

Security Sector Reform, Elections, and Gender Equality in Post-Conflict Environments

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Introduction – SSR, Elections, and Gender Equality

This paper discusses the interlinkages between Security Sector Reform (SSR), elections, and gender equality. It uses FBA's work in Somalia to show how gender-sensitive election security can serve as an entry point for working with inclusive SSR in an environment characterized by instability, conflict, and political unrest.

It argues that election security in many ways serves as an opportunity to address multiple issues simultaneously, such as coordination and cooperation within the security sector, dialogue with civil society, and the enhancement of gender equality - sometimes in absence of a formalized SSR process.

There is a broad perception that legitimate elections require an accountable and effective security sector, given that well-conducted security is vital for the legitimacy and realization of the overall election process; from voter registration to voter turnout, to securing election sites, and protecting political candidates. This is especially the case in post-conflict contexts. Elections are intrinsically conflictual events that may cause a heightened period of insecurity in any given context, however, in post-conflict environments the threshold of using violence tends to be lower, and the capacity of the security sector may be limited.

Gender equality is recognized by numerous international agreements and treaties as a crucial component of peaceful and democratic societies.¹ Integrating a gender perspective in election security is vital to promote equal participation of men and women, as insecurity impacts women and men differently. This requires a systematic analysis of the needs and priorities of diverse groups of women and men, as well as ensuring that this analysis informs all stages and aspects of security planning. Failing to integrate a gender perspective, will risk the broad participation of men and women - as candidates, voters, election management staff, media workers and civil society representatives, and in turn, the overall legitimacy of the election.

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Conceptualizing the linkages between SSR and Elections

Together, SSR and elections are important political processes to societies transitioning to peace and democracy. This is especially important in post-conflict environments where elections sometimes are designed to not only promote democratization but also to end civil wars².

SSR refers to the process where the wider security sector is strategically and systematically reformed. It includes responses which ensure that security needs of men, women, boys, and girls are met, through an effective, affordable, accountable, and transparent security sector that is governed by democratic principles³.

1. FBA Brief 06/2016 <- [Link](#)

2. Postconflict Elections: War Termination, Democratization, and Demilitarizing Politics <- [Link](#)

3. An Introduction to Human Rights and Security Sector Reform <- [Link](#)



This means that security actors are subordinated civilian oversight mechanisms and that security is delivered in line with the principles of rule of law and human rights.

SSR plays an important role in post-conflict contexts where political transition is taking place. In countries that have experienced conflict many people perceive security forces as a threat rather than a guarantee for security. In these instances, reforms of the security sector are necessary to promote and sustain peace and to strengthen the social contract in society.

Elections, in turn, are fundamental to democratic governance and political stability⁴. They give people the ability to exercise their right to impact the society they live in, and they provide the opportunity to inform leaders on security needs “...credible elections foster improved governance and societal well-being.”⁵ It is through (free and fair) elections that governments obtain their democratic mandate and may be held accountable for their performance, including their ability to provide security. And it is through elections civilian authorities are elected to control and govern the security sector. In post-conflict contexts, it is argued that the development of democratic institutions, such as electoral commissions and political parties, are crucial to the security and political agenda⁶.

4. IDEA Elections <- [Link](#)

5. USAID Best Practices in Electoral Security <- [Link](#)

6. Post-Conflict Elections: War Termination, Democratization, and Demilitarizing Politics <- [Link](#)

"However, in post-conflict settings where the level of insecurity in general is higher and the use of violence more prevalent, election violence risk to compromise the electoral integrity."

However, in post-conflict settings where the level of insecurity in general is higher and the use of violence more prevalent, election violence risk to compromise the electoral integrity. It may impact the selection of political candidates, voter registration and turnout, or the credibility of the announced results⁵. To effectively address and mitigate electoral violence, responses should be multi-sectoral and involve Electoral Management Bodies (EMB), civil society and security sector programs⁵. To be successful, the importance of advocating for accountability, create platforms for coordination and cooperation between different stakeholders, as well as building trust between government institutions and civil society, are essential.

Finally, as in any large-scale security operation, planning activities such as budgeting, gender mainstreaming, coordination, and cooperation between different security actors and between state- and non-state actors, are important aspects of election security planning. These are also activities undertaken in SSR processes.

Election security relates to an ongoing political process, with a concrete task the security sector is mandated to solve, that will highlight different aspects of the reform process mentioned above. In this sense, working with election security may be a point of departure for working on issues relevant to a broader SSR process, and therefore serves as an entry point.

Violence against Women in Elections (VAWE)

Women engaging in politics in emerging democracies are at risk of suffering from violence, intimidation, and harassment¹⁰. Electoral violence hampers not only women's political participation but is a threat to the electoral integrity and the quality of democracy, as VAWE is a violation of political and human rights¹¹.

VAWE occurs across the world and is defined as violence that *...targets women who participate in public or political life, either specifically because they are women, or in distinctly gendered ways*¹². It seeks to control and/or restrict women's participation in elections, and political processes at large, and may take on different forms of violence, i.e., physical violence, economic force, social pressure, or psychological harassment. It concerns not only female voters or candidates, but also media workers, civil society representatives or EMB staff. Introducing measures to protect men and women's equal participation in elections appear therefore as an imperative for the legitimacy of electoral processes.

"...In the physical world (non-virtual), you find yourself in a male-dominated machinery; the president is a man, his deputy is a man, the ministers are all men (except one), 65 of the 66 Puntland parliamentarians are men, the judges are men and so on."

According to a gender assessment of the electoral process in Puntland, Somalia, conducted by FBA in Partnership with Puntland Development and Research Centre (PDRC) a Politician/Former Deputy Minister at MOWDAFA described the situation for female candidates as:

"...In the physical world (non-virtual), you find yourself in a male-dominated machinery; the president is a man, his deputy is a man, the ministers are all men (except one), 65 of the 66 Puntland parliamentarians are men, the judges are men and so on. Your whole life is regulated by men. Your needs are managed by men. And you are at the mercy of men. If you stay at home, you are not exposed to the above threats and dangers. It is when you step out with the ambition to participate in politics or leadership. Women from the minority groups (clans) are the most vulnerable of all. Somalis call them Looma-ooyaan (literally means "there is nobody who cries for them," and metaphorically means "someone who is completely defenseless"). But nowadays violence is being targeted at all women, not just the minority groups."¹²

Another interviewee in the gender assessment described how she was attacked by a group of young men in her office, which resulted in injuries that made her unable to work for three days. When she tried to confront the families of the attackers, she got evicted from her office despite having paid rent in advance (ibid).



10. Breaking the Mold: Understanding Gender And Electoral Violence <- [Link](#)

11. Violence Against Women in Elections <- [Link](#)

12. Gender Assessment in Puntland Elections <- [Link](#)

Several testimonies were voiced in the report attesting also to the significance of non-physical violence such as discouragement, discrimination, and other forms of psychological harassment, acknowledging the fact that VAWE may take on different forms.

Women make up around 50 percent of the eligible voting population, which means that women represent a significant portion of the potential voter turnout. Female candidates are similarly important to the process, underpinning the fundamental human and political rights to compete in elections. However, security concerns are obstructing women's political participation, and according to the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), women often face greater barriers to participation in politics and in public life in general, as well as suffer from forms of violence such as intimidation, sexual violence, and threats¹¹. Therefore, ending impunity and combating VAWE is not just a matter of justice, but concerns electoral justice broadly.

“Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity, without any of the distinctions mentioned in article 2 and without unreasonable restrictions:”*

The right to equally participate in public affairs is enshrined in UN's declaration of Human Rights, and in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). In Article 25, it is stated that:

“Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity, without any of the distinctions mentioned in article 2 and without unreasonable restrictions:*

- a. To take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives;*
- b. To vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors;*
- c. To have access, on general terms of equality, to public service in his country”*

As women (and girls)³ are entitled to fully enjoy all human rights, the matter of combating VAWE is of utmost importance - for the sake of the individual, and for respecting human rights. Women are however not equally represented in political life, nor do they control or have access to resources to the same extent as men. Therefore, there is a need to actively focus on realizing the human rights of women and girls. With regards to elections, this includes to systematically assess the needs and experiences of e.g. women as voters, political candidates, EMB staff, media workers, and protesters.

“Guidelines for States on the effective implementation of the right to participate in public affairs”, recommending that “States should take measures to protect the safety of candidates, particularly women candidates, who are at risk of violence and intimidation, including gender-based violence, during the electoral process”.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security recognizes the importance of women’s involvement in peace and security issues to achieving long lasting stability¹⁶. In addition, The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) urges State Parties to eradicate discrimination against women in all areas of life and asserts women’s full right to enjoy their human rights and fundamental freedoms in the same way as men¹⁷.

In 2018 the UNHCR published *“Guidelines for States on the effective implementation of the right to participate in public affairs”*, recommending that *“States should take measures to protect the safety of candidates, particularly women candidates, who are at risk of violence and intimidation, including gender-based violence, during the electoral process”*¹⁸. The guidelines reinforce the responsibility of the security sector to ensure the safety of all men and women, as equal political participation plays a key role in promoting democratic governance and is critical for the successful implementation of a SSR process.

Gender-sensitive Election Security in Somalia

FBA is committed to broad participation in state- and peacebuilding processes in Somalia and considered the 2021/2022 Somali parliamentary election to be one of the most important state- and peacebuilding processes in the country. It was therefore a significant opportunity to promote women’s political participation. FBA recognized that election security was going to be crucial to ensure men and women’s broad participation, and critical for the overall legitimacy of the election.

Against this background, FBA developed, together with key stakeholders such as the Somali Police, the UN, and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), a concept to contribute to the protection of men and women’s equal participation from a security perspective, as voters, candidates, election workers and members of civil society.

FBA’s overall objective with regards to SSR is to strengthen democratic governance and gender mainstreaming of the security sector in conflict and post-conflict countries. Moreover, FBA is mandated by the Swedish Government to pursue two specific objectives in Somalia; increased possibilities for women and youth in particular, to participate in peace- and state building processes, and strengthened capacity to implement a sustainable and inclusive SSR.

16. What is UNSCR 1325? - An Explanation of the Landmark Resolution on Women, Peace and Security <- [Link](#)

17. Introduction to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women <- [Link](#)

18. Guidelines for States on the effective implementation of the right to participate in public affairs <- [Link](#)



Promoting gender equality in the planning process of election security, relates to both objectives. It required cooperation and dialogue between different security actors in the Somali security architecture, as well as dialogue and cooperation between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and the Federal Member States (FMS). Working with integrating a gender perspective in election security provided an opportunity not only to promote women's participation in elections and political processes, but also to initiate a discussion on gender in the security sector in general, an issue largely neglected in Somalia.

Women's political participation in Somalia was, and is, expected to face various challenges around elections, including violence. VAWE is often exacerbated in post-conflict contexts like Somalia, where levels of public and domestic violence are already high¹², including acts such as intimidation, physical assault, exploitation, threats, humiliation, harassment, and social media attacks.

Due to their vulnerability in society, women suffer disproportionately greater harm when election violence occurs. With women and men impacted differently by election violence, specific measures need to be tailored to ensure that women are effectively and sufficiently protected throughout the process. Ensuring that women can freely and fully participate in the process is an equally critical foundation for democratic development.

While significant progress has been made with regards to women's political participation in Somalia, there is still work to be done to ensure safe participation of women voters, candidates, and election workers.

“Women’s Situation Desk (WSD)” as an integrated component of the election security operations. The objective of the WSD is to record, report and respond to cases of VAWE”.

Women’s Situation Desk (WSD)

Based on previous research, and outcomes from a Roundtable Discussion with stakeholders drawn from civil society, the security sector, the international community as well as the media, FBA developed a concept for Police in Somalia, “Women’s Situation Desk (WSD)” as an integrated component of the election security operations. The objective of the WSD is to record, report and respond to cases of VAWE.

The concept was developed ahead of the indirect elections at national level in Somalia, where seats in parliament and the senate were elected by delegates, that in turn, were selected by traditional elders, state governments and civil society representatives. FBA provided training for approximately fifty Police Officers staffing the constituency and national level WSD, as a part of the broader election security training program. The training was carried out with support from the UN’s Joint Police Program (JPP).

The election process at the federal level in Somalia was marked by several complications, the postponement of many of the preparations with regards to security and the political stalemate to name a few. However, the intention of integrating a gender perspective in the broader election security planning and operations was considered as a positive element in the overall process.

In parallel with the establishment of the WSD at the federal level, Puntland, one of the member states, was preparing for local council elections. As a result of FBA’s training and support to the WSDs, the Puntland Police decided to expand the WSD-structure to encompass all nine regions in the member state, and to make the WSD a standing capacity at the Police Head Quarter, as well as looking more broadly on gender-sensitive policing.

According to the gender assessment previously mentioned in this paper, that evaluated Puntland’s local early elections in October 2021, findings showed that the risk of VAWE in Puntland was to be considered high. As described in the previous section of this paper, several interview respondents had personally experienced or knew of someone who had experienced VAWE¹². The report concluded that gender-sensitive security planning is crucial and will foster good practices for security personnel. The establishment of the WSD in Puntland therefore builds upon the overall findings from the gender assessment of the local early elections in 2021. Since then, FBA have trained the remaining police officers in Puntland who will staff the WSD, as well as supported the development of a gender equality strategy for the Police, to ensure the WSD is sustained as an integral part of the organization.

More specifically, the WSD is designed as an integrated point of contact system for Police to prevent and respond to cases of VAWE, and to strengthen the protection of women's rights. The WSD provides specialized, gender-sensitive support, recognizing that the effective protection of women calls for specific measures and actions. Moreover, the WSD is set out to:

- provide a heightened response to violence directed at women;
- collect, record and track information of incidents involving women;
- to analyze data about incidents involving women;
- to refer incidents to appropriate responders;
- strengthen the protection of women by mitigating impunity; and
- to support a basis for evolving evidence-driven policy.

“ The institutionalization of the concept of gender in security planning is vital for mitigating the problem of VAWE. ”

The institutionalization of the concept of gender in security planning is vital for mitigating the problem of VAWE. This involves considering specific measures to meet the security needs of women in the entire election cycle, and for security planners to prepare strategies for how this is to be operationalized. The WSD aims to contribute to peaceful and inclusive elections, by supporting targeted services to protect women's participation and respond to intimidation, harassment, violence, and sense of impunity. This will ultimately strengthen the credibility of the elections - if all citizens' rights will be protected, and men and women are equally able to safely participate in the elections.

Moreover, the WSD is tasked to inform community members of the Police' work on preventing and mitigating violence against women, and to actively contribute to increased trust between civil society and security staff. Raising local awareness and creating spaces for dialogue with civil society will also contribute to improved coordination between different sectors. This in turn contributes to harmonizing efforts to effectively respond to VAWE. In post-conflict contexts trust in government institutions is often low, and people (women in particular) may feel more safe and comfortable reporting incidents of harassment, intimidation or violence to members of civil society rather than Police. Creating platforms for dialogue and information-sharing are therefore important venues for building trust and strengthen legitimacy.

Conclusion and summary

This paper has explored the interlinkages between SSR, elections, and gender equality. It argues that election security may serve as an entry point for working with SSR in post-conflict contexts.

SSR and elections are two interlinked processes important to peace building and democratic governance. The integration of a gender perspective is a prerequisite for their implementation, as a process that systematically excludes large parts of the population will fail to be sustainable, nor respectful of human rights.

SSR and elections are interdependent – a security sector governed by democratic principles under civilian control, underpins the importance of elections as a mechanism for people to exercise their right to participation in public life as well as to hold governments accountable for their performance.

Elections in post-conflict settings are often characterized by high level of insecurity and violence, which emphasizes the need of well-conducted election security, to ensure broad participation of men and women and subsequently, strengthening the overall legitimacy and realization of the election.

FBA's work with gender-sensitive election security in Somalia, and the support to the establishment of the WSD, is considered a long-term capacity building initiative to strengthen the Police' efforts to implement gender-sensitive policing, using election security as a first step to working with issues around gender in the security sector. It has served as an opportunity to work with core security actors on issues around gender equality, coordination with key stakeholders, and dialogue with civil society - essential components of an inclusive and sustainable SSR process.

The Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) is the Swedish government agency for peace, security and development.

FBA supports international peace operations and international development cooperation. The agency conducts training, research and method development in order to strengthen peacebuilding and statebuilding in conflict and post-conflict countries. We also recruit civilian personnel and expertise for peace operations and election observation missions led by the EU, UN and OSCE. The agency is named after Count Folke Bernadotte, the first UN mediator.

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