
2017

**Violent conflict, political settlement
and intimate partner violence**

Lessons from Northern Ireland

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Research Report

Report policy recommendations

1. An understanding of inter-personal ('domestic') violence (IPV) that incorporates coercive and controlling behaviour related to threats of harassment and psychological abuse, alongside physical violence, is vital in both conflict and post-conflict situations.
2. Given the investment in security sector reforms and DDR that to date has predominantly favoured male-led organisations, the role of women post-conflict should also be considered in future resource allocation.
3. DDR processes have significant implications for women experiencing IPV.
4. The decommissioning of illegally held weapons and the regulation of legally held firearms should become more of a focus in negotiations on disarmament and normalisation as these have IPV-prevention dividends.
5. In formulating policy relating to IPV in conflict and post-conflict societies, statutory agencies should take into consideration the impact of, and connections between, violent conflict and IPV.
6. Service providers place a greater priority on training and data collection in relation to IPV when there is a shift in focus from the ethno-national conflict to other forms of violence such as IPV.
7. Responses to IPV are transformed when increased choices/options open up allowing victims to turn to more legitimate sources of help following a conflict.
8. In post-conflict societies increased reporting and improved access to criminal justice agencies is just as likely an explanation for the increase in IPV as the return home of armed combatants.
9. Institutional reforms to policing that form part of a peace process political settlement and help to establish a more representative, transparent, accountable police service can have a positive impact for victims of IPV.
10. The re-orientation of a conflict-focused and militarized 'police force' to a more community based police service is a key factor in increasing victim confidence in policing following a political settlement.

Report summary

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a global phenomenon, but it is shaped by the socio-political and cultural factors that exist within a given society. A key factor shaping IPV is the presence of violent conflict, although empirical research on the precise ways in which IPV and conflict connect has been scarce. Drawing on a Northern Ireland case study, this briefing paper seeks to address this gap by investigating how the transition from violent conflict to peaceful political settlement has shaped experiences of and responses to IPV. More specifically, the research investigates changes across three key areas, namely policing, paramilitarism and firearms. It does so on the basis of findings from more than 100 in-depth semi-structured interviews with women victims of IPV from across Northern Ireland conducted at two junctures; first in 1992 during a period of protracted violent conflict, and more recently in 2016 at a time of enduring peace. The findings trace the changes that have occurred across each of these areas and highlight the problems that remain in the post-conflict environment. The policy implications of these findings for political settlements are outlined below. The research contributes to better understanding of how IPV shapes women's participation in peace processes, and how peace processes can re-shape violence beyond the conflict in ways that enable the fuller participation of women.

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Context

Global statistics reveal that the highest prevalence rates of IPV are generally found in those countries recently affected by violent conflict (Ali, Asad, Mogren, & Krantz 2011; Garcia-Moreno et al. 2006). Quantitative studies suggest an increase in levels of IPV following the onset of violent conflict (Saile, Neuner, Ertl, & Catani, 2013; Peterman, Palermo & Bredenkamp 2011; Clark, et al., 2010), with one study from Uganda showing 37% more likelihood of women living in conflict areas experiencing IPV in the previous year than those from peaceful regions (Koenig et al., 2003). However, the reliability of quantitative data based on conflict-affected settings is often limited by the distorting effect of the conflict on data collection. Variations in methods of collection and assessment also make comparison between studies more difficult (Saile, Neuner, Ertl, & Catani, 2013; McWilliams & Ní Aoláin, 2013). An increase, or spike, in official statistics on IPV in the aftermath of conflict may be connected to improved service provision and more accurate data collection as shown below. Both researchers and policy-makers need to be cognisant of these factors.

Although there has been much debate on the increased prevalence of IPV post-conflict, much less is known about how the relationship between violent conflict and IPV is mediated during a peace process. We know little about the ways in which the occurrence of violent conflict and the cessation of hostilities in a society shape victims experiences of IPV. With these key gaps in mind, the research had three key objectives:

- to assess any changes that occurred in the policing of IPV between the 1992 (in conflict) and 2016 (post-conflict) studies
- to examine the impact of paramilitarism on experiences of IPV between the studies
- and to examine the impact of firearms on experiences of IPV between the studies

Methodology

The same methodology was used in the first (1992) and second (2016) studies with both studies using qualitative research methods in the form of semi-structured interviews and employing identical approaches to sampling and data collection. A non-probability sampling strategy was used to identify potential participants, paying attention to the inclusion of women¹ from across different age groups², from rural and urban areas and from different religious, ethnic and economic backgrounds. Both studies were assisted by Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation with their refuges and outreach centres helping to recruit respondents and provide support during and after interviews.³ In each of the studies, data was analysed for 60 to 70 respondents. A systematic coding scheme drawn from the research questions, interview questions and main debates in the literature was used to analyse the data. While the interview questions asked in the first study were repeated in the 2016 study, other questions were added to explore the impact of the political settlement. The additional questions related to the impact of the demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) processes on victims experiences of IPV. Questions in both studies included the use of firearms, paramilitary presence in communities and other security related aspects in the context of IPV.

¹ Only women were included in the sample, a decision taken to ensure methodological consistency and thus comparability with the 1992 study which had a women-only sample.

² For ethical reasons no women/girls under the age of 18 were interviewed.

³ Ensuring the provision of qualified emotional and practical support for participants was a high priority throughout the research.

Findings

In Northern Ireland there was a large increase in IPV to over 29,000 incidents in 2016/17⁴ from the much smaller figure of 5,903 incidents in 1995/6, recorded just before the political settlement.⁵ Whether the increase in domestic violence relates to an actual increase in incidents or to an increase in reporting is open to debate. The absence of regular large-scale survey data during a conflict makes it difficult to provide a reliable answer to whether the increase relates to more extensive IPV post-conflict. The reluctance of victims to report their abuse during a conflict has to be considered, where the perception is that the focus of attention will be on countering political terrorism rather than other forms of violence. In post-conflict situations where prisoners are being reintegrated into society or where standing armies are returning from conflict zones, there may be a spike in IPV. In other situations such as Northern Ireland, a continuum of IPV is just as likely given that combatants have continued to live alongside their partners during and after the conflict.

Police response to IPV

Improvements in policing of IPV following a successful transition from violent conflict to peaceful political settlement must also be taken into account. The 2016 research study from Northern Ireland shows a significant increase in positive appraisals of policing when compared to the 1992 results.⁶ The proportion of participants who described the police as 'helpful' rose by 40% between the studies and perhaps more significantly the proportion of participants who described them as 'not helpful', fell by 44%⁷. These changes are also reflected in the qualitative accounts given by participants and the following extract provides one typical example of positive reports on policing:

I had a lovely police officer; he was really nice. They [police] came out right away and then came [back] the next day and took photographs...and put out a warrant for him... I'd give them [police] ten out of ten.

In explaining the low level of satisfaction with police in the 1992 study, a common feature of the 1992 study was that police sided with perpetrators, minimised violence, and/or refused to intervene in 'domestics'. The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) at that time was composed of officers from an almost exclusively Protestant background (more than 92%). Trust in the police was particularly low among Catholic, nationalist/republican communities who tended to view the police as a source of harassment, and where accessing police could itself attract a violent response from non-state armed opposition groups. The high level of mistrust between communities and the police, in situations where a minority community is policed by an almost exclusively majority force, limits both access to police officers and the reporting of IPV crimes from these communities (Erez, Ibarra, & Gur, 2015; Swaine, 2015). This issue of distrust of police in relation to IPV, which was a key finding of the 1992 study, was not raised by any participants (including participants from Catholic,

⁴ Figures from 2017 PSNI annual report shows a 37% increase in incidents of IPV as reported to the police from 2004/5 to 2016/17.

⁵ This is also the official figure recorded by the police that is closest to the 1992 study when there was no rigorous data collection for IPV.

⁶ The 1992 study has been published as a book manuscript; see McWilliams & McKiernan (1993).

⁷ The increase in satisfaction with police responses to IPV was from 9/35 (25.7%) in 1992 to 25/40 (62.5%) in 2016 whilst the decrease was from 26/35 (74.3%) in 1992 to 12/40 (30%) in 2016. These figures relate only to the portion of participants who had contact with the police in relation to IPV.

nationalist/republican communities) in the 2016 post-conflict study and points to the successful post-conflict reforms recommended by the Patten Commission, following the 1998 peace agreement.⁸

In addition to changes in appraisals of policing between the studies, significant change is also evident in terms of how the police respond to IPV incidents. For the 2016 study, most participants who had contacted the police reported that the police took official action, either by arresting the perpetrator (in 14/40 cases; 35%) or issuing them with an official caution (13/40 cases; 32.5%) whilst other participants reported that the police were helpful in other ways. In the 1992 study, few participants reported that the police took official action, with only three reports (out of 35 respondents; 8.6%) stating that the police arrested the perpetrator and three (out of 35; 8.6%) reporting that they issued an official caution. Between the two studies, this represents an increase of 26.4% in reports of arrest and an increase of 23.9% in the use of official cautions. Reports of 'no action' were commonplace in 1992⁹ with several participants reporting that they waited 'all night' for police to respond. While the reports of 'no action' in the 1992 study came from participants from different localities, they were most common for participants living in 'minority' nationalist/republican communities. During the conflict, the reluctance and delay in police response was due to bogus domestic violence calls, used by republican paramilitary groups to lure police officers into these areas with a view to attacking them. Previously, the police had to be accompanied by the army when entering such areas making reporting, and responses, even more onerous. By the time of the 2016 study, the 'no go' areas, previously regarded as 'off limits' to police, had mostly disappeared which in turn meant that no participant reported that the police failed to respond or arrive when called and that most participants reported that the police were prompt in their response. Moreover the prolonged and fairly successful ceasefire of most republican groups made police response notably safer. This is a significant change and reflects the outworking of the transition from violent conflict for victims of IPV.

While the comparative results underscore a notable improvement in policing response to IPV in situations where violence was non-physical, respondents in both studies reported negative or mixed experiences with police. Whilst police officers were seen as helpful and reactive to physical violence, they became more dismissive when an incident involved psychological violence; as one study participant put it 'unless they [perpetrator] draw blood nothing is going to happen'. Respondents also reported being stalked and harassed, including by extremely violent ex-partners who had been released from prison. This issue needs to be taken more seriously, particularly in pre-release assessments of perpetrator's former behaviour. In this regard, the findings also draw attention to the value of an understanding of IPV that incorporates coercive and controlling behaviour related to threats of harassment and psychological abuse at a policy and public level. This understanding is vital to responses to IPV in both conflict and post-conflict situations.

Paramilitary control

The continuation of paramilitary control on women experiencing IPV remains a concern although it is two decades since the cessation of formal paramilitary hostilities. In the 2016 study, 11 of 53 participants¹⁰ (20.8%) raised the impact of paramilitarism on their lives when asked about the conflict and its aftermath, making it a highly prevalent legacy of the conflict. The impact of paramilitarism was evident in two main

⁸ The Patten Commission was established following the peace agreement and recommended a series of reforms to policing. The introduction of quotas for Catholic recruits led to a change in the make-up of policing with 68% and 32% of officers coming from Protestant and Catholic backgrounds in 2016 (see PSNI, 2016; CAIN, 2004).

⁹ The prevalence of this issue among study participant was not recorded in the 1992 study.

¹⁰ Whilst there were a total of 63 participants in the 2016 study, 10 participants had partners/ex-partners from outside of Northern Ireland and/or had resided in Northern Ireland for only a short period of time and thus did not consider Northern Ireland specific issues relevant for their case.

respects: on the one hand, affiliation to paramilitary groups provided a source of power to perpetrators of IPV whilst, on the other hand, they represented for victims an alternative and more rapid response to IPV; a response that meant by-passing the established criminal justice system. Considering the first and most prevalent issue, nine participants (out of 53; 17.0%) stated that their partners used or had used paramilitary connections or alleged paramilitary connections to threaten, control and/or abuse them¹¹ and this issue was raised with respect to both republican and loyalist/unionist paramilitary groups. The authenticity of a connection to paramilitary organisations was frequently open to question with many participants who raised this issue claiming the threats had been fabricated with the specific intent of controlling them. Several participants only discovered the fabrication after exiting the relationship showing that these threats had the same impact as if they were real. The fact that perpetrators of violence use their affiliation with armed groups to threaten and abuse their partners points towards the different sources of power that may be open to perpetrators of IPV in conflict and post-conflict contexts (also recorded by Swaine, 2015 and McWilliams & Ní Aoláin, 2013).

The impact of paramilitarism on perpetrator power, reporting and impunity was also reported in the 1992 study, prior to the ceasefires, when it was a central issue. In highlighting the continued influence of paramilitarism on experiences of IPV in Northern Ireland twenty years following the ceasefires, the findings call attention to the lack of a gender approach to the process of demilitarisation post conflict. The falsification and fabrication of paramilitary threats was not reported in the 1992 study since the connections at that time were mostly real. The formal process of disarmament in 2007 had closed off avenues of former control, in that perpetrators no longer had the same access to firearms or could be prosecuted for membership of an illegal organisation if found to be possessing such a firearm. These are the issues that need to inform the discourse on conflict transformation following a peace agreement.

The second aspect, relevant to this discussion, is the way in which a paramilitary/armed group acts in a policing capacity by offering 'protection' to victims of IPV. Typically, this 'protection' involves a paramilitary group issuing a warning/threat to a perpetrator to stop harassing or abusing a victim. In the 2016 study, one participant spoke about how her partner had, after many years, stopped harassing her following her request for 'somebody [from a paramilitary group] to have a wee word in his ear' whilst the second participant agreed her request served its purpose. In general, participants did not seek assistance from paramilitary groups even where this was potentially an option. In the 1992 study when the conflict was still at its height, victims reported their concerns that perpetrators were being recruited as police informers so as to avoid prosecution or enforcement orders for IPV. An allegation of this kind was sufficient to prevent an approach from victims to either the paramilitaries or the police.

Comparing the 2016 post conflict study to that taking place during the conflict in 1992, there was a decrease in the number of participants contacting paramilitary groups for assistance.¹² Across both studies participants reported that they only turned to paramilitary organisations when they felt they 'had no more options.' Moreover, whilst participants in the 1992 study spoke about how paramilitary groups had an advantage over the police since officers had to wait for clearance and/or a military escort to enter nationalist/republican areas, no such situation existed in the 2016 study. As mentioned previously, participants from all areas in the 2016 study commended the police on the speediness of their response noting that this also increased their options for other help provision. In addition to the demobilisation of paramilitary groups, changes to policing as part of the political settlement in Northern Ireland have left less of a role for paramilitary groups in responding to IPV. Even in the 1992 study when access to policing was limited, only a small number of participants reported that they had contacted paramilitary groups for assistance. The reasons were the same

¹¹ Prevalence was not recorded in the 1992 study, although it was raised as an issue (see McWilliams & McKiernan, 1993).

¹² The figures are small ranging from four (of 56; 7.1%) in 1992 to two (of 53; 3.8%) in 2016.

across both studies; that women who have been abused by their partners also fear paramilitary groups. Excessive force by armed groups in dealing with their partner is one cause for fear. Participants who spoke of the influence that paramilitaries exercised, and continue to exercise, within their communities were frightened of being held responsible for the harm caused to their partners which was not what they wanted. Punishment by men in paramilitary groups may be seen as an appropriate response but it is rarely exercised on abusive partners who are members of a paramilitary group and highlights the connections that often exist between paramilitarism and militarised masculinity.¹³ The recent data on punishment assaults carried out by paramilitary groups also confirms that many fewer attacks are on perpetrators of IPV as compared to the years prior to the ceasefires.

Firearms

The presence of a firearm in the home significantly increases the risk that a victim of IPV will sustain an injury or be killed during an incident (Dobash et al., 2007; Campbell et al., 2003). During the conflict in Northern Ireland, members of the security forces, politicians, members of the judiciary, and business people on security related contracts were permitted to have legally held 'personal protection' firearms which led to their marked increase.¹⁴ Add to this the considerable arsenal of illegal weapons including firearms by members of paramilitary groups active at the time,¹⁵ providing a picture of the extent of firearm ownership during the conflict. The extent to which these firearms impacted on participants' experiences of IPV was a main feature of the 1992 study. Participants referred to incidents in which a firearm was held to their head as well as threats from partners saying they would get a firearm. Refugee workers also recalled seeing women with circular bruising on their necks caused by a firearm's muzzle.

Comparing these findings to those from the 2016 study means that in the context of IPV, the disarmament process in Northern Ireland has had a significant impact in reducing access to firearms. In 2016, only two participants reported the use of firearms in IPV situations indicating a decrease between the studies. Legally held firearms are also more highly regulated and much less likely to be used as a weapon inside the home. The findings also reveal a shift in police attitudes and responses towards firearms in IPV situations. In the 1992 study, participants reported that the police were reluctant to remove 'personal protection' firearms and/or removed them only temporarily, returning them the next day. This is in contrast to what is recounted by two participants in the 2016 study; each noting that the firearms were immediately removed by the police, when they did contact them and not returned. The improvements to protocols where police officers responding to incidents of IPV are required to check if a firearm has been used would explain this although an alternative explanation may be that the changes to the security situation mean that police officers, or those working for the security services, no longer feel the need to take personal protection weapons (PPWs) home as was the case during the conflict. The introduction of a protocol recommending that police officers should keep these firearms (PPWs) in their workplace has also helped in this regard.

¹³ The scale of the problem has vastly reduced since the height of the conflict but brutal physical attacks still continue. The attacks can take the form of a physical assault, which typically involves a group of assailants attacking an individual with iron bars or baseball bats, resulting in physical injury. Alternatively, the attack may involve shooting the person in the knees, elbows, feet, ankles or thighs. Multiple injuries can result from a single incident and, indeed, some victims have died. There have been almost 4,000 casualties resulting from such attacks since the start of the conflict but the number has reduced in recent years, with 88 casualties recorded in 2015 (Alderice, McBurney & McWilliams 2016).

¹⁴ From 105,000 near the start of the conflict in 1973, to almost 139,000 by the time the Belfast agreement was signed in 1998 (Irish Times, 1998).

¹⁵ By way of example, the BBC News (2005) provided a full inventory of the list of weapons owned by the main nationalist paramilitary group, the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

Conclusions deriving from research findings

Policing reform and IPV

- The comparative findings from the two studies draw our attention to how the end of the conflict and effective policing changes, responding to the institutional reforms demanded by the political settlement, impact on experiences and policing of IPV. While a number of other factors have also contributed to improvements in policing of IPV, including local and global shifts in criminal justice and societal attitudes, what this research tells us is that the transition from violent conflict to peaceful political settlement has a pivotal role to play.
- Improvements to policing have also played a key role in limiting the power and control of paramilitary groups in conflicted communities. As a result of improved access to policing, participants are less likely than before to involve paramilitary groups in assistance for IPV. This, in turn, reduces the power of these groups to 'police' these communities.

DDR and IPV

- Connected to this, there was a reduction in the capacity of perpetrators to control their intimate partners using tactics of coercive control related to the presence of violent conflict. These include the reduction in paramilitary influence as a result of improvements to policing but also a more general reduction in the influence of paramilitarism and in the use of firearms between the studies as a direct result of DDR processes. The comparative findings underscore the positive impact that the demobilisation of paramilitary groups and the removal of both illegally and legally held weapons had for victims of IPV in Northern Ireland. In this regard, the study reinforces the view that the end of a conflict and crucially the institutional and legislative reforms alongside the DDR processes as part of the new political settlement provides a unique opportunity to positively transform a society.
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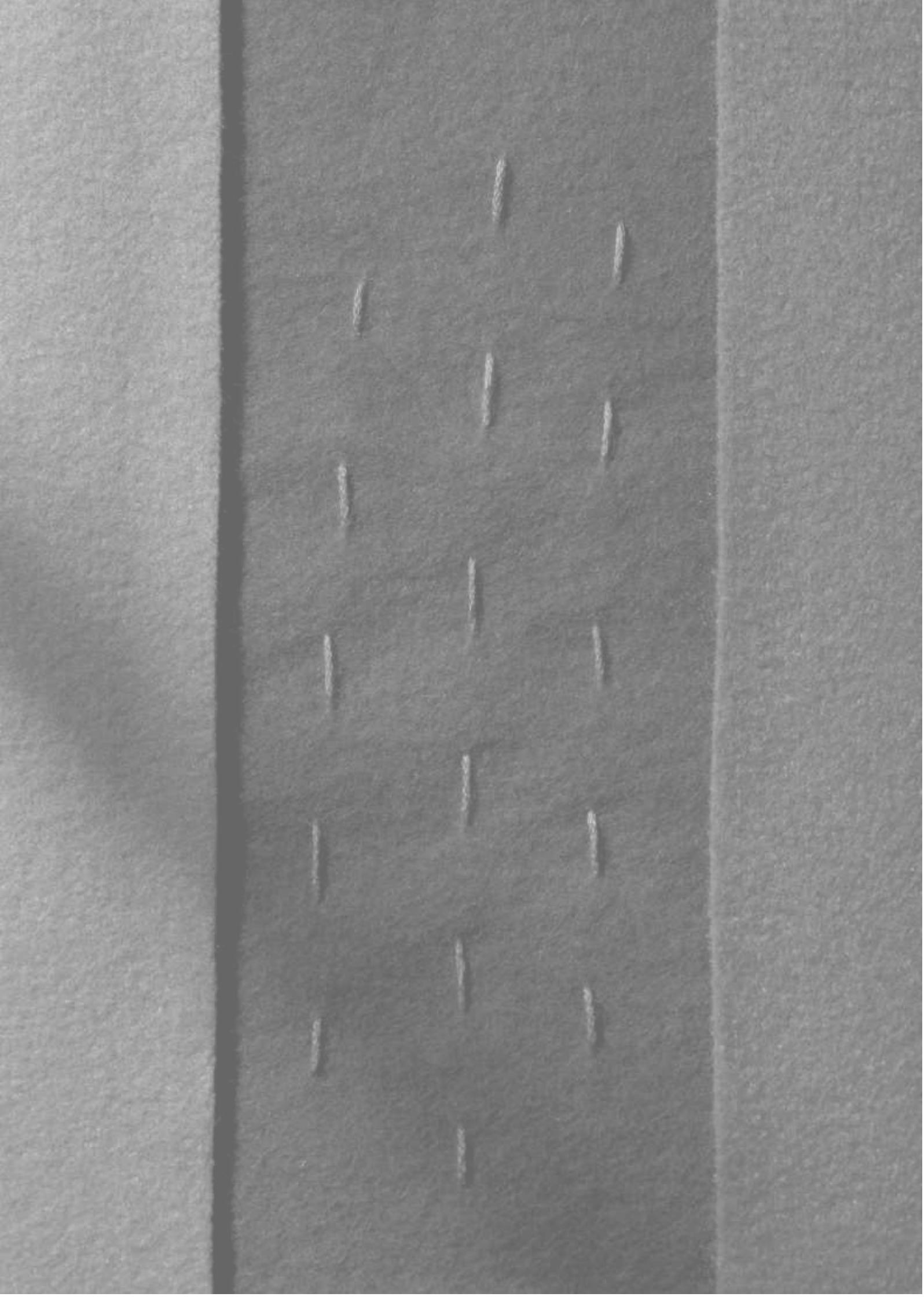
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2. How can political settlements be improved by internally-driven initiatives, including the impact of gender-inclusive processes and the rule of law institutions?
3. How, and with what interventions, can external actors change political settlements?

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