

Gender Symposia during Donor Conferences: A Model to Guarantee Women Leaders a Voice in Setting Priorities for Reconstruction

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Donor conferences are critical for focusing global attention on a country's post-conflict priorities. Key decision makers representing the post-conflict country as well as bilateral and multilateral donors from around the world gather to define a path to peace and prosperity for a war-torn society. Sector experts present long-term needs assessments for analysis and discussion. Aid agencies announce pledges of financial and technical assistance.

Women are essential partners in rebuilding after war. Often the majority of the post-conflict population, women regularly maintain their communities through years of violence. They possess critical knowledge of local priorities and needs. Frequently, they are better trusted by conflict survivors and less tainted by the conflict than men. Along with their dependent children, women are also usually the majority of the displaced and most vulnerable.

Despite women's central importance to reconstruction, they are regularly marginalized by the donor assistance pledging process. Women and other civil society leaders are only sporadically consulted in determining reconstruction priorities and needs. Male government representatives dominate donor conference delegations.

A gender symposium held in conjunction with an international donor conference can help provide women and civil society with a voice in reconstruction. Such a parallel conference enables women from the aid-receiving country to highlight priorities to donors. It provides a venue for policymakers from around the world to consult with women representing diverse constituencies. It also offers female leaders from the conflict zone the opportunity to build relationships with key decision makers.

In conjunction with recent donor conferences for Afghanistan, Liberia, and Sudan, The Institute for Inclusive Security organized gender symposia that focused attention on female leaders and on women's needs and priorities in reconstruction.

The Afghanistan Experience

In late January 2010, the president of Afghanistan, the British prime minister, and the UN secretary-general hosted a conference in London for the international donor community "to fully align military and civilian resources behind an Afghan-led political strategy." The Dutch government had expressed concern in late 2009 that the conference might take place without meaningful participation by Afghan women leaders. In response, Inclusive Security joined with the UN Development Fund for Women and the Afghan Women's Network to ensure that donors at the London Conference heard directly from Afghan women. Five Afghan women leaders succeeded in conveying the priorities of Afghan women to the most senior representatives of many donor governments.



The delegation of Afghan women met with Hillary Rodham Clinton, US Secretary of State.

To prepare for effective advocacy during the London conference, in early January UNIFEM and AWN organized a series of meetings in Kabul to begin developing a statement expressing the opinions of a wide range of Afghan women leaders on their priorities for international support. The Kabul meetings were followed by a gathering with a smaller number of AWN members in Dubai to create a framing document to bring to London.

As the London Conference began, Inclusive Security worked in London with Afghan women leaders to develop concrete recommendations on security and governance priorities. Five of the leaders built on their efforts in Kabul and Dubai; several other Afghan women leaders who were in London in conjunction with events related to the conference also participated. Their priorities included the following:

1. Ensuring that women's representation in peace processes is consistent with constitutional guarantees of women's representation, such that women must make up at least 25 percent of any peace process, including peace jirgas;
2. Guaranteeing that reconciliation initiatives protect women's rights so the status of women is not bargained away in any short-term effort to achieve stability; and
3. Implementing gender-responsive security policies that better serve women.

With no formal option for the Afghan women to meet with representatives of the donor governments, Inclusive Security worked with UNIFEM to get them admitted to the London Conference's opening reception hosted by the Prince of Wales. At that gathering, the Afghan women leaders delivered their written recommendations in person to the president of Afghanistan, the British prime minister, the chancellor of Germany, the US secretary of state and the US special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, the foreign ministers of Afghanistan, Australia, Belgium, France, Germany, India, New Zealand, and Norway, as well as several senior NATO officials.

The women also participated in a briefing at the UK House of Commons, a gathering of civil society organizations at which they spoke, a press event organized by the US secretary of state, and the conference's main plenary event.

Ultimately, only members of the formal Afghan delegation and two civil society representatives were admitted to participate in the main plenary event. As one of two speakers who represented Afghan civil society there, Arzo Qanih of Afghanistan, the sole Afghan woman to address the conference plenary, delivered a statement on behalf of Afghan women. Other Afghan women gained entry into the conference venue by obtaining press credentials and then distributed copies of the recommendations developed in London, as well as copies of Qanih's statement, to the press.

International media coverage played an important role in elevating the visibility of the Afghan women leaders and the prominence of their messages. The women credentialed as journalists provided real-time commentary for networks (including BBC and CBC) covering the event. *The New York Times*, *TIME* magazine, Reuters, and many other media outlets carried relevant stories mentioning the women.

The Afghan women who traveled to London influenced the proceedings of the conference. The US secretary of state even recognized them in her remarks at a press briefing during which she announced the US government's ten-year "National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan." Inclusive Security also worked with the US State Department to craft language affirming the rights of women in any negotiations with the Taliban. That language survived into the official communiqué issued at the conclusion of the London Conference.

AWN, UNIFEM, and Inclusive Security continued to build on the momentum from the London Conference in working with the US Institute of Peace to prepare Afghan women to participate in the peace jirga in late June 2010. At that jirga, more than 400 women were among the approximately 1,600 provincial, religious, tribal, and other leaders.

The Liberia Experience

In February 2007, Inclusive Security partnered with UNIFEM, the World Bank, and the Liberian Ministry of Gender and Development to host 18 women leaders from government and civil society for a one-day symposium in Washington, DC on gender and development. The event was held in conjunction with the Liberia Partners' Forum, which brought together the government of Liberia, international donors, and development agencies to discuss debt forgiveness, establish priorities for reconstruction, and pledge financial assistance.

Before the symposium, Inclusive Security led a two-day preparatory conference to develop formal, written input to the interim Poverty Reduction Strategy, the document used by donors to determine priorities for development. Participants made recommendations for improving each of the four "pillars" identified in the iPRS (enhancing national security; revitalizing the national economy; strengthening governance and rule of law; and rehabilitating infrastructure and delivering basic services). Additionally, they highlighted:

1. The need to balance efforts to ensure security with programs that drive economic development and improve health and education, which rebuild communities and demonstrate local progress.
2. That women's inclusion isn't only about guaranteeing women's representation. Rather, it is about recognizing the unique leadership women offer and training them to participate effectively in governance at all levels.
3. That many "women's issues," such as the need for an effective justice system and a means to combat HIV/AIDS, are also national priorities.
4. The importance of collaboration between the government and civil society.

Symposium participants were granted observer status in the Partners' Forum. Additionally, Julia Duncan-Cassell, superintendent of Grand Bassa County, delivered a statement to the Partners' Forum plenary on behalf of fellow symposium attendees.

The gender symposium and enhanced women's participation in the Partners' Forum increased the focus on engaging women and addressing their needs in subsequent planning. Several country delegations commented on Cassell's remarks and the importance of putting a human face on the reconstruction process. Subsequently, the World Bank Gender and Development Unit committed additional human and financial resources to ensure attention to gender in the development of the Liberia Poverty Reduction Strategy. Liberian government officials and international donor community representatives in Monrovia established a working group to track consideration of gender throughout all pillars of the PRS.



Julia Duncan-Cassell delivered remarks at the World Bank on behalf of the Liberian delegation. During two days of consultations, the delegation developed a comprehensive set of recommendations for improving the interim Poverty Reduction Strategy developed by the government of Liberia.

The Sudan Experience

Norway hosted the May 2008 Oslo Donor Consortium to review progress on the implementation of Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and to generate donor pledges to support further reconstruction and development in Sudan. Inclusive Security worked with the Norwegian Government and UNIFEM to hold a meeting of Sudanese women alongside the consortium. Twelve women traveled from Sudan to Norway for a three-day conference that brought together major donors and senior officials from the World Bank, the UN, and the government of Sudan. They were joined by women from the Sudanese diaspora living in Europe.

Prior to traveling to Norway, participants gathered their colleagues in civil society to review progress toward addressing women's needs in peace building and reconstruction. Upon arrival, they consolidated their work and drafted a set of priorities for increasing women's inclusion in all aspects of Sudan's development. They recommended four key strategies:

1. Fast-track efforts to address areas in which women's most serious human development deficits are concentrated;
2. Prioritize women's leadership;
3. Enhance cooperation between government and women's civil society organizations; and
4. Increase the accountability of governments and donors to women.

UN Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro, the most senior UN official in attendance, met with delegates at the end of their two-day Preparatory Conference. She called their contributions critical to progress in Sudan and highlighted their priorities in the consortium's opening address.

As the consortium commenced, the Sudanese women circulated their written priorities widely, leaving copies of the two-page document at materials tables, in common areas, and outside meeting rooms. Most importantly, they presented their priorities directly at breaks, lunch, and evening receptions to senior leaders representing the donor nations, the Sudanese government, the UN, and the World Bank.



The delegation of Sudanese women met with Joanne Sandler, Deputy Director-Program, UNIFEM; Asha-Rose Migiro, UN Deputy Secretary-General; and Erik Solheim, Norway's Minister for International Cooperation.

Inclusive Security, UNIFEM, the Norwegian government, and, most importantly, the women delegates themselves advocated extensively for admission to the formal consortium meetings and for speaking opportunities. Only on the last day did organizers grant them access and an opportunity to address the plenary. Two participants conveyed the group's efforts through formal statements.

Following the conference, participants worked to sustain momentum built in Oslo. Aiming to broaden support and advocacy, they translated their priorities into Arabic and distributed them to colleagues throughout Sudan. They strategized to develop indicators and timelines for monitoring the implementation of recommendations and to sustain strong coordination among women from all parts of the country.

Donor discourse changed dramatically in response to the women's actions. Only nine donors had even mentioned women or gender in their opening remarks. Three days later, during the closing session while pledging funds for Sudanese reconstruction, 20 of 22 donor delegations mentioned the need to fund women's leadership and priorities. Norway set aside additional funds to address women's needs in southern Sudan. Norwegian State Secretary Raymond Johansen, as well as representatives of the Netherlands and Canada, explicitly acknowledged the important work of the women participants and called for their inclusion in the full session the next time the consortium met.

Replicating Successful Gender Symposia

Key to Success: Work early, assiduously, and consistently with organizers of donor conferences to give women access to the main conference, invitations to all associated receptions and dinners, and speaking slots to present their views and recommendations during relevant sections of the donor conference agenda.

→ **Recommendation:** Partner with local women's groups to advocate to local government authorities, international organization representatives, and donor country representatives for gender symposium participants to be given entry passes and speaking time to address all participants.

→ **Recommendation:** Focus particularly on cultivating support in the donor conference's host country and in the organization structuring the conference (often the World Bank, UN Development Programme, and/or the national government hosting the conference), as they control admission.

Key to Success: Reach out as broadly as possible to identify a diverse group of women leaders in government and civil society who can attend the donor conference and credibly and legitimately represent the views of women from the conflict area.

→ **Recommendation:** Solicit nominations from international and local groups that have experience working with women leaders; select individuals who are recommended by several sources and have a true constituency back home.

→ **Recommendation:** Make sure gender symposium participants hail from different parts of the country, represent various ethnic and religious groups, and lead within government or civil society.

→ **Recommendation:** Explore inviting representatives of the diaspora community living near the location of the donor conference; they can help enrich the discussion and increase the visible presence of women.

- Key to Success:** Plan for the gender symposium to begin one or two days before the donor conference.
- **Recommendation:** Hold the symposium in the same location as the donor conference; a shared location will facilitate interaction with senior-level policymakers and delegates.
 - **Recommendation:** House gender symposium participants in the same hotel as donor conference participants; this will maximize the visibility of women and the time available for them to network with donor conference delegates.
 - **Recommendation:** Invite policymakers to address the gender symposium conference and meet with gender symposium participants; this can be done as part of the formal daily program, in the evening, or during breaks in programming.
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- Key to Success:** Create an agenda for the gender symposium that enables participants to identify priorities for investment and attention.
- **Recommendation:** Begin the gender symposium by allowing participants to analyze and reflect on documents prepared by the international donor community to serve as the foundation for providing post-conflict aid.
 - **Recommendation:** Help symposium participants identify gaps in the existing donor documents. Divide participants into small groups by interest and expertise to analyze different sections of documents (by area of need or proposed investment).
 - **Recommendation:** Following the analysis of donor documents, help participants select a limited set of priorities to emphasize to donors. It is optimal to focus on 10 to 15 key areas.
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- Key to Success:** Help participants develop a written document that reflects group consensus regarding the conclusions and recommendations emerging from the gender symposium and highlighting women's priorities for reconstruction.
- **Recommendation:** Work with participants to negotiate shared priorities to be presented in writing to donors.
 - **Recommendation:** Help participants develop a polished document that uses the language of the donor community.
 - **Recommendation:** Distribute the written summary of shared conclusions and recommendations widely at the donor conference and to members of the media.

Key to Success: In consultation with participants, select one to three people to speak to donor conference attendees to present the conclusions of the gender symposium.

- **Recommendation:** Study the donor conference agenda to identify sessions at which it would be appropriate to present the gender symposium conclusions; speak with donor conference organizers to request an opportunity for gender symposium participants to deliver remarks.
- **Recommendation:** Ensure that speakers reflect the diversity of the nation and participants in the symposium.
- **Recommendation:** Write concise remarks to be read (no longer than five minutes) and distributed in hard copy. The remarks should be derived from the longer documents but should not repeat the longer documents verbatim.
- **Recommendation:** Practice delivery of written remarks with speakers. Replace difficult-to-pronounce words.
- **Recommendation:** Show speakers the venue where they will address the donor conference beforehand so they are familiar with the space.

Key to Success: Follow up after the gender symposium to disseminate gender symposium conclusions, recommendations, and written remarks.

- **Recommendation:** Advocate for attention to priorities identified at the gender symposium to policymakers within the post-conflict country as well as to international policymakers charged with implementing the outcomes from the donor conference.
- **Recommendation:** Organize, or encourage women participants to schedule, a meeting to brief women back home on the conference, related conclusions, and next steps.
- **Recommendation:** Track donor fulfillment of promises and pledges related to women's inclusion and to addressing women's priorities and needs.

Key to Success: Look for opportunities to leverage media interest to elevate and increase the visibility of women's priorities and recommendations.

- **Recommendation:** Contact news organizations in advance so that they know women leaders are interested in speaking with journalists. Determine which journalists are covering an event and contact them directly.
- **Recommendation:** Prepare women leaders with a few specific ideas to express to the media. Develop particular verbiage that is easy to pronounce.
- **Recommendation:** Organize a press conference at the conclusion of the women's preparatory meeting but before the official event, to focus attention on the women.
- **Recommendation:** Obtain press credentials for women leaders so that they can get close to the journalists.
- **Recommendation:** Distribute copies of oral statements to journalists electronically and in printed form.
- **Recommendation:** Have women leaders wear distinctive clothing that will appeal to television journalists.