchy and conflict. It requires joined-up thinking and action that shifts action towards peace that works for women and all people. All stakeholders must strengthen institutional opportunities to promote policy coherence across the 2030 Agenda, but from a perspective that shifts power to be bottom-up.

What would designing governance for gender equality and peace look like?

Realizing the transformative intent of the 2030 Agenda requires recognizing that current systems are not inefficient: their construction undermines gender equality and peace. Linking up commitments to UN Security Resolution 1325 on Women Peace and Security and disarmament with action on the SDGs will be critical if we are to have transformative change.

To move forward, we need both short-term and long-term solutions:

In the short term, take action to #MoveTheMoney:

- Shift funding priorities away from funding the

8 See www.oecd.org/dac/HLM_ODAeligibilityPS.pdf.

military and toward funding women's human security

- Tax global expenditures on violence (i.e., global arms tax)
- Strengthen military transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption
- Stop militarization of development aid (e.g., OECD-DAC rules)
- Accelerate implementation of Resolution 1325 National Action Plans (NAPs) as part of realizing SDGs 5 and 16
- Invest in care economies and social economic and cultural rights though prioritizing social protection and public sector support, and preventing austerity measures
- Report on military versus social spending for SDGs in line with the Beijing Platform and Agenda 21 Declaration

In the long term, take action to govern for nonviolence and gender justice:

- Disarm defense systems by shifting power from military to civilian control
- Regulate those with power and privilege (i.e., militaries, private military corporations) and open opportunities for those at risk (i.e., women's and social justice movements)
- Institutionalize leadership for peace (i.e., ministries of reincorporation, decolonialization, peace, women)
- Strengthen gender-responsive budgeting (human security/ human rights budgeting)
- Use post-conflict reconstruction and recovery processes to redress inequalities, including gender inequalities, including through linking reparative measures to wider transitional processes, such as economic reforms
- Promote development justice

Conclusion

Tackling root causes of violence requires creating structural rather than technical changes that shift entrenched power away from systems of violence towards systems of nonviolence, justice and peace. The SDGs provide a tool to make this shift. However, change is not a given. Following the courageous leadership of local women human rights defenders and peace-makers around the world who continue to demand accountability for the exercise of patriarchal power, and the need to take political, rather than technical action, is essential to delivering on sustainable development and peace.

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