

Investing in gender equality

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Demonstration for peace in Colombia. Flickr. Some rights reserved.

KATJA NOORDAM | MARCH 16, 2016 - A corporate perspective with a focus on gender equality makes obvious that investing in the human capital of women equates to investing in the development of strong businesses in peaceful societies. [Also available in: Spanish | Portuguese.](#)

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Various international experiences in post-conflict contexts demonstrate that the role of women in a country's socio-economic, political and cultural reconstruction is essential for a sustainable and lasting peace. Generally, during and immediately after armed conflicts, women's presence in the workforce increases due to the absence - or death - of men who have traditionally

provided for families' economic livelihood. In so doing, women stimulate local economic recovery once hostilities have ended.

While more systematic research is needed to conclusively ascertain a positive relationship between female labour force participation and economic recovery in post-conflict scenarios, there are strong indications as regards this relationship. In Colombia, for example, evidence was found of local economic stimulus generated by women in areas affected by the conflict. For one, the economic activity of women can generate additional wealth, help maintain functioning markets, and increase productivity in the use of resources, and for another, it can bring greater prosperity to the home and to the community as a result of an increase in per capita consumption. [1]

Women in the workforce: an indispensable generator of economic development

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD, estimates that if the global level of female labour participation were to reach the same as that of its male counterpart by 2030, countries' GDP would grow by 12%. This is to say that increasing national income, which is necessary for a sustainable peace, depends largely on the full participation of women in the workforce. From a business perspective, according to Deloitte (2015), investing in women is investing in what the consulting firm calls the 'gender dividend'. The full integration of women into the workplace and the market can generate significant return reflected in increased sales, market expansion, and improved employability and retention of human talent, of prime importance for business development. [2]

But how to bring these facts to bear on the reality of a post-conflict Colombia? Undoubtedly, women's economic empowerment will not be an easy task. The regions hardest hit by the armed conflict are, at the same time, the areas most affected by poverty, inequality and exclusion. And it is precisely in these areas where gender gaps are often wider than in other parts of the country, according to studies by organizations such as UN Women, a United Nations organization for gender equality and women's empowerment. [3]

At the national level, women's labour participation is lower than that of men, and they earn 15-20% less in jobs that have the same responsibilities. The number of unpaid hours worked is 3.5 times more for women than for men. For those women that have paid work, 60% work in the informal market. Within the Colombian business sector, while female recruitment has improved for specific areas (public relations, human resources, finance or administration for example), they do not occupy more than 12% of high corporate positions, according to International Labour Organization (ILO) statistics (2015). [4]

Added to this scenario of country-level gender inequality are gaps generated or exacerbated by armed conflict at the local level. The Ombudsman notes that in rural areas various phenomena associated with the war have harmed women specifically. Among these are sexual exploitation of women and girls, which is associated with illegal mining and other activities in the context of the war economy, linkages to drugs trafficking, and persecution of rural women leaders [5]. The nearly three million women registered displaced by the Victims Unit are particularly vulnerable in these situations. They also have to deal with a number of additional socio-economic and legal risks, such as barriers to return to their areas of origin and obstacles to registering land in their name.

The persistence of public officials' prejudices and outlooks that tend to justify exclusion and even violence against women is worrying. According to the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Equality for Women, these prejudices limit women's access to justice for acts related to the armed conflict. In addition, they can prevent effective design and implementation of public policies for equitable socio-economic inclusion of women. [6]

Lines of action for business and women's empowerment for peace

To address these and other shortfalls, we at the Ideas for Peace Foundation (Fundación Ideas para la Paz, FIP) and in partnership with UN Women Colombia, have defined several lines of action regarding women's economic empowerment from inside the business sector. The aim is to provide the private sector with concrete tools for the inclusion of equality for women in their policies and operating practices in the (post-) conflict context.

Five lines are prioritised: Inclusive work environments and responsible management of human rights and women's rights – lines of action that relate to the business's inner workings and its daily operations -, Entrepreneurship for peace, Strengthening of local capacities for public benefit, and Reconciliation and new narratives..

Among those international guidelines and norms that inspired the development of the lines of action are the Women's Empowerment Principles, published in 2011 by the United Nations Global Compact and UN Women to promote the full participation of women in all sectors and at all levels of economic activity. Furthermore, the new Sustainable Development Goals include numerous goals designed to promote women's social, economic and political empowerment, and can relate directly to business operations.

To consolidate these international frameworks with the present conflict situation in Colombia and its possible post-conflict iteration which is currently being negotiated in Havana, the lines of action reflect elements of the priorities defined by the government for the business sector and peacebuilding. And as a complement, cornerstones of the agenda for business in

peacebuilding identified by the FIP, and the strategic priorities based on the work ongoing by UN Women in partnership with the Global Compact, with different businesses in Colombia, were taken as references.

Beyond gender and employment policies

Achieving inclusion into the labour market and women's economic empowerment in Colombia goes beyond those obvious - but very important - actions such as forming a gender policy for the business. Promoting equality of women in local (post-) conflict contexts requires, additionally, efforts beyond hiring female victims or female excombatants. Filling female and male supply and wage gaps in the regions hit by the conflict means designing and implementing initiatives capable of transforming patterns of economic marginalization of women rooted in local traditions. This means building bridges between groups divided not only by deep imbalances of power, but also by resentments generated by decades of armed conflict.

Businesses can act in many ways and from many areas, in different operational spheres. These actions include, to name just a few possibilities, identifying and managing risks and impacts relating to women and girls generated by business operations, ensuring the representative inclusion of different population groups of women in consultation processes for economic projects affecting neighbouring communities, providing support - financial, technical, and forms of corporate volunteer schemes, etc. - to local dialogue initiatives led by women, or promoting, in the company's value chain, access to financial resources for productive projects for women.

Sometimes these actions go beyond the ambit of the company's daily operations. An example is the case of strengthening capacities for public benefit. The experience gained in international peacebuilding demonstrates the vital importance of the presence of strong public institutions and citizen participation as pillars of lasting peace. But for many businesses it is not so obvious where their interest would lie and what their role would be in this regard; much less how the strengthening of public institutions and participatory democracy are associated with the issue of gender equality.

Nonetheless, there are many responses that can be brought to the table to clarify the 'how' and the 'why' of the private sector's actions in this area. The existence of institutions capable of implementation, compliance and control, supports an favourable and secure environment with transparent rules for business. If this institutionality extends to guarantees for the rights of women and to promoting their economic empowerment, this will impact positively on the creation and expansion of stable markets. This impact is reflected in part in strengthening the purchasing power of women, providing them with autonomy in their consumption and purchase of businesses' products and services. And furthermore, the effects are evident from

the perspective of women as producers and business providers of quality inputs for businesses..

Encouraging lobbying, and promoting, from the business sector, opportunities for consensus on public policies regarding social issues, employment and training, contributes to the creation of human capital in areas affected by conflict, with emphasis on gender equality. Human capital - the skills, competencies, knowledge and experience of individuals and societies needed to generate economic progress and be resilient to adversity - is one of the foundations of sustainable peace identified by different international studies. [7]

Human capital for sustainable peace

For businesses, human capital refers to the abilities, knowledge and skills of employees. In this regard, strengthening human capital benefits capacities for business growth, innovation and competitiveness. If the macroeconomic perspective is brought together with the corporate perspective of human capital with a focus on gender equality, it is obvious that investing in the human capital of women - who represent half of society and half the potential workforce - equates to investing in the development of strong businesses in peaceful societies. This is where the gender dividend and the peace dividend converge in Colombia.

In Colombia different women producers' initiatives and micro-businesses have been observed that operate under the most adverse conditions from the point of view of both conflict and machismo. These are stories of challenges faced and further and above all, economic independence, self-esteem and business returns achieved. Also, several large and medium-sized companies have implemented effective policies and practices of female workforce participation, despite sometimes adverse organizational cultures towards gender equality.

There is no one-size-fits-all strategy: what there are, however, are numerous concrete measures to strengthen the economic potential of women in Colombia from within the private sector, in accordance with local needs and opportunities. Developing as a company towards empowering women to build sustainable peace requires concrete and systematic actions over time, with an innovative and comprehensive vision. It also requires, with the will from senior corporate management as well as the time, human resources and budgets to allow for trial and error, investing in new initiatives and improving upon them based on lessons learned, which will include the perspectives of the women themselves. •

Footnotes

[1] Justino, Patricia. *Mujeres que trabajan por la recuperación: impacto del empleo femenino sobre el bienestar familiar y comunitario después de un conflicto*. UN Women, 2012

[2] Pellgrino, Greg, S. D'Amato, A. Weisberg. The gender dividend: Making the Business case for investing in women. Deloitte, 2015

[3] <http://colombia.unwomen.org/es/onu-mujeres-en-colombia/las-mujeres-en-colombia>

[4] Colombia, ¿uno de los países con más mujeres al mando?, 3 de agosto del 2015, Dinero.com. Para estadísticas sobre mujer, economía y participación laboral see: UNDP, briefing notes anuales para Colombia en materia de trabajo para el desarrollo humano, y el Índice de Desigualdad de Género anual para Colombia; Ministerio de Trabajo; <http://www.mintrabajo.gov.co/equidad.html>;

[5] El conflicto armado y el riesgo para la mujer rural. Estudios de caso en los departamentos de Chocó, Córdoba, Santander y Caquetá, Defensoría del Pueblo, 2014

[6] Estudio sobre tolerancia social e institucional a la violencia basada en género en Colombia. Consejería Presidencial para la Equidad de la Mujer, 2015

[7] Peace through prosperity. Integrating peacebuilding into economic development. International Alert, 2015, y: Pillars of peace. Understanding the key attitudes and institutions that underpin peaceful societies. Institute for Economics and Peace, 2013

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