

The background of the cover is a photograph of two women. The woman on the left is wearing a bright yellow headwrap and a matching shawl. The woman on the right is wearing a dark blue headwrap with intricate gold and white patterns. Both women are looking towards the left of the frame with serious expressions. The background behind them is a blurred mix of red and green vertical stripes.

International Alert.

**IMPLEMENTING RESOLUTION 1325  
IN GUINEA, LIBERIA AND  
SIERRA LEONE:**

**Charting a Way Forward**

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**Understanding conflict. Building peace.**

## **About International Alert**

International Alert is an independent peacebuilding organisation that has worked for over 20 years to lay the foundations for lasting peace and security in communities affected by violent conflict. Our multifaceted approach focuses both in and across various regions; aiming to shape policies and practices that affect peacebuilding; and helping build skills and capacity through training.

Our field work is based in Africa, South Asia, the South Caucasus, Latin America, Lebanon and the Philippines. Our thematic projects work at local, regional and international levels, focusing on cross-cutting issues critical to building sustainable peace. These include business and economy, gender, governance, aid, security and justice. We are one of the world's leading peacebuilding NGOs with more than 125 staff based in London and our 13 field offices. To learn more, visit [www.international-alert.org](http://www.international-alert.org).

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## Introduction

International Alert has worked in West Africa for many years, and has a long association with Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, the original member countries of the Mano River Union (MRU)<sup>1</sup>. Since 2007 much of its focus in the region has been on gender issues in peacebuilding.

International Alert's work uses UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security as a way of addressing women's priorities in peacebuilding. Resolution 1325 – a landmark legal and political framework adopted by the United Nations in October 2000 – identifies women's participation and perspectives as essential components of effective peacebuilding. By "peacebuilding", we mean the long-term process of building capacity and strengthening institutions and culture within society to manage and resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner.

With funding from the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Alert implemented a project called Supporting Women's Peacebuilding Priorities: Implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone from 2007 to 2009. The project's objective was to build women's capacity to have their priorities included in ongoing peacebuilding efforts. In addition, International Alert is currently implementing its 2008-2010 Human Security Project in all three countries, again with funding from the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This project's aim is to address the culture of impunity around sexual and gender-based violence in the three MRU countries. Finally, and with additional funding from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the European Commission, the organisation has carried out several research activities focusing on women's peacebuilding priorities in the region.

This briefing note seeks to contribute to the knowledge on Resolution 1325, building on International Alert's work in the MRU region during the last few years. The first section briefly discusses the need to adjust the approach to implementing Resolution 1325 in challenging contexts such as post-conflict Sierra Leone and Liberia and conflict-prone Guinea.<sup>2</sup> Based on a brief discussion of salient issues and thematic priorities across the three countries, the subsequent section sketches the contours of a comprehensive agenda for implementing Resolution 1325 in the MRU region. The three components of this agenda are addressing women's security needs, enhancing their political participation, and implementing gender equality legislation and policies. The briefing note ends with the following four broad recommendations to sustain and enhance work on Resolution 1325 in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone:

1. Working (better) with what exists: Engage custodians of the customary justice system.
2. Address sexual and gender-based violence: Mobilise communities through change agents.
3. Economics matters: Address the economic dimension of gender, peace and security.
4. From plans to action: Make smart investments in civil society.

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<sup>1</sup> Côte d'Ivoire joined the MRU on 15th May 2008, but is not included in this briefing paper since it was not yet a member when International Alert started its work on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and peacebuilding priorities for women in the region.

<sup>2</sup> Although Guinea did not experience protracted civil conflict, it has been plagued since its independence in 1958 by political instability, authoritarianism, state-sponsored violence, minimal political and individual freedom, state-controlled media and periodic waves of "preventive arrests".

## Implementing 1325 in a context of fragile stability

Women's experiences, capacities and perspectives on peace, security and development continue to be underrepresented in the peacebuilding/democratisation processes of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. In the words of Liberia's President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf: 'Women's contribution to the search for durable peace is remarkable, unparalleled, but most often overlooked'. This statement resonates with Resolution 1325, which states that the international community and its member states have a responsibility to include women and their priorities in peace, security and development processes.

Resolution 1325 should be regarded as a useful and important instrument for putting women's views and priorities – as well as their skills and capacities – more prominently at the centre of peacebuilding efforts. However, as a practical framework for action, the resolution has left much to the imagination of a wide range of stakeholders. A decade of working with Resolution 1325 has made it clear that one of the key challenges is to translate high-level policy commitments in the form of Security Council resolutions, policies and National Action Plans into peacebuilding mechanisms that include women's participation and adequately address their priorities.

Resolution 1325 applies to all UN member states, but its application in the context of the Netherlands or the United Kingdom will assume a very different form compared to work in Guinea, Liberia or Sierra Leone. Any attempt to translate policy commitments into concrete interventions will inevitably be affected by the particular context. In the case of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone that context can be described as "fragile stability". Thus, a certain degree of stability co-exists with indicators of fragility such as a weak economy, poverty, inadequate governance and limited state capacity. Any agenda for change – including work towards gender equality and advancing women's rights – will inevitably be confronted, if not frustrated, by the uncertainties of transition, inadequate resources and limited state and civil society capacity, as well as vulnerability to violent conflict.

Therefore, understanding the realities of environments marked by fragile stability constitutes a critical point of departure for all interventions – whether led by national or international players – seeking to include women's capacities and priorities in ongoing peacebuilding processes.

## A comprehensive agenda for action in the MRU region

Zooming in to look at the factors that affect the inclusion of women and their priorities in peacebuilding, many of these are broadly similar in the three MRU countries. They include cultural practices and norms, discrimination under the law, gender-based violence, and marginalisation from decision-making structures, as well as the disempowering effects of poverty and economic insecurity.

Women's peacebuilding concerns and priorities in the region can be divided into three broad thematic areas: addressing their security needs, enhancing political participation, and implementing gender equality legislation and policies. These three thematic areas constitute a comprehensive agenda for further action that will be discussed below. Rather than providing a wide-ranging analysis of each thematic area, this section merely seeks to provide the contours of a comprehensive agenda for action.

## 1. Addressing women's security concerns

Community dialogues conducted by International Alert in 2009 across the three countries sought to identify women's shared security concerns. Participants understood and described women's insecurity in terms of social, political and economic disempowerment, and lack of education, as well as a customary justice system that is biased against women. In broad terms, women's security in the MRU region continues to be affected by the inferior social status accorded to them, narrow assumptions about appropriate gender roles, and harmful cultural practices. Two broad security challenges that stood out in these community dialogues were sexual and gender-based violence and the effects of economic insecurity.

Despite the end of the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia, women and girls remain vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence. As a result, women regard reform of the security sector as critical to ensuring that their concerns are adequately integrated into mechanisms for security provision. This would entail, among other things, a more gender-balanced security sector with a substantial increase in the number of women involved in the provision of security and law enforcement. Nonetheless, weak security and justice institutions, a culture of impunity and silence, extreme poverty and deeply rooted patriarchy continue to constitute an environment of heightened vulnerability for women and girls. Addressing sexual and gender-based violence remains a fundamental challenge in the three countries.

Women observe that economic factors represent a prominent but generally overlooked aspect of their security situation. Poverty and the lack of income-generating opportunities as a fundamental security concern cropped up as a consistent theme during the community dialogues. There is also a widespread conviction among women that their effective participation in peacebuilding is held back by pressing immediate basic needs, an overwhelming domestic workload, lack of access to resources and exclusion of women from inheritance and property ownership. Finding innovative ways to address the economic dimension of security is therefore a critical priority for interventions related to Resolution 1325 in the MRU region.

## 2. Enhancing women's participation and representation

Strengthening women's participation and representation in peacebuilding in the MRU region requires interventions in the domain of political decision-making. In Guinea, women's representation in parliament is very low and political competition, around elections in particular, remains a considerable source of tension and violence. This was visibly demonstrated on 28th September 2009, when soldiers were ordered to attack people protesting against continuation of military rule. The post-conflict recovery processes in Sierra Leone and Liberia, on the other hand, seem to have generated concrete opportunities for women to occupy spaces within the formal political domain, but women continue to be underrepresented.

However, assessing progress in terms of the number of women elected into public office can be problematic. Numerical gains in representation convey very little information about the *quality and influence* of women's participation. Moreover, it is too simplistic to assume that an increase in elected female politicians will automatically result in meaningful changes to women's lives. Rather than solely focusing on outcomes in terms of gender equality, there is a need to look at barriers that reduce equal opportunities to participation in decision-making.

For example, entrenched discrimination against women operates as a fundamental obstacle. High levels of illiteracy and a lack of qualifications – as the combined result of limited educational

opportunities and cultural marginalisation – are hampering women’s involvement in decision-making at all levels of society. In addition, lack of basic civic knowledge among women serves to reinforce the traditional view that politics is a “men’s business”. This deepens the general lack of confidence among women in local communities to engage in politics.

Moreover, women who try to enter politics are routinely confronted with intimidation, often lack the finances to run effective constituency campaigns, and face discriminatory attitudes of male-dominated political parties that control the formal political spheres. Overall, the combined effects of poverty, inadequate governance, exclusion and violence in the MRU region continue to have a considerable impact on women’s prospects of entering and participating in the political domain.

It is generally assumed that the local governance system presents additional opportunities for enhancing women’s participation and representation in decision-making. For instance, as a result of the peacebuilding process in Sierra Leone, governance was decentralised to generate additional opportunities for women and other marginalised groups to participate in decision-making. However, this strategy needs to be scrutinised further within the context of the MRU region.

One important issue for further consideration is the complex interaction between decentralised local governance institutions and customary governance structures. The latter may function as an impediment to effective women’s participation in community-level decision-making. In the case of Sierra Leone, decentralisation provides women with invaluable political experience at the local level, but it has also exposed women to intimidation and violence due to tensions with customary governance structures.

A key challenge therefore is to generate opportunities for women to participate in community-level decision-making without ignoring the interplay with long-established customary governance structures. Strengthening women’s participation in local governance mechanisms should include a strategy to work with existing customary structures. Although it might be difficult to get women involved in the customary governance system, it is not impossible, as evidenced by the fact that Liberia now has a number of female paramount chiefs.

### 3. Implementing gender equality legislation and National Action Plans

When it comes to integrating gender equality into national legislation and policies, there have been a number of encouraging developments in the MRU countries, most notably in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Both governments have developed – with considerable support from the international community – an impressive raft of new or revised legislation and policies frameworks. Key outcomes in Liberia are new legislation addressing rape and inheritance, and the establishment of a new court to try cases of sexual and gender-based violence. In Sierra Leone, three new laws on issues directly affecting women were enacted between 2007 and 2009.<sup>3</sup> Although lagging behind its neighbours, Guinea revised its penal code in 2006 and has introduced legislation to address sexual and gender-based violence.

Despite these encouraging developments, slow implementation of new legislation and access to justice represent key challenges across the region. Lack of awareness among citizens of their

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<sup>3</sup> These include the Domestic Violence Act, the Devolution of Estate Act and the Customary Marriage and Divorce Act in 2009.

rights remains a fundamental problem. This is compounded by the fact that the system of customary justice remains influential in many parts of the region. The presence of a customary legal system alongside a statutory legal system generates resistance as well as misunderstanding about what procedures to follow when rights have been violated. Lack of capacity in the justice sector and subsequent delays, as well as the absence of formal courts in the remote interiors, severely undermine the establishment of the rule of law.

Finally, National Action Plans in Liberia and Sierra Leone on Resolution 1325 represent another entry point, as a particular subset of policy instruments, for strengthening women's participation in peacebuilding. These National Action Plans provide a framework for government implementation and civil society participation and monitoring, as well as a funding framework for donor support. Key challenges include improving coordination between the various stakeholders, ensuring resources and capacity for implementation and translating these documents into time-bound, action-oriented programmes to address the needs of women and communities.

## Recommendations: Four stepping stones to sustainable implementation of Resolution 1325 in the MRU region

Taken together, the three thematic areas discussed in the previous section represent a comprehensive agenda for the implementation of Resolution 1325 in the MRU region. However, if national and international actors working to implement the resolution are going to sustain their achievements, they need to adjust their approach to make it even more relevant to the specific context of fragile stability. To that end, this final section puts forward four recommendations that could maximise the impact of Resolution 1325 on women's peacebuilding efforts and priorities.

### 1. Working (better) with what exists: Engage custodians of the customary justice system

A major challenge to the advancement of women's rights in the MRU region is the dual justice system, whereby customary practices exist alongside the formal justice system. The traditional justice system and local conflict mitigation mechanisms continue to play an important role, not least because they appear to enjoy a measure of confidence among communities, especially in the peripheral areas of the MRU region. The predominance of male chiefs and traditional leaders in the customary justice system<sup>4</sup> tends to work to the disadvantage of women, as it grants women fewer rights and limited access at best.

However, a community-focused approach to addressing women's peacebuilding priorities cannot ignore the presence of a dual justice system. Legal harmonisation of the two justice systems represents a way forward, but it is a long and arduous process that is unlikely to generate positive results for women in the short term. There is a substantial risk that any attempt to impose a formal governance and justice system across the MRU countries might generate a backlash, with detrimental consequences for women. In addition, the lack of adequate resources is likely to hamper efforts to expand and sustain formal governance and justice institutions.

In light of this, the best way forward is a more pragmatic and context-specific approach. In essence, this would entail working with what already exists at the community level. Thus, in addition to

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<sup>4</sup> Although this also applies to the formal justice system.

strengthening the formal justice system, there is a need to develop an intervention strategy that works with and builds on existing community structures with the aim of finding the best way to address women's immediate peacebuilding priorities.

Given the high regard with which traditional leaders and chiefs are held in their communities, these custodians of the customary justice system are key actors to work with at the community level. In addition to raising awareness on women's rights among these custodians, there is a need to transform the customary system into a more gender-appropriate mechanism of local justice and governance. This would require increased engagement with chiefs and traditional leaders as well as the structures in which they operate.

One way of making the customary justice system more inclusive and responsive to women's peacebuilding priorities is by providing a platform for interaction between the two justice systems. This can be achieved by providing joint training sessions on sexual and gender-based violence to representatives of the two justice systems (traditional chiefs, police, judiciary) together with beneficiaries (the local community). Joint training and sensitisation activities to foster enhanced cooperation could make a significant contribution to addressing women's immediate needs, while it may also represent a pathway towards harmonising the two legal systems in the long run.

## 2. Addressing sexual and gender-based violence: Mobilise communities through change agents

Social attitudes that produce and condone violence against women within the family, community and society at large are the combined product of both individual and structural factors. This underlines the importance of adopting a comprehensive approach to address sexual and gender-based violence. However, the practical challenge of implementing such a comprehensive approach is compounded by the fact that state-led interventions are likely to have limited reach in the peripheral areas of the MRU region. In view of this, state-led interventions to address sexual and gender-based violence need to be complemented by community-focused interventions. Such an approach needs to be centred on strengthening the capacity of communities and individuals to address sexual and gender-based violence and break through the culture of impunity.

In practice, this involves the identification and training of change agents within the community. These change agents can play a pivotal role in mobilising and engaging their communities on the issue of sexual and gender-based violence. The potential contribution of community-based advocates for change include: increasing awareness of women's rights; generating positive behavioural changes; and promoting and facilitating access to redress mechanisms. The fact that these individuals, as members of their community, have knowledge of the local culture, customs, community dynamics and dialects, places them in the best position to establish good working relationships with local authority structures, build links between local-level networks of women's organisations and community-based organisations, and engage with their communities in dialogues about sensitive issues. Communication mechanisms such as community radio, drama and cultural festivals are an important aspect of reinforcing the work of change agents, especially with regard to sensitising communities on the rights of women and girls.

The involvement of men as advocates and partners in addressing sexual and gender-based violence needs to be a critical component of a community-focused intervention strategy. Especially men in decision-making positions, such as chiefs, elders, imams, pastors, youth leaders, teachers, and

opinion leaders, need to be sensitised on their roles and responsibilities to address sexual and gender-based violence in their communities. In addition, changing attitudes, knowledge and practice of men and boys through positive engagement represents another aspect of addressing sexual and gender-based violence and counteracting the culture of impunity.

In addition to engaging and mobilising different actors, there is a need to create an environment in which women feel able to claim the right to redress. This includes strengthening security and justice provision at the community level to ensure that perpetrators are held accountable. However, facilitating access to redress should be seen as encompassing more than bringing perpetrators to justice. Many survivors of sexual violence say that what came afterwards was in many ways worse than what actually happened before – the way they were treated by their family and communities, the stigma, lack of psychosocial support, disregard from the authorities of what had happened, as well social exclusion. Interventions to empower women to seek legal redress should therefore include the provision of health care, psychological healing, addressing stigma and discrimination, and economic skills training.

### 3. Economics matters: Address the economic dimension of gender, peace and security

Given that a substantial proportion of the populations in the three MRU countries are affected by poverty, the limited understanding of the linkages between violence, economic insecurity and Resolution 1325 is a critical knowledge gap that needs addressing. Economic insecurity and lack of resources are likely to have a negative impact on women's prospects of gaining access to decision-making structures. More concretely, for women engaged in subsistence or survival activities, economic security represents an acute practical need that could thwart broader efforts to enhance their access to decision-making and protect them from gender-based violence. As for women employed in the formal sector, their challenges include gaining access to resources, defying gender stereotypes and being safe to carry out their economic activities. More needs to be done to locate suitable entry points for programmatic interventions that can address economic constraints to women's security and participation in decision-making.

Yet, little work has been done to understand and address the economic dimensions of women's political participation and security within the framework of Resolution 1325. An important question to explore further is how and to what extent economic empowerment activities can be better linked with interventions that seek to enhance women's political participation and prevent gender-based violence. Another thematic priority for research and programming is to identify mechanisms that could strengthen women's roles and participation in post-conflict economic recovery processes.

However, there is also a need for a more comprehensive gender perspective on the link between Resolution 1325 and the economic domain that would widen the focus beyond just women. Lack of economic opportunities may also generate problematic and sometimes violent forms of masculinity. The potentially negative impact of poverty on men's gender identities and behaviour may undermine women's security and participation as well as peace within the region.

In terms of implementing Resolution 1325, there is a very clear need to consider and address the gender dynamics of poverty and economic insecurity, and how this mediates the prospects for women's advancement, and more broadly, the prospects for sustainable peace in the three MRU countries.

#### 4. From plans to action: Make smart investments in civil society

Bridging the gap between policy and concrete actions – already identified as a core challenge – requires functional and accountable governance structures with the capacity to implement commitments related to Resolution 1325. Political will is also critical. In short, governments may have the capacity and the will to develop policies and action plans, but there is no guarantee that commitments on paper evolve into impact-oriented action. This is especially important to recognise in a context of fragile stability marked by (still) inadequate governance structures, resource constraints and competing priorities.

The need to balance state-focused interventions to strengthen government capacity with a focus on civil society-based actors is sometimes overlooked. An active and informed civil society that is able to articulate its needs and priorities and has the space and capacity to demand accountable and improved performance from the government is a critical asset for the implementation of Resolution 1325. More to the point, the sustainability and effectiveness of work around Resolution 1325 hinges to a large extent on civil society's capacity to translate policies into action-oriented programmes that can address women's peacebuilding priorities. If Resolution 1325-related commitments at the political level are to have any tangible impact, civil society actors need to be enabled to complement the efforts of government agencies and international actors.

Following on from this, an important area for civil society support is to enhance its capacity to engage in policy processes and influence stakeholders. This includes strengthening the capacity of civil society to monitor the implementation of government commitments. National Action Plans provide an important framework for civil society to monitor the extent to which women's peacebuilding priorities are being addressed.

Another priority in the context of MRU countries is to raise awareness within communities on women's rights and women's security needs. Resolution 1325 is an important tool, but work around this requires additional investments in the capacity of women's associations, networks, community-based organisations, media and NGOs.

One concrete strategy is to broaden the range and diversity of civil society actors working with Resolution 1325. There is a tendency to concentrate on relatively well-established civil society organisations that are often based in capital cities. This comes at the expense of expanding and trying to connect with less well-established civil society actors, most importantly those operating in the marginalised communities of the interior, and with groups other than women's organisations. Government and donor support to civil society should therefore seek to foster a more diverse and representative range of civil society actors working on Resolution 1325.



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