Women's contribution to conflict prevention, early warning and disarmament

Felicity Hill

The United Nations was created by a war-torn generation, convinced that conflict could be prevented. By providing a venue where political developments would be routinely monitored, debated and acted upon, the founders of the United Nations anticipated that early warning signs would be heeded to prevent conflict. When the Security Council first debated its role in the prevention of armed conflict in November 1999, Secretary-General Kofi Annan urged the international community to move 'from a culture of reaction to a culture of prevention.'[1] Two years later, the Secretary-General issued a comprehensive report on conflict prevention that underscored the importance of early warning and gender equality.[2] This article will review recent developments in the conflict prevention debate, emphasizing the role of women in early warning and UNIFEM's efforts towards mainstreaming gender into the early warning efforts of the United Nations.

Early warning has been described as 'any information from any source about escalatory developments, be they slow and gradual or quick and sudden, far enough in advance in order for a national government, or an international or regional organization to react timely and effectively, if possible still leaving them time to employ preventive diplomacy and other non-coercive and non-military preventive measures.'[3] By providing time to prepare, analyse and plan a response, early warning is an essential precursor and prerequisite for effective conflict prevention. Not always about predicting a conflict or episode of violence before any such incidents have broken out, early warning information is also used to predict a resurgence or escalation of conflict and violence.

Peace and women's organizations have asserted that effective preventive strategies must consider information and early warning from and about civilians. The significance of the threat and violence inflicted on civilian women in conflict situations has underscored the need to incorporate gender analysis into early warning activities. Such steps must be based upon timely and accurate information, knowledge of facts, an understanding of developments and global trends, and the economic, social and political causes of the conflicts.

Influential authorities in the field have bemoaned information overload, and a dearth of analysis and response options, however, this perspective overlooks a rich source of information that is not being tapped. Experts interviewing women in conflict zones have identified women's experiences and perceptions as an under-utilized set of resources to prevent deadly conflict and its resurgence. Conflict-

Felicity Hill is a Peace and Security Adviser to the United Nations Development Fund for Women and is responsible for UNIFEM's Peace and Security Programme initiatives on enhancing women's role in early warning and preventing violent conflict. She is generating a web portal on women, peace and security in order to provide targeted information to the Security Council and other actors on the impact of armed conflict on women and women's role in peace-building. Before joining UNIFEM, Felicity Hill worked for the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, in Geneva from 1996 to 1997 monitoring the Conference on Disarmament, and then in New York from 1998 to 2001 as the Director of WILPF's United Nations Office.

affected women spontaneously describe and refer to early warning indicators. The two accounts below illustrate the kinds of information women have about weapons, and the kinds of dangers and barriers they face in presenting early warning information.

> In Kosovo we met Zlata who told us that when she saw arms caches growing in early 1998, she realized that armed conflict was imminent. But she had no one to tell and doubted that her concerns would be taken seriously. 'At a certain point, the boys—young men I suppose, my own nephew also—went up into the hills and got trained,' she said. 'That was the beginning. Then there were guns, first only some, which is usual, but then a lot of weapons being talked about. I didn't see them, but I heard about them. We knew all this, but still nobody was watching or listening to us in Kosovo.' Sometimes, women have nowhere to turn with their information. In Sierra Leone, a young woman named Amy told us that in her village, 'we knew roughly where and when the RUF were planning something big against the peacekeepers. My friend and I, we wanted to tell someone, but it was hard, we were watched, it would take a long time to walk in the night, and it was dangerous. It was a big pity too, because the RUF took the guns and the pride of the UN that day, but it took our hope too. We were scared again, which is exactly what they wanted.'[4]

These accounts represent the potential reservoir of experience and insight that women have about weapons accumulation and proliferation, one of the principal signs of impending conflict. Women often know about the location of arms caches, the routes used to transport them, and the social changes brought about by an influx of guns. Additionally, women have been documented as voluntarily or forcibly carrying or concealing weapons under clothing or in shopping bags as part of the smuggling operations of gunrunners. This covert militarization of traditional gender roles has increased women's familiarity with weapons, and has sometimes carved out a niche in which women have received social and cultural approval and status, some of the benefits gained from being considered brave and courageous by one's community in a war situation when these qualities have enhanced value.[5] It is possible that the fixed gender roles in war that have traditionally associated men with guns have blinded those searching for weapon-specific and gender-specific early warning signals to vital sources of information in this and other areas. It follows that listening to women and learning from their experiences can correct gender blind spots in early warning information collection and analysis, and can contribute towards conflict prevention.

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Recent developments in conflict prevention and enhancing women's role in peace and security decision-making

Over the last five years, the debate about conflict prevention at the United Nations has been stimulated by a number of reports and resolutions, many of which have noted the lack of information about women,[6] and often referring to their *potential* role. The theme of women, peace and security has also achieved prominence and coherence throughout the organization over the same period, especially since the passage of Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in October 2000.[7] In addition, global concern about the tools of violence used in modern conflict—small arms and light weapons—led to a world conference on the subject in 2001. All of these debates have referred to the need for an increase in women's participation and a decrease in military expenditure and for general and complete disarmament as a necessary precondition for conflict prevention.

In the mid-1990s, the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict brought together eminent persons from a wide range of expertise, including on disarmament and weapons proliferation. Their final report, published in 1997,[8] and the numerous papers and events that contributed toward it, created the foundation for a renewed contemporary focus on conflict prevention. The concepts of operational (immediate) and structural (root causes) prevention elaborated in this document have informed subsequent debates and it remains a key text in this field. The Commission qualified the post-Cold War optimism for a 'peace dividend', while not abandoning hope that the end of bi-polar hostilities could reduce reliance on narrow concepts of military or state security, and broadened the concept of security into its human dimensions.

The change of attitude witnessed since the publication of the Carnegie Commission report proves the cynics wrong on preventing war, as the Security Council, the General Assembly, the G8, the OECD, the European Union and the African Union have returned the notion of conflict prevention to the realm of realism. Serious debates, resolutions and small, concrete steps towards establishing mechanisms for early warning and response have demonstrated that preventing conflict is a legitimate and achievable goal. NGOs have advanced this agenda considerably through predicting conflicts, refining early warning instruments and documenting that, in fact, prevention works.[9]

In late 1999, Secretary-General Annan emphasized the need for the international community to develop a 'culture of prevention.'[10] The Secretary-General lamented that rather than investing in development, governments have built up their militaries, spending human and economic resources on 'military action that could be available for poverty reduction and equitable sustainable development.' In June 2001 the Secretary-General issued a comprehensive report on conflict prevention that underscored the importance of gender equality, the costs of failing to prevent war and the need for NGOs to clarify their role in conflict prevention and their relationship to the United Nations. He also repeated the message to governments that they should discourage competitive arms accumulation and create an enabling environment for arms limitation and reduction agreements as well as the reduction of military expenditures. The report stressed the need to protect women's human rights, and called on the Security Council to include a gender perspective in its work and to integrate the protection of women's human rights in conflict prevention and peace-building.[11] In response, the Security Council passed resolution 1366 on conflict prevention, which reiterated its recognition of the role of women in conflict prevention and its request to the Secretary-General 'to give greater attention to gender perspectives in the implementation of peacekeeping and peace-building mandates as well as in conflict prevention efforts.' Many other regional security organizations have made similar statements about the crucial role of women in conflict prevention, and have made commitments to incorporating gender issues, including, *inter alia,* the G8,[12] the African Union,[13] the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD).[14]

On 31 October 2000, the Security Council adopted its first resolution on women, peace and security (resolution 1325). This resolution provides a comprehensive political framework within which women's protection and their role in peace processes can be addressed. For the first time, the Council called

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for a comprehensive assessment of the impact of armed conflict on women and girls, the role of women in peace-building and the gender dimensions of peace processes, and reaffirmed women's role in conflict prevention. In their July 2001 statement, the G8 expanded on this role, affirming that, 'Women bring alternative perspectives to conflict prevention at the grass roots and community levels. We must encourage creative and innovative ways to better draw on the talents women bring to preventing conflict and sustaining peace. Furthermore, we should identify practical steps and strategies that we can support individually and collectively to advance the role of women in conflict prevention and post-conflict peace-building.'

The 2000 Brahimi Report provided a comprehensive review of United Nations peacekeeping efforts and emphasized the need for enhanced conflict prevention strategies, echoing the advocates of the women, peace and security agenda that verbal postures without political or financial support is not

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sufficient for preventive action to work.[15] The report recommended improving information and analysis capacities within the United Nations and urged the Secretary-General to establish an Information and Strategic Analysis Secretariat and to conduct more fact-finding missions, despite the 'impediment' posed by some states that fear for the integrity of their sovereignty.[16] The report also referred to the need for investment in prevention rather than military options, 'Prevention is clearly far more preferable for those who would otherwise suffer the consequences of war, and is a less costly option for the international community than military action, emergency humanitarian relief or reconstruction after a war has run its course.'

The 2001 report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, an independent panel of experts brought together by the Canadian government, responded to Secretary-General Annan's request that the international community negotiate how to protect the sensitivities of sovereign states while also preventing genocides and massacres.[17] Affirming the primary responsibility of sovereign states to prevent conflict and protect their citizens, the panel proposed that the responsibility shift to the shoulders of the international community if a state cannot or will not protect its citizens, or if it is the perpetrator of 'conscience shocking situations crying out for action' such as 'large scale loss of life' or 'large scale "ethnic cleansing" … whether carried out by … forced expulsion, acts of terror or rape.'[18] The report emphasized that crimes against women constitute 'conscience shocking' events and the need for a renewed commitment to prevention, early warning and analysis as well as effective disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) and security sector reform in post-conflict countries to prevent the resurgence of violence. This report also highlighted the need for 'constant campaigning'[19] for preventive action, and has deepened the debate about how and when to intervene, emphasizing non-military actions, and reconfirming that United Nations Security Council authorization 'should in all cases be sought prior to any military intervention action being carried out.'[20]

Early warning, information and analysis with a gender lens

The last decade has seen a proliferation of early warning indicators—lists of circumstances or events that predict food crises, imminent refugee flows, or outward signs of violent conflict such as cross-border trade disruption, sudden public displays of military-style weapons and increased crime rates or human rights violations. Too often these lists have not incorporated gender-sensitive indicators that could fine-tune the information collection and analysis work of security institutions, and reveal previously overlooked signs of instability at a grassroots level that can anticipate conflict before it spreads to formal politics. According to some experts, '… [G]ender analysis elicits different questions about the causes and effects of conflict on different sectors within society and their particular relationships and roles with each other. It also provides a better understanding of unequal social hierarchies (including gender hierarchies), inequality and oppression, which are often characteristics of societies that are prone to, or embroiled in conflict.'[21]

Examples of gender-based early warning indicators include:

• Sex-specific refugee migrations;

• Sex-specific unemployment;

• Increase in single female-headed households;

- Upsurge in acquisition, transportation, concealment and training in weapons by men, women and children;

- Propaganda emphasizing and encouraging militarized masculinity (often in defence of a violated or threatened femininity);

- Crime reports and eye-witness accounts of women about the types of weapons being used;

- Making a scapegoat of women, accusing them of political or cultural betrayal;

- Disruption of women's cross-border trade activity;

- Engagement of women in a shadow war economy;

- Resistance to women's participation in peace processes and negotiations;

- Lack of presence of women in civil society organizations; and

- Growth of fundamentalism.[22]

The literature on early warning has divided indicators into two categories: root (or underlying) causes and trigger (or accelerating) indicators. When documenting root causes of war, focusing on gender analyses of power and structures will provides insights into violent societies. For instance, preliminary research suggests that countries with very low percentages of women in parliament and in the formal labour sector, or cultures that restrict women, condone violence against them or treat women as property, are more likely to resort to armed conflict to settle disputes.[23] Other data that may be relevant includes female literacy rate, average level of female education, and number of children per household—all of which influence a woman's ability to participate in structures that may prevent war by engaging in other forms of conflict resolution. Other underlying causes include monetary indicators such as military budgets and changes in those budgets. Gender budget analysis looks at the allocation and distribution of resources to determine how they impact women and men differently, and has been used by women's NGOs to demonstrate the impact of increased military spending on essential services impacting women disproportionately.[24]

Gender is also a relevant category when examining trigger indicators—the medium-term conditions that reflect rising tension in the society. The prevalence of the following occurrences—which may only be evident to those on the ground—indicate social discord that could result in armed conflict: gender-specific human rights violations such as rape, abductions, trafficking, domestic violence, sexual harassment, abuse by security forces; killings and disappearances of women; election-related violence; lack of institutional prosecution of perpetrators; increased rates of prostitution and commercial sex work due to military presence; abrupt changes in gender roles, such as the imposition of restrictive laws, rewards for aggressive behaviour and propaganda emphasizing hyper-masculinity; a rise in the number of single female-headed households; sex-specific refugee migrations; sex-specific unemployment; sale of jewellery or other precious materials; and hoarding of goods.

While manifestations of the cultural impact of war and psychosocial trauma are less easy to document, it is certainly not invisible, and can be seen by those living in close proximity to the society. For example, it is recognized that restricting public debate on increasing political tensions is a sign of impending conflict. Politically active and visible women are silenced in gender-specific ways, threats of rape and threats of injury or death to children are common yet undocumented. Inflammatory public rhetoric very often manipulates gender roles and symbols to arouse hatred of 'the enemy'. Concrete examples in conflict countries of press materials, graffiti or social codes enforced by armed groups are relevant and useful in predicting the patterns violence may take, therefore prompting appropriate protection initiatives.

UNIFEM's response

UNIFEM's mandate is to generate and support innovative and catalytic strategies towards gender equality. Because it has long-standing relationships with women's organizing efforts in every region of the world, including conflict areas, UNIFEM is well placed to test information collection models and to provide support to other entities collecting and analysing information on the impact of armed conflict on women and women's role in peace-building.

Complying with a call from the General Assembly to enhance efforts undertaken in conflict areas, and responding to Security Council resolution 1325, UNIFEM has intensified its work in twenty-five conflict-affected countries through a four-pronged framework for action to:

- increase the availability of targeted information on the impact of conflict on women and their role in peace-building;

- strengthen approaches to protection and assistance for women affected by conflict;

- strengthen the contribution of women to conflict prevention, resolution and post-conflict peace-building at the national, regional and international levels; and

- mainstream a gender focus in inter-governmental peace and security initiatives.

In order to establish a common pool of knowledge concerning how women are affected by conflict, UNIFEM appointed two Independent Experts, Elisabeth Rehn of Finland and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, to travel the world's war zones listening to women. Their assessment—launched on 31 October 2002, the second anniversary of the passage of resolution 1325—reviews existing knowledge and offers sixty-four recommendations on increasing women's protection and supporting their role in peace-building.

The United Nations Department of Political Affairs is the United Nations focal point for prevention, and works in close collaboration with other United Nations agencies through the Inter-Agency/Inter-Departmental Framework Team for Coordination, made up of fourteen United Nations agencies and departments. The Framework Team meets regularly to evaluate areas of risk and identifies preventive measures for countries at risk of conflict. At present there is no dedicated staff to assist this information sharing and coordination mechanism. In addition, the early warning indicator instrument used by the team is lacking gender components. The Framework Team has just invited UNIFEM to participate in the group in order to integrate gender in its efforts to coordinate the United Nations system's preventive response to potential conflict.

In pursuing a collaborative approach to mainstreaming gender into indicators for early warning by working through the Framework Team, UNIFEM's first step was to develop a set of gender-based early warning indicators for testing in field-based pilots. This required the adaptation of conflict analysis tools—including situation profiles, analysis of the causes, actors and potential scenarios of the conflict—that have been traditionally gender blind. The organization has generated lists of gender-specific characteristics of conflict, including signs forthcoming in the latent formation of conflict, as well as the stage of escalating tension. The obvious indicators relate to the feminization of poverty[25] and the increased economic burden placed on women during conflict, increases in forced or voluntary prostitution, and the decline in women's access to health, education, employment, credit and land.

Experience in this field has proven that the process may be as important as the results. As analysts and practitioners become familiar with the information offered by gender-based early warning indicators, not only will they learn more about the impact of armed conflict on women, and will also appreciate the critical role women can play in preventing conflict. During the field-based testing of the indicators

listed above, UNIFEM will be working closely with United Nations country teams, governments and NGOs to enhance both the security literacy of women, and the gender literacy of security institutions and decision-makers.

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Decision-makers on the Security Council obtain analysis and recommendations for action from a variety of sources including their national intelligence mechanisms, and through the thematic and country-focused reports of the Secretary-General. Security Council resolution 1325 acknowledges the lack of data about the impact of armed conflict on women and women's role in peace-building informing their deliberations. Resolution 1325 asks the Secretary-General, where appropriate, to include in his reporting to the Security Council progress on gender mainstreaming throughout peacekeeping missions and all other aspects relating to women. Despite this request for a more complete picture of the situation on the ground in war-torn societies, the information provided to the Council has been patchy.

In order to ensure that ongoing, detailed and up-to-date information on the impact of conflict on women and their activities in peace-building is available, UNIFEM is developing a web portal on women, war and peace. The portal will be launched on 31 October 2003,[26] the third anniversary of the passage of Security Council resolution 1325, and will provide gender profiles of countries in conflict, as well as thematic resources on issues such as displacement, violence, health, HIV/AIDS, justice, reconstruction, prevention, small arms and human security. Rather than providing ad hoc information prior to a Security Council mission or to a United Nations department writing a report, through this mechanism UNIFEM will be facilitating ongoing and routine inclusion of information by and about women enduring war.

The importance of gender to conflict prevention and early warning has been recognized. However, concrete measures to improve the flow of early warning information from and about women have not yet been put in place. If preventive visits and fact-finding missions to areas of potential conflict were to routinely include gender expertise and consultations with women's organizations, systematic and useable information could be collected and analysed. Only then could 'gender perspectives' be turned into concrete early warning indicators, and we could build on the foundation of Security Council resolution 1325.

Notes

1. United Nations Press Release, SC/6759, 29 November 1999.
2. *Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council on Conflict Prevention*, United Nations document A/55/985-S/2001/574 of 7 June 2001, available at <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpa/prev_dip/fst_prev_dip.htm>.
3. Max Van Der Stoel, High Commissioner On National Minorities, Key-Note Speech to the Seminar on Early Warning and Preventive Diplomacy, Warsaw, 19–21 January 1994, available at <http://www.osce.org/odihr/documents/periodicals/bulle2-2.pdf>.
4. Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, 2002, *Women, War and Peace: The Independent Experts' Assessment on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Women's Role in Peace-building*, UNIFEM, available at <http://www.unifem.org/index.php?f_page_pid=149>.
5. This utilization of women's traditional roles and appearance as a disguise for the purposes of furthering war efforts has been discussed elsewhere in detail. See Vanessa A. Farr and Kiflemariam Gebre-Wold (eds), 2002, *Gender Perspectives on Small Arms and Light Weapons: Regional and International Concerns*, Brief no. 24, Bonn, BICC, available at <http://www.bicc.de/weapons/brief24/content.html>; and Anatole Ayissi and Robin Poulton (eds), 2000, *Bound to Cooperate: Conflict, Peace and People in Sierra Leone*, Geneva, UNIDIR.
6. Security Council resolution 1325 opens its operative paragraphs 'Noting the need to consolidate data on the impact of armed conflict on women and girls'.
7. Security Council resolution 1325 of 31 October 2000, available at <http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf>.

8. For the Commission's full report, see < http://www.ccpdc.org/>.

9. The European Platform for Conflict Prevention and Transformation is an open network of some 150 key European NGOs involved in the prevention and/or resolution of violent conflicts in the international arena. Its mission is to facilitate the exchange of information and experience among participating organizations, which includes women's organizations, < http://www.euconflict.org/>. Founded in 1991, the African Center for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) is one of many African NGOs focused on conflict prevention and has devoted considerable energies to exploring gender and women's role in prevention and peace-building in Africa, < http:// www.accord.org.za/web.nsf>. In 1999 a large coalition of international and national groups launched the Global Action Plan to Prevent War. The Plan is a blueprint for a war-prevention regime to be established in four phases over three to four decades, < http://www.globalactionpw.org/>. A collection of fifty prevention success stories recently published by the Oxford Research Group reveals the detailed analysis of strategies for prevention, conflict management and resolution that is now readily available from the NGO community, including women's organizations. See Dylan Mathews, 2001, *War Prevention Works: 50 Stories of People Resolving Conflict*, Oxford Research Group, available at < http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/wpwhome.html>.

10. United Nations Press Release, *ibid.*

11. Report of the Secretary-General, *ibid.*

12. Conclusion of the meeting of the G8 Foreign Ministers' Meeting, *Strengthening the Role of Women in Conflict Prevention*, Attachment 2, G8 Roma Initiatives on Conflict Prevention, 18–19 July 2001, Rome, Italy, available at < http://www.g7.utoronto.ca/g7/foreign/fm091901_con_att2.html>.

13. The 1993 Declaration of the Assembly of African Heads of State established the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution. The objective of the Mechanism, overseen by a sixteen member Central Organ, is the anticipation and prevention of situations of potential conflict from developing into full-blown conflicts. The Organization of African Unity (now called the African Union) has begun to take practical steps to include African women and utilize their skills in resolving conflicts in Africa. For example, in 1997 the African Union dispatched an African Women's Solidarity Mission to Burundi with the goal of encouraging the participation of women in the peace-building process. In 1998, in collaboration with the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the African Union created an advisory body called the African Women's Committee on Peace and Development to foster the full participation of women in continental efforts to manage conflicts, although the Committee is criticized for being weak and not integrated into the Mechanism.

14. IGAD Member States have established a Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism and held a workshop titled 'Engendering the Early Warning and Response Mechanism for IGAD Member States' on 25–26 November 2002 in Addis Ababa, which was attended by thirty-four participants from seven IGAD Member States.

15. United Nations, *Comprehensive Review of the whole question of peacekeeping operations in all their aspects* (The Brahimi Report), document no. A/55/305 – S/2000/809 of 21 August 2000, para. 32, available at < http:// www.un.org/Depts/dpa/prev_dip/fst_prev_dip.htm>.

16. *Ibid.*, para. 33.

17. *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty*, December 2001, ICISS, Ottawa, Canada, available at < http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/iciss-ciise/menu-en.asp>.

18. *Ibid.*, p. xii.

19. *Ibid.*, para. 8.18, p. 72.

20. *Ibid.*, p xii.

21. Anne J. Tickner, 1999, Why Women Can't Run the World: International Politics According to Francis Fukuyama, *International Studies Review*, vol. 1, no. 3, pp. 3–13 as cited in Susanne Schmeidl with Eugenia Piza-Lopez, 2002, *Gender and Conflict Early Warning: A Framework for Action*, Swiss Peace Foundation and International Alert, available at < http://www.international-alert.org/women/Ewgender.pdf>.

22. Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, *op. cit.*

23. Mary Caprioli, 2000, Gendered Conflict, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 37, no. 1, pp. 51–68 as cited in Susanne Schmeidl with Eugenia Piza-Lopez, *op. cit.*

24. See the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom's Women's Budget Project, available at < http:// www.wilpf.org/women/budget.htm>.

25. The majority of the 1.5 billion people living on one dollar a day or less are women. In addition, the gap between women and men caught in the cycle of poverty has continued to widen in the past decade, a phenomenon commonly referred to as 'the feminization of poverty'. Worldwide, women earn on average slightly more than 50% of what men earn.

26. See < http://www.womenwarandpeace.org>.