

Making Cities Safer: Gender, Urban Insecurity, and Police Reform in Fragile States

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by
Sarah Katz-Lavigne

Introduction

Building on a paper by Susann Feuerschütz, "[Gender and Urban \(In\)Security in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States](#)," The North-South Institute hosted a round-table discussion on March 18, 2013, entitled "Making Cities Safer: Gender, Urban Insecurity, and Police Reform in Fragile States." The event drew on a definition of safety as "freedom from direct physical and sexual violence" to discuss the interaction between gender and urban insecurity, and the role of police reform in improving gender-sensitive safety. The discussion was held under the Chatham House Rule of non-attribution, with development practitioners, academics, and government officials participating. The goal was to inform a policy-oriented research program that better incorporates a gender lens, thereby contributing to practical recommendations on how to appropriately incorporate gender into urban police reform interventions in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS).

The discussion addressed three central questions:

- What does it mean to be (in)secure in a city?
- Where and how do gender and urban (in)security interact in fragile states?
- How can police reform help to improve gender-sensitive urban security?

The Fragile and Conflict-Affected States Context

Unprecedented levels of urbanization, particularly due to violent conflict, have characterized FCAS in recent years. Robert Muggah terms this the "urban dilemma": while rapid urbanization is the primary force for development, it may create or exacerbate security risks.¹ Sustained interventions are needed to address insecurity in urban settings. Yet, the range of issues encompassed by the interaction among gender, insecurity, and state fragility is poorly understood. How can these gaps be addressed?

What Does It Mean to Be (In)Secure in a City?

"The evidence base is quite thin in terms of what makes a city safer and more inclusive." —Round-table participant

One challenge to a more meaningful understanding of urban (in)security is the lack of tools to measure the multi-layered nature of violence. Homicide rates are one of few statistics captured on a systematic basis in most countries. There is a need to

¹ Robert Muggah, *Researching the Urban Dilemma: Urbanization, Poverty and Violence* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2012).

understand how gendered socialization shapes violence—such as why homicide rates for men are double those for women—while moving beyond a simplistic focus on violent male youth and female victims. Round-table participants acknowledged that the gender dimension is often the best proxy for safety and that women in urban settings face considerable risk of being sexually harassed and abused.

Sexual and gender-based violence is often seen as inherently difficult to measure. Despite advances using different types of survey methodology, research may require a willingness to engage with imperfect data, such as on private violence. The limited availability of data on gender and urban insecurity may make it necessary to use data from more stable developing countries to inform policy recommendations. A collective approach, with common indicators and information shared across cities, potentially in partnership with companies like Google, is needed.

Do we understand the dynamics of urbanites' different survival and coping strategies in FCAS and other developing countries? Institutions in FCAS are often weaker than those in countries where there are more community-based structures. A more helpful understanding, around which the policy community is increasingly coalescing, is that deficits of government authority, legitimacy, and capacity can be found in relatively strong states, such as Colombia. It is more analytically useful to refer, as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee does, to "fragile situations." Recognizing the fluidity and dynamism of "fragile places" and the opportunities they present to influence how cities grow suggests that as urban planning occurs alongside the creation of new social relationships and expansion of government institutions, it must also address (gendered) insecurity.

Key Points

- Existing measures of urban violence do not adequately take gender into account.
- Data on gender-based violence can be lacking, difficult to access, or empirically unclear; new initiatives and partnerships are needed to remedy this.
- Better understanding is needed of the differences between FCAS and other stable developing countries in terms of urban (in)security needs, urbanites' survival and coping strategies, and the gender dimensions thereof.

Where and How Do Gender and Urban (In)Security Interact in Fragile States?

There are positive, neutral, and negative interactions between gender and insecurity, with variations between public and private spaces. Though much gendered violence occurs in private spaces, public violence is easier to grapple with from a state policy perspective. Stresses on social networks and ties can push youth into gangs and other non-traditional or insecure groupings. Traffic accidents can affect women, girls and marginalized men and boys involved in the informal sale of goods by roads. Children may face unsafe commutes to and from school. Geography is an important entry point to understanding local realities. Mapping where violence occurs—through initiatives such as HarassMap, which uses mobile phones to map the sexual harassment of men and women in Egypt—encourages us to ask why, where, and to whom violence happens. In some places, geographies of fear or perceived threat, rather than of reality, may exist.

Urban violence can be mapped at the macro, meso, and micro levels. At the macro level, country comparisons can be made, including between those not typically thought of as fragile but where high levels of gendered violence remain (South Africa and India, for instance). At the meso level, the view that movement from rural to urban areas exacerbates violence may be oversimplified. Many shantytown residents are forced to the periphery of a city from elsewhere in the city due to neo-liberal models of urbanism and economic development. Industries characterized by hostel life, such as mining, may contribute to a masculinized, aggressive identity that can lead to violence against women or men when individuals face stresses such as unemployment. At the micro level, gender norms may be “transgressed” through the use of space. By engaging in economic activity, attending school, or just being in public, women may be more vulnerable to public and private violence. Understanding how places are gendered is necessary for effective police reform.

Useful information on gendered realities in urban contexts in FCAS could include qualitative data on perceptions, since when it comes to gender, as one round-table participant said, “there is no objective perspective—there are many perspectives.” However, anecdotal evidence may fail to fit into structured performance measurement frameworks. This may explain the slow pace of the meaningful integration of gender, still seen as “soft security,” into mainstream analysis and policy-making.

Key Points

- Gender and insecurity interact to (re)produce violence, including gender-based violence, both in private and public spaces (such as markets and busy roads).
- Geography is an important lens through which to understand why, where, and to whom violence occurs.
- Significant research gaps exist on gendered realities in urban contexts in FCAS; less-structured data, such as information on perceptions, could be a valuable tool to complement more “traditional” measures such as homicide rates.

How Can Police Reform Help to Improve Gender-Sensitive Urban Security?

A police service has a key role to play in improving security in urban areas. In the long term and along with other institutions, it can help bring about greater security, but only by integrating gender into police reform. Three areas for reform were identified:

1. Strengthening women’s representation in a police service.
2. Fostering an organizational culture that promotes equality and is respectful of human and women’s rights.
3. Developing a community-based policing model that responds to local needs and promotes joint police and community efforts to address the causes of violence and identify longer-lasting solutions.

The three areas are mutually reinforcing. First of all, women continue to be under-represented in police services. This not only fails to recognize the benefits of women’s participation, but also affects police responsiveness. Many countries have created women-only police stations, albeit with mixed results. Anecdotal evidence from the Democratic Republic of the Congo suggests that women reporting sexual and gender-based violence are more at ease with female officers. Yet, as a forthcoming study by the International Peace Institute highlights, a singular focus on numbers of women may obscure the goal of fostering a gender perspective within police work. Gender analysis emphasizes the need for victims *and* perpetrators to discuss violence openly.

Social norms and biases that promote gender inequality and discrimination continue to prevail in organizational cultures of countries’ security sectors. Top-down procedures and policies and bottom-up training approaches must be reconciled. Challenges to community-based policing often arise in countries where the military is powerful. In

Pakistan, where the army tends to overrule the police, the population is accustomed to military involvement. This hinders the development of community policing.

In such contexts, and in places where the police have been implicated in violent conflict, repression, and human rights abuses, police services are often seen in a negative light by the people they are meant to serve. Gender-based violence perpetrated by the police is frequent. The lack of trust that exists between the police and community also hinders the development of community policing. In order to overcome negative public perceptions, engagement with the police by a variety of state and non-state actors, and transformation of its aggressive image is necessary. The meaningful integration of gender into police reform requires significant resources, including gender experts for security analysis prior to project development.

Key Points

- Strengthening women's representation in a police service is an important measure to address gender-based violence in FCAS, but should not obscure the need to build police services that can address gender issues within the community.
- Police reform interventions should focus on changing organizational cultures that, within police services, allows for the persistence of gender inequality.
- The successful implementation of community-based policing may require efforts to tackle community perceptions of the police as aggressive or distant.

Next Steps

Urbanization in FCAS presents important opportunities for reconfiguring gender relations and is reflective of what is happening elsewhere. Building on the round table, The North-South Institute plans to explore how gendered urban insecurity differs between FCAS and other developing countries. This will help to determine whether there is something distinctive about gender and urban insecurity in FCAS, or if diverse urban centres can be integrated into a broad analytical framework. Such a framework would provide practical options for policy-makers and practitioners to respond to the challenges of inadequate tools to capture gendered dynamics, insufficient understanding of how gender and urban insecurity interact in FCAS, and the implications of this for police reform and other processes.

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For further information, please contact Jennifer Salahub, Senior Researcher and Theme Leader, Fragile and Conflict-Affected States at jsalahub@nsi-ins.ca.