

Advancing the UN's women, peace and security agenda: political challenges and opportunities

By Rob Jenkins

■ Executive summary

The UN's primary roadmap for operationalising its women, peace and security (WPS) agenda is the 2010 Seven-Point Action Plan on Gender-Responsive Peacebuilding, which specifies concrete commitments for the UN system in such areas as conflict resolution and economic recovery, and focuses on institutional reforms in relevant UN entities. Despite the Action Plan's endorsement by the Secretary-General and his senior leadership team, implementation has been extremely disappointing. The UN's failure to fulfil its commitments stems from weak incentives and insufficient transparency. The two entities charged with co-ordinating implementation – the Peacebuilding Support Office and UN Women – lack the institutional leverage to change behaviour in key operational entities such as the Departments of Peacekeeping Operations and Political Affairs and the UN Development Programme.

Member states such as Norway can help to improve implementation by (1) partnering with non-permanent Security Council members committed to advancing the WPS agenda; (2) using membership on UN specialised agencies' executive boards (and in World Bank executive directorates) to obtain and publicise information on fulfilling Action Plan commitments; (3) mobilising embassy staff to support implementation in "pilot" countries identified by the UN; and (4) earmarking contributions to country-specific multidonor trust funds for projects focused on enhancing women's capacities to participate in peacebuilding.

Introduction

The UN's primary roadmap for operationalising its women, peace and security agenda is the Seven-Point Action Plan on Gender-Responsive Peacebuilding. Adopted by the Secretary-General's Policy Committee in September 2010, this detailed blueprint includes concrete "commitments" relating to (1) conflict resolution, (2) post-conflict planning, (3) peacebuilding funding, (4) civilian capacity, (5) governance, (6) the rule of law, and (7) economic recovery. While designed chiefly for UN entities, the Action Plan emphasises the need for sustained support – financial and diplomatic – from member states.

Implementation of the Action Plan has been extremely disappointing. Progress reports submitted by UN entities in 2011 and 2012 consisted mainly of isolated activities – training courses conducted, stakeholder consultations held and co-ordination structures devised. The Action Plan's main objective, however, was to change fundamentally the systems and procedures used by all UN entities at headquarters and in the field so that efforts to enhance women's participation in peacebuilding would be integrated into their working methods. This has not happened. The UN's senior management bears primary responsibility for this failure. Strategic engagement by member states will be needed to overcome the structural impediments to implementation.

Weak incentives and insufficient transparency

While each of the Action Plan's seven areas has faced specific institutional problems, two shared obstacles underlie the disappointing performance: weak incentives and insufficient transparency. Three examples illustrate how these deficiencies reinforce one another.

1. Post-conflict financing for women's empowerment

The Action Plan commits UN entities to dedicating at least 15% of their funds in post-conflict settings to projects aimed primarily at enhancing women's capacity to participate in peacebuilding. The rationale for this commitment was that women's structural subordination, magnified by the effects of conflict, made earmarking necessary. No UN entity has fulfilled this commitment. The Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) unilaterally exempted their field operations from this requirement. No UN entity other than the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) has even formulated a credible plan for achieving the 15% funding level. Most lack methods for tracking gender-disaggregated expenditure. Project-scoring systems using a "gender marker" have remained at the experimental stage for years, and no independent assessment of how gender-marker systems have been implemented has taken place. This lack of transparency provides agency management with little incentive to meet the 15% funding commitment. Senior leaders can trumpet ostensible achievements without fear of their claims being subjected to serious scrutiny. While claiming that funding for gender equality is a peacebuilding priority, the Secretary-General's Office has failed to pressure the UN system to fulfil this crucial commitment.

2. Technical assistance on women's electoral quotas

The proportion of women in elected bodies is a key indicator of gender equality under the monitoring framework for the Millennium Development Goals. Empirical analysis has revealed that without electoral quotas women remain severely under-represented in post-conflict legislatures. The Action Plan therefore committed the UN to providing timely technical assistance on quota-based systems as a routine part of post-conflict electoral support. DPA was charged with ensuring that experts on various quota-based mechanisms are deployed to post-conflict countries; that UN entities facilitate structured national consultations (involving women's civil society organisations) to assess the potential value of such "temporary special measures"; and that the experiences of countries with gender-based electoral quotas are closely examined. Yet these three elements are still not incorporated into the standard terms of reference for DPA's electoral needs-assessment missions. DPA's excuse for not doing so – its inability to "impose" electoral rules on post-conflict governments – evades the procedural nature of the Action Plan's commitment. Making serious consideration of gender quotas a core component of the UN's electoral support package does not compromise national sovereignty. Governments will make their own choices, but the UN must ensure that

these choices are based on an inclusive decision-making process that assesses evidence-based policy alternatives.

DPA's senior management faces almost no incentive to discharge the department's responsibility to provide comprehensive technical assistance in support of women's increased political representation. Neither the Secretary-General's Office nor other UN entities have exerted substantial pressure on DPA to change its procedures. The lack of transparency with which DPA conducts its electoral assistance mandate has exacerbated the problem. The department has no formal mechanism to share information on upcoming assessment missions with other UN entities that could supply experts on quota systems or support local women's groups to convene national consultations.

3. Women's participation in international engagement conferences

The third example concerns the Action Plan's commitment to ensuring the substantive participation of women's civil society representatives in donor conferences and other international engagement meetings, which play a crucial role in defining post-conflict priorities. Where civil society has been invited to participate in such events, independent women's organisations have often not been given an opportunity to shape the statements issued or to join sectoral working groups. While the UN is rarely the primary organiser of international engagement conferences, UN field missions and country teams are usually closely involved.

But without strong pressure from senior management in New York there is little incentive for UN entities on the ground to press for women's involvement, let alone engage in the capacity-building necessary to render such participation meaningful. The lack of transparency concerning the role played by various UN entities in the planning of international engagement meetings has made it more difficult to hold management accountable for fulfilling this important commitment.

Opportunities for member states to catalyse implementation

Weak accountability systems within the UN system make it difficult to improve performance on meeting Action Plan commitments. The two entities charged with co-ordinating implementation – the PBSO and UN Women – lack the institutional leverage to change the behaviour of other entities. Beyond its control over the Peacebuilding Fund, through which it has demonstrated possibilities for meeting the 15% target, the PBSO, headed by an assistant secretary-general, has little capacity to incentivise (let alone compel) powerful entities such as DPKO, DPA and the UN Development Programme to deliver on their commitments. UN Women, headed at the under secretary-general level and supported by two assistant secretary-general appointments, has proven even less effective at mobilising effective implementation. UN Women's senior leadership has failed to criticise the UN's primary peace

and security entities for their lack of follow through on Action Plan commitments. Its advocacy in the Secretary-General's Policy Committee and in interagency forums such as the Senior Peacebuilding Group is reportedly lacking in sharpness and vigour.

Member states, including leading donor countries such as Norway, can play a catalytic role in overcoming the systemic incentive problems that impede Action Plan implementation. To do so they will need to capitalise on strategic opportunities. Four recommendations are outlined here.

1. Concerned member states/donors should work with non-permanent Security Council members committed to advancing the women, peace and security agenda.

Permanent members of the Security Council that have traditionally been hostile to the women, peace and security agenda have in recent years found willing accomplices among several non-permanent members from the developing world. Backing from Southern countries has provided diplomatic cover for resisting such measures as the adoption of quantitative performance indicators on implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325. However, recent turnover among the Security Council's non-permanent membership has seen the induction of countries that have a demonstrated commitment to engaging women in post-conflict and post-authoritarian transitions. "Triangular co-operation" with countries such as South Korea – which has provided financial assistance for the UN's women and peacebuilding agenda – offers an attractive opportunity for Norway and other traditional donors to leverage their support.

2. These countries should use membership on UN specialised agencies' executive boards (and World Bank executive directorates) to obtain and publicise information about performance in fulfilling Action Plan commitments.

The financial support provided to UN specialised agencies by Norway and other donors must be complemented by robust efforts to obtain and publicise hard data on how Action Plan commitments are being met. Unless agency management is convinced that it will be subjected to close questioning on its activities, reporting will continue to be afflicted by generalities and characterised by the artful deployment of anecdotal evidence. Getting behind headline

data requires a willingness to challenge management explanations. Because of the World Bank's crucial role on economic recovery issues, donor engagement through its respective executive directorates is a crucial means of obtaining data on, for instance, the proportion of women participating in post-conflict employment programmes. All entities should be pressed to institutionalise gender-disaggregated expenditure analysis and to submit to regular independent assessment of the quality of project-scoring systems.

3. They should mobilise embassy staff to support Action Plan implementation in "pilot" countries identified by the UN.

In 2012 senior leaders of UN field missions in more than ten post-conflict countries joined an initiative to demonstrate how Action Plan implementation could make a difference on the ground. Almost a year later, however, virtually no action has been taken. Direct engagement by the embassies of donor countries such as Norway can help to provide momentum to this process. This may take the form of sharing direct experience of addressing gender issues in conflict-resolution processes, for instance. The focus in each case should be on pressing for full implementation rather than allowing UN field missions to select Action Plan elements they find convenient to pursue.

4. They should earmark a proportion of their contributions to country-specific multidonor trust funds to projects focused on enhancing women's capacities to participate in peacebuilding.

Sensitivities around national ownership have made earmarking a bad word. Yet there is increasing awareness that ostensibly technical fund-allocation processes tend to be gender biased. Donors such as Norway must build on this insight, as well as on the growing realisation that ownership cannot be truly national when women's voices are excluded, by reserving a proportion of their funding in post-conflict situations for projects that enhance women's capacities to contribute to peacebuilding. Fund managers will resist; donors must insist. The fact is that earmarking already exists for other policy sectors – such as education, security and governance. Women's empowerment is no less a priority. ■

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