At the crossroads
Women’s rights after 2015

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Introduction

Women’s rights organisations have thrived in the last two decades, and have been at the centre of progress on women’s rights and gender equality. In every country they are campaigning for justice for women and for wider change. Raising awareness of women’s rights, providing frontline services, supporting women to organise for collective action, and urging government bodies to act on commitments are just some examples of what they do.

Women’s rights organisations (WROs) are women-led organisations working to advance gender equality and women’s rights. They vary in focus and scale but are informed and inspired by an understanding of the context in which women live, and what needs to change. They organise as women but recognise that women experience many layers of inequality shaped by age, ability, ethnicity, race, HIV status, sexual orientation, religion and other social differences, and so have diverse needs and interests. A feminist analysis of how these inequalities intersect with gender inequality, and of the power structures which maintain women’s inequality to men, is at the core of WROs’ work.

Coming together in autonomous women’s rights groups and organisations empowers women to challenge the deep-rooted discrimination embedded in every sphere from family to workplace, to politics and other arenas of public life.

Through organising and advocacy WROs have put gender equality and women’s rights on the public and political agenda in most countries and internationally, resulting in notable positive gains. But so much more needs to be done. And the challenges facing WROs are huge.

Most governments lack the political will to consistently prioritise women’s rights. National and international bodies allocate inadequate resources and capacities to ensure gender equality and respect for rights.

The achievement of women’s rights is tied to global issues. Working for justice in an unjust world requires that WROs with the capacity and opportunity engage in discussions on global challenges, such as the economic crisis, climate change and insecurity.

The year 2015 is a crossroads for women’s rights. Progress on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) – agreed in 1995 and seen as the most visionary and comprehensive framework on women’s rights and gender equality – is being reviewed. The achievements and failures of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted in 2000, have run out of time and the Post-2015 development framework is being drafted. The impact of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) and accompanying Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security is being appraised.

Governments and international institutions have a political choice: to give prominence to women’s human rights in the coming 15 years and thus make significant strides towards ending centuries of abuse and discrimination which undermine progress towards social justice, real democracy, peace and sustainable development in every country; or, to sideline women’s rights to the margins. WROs are working harder than ever to influence that choice and to ensure their analysis and perspectives are integrated fully into the discussions.

This policy briefing has been developed following a survey and in-depth interviews with 13 of Womankind Worldwide’s partner organisations.3 It interrogates progress on the BPfA, the MDGs and UNSCR 1325 – what has changed, and what has not. It highlights the work of Womankind partner WROs in three crucial areas: violence against women and girls, women’s leadership and political participation, and Women, Peace and Security.

It does not attempt to cover the full range of gender equality and rights issues, rather it examines the areas in which Womankind and our partners have evidence and expertise. The paper concludes with an overview of the political and practical challenges WROs face, and proposes recommendations for urgent action.

2. Also known as the ‘sustainable development goals’.
3. Womankind’s partners are in-country women’s rights organisations working across Africa, Asia and Latin America.
2015: Reviewing and accelerating progress on women’s rights?

The United Nations (UN) Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, was an unprecedented mobilisation of some 17,000 participants and 30,000 activists – including youth, media, parliamentarians, government officials, researchers, UN entities, funds and WROs – which resulted in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA). Visionary and forward-looking, the BPfA saw women’s rights widely recognised as human rights, and outlined specific commitments to be implemented by governments, international organisations (including UN bodies), civil society, the private sector and media to improve the status of women and achieve gender equality.

Galvanised by this extraordinary meeting, participants left with a clear sense of purpose and a roadmap to gender equality, accompanied by remarkable political will and worldwide visibility. The Beijing process also connected and reinforced the activism of the feminist and women’s movements globally, nationally and locally who were keen to bring Beijing back home. This would prove crucial to the achievement of progress on the BPfA in following years.5

“BPfA is key because it’s a complete document, which for the first time addressed all the issues of women. It is a document that most women activists in Nepal see as the foundational policy framework for the achievement of gender equality, women’s rights and women’s empowerment. Post-2015 and UNSCR 1325 processes are complementary but BPfA is key because Beijing was the biggest conference and the largest ever number of women from Nepal attended.” – Bandana Rana, Saathi, Nepal

In 2000, the UN and international organisations agreed the MDGs, which provided a time-bound set of goals and targets aimed at halving extreme poverty by 2015 – including MDG Three (MDG3): ‘To promote gender equality and empower women’. In contrast to the participatory approach and mobilising energy of the Beijing Conference, many women’s rights activists felt the MDG agreement process lacked inclusiveness and transparency, and considered MDG3 as a huge backwards step from the BPfA, both in scope and transformative potential. Most crucially, the MDGs narrowed and depoliticised the women’s rights and gender equality agenda, by eschewing a focus on the underlying structural conditions and power relations maintaining gender inequality.

“Most women activists didn’t want anything to do with the MDGs when they first came, as they had not yet been able to implement BPfA. The reason for this was that it was a top-down approach. Women’s rights organisations and civil society weren’t engaged in the process. It was difficult to build ownership over the MDGs.” – Bandana Rana, Saathi, Nepal

Shortly afterwards, in 2000, campaigning led by WROs and feminist activists in conflict-affected countries culminated in the adoption of UNSCR 1325. This landmark Resolution established the global Women, Peace and Security framework, and recognised the impact of conflict on women and their central role in building peace. It also provided strong impetus for governments and other key actors to ensure women’s full inclusion in all aspects of conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

This was followed by six subsequent Resolutions to further strengthen the Women, Peace and Security framework.6

A straight road to justice for women?

Many steps towards gender equality and the achievement of women’s rights have been taken since the agreement of the BPfA, MDGs and UNSCR 1325. After their agreement, the MDGs quickly became the dominant framework for international development. Most positively, the MDGs leveraged resources and political will with some notable, if limited, successes in promoting gender equality.

Some progress has taken place in areas prioritised by the MDGs, particularly in girls’ education, national-level political participation and maternal health.7 UNSCR 1325 and related Resolutions have contributed to growing recognition of women’s specific experiences of conflict and roles in peacebuilding. Some ‘pillars’ of this agenda have received widespread international attention, notably the development of measures aimed at the protection of women from violence.8 Whilst this progress has been welcomed, WROs have
highlighted that implementation remains weak and that efforts should take a holistic approach to tackling violence against women, and prioritise addressing its root causes.\(^\text{10}\)

Overall progress on all of these agreements remains slow and uneven. Interviews carried out with Womankind partners across Asia, Africa and Latin America demonstrate that despite important international-level gains in terms of rhetorical commitment and laws and policies at national level, huge deficiencies remain in their full implementation. Many of the most progressive aspects of the BPfA have yet to be fulfilled, including the recommendation to adopt measures with a view to achieving equal representation of women and men in all governmental and public administration positions.

Increased awareness has not always led to sustainable, transformative outcomes. The ‘gender agenda’ has become more widely recognised by a range of development actors, including those with significant resources. This includes the private sector which, through initiatives such as the Nike Foundation’s ‘Girl Effect’ initiative, has begun to increase investments targeted at women and girls.\(^\text{11}\)

However, the focus on women’s rights and gender justice which inspired action in Beijing has often been significantly diluted or lost in mainstream development initiatives. Women have frequently been instrumentalised, with efforts often narrowly focused on women as producers and consumers whose increased economic participation will drive national growth. This approach sees women’s empowerment as primarily benefitting families and societies, rather than prioritising women’s rights as an important end in themselves.\(^\text{12}\)

The structural nature of gender inequality and power relations, embedded in the formal and informal institutions of society and in the social norms, cultural values and attitudes that underpin them, is not confronted. Echoing the loss of focus on BPfA following the MDG launch, many WROs are apprehensive about any new agenda which diverts from the comprehensive framework of the BPfA and initial progress achieved since UNSCR 1325. Losing sight of these commitments could allow governments and international agencies to (further) limit their action on gender equality and women’s rights.

"Would we be where we are today without the women’s movement? They have played a big part in setting the tone and through negotiation processes, coming up with frameworks and commitments and monitoring them.” – Abigail Matsvayi, Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association (ZWLA), Zimbabwe

\(^{10}\) From the ground up: women’s rights organisations at the heart of tackling violence against women in conflict. Joint statement on the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, June 2014. Womankind Worldwide.


\(^{12}\) GADN, GAPS, UKSRHR Network. 2015. Turning Promises into Progress.

2015: At the crossroads

The milestone BPfA and UNSCR 1325 global progress reviews taking place in 2015 provide space for a rigorous stock-take of achievements to date and remaining challenges, as well as providing impetus for a renewed commitment to their implementation. This opportunity for governments and international actors to assess national progress against international standards and for WROs to strengthen accountability of governments around women’s rights and gender equality is unparalleled.
“The opportunity that is being presented here is for the global women's movement to reclaim the BPfA. I think that by coming up with the MDGs the women's movement lost a lot - this was a direct attack on the BPfA. Women had achieved so much. Then men felt something below the belt so they came up with the MDGs which diluted the efforts that women had made. [2015] provides an opportunity for us to claim that back and state what exactly it is that we want as the global women's movement.”

– Emily Sikazwe, Women for Change, Zambia

“The 15th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 and Global Study and review give the opportunity to showcase the achievements, but also an opportunity to review our gaps and what the priority areas are. The Global Study provides opportunity to strengthen accountability of national governments and pave more concrete and effective strategy for coming years. Nepal comparatively has been moving ahead in implementation; but the mid-term report shows gaps, particularly in relation to reaching out to the most affected. So I hope that this global review will provide an opportunity to strengthen that accountability and speed and expedite the implementation of 1325.”

– Bandana Rana, Saathi, Nepal

These review processes are also an opportunity for the global women's movement to draw on its experience and expertise accrued over the past few decades, to articulate priorities for future BPfA and Women, Peace and Security action, and for the new Post-2015 framework. Civil society shadow reports contributing to these reviews also ensure that a comprehensive analysis of the situation of women is available, and provide space for the views and experiences of marginalised groups, such as Dalit women, to be voiced.  

In particular, discussions around women’s rights and the Post-2015 development agenda provide the opportunity to refocus the ‘gender conversation’ on the comprehensive commitments made in Beijing, whilst identifying global priorities on gender equality and women’s rights to 2030. There is general consensus that the MDGs were not sufficiently transformative, often tackling some of the symptoms of inequality rather than its root causes.  

Therefore, any future framework which addresses the persistent global challenge of gender inequality must address these deficiencies and demonstrate four key principles, as outlined by Womankind and partners in a joint paper on ‘Women’s rights and gender equality in the Post-2015 Framework’ in 2014:

1. **Universality** – but priority of resources going to the world’s poorest and most marginalised women
2. **Structural change** – tackling the barriers to the full realisation of women’s rights
3. **Meaningful participation of women, and WROs, at all levels**
4. **Coherence with existing agreements**, including BPfA, UNSCR 1325 and associated Resolutions, and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
Women’s rights organisations in action

Violence against women and girls

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is one of the most widespread and persistent abuses of human rights, with 35% of women experiencing at least one form of violence in her lifetime and 30% of women over the age of 15 having experienced intimate partner violence. It has now been widely acknowledged by a number of international organisations and governments that the failure to address VAWG is a major omission of the current MDG framework. This is despite the adoption in 1993 of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women and the comprehensive proposals in this area within the BPfA.

Recent years have seen significantly increased high-level acknowledgement that tackling VAWG is an urgent priority. For example, in 2008 Ban Ki-moon marked the start of his tenure as UN Secretary General by launching a campaign called UNITE, aimed at ending violence against women.

Increased visibility on international policy agendas has contributed to increased political will and the allocation of some, albeit limited, resources. However, international commitments alone are insufficient to deliver the holistic and multi-sectoral (including inter alia health, security, education and justice sectors) approaches required to end VAWG and allow women and girls to live free from violence.

Women’s Rights Organisations: Catalysts for change

An increasing body of research demonstrates that WROs are important catalysts in achieving change at many levels, and contributing to significant reductions in violence. Significantly, a ground-breaking, large-scale study across 70 countries demonstrated how WROs have worked at community level to prevent VAWG.

In-country WROs have typically employed a range of innovative strategies to promote gender equality and reduce violence. These have been driven by the demands of women and focused on building strategic alliances from the community to national levels, whilst ensuring that their organisations work closely with women at community level and that their work is based on a nuanced understanding of gender and power relations in each context. They also respond rapidly to support women experiencing violence during and after conflict, when the rate and prevalence of violence increases substantially.

However, women’s rights activists themselves work in the shadow of backlash in the form of violence. Despite the adoption in 2014 of the first-ever Resolution on women human rights defenders (WHRDs), they face continuing threats and attacks as a result of their work for women’s rights which necessarily challenges established social norms and power relations.

Prevention is possible

The recent international focus on VAWG has served to highlight the consequences of this pervasive violation of women’s human rights. However, analysis of its causes has often been missing, as has adoption of the growing evidence base confirming violence is preventable.

The prevention of VAWG requires an understanding of the scale and scope of violence and the underlying causes, risk and protective factors that influence its occurrence in any specific context. The starting point for this is that VAWG is fundamentally related to unequal gender norms, power inequalities and dominant ideals of manhood that condone and legitimise violence and control over women.

Recent Womankind research carried out with partners in Ethiopia (Siiqqee Women’s Development Association), Ghana (Window for Hope) and Zambia (Women for Change) demonstrates how WROs have worked at community level to prevent VAWG. Whilst the programmes in the three countries took different, context-relevant approaches, common elements included: the vital role of a local women’s rights organisation in delivering the work, a focus on individual attitude and behaviour change, identification of gender inequality as the root cause of violence, addressing social norms and working on all forms of VAWG. In all cases, dialogue and engagement at community level, and group work promoting individual reflection and transformation is crucial.
“Our significant achievement is mobilisation for community response to gender equality – working around gender-based violence, changing traditions and cultures that inhibit both women’s and men’s participation in issues that affect their daily lives. We have put this on the agenda.” – Emily Sikazwe, Women for Change, Zambia

**Supporting survivors**

It is crucial that women and girls experiencing violence and abuse are able to access appropriate help, support and advice across multiple sectors. This support can take many forms, and can include focusing on ensuring women’s immediate safety and well-being. It can also involve working with women to support them in building a life in which they are able to assert their rights and live without fear, and providing legal aid to assist their access to justice. WROs have developed and delivered pioneering, holistic services for women who have experienced violence – and are often the only actors to offer this essential support.

For instance, in Nepal, Saathi has worked for over 20 years to support survivors of violence and opened the country’s first women’s refuge in 1995. Aside from directly supporting survivors, Saathi has taken a multi-level approach to ending VAWG, also working with men and boys at community level to change attitudes, behaviours and social norms and advocating for improved legislative and statutory provisions. However, despite overwhelming demand for these services, which further increased during and after recent internal conflict in Nepal, their capacity remains limited due to severe underfunding.

“Now we run three shelters for women in different parts of the country – but over the years we have never been able to find sustainable financial support to run them. The Government has only recently begun providing partial support to one of our shelters. In spite of everyone believing in the importance of the service there is no support to run it – whether it is donors or national governments.” – Bandana Rana, Saathi, Nepal

In Peru, Federación de Mujeres de Ica (FEPROMU) and Estudio para la Defensa de los Derechos de la Mujer (DEMUS) have combined psychological care and legal support to survivors, working directly with women to strengthen their self-esteem, physical and mental health and to enable them to demand respect for the exercise of their rights from various actors, including the state. Again, this is enhanced by legal and policy-focused advocacy, as well as work with the media and other stakeholders, such as the church, to challenge the harmful social norms and men’s continued power over women that condone and maintain VAWG.

“The media has played a key role in many areas relating to women’s rights, such as VAWG being seen as family problems only, and so not dealt with. However, these issues should also be seen as problems of the state, and dealt with as such. Yet the church continues to exert huge pressure over the state not to recognise women’s rights, and until this changes these rights will remain unrecognised and unrealised.”

– Maria Ysabel Cedao, DEMUS, Peru

Liberia Women’s Media Action Committee (LIWOMAC) is using the media in Liberia to promote inclusive governance and is developing guidance for authorities, including the police, on how to deal effectively with cases of violence against women and girls. They have established a women’s radio station, along with ‘listening clubs’, which broadcasts programmes aimed at providing information and support to women.

“The problems that you see in society are also very present in the Liberian media sector e.g. low representation of women, sexual harassment/abuse of women, and many other challenges based on gender inequality and culture. People, particularly men, that work in the media are socialised to see women in a certain way as they come from communities where violation of women’s rights is tolerated. We’re working to change that, with women themselves and to encourage policy change. We are currently working on a gender policy for the media.”

– Estella Nelson, LIWOMAC, Liberia
Legal and policy provisions

National legislative and policy provisions around VAWG have roots both in transnational feminist activism and in the deployment of CEDAW and the BPfA as instruments to secure improved state responses to women’s rights.  

In Ghana, a Womankind partner, the Gender Studies and Human Rights Documentation Centre (Gender Centre) carried out a pioneering study in the 1990s showing the extent of VAWG, and worked in a National Coalition to advocate for Domestic Violence (DV) legislation. When the legislation was passed in 2007, the coalition subsequently pressed the government to adopt a policy framework and Action Plan to implement the law, which when launched was based on accepted international principles specific to VAWG, including the BPfA.

Gender Centre and other WROs played a critical political and technical role throughout, carrying out national-level advocacy relating to passage of the legislation, setting the national agenda on its implementation, working as a member of a technical team in developing regulations for the DV Act and implementing innovative VAWG programmes.

“Whilst a very progressive Domestic Violence Act was passed in 2007, the delay in passing the regulations has resulted in the poor implementation of the Act. Moreover, not enough resources have been made available for the structures set up for the implementation within the Police and Social Welfare Department. The DV Secretariat is also facing human, financial and material resource constraints.” – Dorcas Coker-Appiah, Gender Centre, Ghana

Concerted effort by a strong, coordinated national women’s movement was crucial in the establishment of a dedicated legal and policy framework on VAWG in Ghana. However implementation has been hindered by numerous factors linked to limited institutional and financial support from the Ghanaian government, leaving funding for the Action Plan reliant on international donors. Further delays have been caused by inaction by the judicial system, poor understanding about VAWG exacerbated by misinformed media coverage and a lack of clarity within statutory services about necessary measures to prevent VAWG.

27. Ibid.
Women’s participation and leadership

Women constitute over half of the world’s population, yet unequal gender power relations and discriminatory policies, practices and attitudes prevent their full and equal participation in making and influencing the decisions that affect their lives. Following the establishment of the MDG3 indicator tracking progress on women’s representation in national legislatures, many efforts to increase women’s participation and leadership in the post-Beijing era focused on formal, national-level political structures. Women’s representation in parliaments (combining lower and upper houses) rose to an average of 21.9% worldwide by December 2014 (from 11.7% in January 1997), largely as a result of the implementation of temporary special measures such as quotas.\(^{28}\) This is progress, but it is still a long way from parity between women and men.

“The government has put in quota systems, and in the most recent election we saw the numbers of women MPs increasing. But when you look at participation and leadership it is narrowly defined to mean politics – so most of the actions zero in on that instead of a holistic approach to decision-making within the country”

– Abigail Matsvayi, ZWLA, Zimbabwe

Whilst increasing the number of women in decision-making is critical, for participation to be meaningful, women must be actively involved in and influence decision-making processes. Furthermore, the equal and meaningful participation of women from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds and of different age, ability and sexual orientation at every level and in every institution is fundamental to representative, inclusive democracy, good governance and the achievement of women’s rights and social justice.\(^{29}\) WROs have recognised this, and have used their understanding of ‘what works’ to support women’s participation and leadership in a wide range of fora, taking on multiple technical, political and capacity-building roles.

**Supporting participation at all levels**

Informal, local-level spaces are important arenas in which the skills, experience, relationships, and networks needed for women to navigate pathways to political leadership and posts in formal governance institutions are forged.\(^{30}\) However, whilst empowering women to ascend to high-level positions often starts within local communities, it is at the local level that many of the decisions that affect women’s lives are made. Women’s political and public participation at the local level is an important aim in itself.\(^{31}\)

The ‘bottom up’ approaches frequently employed by WROs recognise that women’s influence in political and public life is linked to their level of decision-making power in the household, and that informal governance systems, such as village councils or school governance boards, are often as relevant to women’s lives as formal structures. They also work to address the additional exclusion and barriers experienced by marginalised and geographically-isolated groups, and improve the receptivity of decision-making bodies to women’s priorities and demands. Enabling elected or appointed women to be influential and political champions for gender equality and women’s rights requires on-going support. Here again, WROs play important roles.

For example, in Ghana the Gender Centre works to strengthen women’s leadership in Market Traders Associations and is mentoring young women to take up future leadership roles. The Feminist Dalit Organisation (FEDO) supports Dalit women to participate in decision-making at the local and provincial level in Nepal, and works to improve the accountability of formal and informal decision-making bodies in responding to Dalit women constituents.

“It is really encouraging. Women’s agenda and issues are being heard ... not fully satisfactorily but at least policies specifically focused on Dalit women are being developed now. Before people did not want to listen to the issues of Dalit women.”

– Bhim Bahadur B.K., FEDO, Nepal

Accountable, gender-sensitive governance

Women’s participation and influence in decision-making requires responsive, transparent and accountable governance to ensure that their priorities and needs are reflected in the policies and services of institutions at all levels.\(^{32}\) WROs play a vital role as ‘civil society’ by channelling women’s demands into the public arena, and in mobilising to hold the state and other institutions to account for failures to deliver on women’s rights commitments.\(^{33}\) They can

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provide expertise and information on gender-responsive policy-making and implementation and strengthen accountability. Informal alliances between women policy- and decision-makers and WROs and women’s movements can build and sustain momentum for social justice.

WROs are adept at developing locally-relevant strategies to track government commitments and their implementation. For example, FEPROMU in Peru and the Federation of Women Lawyers in Kenya (FIDA-Kenya) have created platforms for sharing lessons learnt with other stakeholders and monitoring different aspects of policy implementation and service delivery.

“We have carried out public hearings with women decision-makers in the Ica Region. These women report to the people on progress in the implementation of public policies and actions developed in favour of women.” – Aleida Chacaltana Legua, FEPROMU, Peru

Others such as FEDO in Nepal have formed multi-stakeholder groups to strengthen accountability on statutory provisions for marginalised groups of women whose specific interests and priorities can be neglected by decision-makers. In Afghanistan, the Afghan Women’s Resource Centre (AWRC) has organised meetings with community members and decision-makers to ensure that women’s roles in peacebuilding are recognised and that their voices are heard by local government officials and representatives.

Whilst some WROs are highly successful in engaging decision-makers to further the realisation of women’s rights, others experience significant challenges. A lack of participatory spaces, rapid turnover of government personnel, limited gender knowledge amongst elected representatives and government officials, and the presence of officials who give little priority to being accountable and accessible to civil society are barriers frequently reported by Womankind partners. To counter this, they have adopted strategies to build institutional gender knowledge and capacity and capture their attention, such as providing seminars and gender and women’s rights training.

Supporting WROs to improve women constituents’ capacity to actively monitor governments is a particularly valuable strategy for ensuring accountability for gender equality commitments.36 For example, as the ‘missing link’ between women in conflict-affected countries and national and international decision-makers, WROs can help fill the gap between women and the institutions governing their lives. They do this by representing knowledge and perspectives of women’s realities in the policy process, and facilitating marginalised women themselves to participate in these processes.35

**Strengthening institutional structures**

Women’s participation is defined by institutional structures, which include a country’s constitution, the electoral system and special legal measures such as gender quotas.39 Strengthening these structures to ensure they enable – and do not block or constrain – women’s full and meaningful public and political participation is essential.

Across the global South achieving strong political settlements generally requires the collaboration of many stakeholders, including political parties, parliaments, constitutional assemblies and international institutions. Post-conflict contexts offer key opportunities to set up or transform institutional structures for gender equality.37

WROs are ideal partners for gender-focused institutional strengthening initiatives. Their autonomy allows them to work with and across political parties to increase gender-sensitivity, as well as allowing them to take on social norm change work which political parties and other stakeholders may find too politically sensitive to engage in directly and overtly.38

With technical and legal expertise, some WROs also provide advice on constitutional and electoral reform, including the development of legislated and voluntary gender quotas.39 FIDA-Kenya was closely involved in ensuring the country’s recently agreed Constitution provides far reaching provisions on women’s equal rights and opportunities, and acted swiftly to enact it by pushing for related legislation. ZWLA provided legal expertise on women’s rights priorities and issues to the Zimbabwean Parliamentary Constitutional Committee, contributing to a new Constitution which contains many positive provisions on women’s rights.

Women in Law and Development in Africa (WiLDAF-Ghana) has challenged women’s exclusion from political tenure by supporting a proposed affirmative action law to increase participation and fulfil Ghana’s commitment to international conventions, treaties and protocols. Aside from sustained advocacy on the law, WiLDAF-Ghana is part of the Committee drafting its text and accompanying guidelines.

“FIDA Kenya’s advocacy on gender equality has been critical. Discriminatory provisions in the Constitution have been done away with. Several laws to protect women in the area of marriage have been enacted, and the Protection against Domestic violence Bill drafted and awaiting debate in parliament.” – Christine Ochieng, FIDA Kenya
Women, Peace and Security

Recent years have seen increased militarism and conflict across the world with exacerbated violence against women and girls continuing unabated and women persistently sidelined from conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes. Conflict and instability are cited by many of Womankind’s partners as the principal factors impeding realisation of women’s rights and development at all levels. They bring additional challenges to already overstretched WROs. Increased demand for their services is left unfulfilled in a context of uncertainty, with resources to sustain their work frequently becoming even scarcer.

“The security situation of Afghanistan is threatening to every organisation working for women’s rights, but it is far more risky for front-liners. We have received and worked on hundreds of cases of violence against Afghan women in the past years. Most of our colleagues working in the provinces and faraway districts accept the grave dangers of working for the improvement of Afghan women’s lives.” – Najia Karimi, Humanitarian Assistance for Women and Children of Afghanistan (HAWCA), Afghanistan

Given the recent escalation of numerous new and ongoing conflicts, UNSCR 1325 and associated Resolutions are more relevant than ever. Yet overall, progress on the ground has been slow and inconsistent. In many cases UNSCR 1325 has had little impact on women’s actual experiences of conflict.

As with other women’s rights frameworks, a lack of political will, sufficient and transparent funding and systematic monitoring all hinder effective implementation of the UNSCR 1325 framework. Women, Peace and Security commitments are often isolated and sidelined, with women’s rights rarely integrated into donor agendas and interventions around conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

“Government and development partners have failed to appreciate and understand that women survivors of conflict are active political actors who, just like their male counterparts, have a right to substantive political engagement, especially in decision making.” – Ruth Ojiambo Ochieng, Isis-Women’s International Cross Cultural Exchange (Isis-WICCE), Uganda

At the international level, a number of donor governments and international institutions have begun to discuss how best and strategically to integrate UNSCR 1325 and the Post-2015 agenda, with some engaging in annual open exchanges on national implementation of UNSCR 1325 and associated commitments. Avoiding replication and ensuring coherence with the strongest elements of the BPfA and the international Women, Peace and Security frameworks within the new Post-2015 development agenda is a priority for many WROs.

Alternative ways of interpreting 1325 to improve responses

WROs have long recognised that post-conflict transitions are opportunities to renegotiate the terms of citizenship and build recognition of women’s experiences of conflict and the varied roles women play in local-level conflict resolution and peacebuilding. International frameworks have been both a help and a hindrance in their work to build on this opportunity.

Some Womankind partners, such as Isis-WICCE, worked with women in Uganda, Liberia, South Sudan, Kashmir and Nepal to develop a locally-relevant conceptualisation of participation, rights promotion, prevention of violence against women and conflict recovery long before UNSCR 1325. However, an unintended effect of the establishment of the global Women, Peace and Security framework is that these established and homegrown understandings of women’s rights and empowerment and the specific concerns of women are subsumed into the international architecture.

UNSCR 1325 has increased funding, visibility and international support for gender-sensitive conflict responses. However, in some situations, this has created pressure on WROs to move away from their locally-relevant priorities and concede to global agendas that determine which projects are viable.

WROs globally have made strategic decisions on how to invoke international agreements whilst engaging stakeholders, drawing on UNSCR 1325 and subsequent Resolutions where most useful. For example a representative of LIWOMAC in Liberia said: “[We] work on the instrument that is most supported by the government and international NGOs within the country – and that’s 1325. They fund more work on 1325 in comparison to other instruments.”

41. Report from EU Member States annual meeting on UNSCR 1325, Brussels, 4 July 2014.
42. ActionAid, Institute of Development Studies and Womankind Worldwide. 2012. From the ground up: Women’s roles in local peacebuilding in Afghanistan, Liberia, Nepal, Pakistan and Sierra Leone.
In some cases WROs draw on UNSCR 1325 over other frameworks in national policy advocacy, because its security-related language holds more political resonance in contexts where rights-based approaches, such as those outlined in BPfA and CEDAW, are rejected by conservative elements of government and society.

**National Action Plans**

The realisation of ambitious and fully-funded National Action Plans (NAPs) by governments of both donor and conflict-affected countries can be an important means of ensuring thorough implementation and accountability of UNSCR 1325 and subsequent Resolutions. Meaningful collaboration with WROs ensures that NAPs reflect the priorities of women in fragile and conflict-affected countries.

Yet practice in this area has been highly mixed. Womankind partners report a spectrum of experience: participatory collaboration leading to a strong national NAP with clear indicators, time lines and responsible entities in Nepal, a NAP which lacked systematic consultation of in-country WROs and has no ring-fenced budget attached in the UK. In Zimbabwe the government has entirely eschewed committing to full implementation of UNSCR 1325, including producing a NAP, instead deriving a ‘4 Ps of Peace and Security’ approach comprising Prevention, Protection, Participation and Programmes ending gender-based violence, which draws only on select provisions within the Resolution.

At the same time as advocating for strong NAPs, WROs have worked to ensure that localised implementation of UNSCR 1325 is not contingent on the existence of a NAP. Womankind partners including Saathi (Nepal), LIWOMAC (Liberia) and Isis-WICCE (Uganda) have undertaken initiatives to engage women and local leaders for the implementation of Resolutions at the local level. As LIWOMAC reported, this has created community ownership of UNSCR 1325, ensured women’s voices are heard, and encouraged local leaders to mainstream Women, Peace and Security into their programmes.
Leaders for change

“There is a shortage of gender equality knowledge and capacity in government ministries and regional and local bodies”

Globally WROs are leading the way for change in power relations between women and men and for social justice. So that all women, men and children, and all gender identities, and regardless of background or other differences, can enjoy and exercise their full human rights and seek redress if these rights are denied or abused.

International conventions and agreements, such as the BPFA and CEDAW, are invaluable. They represent international standards against which governments and international agencies can be evaluated. There is a close link between progress made and the presence of WROs and activists. Evidence shows that substantive gains are seen only where vibrant women’s movements are able to draw down on international treaties and influence government policies.45

WROs are crucial in setting the tone and agenda nationally and locally for the implementation of international agreements, and have been effective partners in the innovative and sustainable women’s rights-focused programming that has secured change.46

However, they face many political and practical challenges.

Political challenges

Slow or stalled implementation of legislation and equality policies is a feature in almost all the countries where Womankind’s partners work. Limited political will on the part of government and national parliaments is the critical factor here. As we saw above with the Domestic Violence Act passed in 2007 in Ghana, the delay in adopting the regulations and insufficient allocation of resources to the structures mandated to implement the Act resulted in poor implementation.47

There is a shortage of gender equality knowledge and capacity in government ministries and regional and local bodies. Womankind’s partner, FEPROMU in Peru reports that regional government officials showed little interest or knowledge during the implementation.

The global agenda for justice

WROs working for justice for women know that progress on women’s rights is linked inextricably to global justice matters. Sustainable development, as defined by the United Nations48, cannot be achieved unless the underpinnings of gender inequality and unsustainable patterns of economic development are tackled.

Unregulated market-led growth and unsustainable patterns of production, consumption and distribution depend on and replicate gender inequalities and unequal gender power relations. These in turn, permit the exploitative use of women’s labour and unpaid care work. Increasingly dominant ‘smart economics’ discourses have led development institutions, corporations and corporate NGOs to instrumentalise women’s economic participation as a means to strengthen communities and national economies.49

Many economists acknowledge that the current economic system is not working for most people.50 Feminist researchers and activists, including some Womankind partners, are challenging fundamentalist neo-liberal economics and generating ideas on how an alternative economic system that delivers for all people would function.51

Practical challenges

Although WROs have long-term commitment to their communities, ongoing engagement with community members and government bodies can be curtailed when they lose capacity due to project funding ending or a lack of long-term, core and flexible funding. In some cases WROs are being forced to respond to funding opportunities outside their core vision or mission just to keep going, further limiting their capacity to deliver the impactful activities in which they specialise.

49. Cornwall, A. 2014b. op. cit.
At the crossroads:

Donor governments are increasingly channelling aid directly to partner governments in the global South. Some funds align well with the priorities of partner governments; others reflect each donor government’s own priorities. Funding partner governments, and some favoured civil society organisations, directly means that many donors are unaware of the realities of women’s lives, the work of WROs and how sustainable change is achieved. It also means that WROs struggle to access funds. The current donor preoccupation with ‘quick wins’ and tangible ‘results’ is at odds with the long-term processes of social transformation.

Furthermore, the long-term commitment needed to work for women’s rights and gender equality does not align well with donor governments’ shifting priorities, what one Womankind partner describes as ‘on-off short-term funding’. Donor governments tend to re-set priorities frequently which can result in piecemeal and fragmented initiatives. The emergence of new donors – bilateral, private sector, philanthropist – and the recent donor spotlight on ‘women and girls’ has not significantly improved the funding position of most WROs. Directly funding both WROs and women’s funds is the best means to ensure that the self-led, collective, feminist action and structural change needed to achieve women’s rights and gender equality takes place.

Challenges of private sector engagement

Increasing emphasis has been placed in the last decade on the roles of the private sector in fostering economic development in the global South. Local and foreign companies and philanthropists are allocating some resources towards selected gender equality areas, such as economic enterprise, leadership, education and health. This support is welcome but is it not comprehensive.

A relatively new trend, spurred by staff cuts in donor government aid agencies, is the contracting-out of the management of funds for development programmes to the private sector, which has little understanding of transformative social change and the work of WROs. This may be efficient in the short-term for donor governments but it distances them from the reality on the ground and learning on ‘how change happens’. The private sector is generally not well placed or skilled to manage social transformation.

The opinion of many Womankind WRO partners is that the private sector displays an overall lack of interest in the issues most important to the women they work with. The private sector, in their view, “is not engaging adequately on women’s rights – they tend to be disassociated from what is going on”. The assessment of one partner WRO in Ghana is: “Private sector organisations, such as telecom companies, are more interested in supporting activities that sexualise the woman’s body.”

Moving forward

Ensuring women and girls can enjoy and exercise their full human rights, and seek redress when those rights are neglected or abused, is an intensely political and long-term endeavour. It is WROs who will continue to frame and lead this work, each in their respective contexts, using international conventions, instruments and agreements as leverage and guidance. International institutions (including UN entities, European Union and other regional bodies), governments, private sector, media and civil society (including international non-governmental organisations [INGOs]) can support this work in a myriad of ways.

The political decisions taken in 2015 will shape the future. The review processes and the definition of the Post-2015 development framework are an opportunity for governments and international organisations to reaffirm their long-stated commitment to gender equality and women’s rights, and resource its urgent implementation.

Justice demands political action now.
Recommendations

To donor governments, governments of the global South, new development actors and international institutions (including UN entities, European Union and other regional bodies)

1. Re-establish commitments to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) as the comprehensive framework for women’s rights and gender equality, and accelerate its full implementation by making it a high-level political priority to 2030.

2. Recognise the innovation, knowledge, skills and experience of women’s rights organisations as essential long-term partners in shaping the agenda on women’s rights and gender equality, and support them to draw on their in-depth understanding of local realities to set their own agenda, providing flexible, core and long-term funding for their work.

3. Allocate substantially increased financial resources and capacity to implement fully the BPfA, UNSCR 1325 and related Resolutions, and women’s rights and gender equality commitments within the Post-2015 development framework, and increase the accessibility of existing funding streams to WROs by acting on OECD DAC Network Guidance, including by channelling money through Women’s Funds.

4. Prioritise and invest in preventing all forms of violence against women and girls, including empowering women and girls and challenging discriminatory social norms, and strengthen multi-sector (including health, security, education and justice sectors) and survivor-centred responses to abuse.

5. Enhance women’s leadership and full, equal and meaningful participation in decision-making at all levels, including marginalised women. This will involve strengthening political systems and governance institutions and increasing their accountability to women, as well as promoting special measures to ensure women’s representation.

6. Increase women’s participation in peace processes by: creating safe spaces for women’s collective action, acknowledging the diversity of women’s experiences of conflict, and recognising peace agreements and political settlements only where women’s participation has been meaningful and which fully integrate gender equality and women’s rights.

Further information
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Womankind Worldwide is the UK’s leading international women’s rights and international development organisation, working with women’s rights organisations across Africa, Asia and Latin America.