

Why Do Women's Rights Advance More Quickly after Major Conflict? #IWD2017

On International Women's Day 2017, Aili Mari Tripp discusses insights from her research on the advancement of women's right in postconflict societies in Africa. She argues that in many cases, the very disruptions caused by major conflicts have enabled women to mobilise and assume new roles in both the economy and politics, transforming legal, institutional, and normative frameworks along the way.

A curious byproduct of major conflict over the past three decades has been the heightened interest in women's rights reforms and female political representation in countries coming out of major conflict. In Africa, not only did postconflict countries embark on these reforms earlier than non-conflict countries, but they began making more constitutional and legislative changes related to women's rights. Legal reforms have been especially visible in the areas of female political leadership and laws pertaining to land rights, violence against women, political equality and the family.

Moreover, these postconflict countries have considerably higher rates of female political representation when compared with non-conflict countries. Rwanda, for example, today has the highest rates of female legislative representation in the world (63.8%). It is no accident either that postconflict Liberia was the first country in Africa to elect a woman president. Similarly, from 1994 onwards postconflict Uganda had a woman vice president for ten years.



A group of female UNAMID peacekeepers participate at the march organized by UNAMID Gender Advisory Unit in collaboration with the State Advisory of Women and Children Affairs in El Fasher, North Darfur, to commemorate the International Women's Day 2014

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Uganda was the first country where this trend became evident in Africa. I first went to Uganda in 1992 to carry out research on women and politics because I was interested in why Uganda, which had just come out of years of conflict, had so many women in top government positions and why the country had the highest rates of representation of women in parliament in Africa at the time. My latest book, *Women and Politics in Postconflict Africa* (Cambridge University Press 2015), shows how the trends I observed in Uganda in the early 1990s became evident in many of the 16 other African countries that came out of conflict, especially after 2000. These trends, particularly

the link with female political representation, are evident in other parts of the world, like Slovenia, Nepal and East Timor.

My book asks: How were postconflict countries able, in a relatively short span of time, to advance women's status in key areas? They not only accomplished what the Nordic countries had done over the course of 100 years by increasing legislative representation, but, in some cases, even exceeded their rates almost overnight. The book is based on extensive fieldwork in Uganda, Liberia, and Angola, but also engages in crossnational comparative analysis of postconflict and non-conflict countries in Africa overall. It also builds on a longitudinal **study** which I carried out with Melanie Hughes, providing statistical evidence for the relationship between women's legislative representation and the decline of major wars that are long in duration and/or have high rates of conflict-related deaths.

To women's rights activists in these countries, the changes have been all too slow and halting, but even the impatience with the slowness of the pace of change is an indication of the way in which expectations have been transformed. In nondemocratic countries like Angola, Chad and Eritrea, the changes are compromised by a lack of political rights and civil liberties. But when one looks at the big picture in a country like Uganda, one sees women taking on new leadership roles in business, civil society, academia, religious institutions, and other institutions in which women had previously not been visible. Often attitudes toward women and women's leadership changed throughout society. In some countries the changes were more extensive than others, where sometimes one saw change only along a few dimensions. In Angola, for example, women made gains in legislative representation but less so in other areas.

The existence of women's organizations autonomous from dominant political forces made it easier to pursue a successful women's rights agenda and to build coalitions across party and ethnic affiliations. The lack of democracy curtailed associational autonomy in Angola, making it especially difficult to build a broad based women's movement that could make demands independent of the ruling party.

The postconflict patterns described in the book were not visible in Africa prior to the 1990s. The timing of these changes can be linked to changes in international norms where women's rights were being widely promoted by United Nations agencies, foreign donors, and international organizations. Similar conjunctures may produce comparable outcomes for women's citizenship, as evident from the ways in which the gender disruptions of World War I, women's mobilization, and changing international gender norms were tied to the granting of suffrage to women in many European countries and the United States shortly after the war.

I argue in the book that these patterns are related to disruptions and changes in gender relations as a result of war, the opening of political space, and women's subsequent mobilization. Conflicts pushed women into playing new roles in the economy, in their households and communities and even in national politics. Women became active in peace movements, which were often led by women or involved large numbers of women.

Women sought to influence peace negotiations to insert demands for women's rights into the peace accords, which paved the way for gender-related reforms in electoral institutions, transitional justice processes and constitution making exercises. International donors and other international actors brought resources and political pressure to bear in these processes. Most often, however, women were excluded as formal delegates to peace negotiations even though they were among the societal actors most engaged in behind-the-scenes peacemaking, pressuring militias to lay down their arms, demonstrating for peaceful elections, and negotiating the release of kidnapped civilians.

The book shows how these postconflict patterns of women's new political leadership were particularly evident in countries that had conflicts with high rates of death or conflicts long in duration. This is evident from the high correlation between women's political representation and the intensity and duration of conflict, as well as the change in sex ratio. All of these measures are

indicative of the extent to which society was ruptured by war, making it easier to adopt new norms and institutions.

Civil wars that ended in peace negotiations had a greater chance of creating possibilities for negotiating women’s rights rather than conflicts that ended in a decisive victory for one side, as was the case in Angola and Sri Lanka. This is because peace negotiations and constitution writing exercises allowed for the insertion of women’s rights agendas.

Possibilities for restructuring the political order to bring in new actors like women were more likely after major civil war or wars of national liberation and are less likely after interstate or proxy wars and low-level conflict, localized rebellions, or coups d’état. Ongoing conflicts do not allow for sufficient stability to allow political actors to concern themselves with legislative reform; therefore one should not expect much legal change during conflict.

Finally, the perception that women were outsiders to politics and had not been primary leaders of militias was also a contributing factor in opening up possibilities for female leadership since their involvement was perceived as a break with the status quo.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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