

WRITTEN BY CAITLIN RYAN

Women, Peace and Security: Women's Post-War Economic Empowerment



Small scale agriculture, Liberia. USAID flickr.

JOINT BRIEF SERIES: NEW INSIGHTS ON WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY (WPS) FOR THE NEXT DECADE

On 31 October 2000, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. Several other resolutions followed, which together constitute the normative framework for the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. This brief series was initiated in connection to the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 and promotes the realization of the WPS agenda through evidence-based policy and practice. It is the result of a collaboration between the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA), the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), and UN Women.

The editorial board has consisted of Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs and Sophia Wrede from FBA, Louise Olsson from PRIO, and Katarina Salmela and Pablo Castillo Diaz from UN Women. The views and opinions expressed in the brief series are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the collaborating partners.

■ INTRODUCTION

The marginalization of women's economic activity has been recognized by the UN Secretary General (S/2019/800 and A/73/890–S/2019/448) as a major barrier to women's inclusion in post-war recovery, and by extension to the wider conflict transformation and recovery processes necessary for sustaining peace.¹ In particular, the 2019 UNSG report on Women, Peace and Security emphasizes that initiatives should not be limited to microeconomic or small-scale interventions, but should deal with structural inequalities. To address this, a better understanding of the processes of economic recovery is central. This brief draws on the author's research in Liberia and Sierra Leone to argue that the treatment of formal and informal economic activity as separate and mutually exclusive spheres exacerbates the tendency to address women's empowerment through small-scale interventions, and contributes to the marginalization of women's economic activity. This is illustrated by the way informal economic activity is treated as something that either has to be formalized in order to contribute to economic development, or ignored, such as in bids to attract foreign investment.

What is an informal economy and how does our treatment of this sphere contribute to women's marginalization? While the debate over what

constitutes an informal economy has evolved since the 1970s,² the ILO defines it as all economic activities by workers and economic units that are – by law or in practice – not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements.³ Examples include petty trading, subsistence and small-scale agriculture and waste picking. It is central to note that economic activity should not be equated with illicit economic activity.⁴ The size of the informal economy is significant. According to the ILO definition, up to 61 per cent of the world's workforce is employed in the informal sector, and in sub-Saharan Africa, up to 95 per cent of women are engaged in informal economic activity.⁵

However, deriving policies based on this measure alone is problematic. It removes the problem from large-scale reconstruction by presenting women's activity as separate from formal economic activity and thus marginal to macroeconomic performance. In turn, structural inequalities are obscured when informality is treated as solvable through technical formalization processes. Examples of such formalization processes that aim to reduce the size of the informal economy and the activities associated with it include national campaigns to register businesses, to formalize customary systems of land tenure and formalize licenses for artisanal scale mining. But research shows that instead of reducing women's marginalization, these processes may actually entrench existing inequalities. For instance, the formalization of land tenure can concentrate land holding in the hands of elites and exclude women and the poor if the costs of obtaining surveys and title documents are high.

To avoid such effects, formalization processes need to be designed in ways that consider what kinds of economic and political capital are necessary for engaging in the process. In brief, a process designed to formalize business licenses through a series of technical steps will be experienced differently by a woman with a small business who is illiterate and has few economic and political connections, than by an educated man with dense network in such circles. It is therefore, necessary to account for power asymmetries across all 'steps' of formalization, including but not limited to differences in the concerned groups' capacity to a) access information b) gather necessary documentation, c) have their claims recognized by relevant political actors (such as customary/traditional authorities) and d) access dispute resolution mechanisms.

To demonstrate both the importance of an improved understanding of women's informal activity and the problems of current formalization processes for improving women's economic empowerment, this research brief draws on the author's research on national development policies in Liberia and Sierra Leone.⁶ It specifically focuses on questions of agriculture and natural resource access, which are recognized as essential components for implementing the WPS agenda (S/2019/800). The brief shows how internationally funded projects and national policies for agriculture reinforce the marginalization of women's activities by either ignoring women's contributions to agriculture, or seeking technical solutions to formalize women's activities without considering the power relations involved.⁷

VIEWS OF 'THE INFORMAL' IN LIBERIA AND SIERRA LEONE

Implementation of the Women Peace and Security Agenda through National Action Plans (NAPs) has been seen as a way to implement the WPS agenda within country contexts. Interestingly, the NAPs for implementing the WPS agenda in both Liberia (first adopted in 2009) and Sierra Leone (first adopted in 2010) pay attention to questions of women's economic empowerment. Based on interviews with stakeholders in both countries, it appears that this issue was strongly driven by the involvement of civil society organizations (CSOs) in these processes. The NAPs represent a good starting point to analyse broader national policies on development partly because CSOs organizing around the NAPs provided an avenue to engage in policy consultation within line ministries charged with responsibility for elements of the NAPs. Additionally, the NAPs were framed as roadmaps to ensure greater inclusion of a gender perspective in post-war peacebuilding and recovery. Drawing on the 2019 UNSG report on WPS and attention to questions of informal economies, this section considers how the view of 'the informal' in the NAPs in Sierra Leone and Liberia respectively and subsequent national development policies matters for the kinds of women's economic empowerment that are supported.

Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone's National Action Plan (SiLNAP) does not make a distinction between informal and formal economic activity.

Women's economic empowerment is primarily referred to as 'economic rights'. The risk with this terminology is that it could result in policy interventions that change women's legal economic rights (such as the right to inherit or own land) without considering relevant power imbalances within households, within communities, between elites and the poor, or between communities and investing companies. This may prevent women from accessing legal rights despite important policy reforms.

Partly as a result of the advocacy around the SiLNAP, one of the eight 'pillars' in Sierra Leone's Poverty Reduction Strategy for 2013–2018 was dedicated to women's empowerment. The focus was not on economic empowerment alone; rather, it considers how empowerment depends on women's access to education, decision-making, elimination of violence, and business opportunities. Economic elements of the pillar focused predominately on women's business opportunities and access to financing, as well as setting recommended quotas for women in leadership positions in the civil service and private sectors. The pillar does not privilege formalization and instead points to the need to 'support' for both formal and informal institutions.

However, in the subsequent National Development Plan for 2019–2023, there is an important shift. This plan takes a less favourable view of the informal economy, instead framing it as something that needs to be 'captured' and that failure to do so will limit private sector and manufacturing growth. This is attributed to the ubiquity of the informal sector in businesses such as retail trade (petty trading), and repair and handicraft workshops. Rather than seeing these activities as a vital part of the economy, their informality is framed as making it more difficult to grow 'formal' manufacturing. This serves as an example where the contribution of the informal economy to the formal economy is not considered, and where the proposed solution of formalization does not reflect a gendered analysis of the potential effects. Women's economic empowerment is largely absent from this development plan. The pillar that focuses on women also focuses on children and people with disabilities. All of the policy actions in this pillar relate to a reduction of violence against women. References to women's economic empowerment are made in one of the 'key targets', but it is much less specific: 'By 2023, ensure that more women are supported to engage in entrepreneurial activities than in 2018'.⁸

Liberia

In the Liberian National Action Plan (LNAP), women's economic empowerment is framed in relation to raising low productivity and moving women from the informal to the formal sector. This reflects the dichotomized view of the two sectors, for instance by not recognizing that often activities like petty trading rely on more formal markets, or that workers in the formal economy rely on informal markets to access cheaper goods or services. The LNAP also characterizes informal activity as less productive, and presents formalization as a solution. This treatment of informal economic activity in the LNAP is reflected in broader national economic policies. While the interviewed respondents did not draw a direct link between the NAP and subsequent national poverty reduction strategies, there is continuity in the treatment of informal economic activity, and in particular women's informal economic activity.

While 'gender' has not been a standalone pillar in Liberia's poverty reduction strategies, it has been a common theme in the two most recent strategies. In the 2018–2023 plan, there is a sub-section for women in the section on 'patterns of poverty and vulnerability' but no sub-section in the section on 'potential drivers in growth, transformation, and reductions in inequality'. This misses the ways in which women's economic activity is already contributing to growth, and its potential to do so in the future. Some elements of the strategy include references to both support for the increased formal employment for women and support for women's already existing economic activity. But there is no analysis of how informal activity contributes to formal economies, and the action points regarding formalization are primarily framed in technical terms. However, there are sections of the plan where barriers to women's economic empowerment are analysed in terms of uneven power relations.

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND INFORMAL ECONOMIC ACTIVITY IN AGRICULTURE

Agriculture makes up a majority share of the economic activity in Liberia and Sierra Leone. For this reason, women's economic empowerment depends heavily on agricultural policy and its treatment of informal activity. National agricultural policies in both countries reflect dual priorities of 1) increasing smallholder production in the name of both national food security and

export markets, and 2) a macroeconomic agenda that focuses heavily on attracting agribusiness and logging investments. These dual priorities reflect similar logics of donors and international financial institutions directed at post-war states.

Policies related to smallholding farmers

The policies that focus on smallholders are dominated by a characterization of smallholdings as having 'low productivity' and point to a need for more inputs, mechanization, improved seed varieties, increased irrigation and better access to markets. In these policies, women are targeted as a group that would benefit the most from these interventions. This is seen particularly in relation to projects and policies that focus on value chains for subsistence crops such as cassava and vegetables. There is additional emphasis on increasing productivity and the export of cash crops.

However, there is only limited analysis of how both subsistence and cash crops are 'gendered' in terms of who is seen to be the legitimate 'owner' of the crops, whose labour goes into them, and when. In the absence of considerations of existing social relations tied up in agricultural production and specific to particular crops and tasks, meaningful economic empowerment for women will be out of reach. For instance, programs that try to increase women's cash crop production (such as for cashews, cocoa and coffee) need to consider how interventions and projects will be received by men, and how profits will be distributed.

Positive trends 1: Home Grown School Feeding' programs entail cooperation between international donors, mainly the World Food Programme (WFP), and the Ministries of Agriculture and Education and, women small-holder farmers. This represents an example of how women's greater inclusion into economic markets can be facilitated by providing a reliable market chain directly to county-level school feeding. An important component is the self-organization of women's cooperative farming groups to process and cultivate food. This approach to school-feeding programs builds on the existing legitimacy of farming groups, and enhances their recognition through formal arrangements to supply food. This also provides a clear incentive for women's farming groups to make investments or expand their operations, because they can count on the agreements with the Ministry of Education and WFP. This represents an alternative to relying on lending, either from microfinance savings groups or formal financial institutions, to finance increased inputs.

Agriculture policies and projects need to be attentive to existing social orders that determine what counts as labour, whose labour determines the ownership of crops, and who decides what to grow. These questions were considered during research in communities with land under lease to agribusiness investors in northern Sierra Leone. While gender is not the only factor that determines the answers to these questions, the findings indicate that women are able to exercise a great degree of decision making power and control over some crops: vegetables, pepper, groundnuts, bennie (sesame seed), processed cassava and palm nut oil. Men more frequently made claims to ownership of rice, palm fruit oil, and tree crops.

Men were also less likely to account for the labour of their wives and daughters when asked 'who else in your household is farming?' Women who listed their farming tasks included brushing (final sweeping of land prepared for planting), planting, transplanting rice seedlings, weeding, and harvesting. Men listed clearing, burning, tilling, planting and harvesting. These tasks have different time requirements: men's labour primarily takes place at the start of the growing season, whereas women's labour is spread throughout the season, limiting their potential for off-farm labour. In instances where a household had more than one plot, some women reported that they made decisions about what to grow on their own plots of land, but that men decided what to grow on the common plot. Some women reported that throughout the season they worked mostly with their 'mates' (co-wives) on a common plot of rice and cassava. This points to another important gap in many projects and policy agendas, namely that farmers are often treated as 'individual smallholders' with little accounting for the social relations and labour regimes that determine decision-making, control of outputs, and expectations for labour. This is occasionally acknowledged in relation to policies that account for the difficulties female-headed households may face in finding male labour to clear land for planting. The division of labour and decision-making power between co-wives in polygamous marriages is systematically undervalued in smallholder agricultural policy and projects.

Policies related to agribusiness investment

The research findings from this project also reveal important considerations about the relative value of smallholder and subsistence farming in relation to the state's bids to attract

agribusiness investment, which has been treated as a key objective for post-war recovery. There are two interrelated points worth raising.

The first is that farmer's existing agricultural activities have been systematically undervalued in relation to those of agribusiness companies. This is evidenced by exceedingly low lease payments that do not recognize the productive value of land (average of \$6 per hectare per year, paid to land-owning families), as well as the low rates of payment for destroyed crops. Both of these are gendered in their effects. For instance, on the Ministry of Agriculture's list of one-time off compensation payments for destroyed crops, 'women's crops' are worth significantly less than 'men's'. More fundamentally, lease payments made to heads of the land-owning families are unevenly distributed along gender and age lines. The central government's claims that agribusiness investment will result in both the well-being of local communities and increased GDP have largely failed to materialize, and are re-enforcing gendered inequalities in decision-making and household income.

The second gendered effect relates to the unwaged labour of women in the household, namely the labour associated with finding firewood. The research findings suggest that where companies operate upland palm oil plantations, the availability of firewood decreases, and the time burden for women to collect it increases. Not only are the effects of this not accounted for in most assessments of companies' operations, but some government officials, company representatives and customary authority leaders maintained that these effects are too marginal to matter in the context of foreign investment.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

National development plans are important policy instruments for the advancement of the WPS agenda in post-war states. In the national development plans and labour policies in Liberia and Sierra Leone, it is generally recognized that formalization is not the only solution. But at the same time, the informal is often de-valued, such as when not accounting for how much formal economic activity depends on what is generated informally. This de-valuing is particularly gendered because of the outsized contribution of women to informal economic activity. While there are some instances where power inequalities are analysed as barriers to women's

economic empowerment, the proposed solutions tend to follow a technocratic logic and do not account for how these power imbalances may play out in processes of formalization.

As a way forward, the research presented in this brief suggests that advancing WPS and sustainable peace through women's meaningful inclusion in economic development within both national economic development policy and policies directed at agriculture depends on understanding the connection between formal and informal economic activity and their role in addressing women's economic marginalization. To be effective in sustaining peace and fostering inclusive economic growth, post-war economic recovery has to assume that formal and informal economic activity are mutually dependent. This will allow for thinking about how economic recovery can include women without treating their informal economic activity as marginal or lesser. Women's meaningful inclusion in post-war recovery depends on a view of the economy that recognizes their existing economic activity as an engine.

Positive trends 2: The 2018 agreement between the Monrovia Municipal Corporation and the Federation of Petty Traders and Informal Workers Union of Liberia represents a good example of how legitimacy and recognition can be the starting point to increase women's economic inclusion. The signed Memorandum of Understanding begins by recognizing that street trade is a vital part of Monrovia. Because of this recognition it was possible to make agreements about the mutual responsibilities and entitlements of both parties, for instance that petty traders are entitled to safety and security from harassment and destruction of their tables, and that the city is entitled to expect that the union will register all petty traders, collect a registration fee, and organize street cleaning of areas around petty trading. The end result is a form of regularization, but it hinges first on the recognition of the legitimate right of petty traders to operate and to self-govern.

Rather than technical approaches that seek formalization only through registration or documentation, policies and projects should consider more political questions of recognition and legitimacy. This means that solutions need to consider how informal economic activity already has (informal) recognition and legitimacy. This makes it possible to think about how interventions can build on existing social and economic networks to enhance how informal economic activity is recognized. This would allow the process to meet some of the objectives of these state to increase the legitimacy and

taxability of informal economic activity while encouraging buy-in. Such an approach would also be more likely to avoid entrenched divisions between those who are able to capitalize on registration opportunities and those who are not. Most importantly, thinking about recognition and legitimacy requires acknowledging the existing systems of social organization and power relations that intersect across formal and informal economies. This may have the added benefit of helping states and donors to see all of the ways in which the formal economy – such as the activities of an agribusiness investment firm – are dependent on the informal and unwaged economic activity that makes these investments operable. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 United Nations Security Council. 2019. Women and Peace and Security: Report of the Secretary General. (S/2019/800) 9 October 2019; UN Women. 2015. Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 International Labor Organization. 2018. 'Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture'.
- 4 Martha Chen. 2012. 'The Informal Economy: Definitions, Theories and Policies' WIEGO Working Paper 1. Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO).
- 5 International Labor Organization, 'Women and Men in the Informal Economy'.
- 6 This research brief draws on research conducted by the author in Liberia and Sierra Leone on three research projects: as a co-investigator with Dr. Helen Basini on the implementation of the National Action Plans for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Liberia and Sierra Leone (2014–2015), as the principal investigator on the gendered dynamics of large-scale agribusiness investment projects in northern Sierra Leone (2017–2018) and as the principal investigator current project on 'Politics of formalizing Customary Land Rights in Liberia and Sierra Leone' (2019–2021), which focuses on the global and national processes of land reform.
- 7 Maria Martín de Almagro and Caitlin Ryan. 2020. 'Introduction: (Re)Integrating Feminist Security Studies and Global Political Economy: Continuing the Conversation through Empirical Perspectives' *Politics & Gender*. 16(3); Suzanne Bergeron, Carol Cohn, and Claire Duncanson. 2017. 'Rebuilding Bridges: Toward a Feminist Research Agenda for Postwar Reconstruction' *Politics and Gender* 13 (4): 715–721; Juanita Elias and Shirin M. Rai. 2019. 'Feminist Everyday Political Economy: Space, Time, and Violence' *Review of International Studies* 45 (2): 201–20.
- 8 Government of Sierra Leone. 2018. Sierra Leone's Medium-Term National Development Plan 2019–2023.

The Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) is the Swedish government agency for peace, security and development. FBA has since 2005 supported research primarily through its international Research Working Groups. These are composed of well-merited scholars from universities and research institutes worldwide who conduct scientific research on issues related to FBA's areas of expertise.

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.

UN Women is the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Dr Caitlin Ryan is Assistant Professor at the Center for International Relations Research at the University of Groningen, Netherlands. Her work focuses on political and economic processes of post-war reform in relation to how global processes interact with local politics. She is currently working on an FBA-funded project: 'Politics of formalizing Customary Land Rights in Liberia and Sierra Leone'.

HOW TO REFER TO THIS BRIEF:

Ryan, C., November 2020, Women, Peace and Security: Women's Post-War Economic Empowerment, Joint Brief Series: New Insights on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) for the Next Decade, Stockholm: Folke Bernadotte Academy, PRIO and UN Women.