# Women and Rebel to Party Transitions

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**JOINT BRIEF SERIES: THE POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF DDR**

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## Introduction

Rebel-to-party transitions[2] represent an opportunity for members of armed groups to translate their wartime contributions into post-war political reforms and representation. Yet this is not a straightforward process, and it can be especially difficult for female members. Accounts from around the world underscore that formerly armed groups that later become political parties approach women and women's issues[1] in ways. In some instances, the positions they take as political parties can differ rom their own wartime positions. Furthermore, female veterans of rebel groups that become political parties are not a homogenous group; their experiences of the post-war period differ based on both their pre-war background and their experiences within the armed group during war. While international norms advocating for women's rights and representation – notably those related to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda – are influential in shaping realities on the

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ground in many conflict-affected settings, it would be a mistake to overlook the ways in which former rebel parties, female veterans and women's groups affiliated with those parties make women's issues relevant in various post-war contexts.

The Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS) module 2.20 on the Politics of DDR recommends designing gender-sensitive programs, and many of these recommendations and metrics can be applied during rebel-to-party transitions. For example, the IDDRS highlights the importance of considering whether armed groups operate political wings and whether women are a part of such organizations. These recommendations reflect the prevalence and significance of women's participation in non-state armed groups. It is estimated that women have served in combat roles in roughly 40 per cent of armed groups and that women have been leaders in more than a quarter of groups – to say nothing of women's support in non-combat auxiliary roles[3]. Preliminary research also shows that roughly 57 per cent of groups that did not transition to political parties[4] included women in any role – whether combat, non-combat, or leadership – compared to roughly 84 per cent of rebel groups that did transition to political parties. While this pattern is ripe for additional research about the relationship between rebel group composition and the capacity to transition to a political party, there are immediate implications for policymakers. Those in policy-making positions must be especially attentive to female rebels and women's issues during rebel-to-party transitions. Failing to do so risks marginalizing female veterans of these organizations.

This research brief aims to help policymakers realize the IDDRS ambitions of analysing "women's diverse experiences" in order to ensure that they 'are fully integrated into all peacebuilding, peacemaking and reconstruction processes'[5] in the context of a rebel-to-party transition. In order to do so, we must critically engage with the differences among female rebel veterans, as well as with how women in armed groups experience war and peace differently than their male comrades-in-arms. We must also consider differences among different rebel-to-party contexts, as certain atmospheric and institutional characteristics may influence which women are able to exercise power after war, and to what extent. The three-part analytical framework presented in this research brief aims to facilitate the identification of context-specific hurdles to women's inclusion in the context of rebel-to-party transitions. This framework assesses the gendered implications of rebel-to-party transitions at the ideational, organizational[6], and individual levels. At each of these levels, continuity or change from wartime practices will have implications for how former rebel women experience the post-war period.

The research presented in this brief builds on the author's research regarding the extent and implications of women's participation in the Ethiopian civil war as members of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). This research involved conducting interviews in Ethiopia, as well as a thorough review of secondary sources on women in this and other rebel-to-party transitions.[7]

**Table 1**

| Level | Central Concerns | Example Indicators |
|---|---|---|
| **Ideational** | Continuity or change in the former rebel party's ideological approach to women and women's issues. For example, former rebel parties may articulate gender-egalitarian principles or may advocate for traditional gender roles. | • Women's issues in party platform<br>• Codification of wartime practices or regulations related to women into post-conflict laws<br>• Change or continuity in approach to women's issues<br>• Nature of the appeals to female voters<br>• Public acknowledgement of women's wartime contributions |
| **Organizational** | Continuity and change in the former rebel party's structures for women and means of mobilizing women. Former rebel parties may transform women's associations into women's wings of the political party or may create new government offices for women's issues. Alternatively, they may demobilize women's groups affiliated with the rebels or fail to dedicate government resources to women's issues. | • Presence or persistence of rebel-affiliated women's wings<br>• Female leaders in the former rebel party<br>• Government offices dedicated to women's issues and their degree of funding<br>• Instances of tension or cooperation between civil society and party- or state-affiliated women's groups<br>• Female political candidates associated with the former rebel party. |
| **Individual Level** | The effect of wartime service on individual women's post-conflict experiences and opportunities. This may be conditioned by the role that women played in the organization or by demographic characteristics such as class, race, religion etc. | • Differences in vulnerabilities and opportunities between categories of former rebel women woman (according to class, race, religion, position in the rebel group, etc)<br>• Gender-sensitive components of DDR programs.<br>• Status of female veterans in society<br>• Portfolio and substantive power of women in political office. |

## The ideational level: where rebels outline their vision

During a rebel-to-party transition, former rebel parties must decide if they will continue their wartime approach to women and women's issues or change track. The way that rebel groups incorporate women or women's issues into their political agenda has implications for the types of programs and policies they adopt in office, and it can also influence the means by which women's rights activists make appeals. Understanding continuity and change at this level can help practitioners identify opportunities to engage with former rebel parties to advance women's issues and representation during this period. Changes may reflect one of the new tasks that former rebel parties face in the post-war period: shifting from a base of support that is capable of military victory to one that is capable of winning and holding political office. The need to broker political relationships with more-conservative segments of society can prompt a retreat from radical positions on gender equality. In other cases, former rebel parties seek to win women's support to build a larger base of support as a part of their electoral strategy.

In Ethiopia, women played a critical role in enabling the TPLF's victory. But while women notched important gains in terms of formal representation, legal reforms and the establishment of women's organizations and bureaus after the war, some were still frustrated by the treatment of women and women's issues after the war. Armed groups for whom women's issues were not a prominent aspect of their wartime political agenda or in which women did not play especially visible or prominent roles, can shift tactics and attempt to garner women's support as a political party. In the case of the National Resistance Movement (NRM) in Uganda, the movement's wartime Ten Point Programme did not reference women, but 'by 1999, the NRM's Ten Point Programme was updated to include fifteen points, one of which supported affirmative action as a means of encouraging political, social, and economic participation of marginalized groups,' reflecting women's mobilization.[8] Changes in former rebel parties' approach to women can provide new opportunities for women to exert influence or, to the contrary, can block avenues of political influence that women leveraged during the conflict.

### TPLF AND COMMITMENT TO WOMEN'S ISSUES IN POST-WAR ETHIOPIA

In Ethiopia, women constituted as much as one-third of TPLF fighters and actively contributed to its system of governance and civilian mobilization. After the war, the TPLF retained a degree of commitment to women's issues. For example, the TPLF's wartime women's associations persisted into the post-war period (albeit in modified forms). The government also established new spaces within the government dedicated to women's issues (including a Women's Affairs Office, which was "mandated to coordinate, facilitate and monitor women's affairs at national level and to strive for the enactment of new policies and the improvement of existing ones in the area of women's concerns"), released the "National Policy on Ethiopian Women", and adopted a constitution with an explicit provision regarding women's rights.[9] Women's activism, including that conducted through a transformed women's association, spurred post-war reforms that institutionalized some of the gender-egalitarian wartime practices in the region of Tigray. Yet some women expressed frustration about how women's issues and representation were managed in the post-conflict period.[10] This experience underscores the frustration that can emerge when the expectations that women develop in the course of their service in non-state armed groups do not manifest in the post-conflict period.

## The party level: agendas and institutions

Identifying whether former rebel parties create or continue operating institutions dedicated to women and women's issues is critical for assessing the degree of commitment to their rhetoric regarding women's rights and women's issues. Integral to this is not only documenting the existence of such bodies, but also their relative influence. This analysis can help policymakers identify relevant partners, agencies, and programs to partner with to promote women's issues during rebel-to-party transitions. Furthermore, identifying the existence and strength of party-affiliated women's organizations can provide opportunities to foster cooperation between these groups and independent civil society groups. As with rebels' ideological approach to women and women's issues, there can be continuity or change at the organizational level. During war, some armed groups establish or authorize all-female units and organizations affiliated with the group. This can include organizations like all-female fighting units, mass associations for women, or units of women in non-combat support roles. In addition to supporting the objectives of the armed group, these women's groups can be important sites for women to develop a gendered political consciousness, rise to leadership positions, develop connections to like-minded women, and advocate for their interests.[11]

Shifts in the intra-rebel organizations or forums dedicated to women's issues can be consequential for how women experience a rebel-to-party transition and how they articulate their political demands. Women's groups often confront a difficult decision in the post-war period. One option is to remain close to the party and risk being co-opted by the broader political group. In such situations, the women's organization can become a useful tool for the party as

it seeks to build support among the population and implement its agenda. Another option is to become an autonomous civil society group and articulate women's issues at arm's length from the party. This autonomy may allow for the women's group to mobilize from a broader base of support and take stronger positions on women's issues, but it may also make it difficult to penetrate into the political sphere and effectively make demands on political parties. In post-war El Salvador, the choice of strategy in this respect was widely discussed among the women's groups associated with the former rebel party Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN).

Differentiating between these trajectories may be difficult in practice and there is certainly a degree of fluidity between categories and change over time. While closeness to a political party may help women articulate their political demands to those capable of making change, it also comes with the risk of being co-opted by the political party. Such association may also make it more difficult to broker relationships with independent civil society groups focused on women's issues. Importantly, the sorts of skills, experiences, and identities that women develop during their time in rebel groups can facilitate political mobilization in new organizations or the creation of new political organizations.

Another important consideration at this level of analysis is how women are included in the former rebel party. Relevant questions here are whether the former rebel party runs women as political candidates or incorporates women into high-ranking political positions within the party and government. The process by which these female representatives are recruited and the degree of power they wield are also relevant considerations. Relatedly, when former rebel parties hold political office, they may also develop institutions of the state to manage women's issues or can dedicate resources to a gender-sensitive DDR program.

It is important not to conflate the experiences of elite women, who are likely to be tapped for party or government positions, with the experiences of women generally – however, the inclusion of women by the party can also be a signal about how, to what extent, and under what conditions the party will be willing to include women and to address women's issues.

### Individual Level: identities and experiences

Policymakers cannot ignore the experiences of individual former rebels. Paying closer attention to individual experiences can help shed light on how identity characteristics like gender, race, religion, and class interact to shape individuals' post-conflict experiences.

Whereas men may be praised as heroes for their contribution to the war effort, women may be regarded with suspicion for their participation in gender-transgressive or non-traditional activities during wartime. In some cases, female combatants reported high levels of divorce as the men that they married during war left them for more traditionally feminine partners in the post-war era.[14] These norms and experiences may influence the extent to which former female combatants and other women affiliated with the rebel group willingly identify as

#### WOMEN'S GROUPS AND PARTY AFFILIATION IN POST-WAR EL SALVADOR

After El Salvador's civil war, women's groups associated with the constituent parties of the National Liberation Front (FMLN) were faced with the decision of whether to remain affiliated or to become independent. The issue of autonomy became a point of contention among different women's groups. On the one hand, groups like the Mujeres groups like the Movimiento de Mujeres "Melisa Anaya Montes" (or MAM) argued that women could work to advance both party and women's interests. On the other hand, grups like the Mujeres groups like the Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida (or las Dignas) did not consider such doble militancia a viable strategy.[12] Though there was a significant feminist movement in the country after war, it remained divided, with different approaches to engagement with political parties and electoral campaigns.[13]

such and make political demands on the basis of that identity. In some circumstances, women have leveraged their identities as veterans of the former rebel party to demand political reforms, whereas in other instances women are hesitant to do so.[15] The failure of groups to live up to their wartime promises and the economic, social, and political dislocation that veterans may feel in the post-war context can produce situations in which female veterans of rebel groups are frustrated and disillusioned.

Elite former rebel women who are selected for government or other leadership positions by the former rebel party or who go on to found civil society groups are unlikely to grapple with the same degree of economic or social precarity as rank-and-file female veterans. But the challenges that they face as individual women are relevant for understanding the dynamics of both women's political status and rebel-to-party transitions. The very positions that women are selected for by former rebel parties are a relevant indicator of whether these women will have influence over the party's agenda. Though high-ranking former rebel women may press for pro-woman reform, it is important not to make gender-essentialist assumptions that women representatives will automatically be sympathetic to feminist demands or that they will be capable of representing all women's interests.

Policymakers must pay careful attention to how women's ethnic, religious and class identities shape the opportunities and challenges that they face after war. Higher-class former rebel women may also have more resources at their disposal to ease the transition from rebel back to civilian life both because of their pre-conflict economic status and because of how their pre-war identities influenced their wartime experiences and positions within the group. Poor women who join armed groups, in contrast, may be kept from rising to elite positions in the organization by their lack of education or social ties and may find themselves once again marginalized and underserved at the end of the war. Pre-war identities can shape both wartime activities and post-war experiences; although war is a powerful force, it is not necessarily one that produces a blank social slate at the end of the conflict. In the context of rebel-to-party transitions, policymakers must consider what hierarchies persisted or were created during the course of the war; these divisions shape women's post-conflict experiences and also may contribute to the risk of former rebels returning to armed activities. When designing DDR programs, it is critical to consider how women's pre-war identity characteristics and wartime experiences affect their economic and social prospects after the war.

## Conclusions and implications

This research brief illustrates how ideational, organizational and individual-level dynamics affect women's experiences during rebel-to-party transitions. The framework introduced in this article can guide policymakers seeking to promote women's inclusion and interests. There are no 'one size fits all' policies when it comes to advancing women's issues and rights; this framework is intended to help guide policymakers effectively design policies, rather than to prescribe specific decisions or programs.

At the ideational level, policymakers can work to ensure that women's issues are a relevant part of the post-conflict political discourse. This can take the form of international policy lobbying to include provisions about women and women's issues in peace agreements and the platforms of former rebel parties, as well as other efforts to keep women's issues 'on the table' during rebel-to-party transitions.

At the organizational level, international policymakers can work to bolster the capacity of specific organizations or bureaus dedicated to women's issues. This can include working with women's groups associated with the former rebel party or

governmental bodies dedicated to women's issues. In some instances, the international community can help foster trust and cooperation between independent civil society groups and these women's groups. Critical to this process is recognizing that 'women's interests' as a concept obscures differences among different women's interests and fissures within the 'women's movement'. Furthermore, policymakers should be sure to recognize that the presence of women in political office will not necessarily lead to reforms in favour of women's rights.

At the individual level, the international community can provide support to DDR programs during rebel-to-party transitions that consider both the needs specific to female members and how other aspects of former rebel women's identities shape their interests and experiences after war. Integrating class, ethnicity, religion and other salient identities into our demobilization and post-conflict programs – in addition to recognizing gender differences – is critical.

## Endnotes

[1] Throughout this research brief, I use the term women's issues to signify the complex basket of issues related to women's rights, representation in politics and the discursive question of what role women should play in society. Phrases like 'women's interests' or 'women's issues' often obscure the fault lines between different groups of women, which is counterproductive to a nuanced gender assessment and can hamstring policymakers. I have tried to avoid this pitfall by considering how different types of women experience the post-conflict period.

[2] United Nations Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Resource Centre. 'Women, Gender and DDR' in the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards. https://www.unddr.org/modules/IDDRS-2.20-The-Politics-of-DDR.pdf https://www.unddr.org/modules/IDDRS-5.10-Women-Gender-and-DDR.pdf

[3] Reed Wood and Jakana Thomas. 2017. 'Women on the frontline: Rebel group ideology and women's participation in violent rebellion.' Journal of Peace Research 54(1): 31-46.; Alexis Henshaw, June Eric-Udorie, Hannah Godefa, Kathryn Howley, Cat Jeon, Elise Sweezy and Katheryn Zhao. 2019. 'Understanding women at war: A mixed-methods exploration of leadership in non-state armed groups.' Small Wars & Insurgencies 30(6-7):1089-1116.

[4] This estimate was produced by comparing the rates of women's participation in the ~100 rebel groups held in common between an updated version of Söderberg-Kovacs and Hatz's data (see Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs and Sophia Hatz. 2011. 'Rebel-to-party transformations in civil war peace processes 1975–2011.' Democratization 23(6): 990-1008), and Loken and Matfess's forthcoming data on women's participation in non-state armed groups. This analysis uses the R2PTrans variable from Söderberg Kovacs and Hatz, and the Participation variable from Loken-Matfess. There are several limitations to the descriptive statistics presented here: the estimate excludes groups that were militarily successful, does not account for the relative electoral success of these groups and does not include groups not included in both datasets. Thus these findings are suggestive, but should also be approached with a degree of caution.

[5] United Nations Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Resource Centre. 'The Politics of DDR' in the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards, p 5. https://www.unddr.org/modules/IDDRS-2.20-The-Politics-of-DDR.pdf

[6] For more information on the dynamics of organizational transformation during rebel-to-party transitions, see Sherry Zaks. 2017. Resilience Beyond Rebellion: How Wartime Organizational Structures Affect Rebel-to-Party Transformation. PhD thesis.

[7] Hilary Matfess. 2021. Frontlines and the Home Front: Three Papers on Women's Contributions to Non-State Armed Groups and the Gender Dynamics of Conflict. PhD thesis.

[8] Aili Mari Tripp. 2015. Women and Power in Post-Conflict Africa. Cambridge University Press, p. 65.

[9] Indrawatie Biseswar. 2008. 'A new discourse on "gender" in Ethiopia,' African Identities 6(4): 408.

[10] This section draws on conversations with female veterans conducted as a part of field work. Others have critiqued the TPLF's approach to women's issues and have noted the frustrations of female combatants after war. C.f. Biseswar op. cit.; Negewo–Oda, Beza, and Aaronette M. White. "Identity transformation and reintegration among Ethiopian women war veterans: A Feminist Analysis." Journal of Feminist Family Therapy 23, no. 3-4 (2011): 163-187.

[11] Henshaw et al. 1992. 'Understanding women at war'; Julie Peteet. 1992. Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement. Columbia University Press.

[12] Ilja Luciak. 1998. 'Gender equality and electoral politics on the left: A comparison of El Salvador and Nicaragua,' Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs 40(1): 39-66. Ilja Luciak. 2002. 'Women's networking and alliance building in post-war Central America,' Development 45(1): 67-73; Ilja Luciak. 1999. 'Gender equality in the Salvadoran transition,' Latin American Perspectives 26(2): 43-67; Luisa Maria Dietrich Ortega. 2015. 'Untapped resources for peace: A comparative study of women's organizations of guerrilla ex-combatants in Colombia and El Salvador.' In Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace (pp. 232-249). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

[13] Victoria González-Rivera and Karen Kampwirth, eds. 2010. Radical Women in Latin America: Left and Right. University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State Press; Luciak. 'Women's networking and alliance building in post-war Central America.'

[14] Annette Weber. 2011. 'Women without arms: Gendered fighter constructions in Eritrea and Southern Sudan,' International Journal of Conflict and Violence 5(2): 357-370; Lorina Sthapit and Philippe Doneys. 2017. 'Female Maoist combatants during and after the People's War.' In Women, Peace and Security in Nepal (pp. 33-49). Routledge. This was also raised as an issue by TPLF veterans.

[15] C.f. Gwinyayi Dzinesa. 2008. 'The role of ex-combatants and veterans in violence in transitional societies,' Violence and Transition Project Roundtable, 7-9 May 2008, Johannesburg, South Africa. p. 12-13.

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## Author biography

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**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.

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**The United Nations Department of Peace Operations, Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions: DDR Section** (UNDPO/OROLSI/DDR) established in 2007, deploys peacekeepers who, as early peacebuilders, assist conflict-affected countries in re-establishing the rule of law and security institutions necessary to build and sustain peace. It includes five components: Police Division; Justice and Corrections Service; Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Section; Security Sector Reform Unit; and UN Mine Action Service.