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# Exploring Policies & Practices for The Private Sector to Advance Women's Economic Empowerment and Prevent Gender Based Violence in Post-Conflict Countries

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**The American University in Cairo**  
**School of Global Affairs and Public Policy**

**EXPLORING POLICIES & PRACTICES FOR THE PRIVATE SECTOR TO ADVANCE  
WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND PREVENT GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN  
POST-CONFLICT COUNTRIES**

**A Thesis Submitted to the Public Policy and Administration Department in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of**

**Master of Public Policy**

**By**

**Amina Helal**

**Fall 2023**

## **Acknowledgments**

What an incredible journey! I am forever thankful to God for this milestone.

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I dedicate this new achievement to Faten, the strong woman who I know is very proud today, watching me from above.

## **Abstract**

This study aims to investigate the role of the private sector in advancing women's economic empowerment and gender-based violence prevention with a focus on post-conflict countries. It explores challenges facing them, and opportunities to be seized by governments and other stakeholders in this regard. The study also sheds light on the gap in the private sector's awareness and commitment to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to implement the UN Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in post-conflict countries. It explores the different possible engagements of the private sector in response to the research question. The thesis also sees the stakeholder theory as a relevant framework, particularly to analyze the private sector's engagement with NGOs. It adopts a qualitative approach incorporating in-depth semi-structured online interviews with various participants from managers in private sector companies in post-conflict countries like South Sudan, Liberia and Somalia, to leadership of NGOs active in women's economic empowerment and gender-based violence (GBV) prevention in Cambodia, Liberia, and the Horn of Africa region. In addition, interviews were conducted with Women, Peace and Security experts with extensive experience in analyzing governments' priorities in this topic to explore the possible interventions from the private sector to be better engaged in the implementation of the agenda. The analysis shows that in post-conflict countries, NGOs that execute programs to support women's economic empowerment and prevent GBV are overdependent on donor countries and international organizations to finance and sustain the implementation of their projects. They are therefore highly affected by the global change in funding priorities and feel the significant need of cooperating with private sector companies in this regard. The analysis also exposed that neither the private sector companies nor the post-conflict situations are homogeneous. The frequency of engagement to advance women's empowerment differs greatly depending on the type of company, the incentives and the engagement modalities. Similarly, in countries in their early post-conflict phase, stakeholders' priorities and challenges vary. Within the same vein, due to the high prevalence of GBV in these contexts, awareness campaigns are the most used type of strategies adopted by multinational private companies through their corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs. The study sheds light on the different roles played by the private sector, and reveals a myriad of challenges and opportunities to advance and facilitate it. The lack of accessibility to women because of the poor infrastructure, insecurity, the rural divide, as well as the lack of coordination and communication between NGOs and private companies remain key noted challenges that hinder the effective engagement of the private sector in these contexts. Furthermore, the findings showed that several existing CSR initiatives, and community development projects targeting women's economic empowerment lack depth, and are not designed to accommodate women's needs in post-conflict reconstruction situations. Thus, the thesis stresses the gap between the possible supply of support from the private sector and the existing demand either from the actors involved in advancing women's issues (such as UN agencies, the NGOs, or the women beneficiaries directly). At the normative level, the involvement of the private sector in the implementation of the WPS agenda has also been found underleveraged, only confined to being mentioned as implementing actors in the National Action Plans (NAPs) adopted by governments in these situations. Drawing policy recommendations to governments in these contexts to invest in operationalizing this engagement, and promoting the strengthened collaboration between private companies and NGOs is therefore key for achieving impactful projects. The thesis adds to the available literature on women's economic empowerment and GBV in post-conflict settings, as well as the private sector's engagement in post-conflict settings. It contributes through policy recommendations to enhancing the government's efforts to allow and facilitate the private sector's developmental impact in these particular settings, with a focus on the WPS agenda.

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## **List of Acronyms**

AU	African Union
AUCPCRD	African Union Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development
CBO	Community-based Organization
CRSV	Conflict-related Sexual Violence
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
CSO	Civil Society Organization
FMCG	Fast Moving Consumer Goods
GBV	Gender-based Violence
IRB	Institutional Review Board
ISOA	International Stability Operations Association
MNC	Multinational Corporation
NAP	National Action Plan
NGO	Non-Governmental Organizations
PPP	Public Private Partnership
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-based Violence
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TGoNU	Transitional Government of National Unity
UN	United Nations
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development Agency for International Development Aid
WPS	Women, Peace and Security agenda

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1. Background

Armed conflicts affect men and women differently. Women are often disproportionately affected as victims of Gender-based Violence (GBV). Women in these situations also experience a change in gender roles as part of societal transformations; they assume different responsibilities during the absence of their husbands and become the breadwinners of their families (Justino, 2012). This makes them a key pillar of resilience, and undermined agents of economic recovery in post-conflict settings (United Nations, 2003). 74% of interviewed Syrian women in a UNFPA assessment experienced a change in their role because of conflict and explained that this change is due to the emerging need of providing money for their family (UNFPA, 2022). However, women are commonly left behind in post-conflict reconstruction, and this is also perceived as a great development failure (Hudock, 2016).

Post-conflict situations are not easy to define. As per (Brown et al., 2008), peace agreements and cessation of hostilities mark possible ends to conflict although fighting can still continue, or even resume shortly after those agreements either for the root causes or because of spoilers. While some choose to define it with a time-bound period marked by the peace talks, others believe it is a transition continuum.

Generally, in post-conflict situations, gender-based violence (GBV) is prevalent. The Rome Statute also codified the various forms of GBV as war crimes and acts of genocide (Domingo & Castillejo, 2022). One common dimension in these situations, is that humanitarian and developmental actors, supported by the international community, are first respondents to address women's needs, working closely with governmental national institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) within the spectrum of post-conflict reconstruction. Nonetheless, the role of the private sector as a partner with initiatives targeting women's economic empowerment and GBV prevention lags behind.

To address women's pivotal role in conflict and post-conflict settings, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in the year 2000. The resolution, together with its subsequent nine



resolutions, offer a policy framework known as the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. This agenda mainly targets governments' responsibilities in order to address women in conflict and post-conflict situations. Nevertheless, there is a growing recognition of the need to explore the role of the private sector and its potential to drive positive social and economic changes to advance women's rights in these contexts. This presents an opportunity for breaking the noted silos by (Kantowitz, 2020) between peacebuilding, development and human rights efforts. It will offer a chance to capitalize on the private sector's commitments towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In fact, given that the WPS agenda is embedded within the gender-equality and women's empowerment umbrella, it is instrumental to the SDGs, particularly SDG5 on Gender Equality and SDG16 on Peace, Justice and Strong institutions (Trojanowska et al., 2018). In practice, implementing the WPS agenda falls primarily under the responsibility of governments and it is addressed by the regional and international organizations as such. Nevertheless, governments work together with their different partners such as the civil society organizations (CSOs), Non-governmental actors (NGOs), academia and private sector to reach the objectives and commitments towards the WPS agenda.

In this regard, the private sector has a significant, yet overlooked role in unlocking the potential of the WPS agenda in transforming women's status in these contexts. With the direct link between the WPS agenda and the SDGs, the private sector should no longer be sidelined, or engaged as a matter of a box-checking exercise neither in national policies aiming to advance the implementation of the WPS agenda, nor in the efforts to advance women's status in post-conflict situations. (Drpic, 2020) notes that the private sector should rather be positioned as a key player working closely with governments given its overlapping responsibilities that could feed into a comprehensive approach that empowers women in post-conflict situations and support them. In fact, as an employer, more and more aware and committed to the SDGs, the private sector has an important role in advancing women's economic empowerment through reinforcing women's equal rights in work as part of an inclusive environment, building capacities to enhance women's business skills, and through partnering with women entrepreneurs in post-conflict settings. Other opportunities offered by post-

conflict situations could also be seized to help changing the discriminatory gender norms through advocacy, and by addressing structural barriers to women empowerment. This requires the private sector's will, resources and implementation tools. For example, (CTG, 2021) suggests that the private sector can help cultivate an environment that prevents the Gender-Based Violence (GBV) including Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV), which is the type of violence that is directly or indirectly linked to conflict within the context of conflict or post-conflict settings. The private sector can also impact the community by adopting strategies that are considerate to the root causes of violence in conflict-affected situations and it can do so through gender-sensitive conflict analysis, institutionalizing women empowerment normative frameworks, or by challenging gender roles through awareness raising, sensitization and purposeful advertisement. For this to happen, a nuanced approach must be adopted by policymakers, governments and WPS stakeholders to incentivize actors of the private sector, find coping mechanisms within their various interests and identify their potential impact.

## 1.2 Significance of the study and the growing momentum on the engagement of the private sector in women's empowerment in conflict-affected countries

There is a growing momentum on the engagement of the private sector in advancing women's empowerment, and equal opportunities globally and regionally especially in post-conflict reconstruction and development. At the normative level, the African Union Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development (AUCPCRD) policy, stressed the importance of the public-private partnership for the reconstruction phase, and highlighted the need to increase women's roles as decision-makers in public and private sectors (African Union, 2006).

Furthermore, the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises, put practical gendered measures that States and business enterprises should take to prevent and address business-related human rights abuse in conflict and post-conflict contexts given the risk of sexual violence, discrimination and pervasive inequality faced by women and girls. Furthermore, it highlighted that the private sector should address gender and conflict as part of any heightened human rights due diligence (UN General Assembly, 2020).

In 2021, the UN Global Compact -also considered the world's greatest corporate responsibility initiative- encouraged companies to align their strategies and operations with the universal principles on human rights and the WPS agenda. It issued a paper titled: "Women, Peace and Security Guidance for Business", which serves as a guide for the private sector to engage in the implementation of the WPS agenda. It builds on existing frameworks such as the Compact's Ten Principles, the Women's Empowerment Principles and the UN Guiding principles on Human Rights. Within the same vein, a growing attention has been given to the importance of the WPS agenda in the work of the private sector in conflict-torn countries, given that companies are becoming more and more conscious of their responsibility towards women and girls. For example, the United States-based International Stability Operations Association (ISOA) has recently launched a WPS training for companies involved in conflict and post-conflict situations to ensure that they respect the principles of the agenda while performing their mandated tasks in these complex environments (Constellis, 2022).

Also at the policy level, in an attempt to support the endeavors of the various actors to implement the WPS agenda, UN Women in its capacity as the secretariat of the WPS Global Compact and Humanitarian Action, published a framework guiding private sector actors to take concerted action to put women and girls at the heart of post-conflict recovery. This framework promotes the use of Business-to-Business principles to enable women entrepreneurs and promote the participation of women-owned and women-led social enterprises, businesses in local, national and board room discussions on post-conflict economic recovery and economic revitalization. Furthermore, the guide calls for the private sector to support the establishment of inclusive micro-finance schemes to enable the early recovery for young women.

### 1.3. Research Question

How does the private sector contribute to advancing women's economic empowerment and the prevention of GBV in post-conflict countries?

## 1.4. Research Objectives

It is not possible to develop a precise definition of what constitutes the end of post-conflict, or a return to normalcy, and the end of economic recovery. Typologizing countries into one post-conflict group is a common tendency because of the similarities between the hardships in wars and conflicts, and also due to the impacts that conflicts have on the social fabrics of any society. Nevertheless, in policy-related studies, it is important to note the variances that exist between post-conflict countries (Brown et al., 2008).

The choice of researching post-conflict contexts in this thesis and interviewing different examples of post-conflict situations came in line with (Gizelis, 2013)'s approach on the likelihood of successful post-conflict reconstruction to show high prospects of gender-equality, given that this phase offers an opportunity to increase equality and enhance social norms. It also builds on (Kabeer, 2001)'s definition of "empowerment" featuring transformational effects as empowerment is defined as "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them." Hence this thesis positions the post-conflict situation as an early phase in the development of a country where transformation and change can happen to enhance people's lives. It is also worth noting that the GBV prevention angle of this research is based on many researchers' assessment that post-conflict settings present a high and widespread culture of violence against women as a result of the war, whereby various factors cause this increase such as alcohol abuse, traumas, along with the changes of socio-economic status (Ward, 2002).

In this regard, in an attempt to understand the dynamics and possible engagement modalities, this thesis explores **the ways through which the private sector can positively contribute to advancing women's economic empowerment and preventing gender-based violence in post-conflict situations. It also seeks to understand how this role can be facilitated.**

This thesis is based on a qualitative research method, and focuses on two key interrelated themes: (1) the private sector's role in advancing women's economic empowerment; (2) the private sector's social responsibility as a development actor in adopting gender-responsive approaches, addressing GBV in post-

conflict recovery including through partnerships with NGOs and WPS stakeholders. This thesis will fill a knowledge gap on the role of the private sector in advancing women's rights in post-conflict situations, and will add up to the growing analytical work on the practical business engagement in the implementation of the WPS agenda. It will propose policy recommendations for strategic engagement of the private companies to inform the relevant UN agencies seeking such partnerships, the governments developing WPS NAPs, women's organizations and relevant civil society actors, as well as female entrepreneurs as beneficiaries, and the private sector actors.

### 1.5. Organization of the Study

In response to the abovementioned question, the thesis is divided into the following seven chapters:

- Chapter one introduces the thesis and provides a background of the discussed issues namely: the context of post-conflict countries, the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and the role of the private sector in these contexts. The chapter also presents the research question, the research objectives and concludes by outlining the different sections of the thesis.
- Chapter two consists of the literature review of the existing research on relevant issues to the thesis's research question, namely concepts of women's economic empowerment, the private sector's role in combatting & preventing Gender-based Violence (GBV), and it also encompasses researches about the incentives for the private sector's engagement in post-conflict settings.
- Chapter three provides the context and landscape of the research question, it includes an overview on the relevant normative frameworks, strategies, initiatives and practices.
- Chapter four presents the reader with a visual representation through a diagram of the conceptual framework that helped building the study. It includes the various concepts, as well as an explanation on the logic and connections between the different pillars of the research question.

- Chapter five presents an overview on the adopted research design. Specifically, the study sheds light on the implemented research methods, sampling techniques, as well as the ethical considerations and limitations of the research.
- Chapter six provides the findings and the respective analysis of the collected data. It is divided into five key subsections.
- Finally, with a summary of the study's findings that are also relative to prior literature, chapter seven presents concluding remarks along with policy recommendations and avenues for future research.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Extensive research exists on women's economic empowerment with a focus on governments and CSO responsibility. Moreover, some researchers chose to investigate the CSR in post-conflict situations and proposed different forms of contribution by the private sector to the wellbeing of the society in which they operate. The topic of GBV prevention has also been studied by several researchers in light of its prevalence in conflict-affected societies. The studied research in this chapter helps attain a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Hence, the selected body of literature to inform this thesis is divided into four themes.

The literature review first provides some of the available research about the notion of women's economic empowerment. Secondly, it brings forward some of the available studies on the NGOs and private sector's partnerships. It then discusses existing scholarship on the role of the private sector combatting and preventing GBV. Afterwards, the incentives for the private sector's engagement in post-conflict settings are examined to show the diversity of the private sector, and provide possible engagement modalities in such contexts.

This thesis will fill a literature gap on the role of the private sector in advancing the implementation of the WPS agenda with a focus on the economic empowerment of women, and the different challenges and

possible contributions of the private sector in women economic empowerment and the protection of women from GBV in post-conflict situations. It will also address a literature gap on CSR that target women empowerment in post-conflict countries.

## 2.1. Women's economic empowerment in post-conflict settings

(True & Hewitt, 2018)'s analytical study of the link between women's economic empowerment in post-conflict situations and the "Relief and Recovery" pillar of the WPS agenda shed light on the pillar's true potential in the peace and development spectrum. It described it as a comprehensive and overlooked pillar, given that it captures both the short-term humanitarian assistance that responds to women's immediate needs in the "relief" aspect, while also alluding to the long-term "recovery" encompassing a broader understanding of the empowerment concept. It reflects four key ideas of "recovery", namely: (1) securing women's social and economic rights; (2) developing a gender perspective and promoting women's participation in economic recovery; (3) providing post-conflict financing and conducting gender budgeting; and (4) ensuring gender-transformative reparations and transitional justice, including responsiveness to SGBV survivors for women's political and economic empowerment. This research is of particular relevance to the thesis at hand as it outlines the two themes chosen for analysis: the promotion of women's participation in economic recovery, and gender-responsive reparations including the economic empowerment of SGBV survivors.

In conflict and post-conflict settings, gender roles change and women become responsible bearing the brunt of the livelihoods of their family, usually due to absence of men being imprisoned, disabled, or dead. (Justino, 2012) offered an important contribution to the literature on women in post-conflict situations and peacebuilding. It emphasized that women are beyond just a vulnerable group in these contexts; they are also valuable economic participants in the reconstruction. The UNSCR1889 of the year 2009 underlined that funding for women's early recovery needs and enabling women's capacity to engage in economic recovery lags the adequate recognition in post-conflict situations despite it being vital to increase women's empowerment. Women's economic empowerment contributes to the effectiveness of post-conflict economic

activities and growth. Their equal engagement alongside men in post-conflict economic recovery enhances the quality of social outcomes and hence leads to effectiveness (UN Peacebuilding Commission Declaration, 2013).

However, the concept of women's economic empowerment has a potential beyond the mere provision of financial resources to women. The economic empowerment with the lens of the WPS agenda suggests that the envisaged transformational potential cannot be achieved if the concept of women's economic empowerment remains confined to the "liberal" definition which is widely practiced by development organizations. They increase women's access to jobs in the formal sector, and improve the availability of credit for women entrepreneurs and invest in women's human capital, their education and health only. On the other hand, (Duncanson, 2018) argues that the empowerment concept cannot continue to be reduced to the integration of women into mainstream development. The empowerment concept should rather be seen as a "liberating" concept which challenges the structures and status quo that exacerbate women's poverty.

This study also explains that women's economic empowerment cannot happen in isolation from the different dimensions of women's social, psychological, political empowerment and rights; they are mutually reinforcing. Economic issues are among women's key challenges jeopardizing their security in conflicts, and these are combined with pre-existing inequalities like the disproportionate vulnerability in the destruction of livelihoods, education, health, and increased risks of food insecurity. For example, women's lack of property and land rights further exacerbates women's economic situation in many societies. Structural change is therefore important to ensure that institutions do not discriminate against women, and therefore lead to women's economic empowerment (Duncanson, 2018). Working towards structural change is also core to the "Relief and Recovery" pillar of WPS, it is the building block to "build back better" after conflict (True & Hewitt, 2018).

In this regard, changing norms is central to achieving structural change. Scholars including (Abril, 2009) explained that the post-conflict reconstruction phase presents an opportunity to change discriminatory gender



norms of the past and integrate women empowerment discourses as a new norm. This has been the case in Liberia where gender equality is seen as an important achievement of the “new society”, and it is also perceived as a rightful development goal. The most recommended practices in this regard are working with men to address discriminatory gender norms against women, and adopting a holistic and integrated approach in programming given that women’s needs in conflict are interlinked.

(Care, 2021)’s study conducted in seven villages across three Sudanese states (East Darfur, South Darfur, and South Kordofan) based on mixed methods, revealed that many husbands would not allow their wives to participate in the Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA), which are saving groups that offer women an opportunity to take small loans, and make investment decisions. Within the same context, also in Sudan (Mohamed, 2022) concluded based on a quantitative study that government agencies, CSOs, NGOs and international organizations need to cooperate in providing funds to the Sudanese women in the conflict-affected areas for income-generating activities and trainings. It also explained that work structures restrict women’s economic independence and make them vulnerable to men’s abuse. This is particularly stressed in Sudan because internal displacement in result of armed conflicts is prevalent and a protracted phenomenon. In addition, divorce rates leave women more vulnerable as heads of households under dire financial constraints. On the other hand, women’s access to the business network was noted by (Said & Enslin, 2020) as a challenge when starting a business. Furthermore, some women revealed that they relied on local companies’ initiative that supports women with low income to start a business. The study concluded that the lack of training, society’s perception, limited access to networking and insufficient government support were noted as key obstacles facing women with low income (Care, 2021). More broadly, research showed the universality of the lack of technical skill-set and business capacity as gaps hindering women’s economic success (Sorensen, 1998); and the need to promote the good practices of strategic business interventions that target sustainability through capacity building programmes. As such, supporting women’s economic empowerment and building their economic resilience through training that aims to enhance their knowledge

and skills, is necessary to advance the economic status of women and address their economic vulnerability (Women for Women International, 2022).

## 2.2. NGOs and private sector partnerships

While assessing the available tools to help enhance the role of the private sector in advancing women's issues in post-conflict countries, it was necessary to investigate the NGOs-corporations partnership. The business & society literature lies on theoretical frameworks and explains the dynamics, challenges and opportunities in the NGOs-corporations partnership. (Awan et al., 2020) put the "salience theory" in contrast with the "stakeholder theory" and explained that by measuring the salience, and using it as a criterion for stakeholder identification, companies marginalize some stakeholders. (Awan et al., 2020) chose to ground the stakeholder theory in ethics of care instead of salience, based on the feminist interpretation of the stakeholder theory. It also explained the difficulties facing CSR programs that aim to target marginalized stakeholder groups while shedding light on the gaps between the companies that design the CSR programs and the beneficiaries in this context. It described their issues as "complex and alien" which reflects the difficulty facing the decision makers in companies to have clarity about the communities' needs and problems. If women constitute the marginalized stakeholders, then other groups could help decrease this gap. In this regard, (Awan et al., 2020) highlighted that NGOs could help inform the companies; their role is still underleveraged. This is in harmony with (Poret, 2014)'s studied NGOs-corporations partnership as it explained that multinational corporations (MNCs) and NGOs provide public goods together with each a particular advantage: MNCs with their resources and global reach, whereas NGOs contribute with their knowledge and legitimacy.

Nevertheless, while examining the literature that studies the engagement of the private sector in advancing women's economic empowerment in post-conflict situations through partnerships with NGOs, some opposing arguments capturing practical challenges were found. For example, (Kumar, 2001) argued based on USAID case studies, that women's organizations face a funding gap in post-conflict situations and that

the private sector is unable to fill this gap. It argues that the private enterprises are at a nascent stage in post-conflict situations with an underdeveloped philanthropic activity.

Moreover, (Kumar, 2001)'s report argued that the financing dilemma discriminates between women's organizations and NGOs depending on their size and capacity. For instance, it explains that smaller women's organizations are unlikely to have the resources and expertise to compete or to meet the rigid funding criteria set by the international community. In addition, the report shed light on women's organizations' recognition of a decline in external funding which forces them to reconsider their funding strategies. This thesis will therefore contribute to exploring whether the private sector could be a potential new external funder to women's organizations and NGOs by introducing more flexible criteria that makes the funding accessible to all, or not.

### 2.3. Engaging the private sector to combat & prevent Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV)

According to a research paper by (Morbeck, 2016), the private sector, as an employer, has an important contribution to enforcing an environment that rejects, combats and prevents SGBV. It explained that the private sector can raise awareness about the issue, and train its employees in this regard. Even though SGBV can be seen as a taboo topic in certain cultures, employers should normalize it through giving their staff the "permission" and necessary information to approach this topic in the workplace and in the community.

(Morbeck, 2016) also stressed that the private sector is a key supporter to the fight against SGBV, and that it has the capability to make a difference given its vital role as a shaper of attitudes, contributing to the change of cultural and social norms. Businesses can contribute to this mission through their marketing and advertising strategies that reflect the internal principles. By avoiding gender blindness and stereotyping, by adopting gender-sensitive approaches in messaging and designing its policies and advertisements, the private sector can play an active role in promoting gender-equality and non-violence.

The extent of measures taken by companies to combat or prevent harassment in the workplace also correlates with the nature of company. For example, (Khan, 2014) noted that international companies, especially those

originally from a country with progressive labor laws, usually adopt more comprehensive policies against discrimination and harassment, than local companies.

However, given the emphasis in the literature on the need for context-specificity of CSR projects that are built on analysis due to cultural sensitivities (Barsoum & Refaat, 2015), it might be more challenging to engage in topics related to GBV in some societies than others, and this is part of the structural changes that need to be targeted by the different actors.

In addition, the private sector can also maximize the effect of its interventions to end and prevent SGBV by engaging men in its awareness raising. In fact, both genders suffer from the consequences of SGBV crimes and (Morbeck, 2016) argues that men will better assume responsibility for male violence if they are included as part of the solution. Assigning male and female spokespersons on SGBV could for example be a good practice to adopt, and businesses should not rely on showcasing the consequences by bringing victims to speak about violence.

Moreover, one of the private sector's key possible contributions in the Relief and Recovery pillar of the WPS agenda, is empowering the victims and survivors of SGBV. A study by (CTG, 2021) demonstrated good practices with regards to the private sector's engagements to address Conflict Related Sexual Violence (CRSV), such as the case study of L'Occitane luxury cosmetics, which identified shea cooperatives to establish a long-term partnership within Burkina Faso in order to create its product, targeting communities affected by CRSV. It positioned the private sector's engagement as a substantial economic reintegration model whereby it mobilizes these communities both as suppliers and as workers. The example of CRSV is directly linked to the Relief and Recovery pillar of the UNSCR1325, and it responds to the UNSCR 1820 adopted in 2008, which are both key resolutions of the WPS agenda.

#### 2.4. Incentives and modalities for the private sector's engagement in post-conflict settings

Several studies have been done on the negative impact that MNCs have caused in many countries in which they operate. (Patey, 2006) showed that some MNCs had profit-seeking rationales behind their strategic

decision-making, while others had more state-driven interests (such as securing international oil reserves for the national economy or transferring knowledge). Some MNCs have contributed to the exacerbation of conflicts, civil wars and violence due to the extractive industry activities be it through the extraction of oil, natural gas, or other precious resources like diamonds. Hence, different types of MNCs exist; some act as sources of economic and social development, while other upset the local communities either for social, environmental or human rights violations. Hence, especially in conflict-affected societies, MNCs face huge CSR dilemmas as the headquarters are not necessarily dedicated to invest in CSR.

Even on the role of the private sector actors that are not linked to the extractive industry or natural resources, contradicting views were found in the literature. While some people could argue that the private sector should not operate in post-conflict volatile environments, other researchers like (Joseph et al., 2022) explain the importance of “value creation” that happens between the businesses and the society in post-conflict situations. Directing support to businesses and entrepreneurs in post-conflict settings has been framed as a means to also invest in intergroup inclusion due to the contribution to social and economic value across society and the different community groups. Other noted incentives also include the business case in maintaining a “functioning society”, towards a stable market for it to sustain its profit, particularly in conditions where weak public governance manifests. In fact, weak institutions and governance can become an obstacle handicapping businesses’ interest. It is then notably in their interest to contribute to the solution (Joseph et al., 2022). Although (Ite, 2004) noted that businesses can achieve a real impact on the society in developing countries by increasing capacity building, knowledge transfer and job creation, he emphasized the link between the performance of national macro-economic management and the sustainability of CSR efforts by MNCs, using the example of Nigeria. It argued that government institutional failure can constitute a key turbulent in the CSR outcomes. This perspective is particularly interesting to investigate in the case of post-conflict situations characterized by weak government institutions to conclude if there are prerequisites for the success of CSR initiatives, and private sector’s involvement in the society.

Furthermore, several researches pointed the crucial role that a government can play to incentivizing the private sector. (Wirba, 2023) argued that governments should be proactive and formulate soft laws that financially incentivize the corporations to engage in CSR. Especially in developing countries and Africa, some key instruments can be leveraged by governments to promoting CSR, such as creating awareness, boosting partnerships, mandating, in addition to the drafting and promulgation of a legislation like the tax exemptions for those contributing to CSR initiatives.

Conceptually, to analyze the corporations' incentives for CSR, it is important to understand (Carroll,1991)'s CSR pyramid which refers to key layers of responsibilities: economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic. The CSR as a concept is also discussed in this thesis in order to shed light on its adoption in the post-conflict settings, and the existing limitations in such contexts. (Carroll, 1991) and (Wieland, 2009) argued that philanthropy is the least important of the three layers of responsibilities. (Wieland, 2009) distinguished CSR from philanthropy and saw CSR as a more comprehensive and broad strategy than only donating to society. CSR is explained to be a long-term process driven by a vision that requires planning beforehand. (Wirba, 2023) also believed like (Wieland, 2009) that CSR is rather a tool to spur development with socioeconomic, environmental and legal focuses. (Wirba, 2023) also noted that CSR projects should not be replicated or copied in developing countries from the developed ones and that context-specificity and community-based needs analyses should inspire corporations and guide them instead. Similarly, (Wieland, 2009) had argued that northern-based NGOs have strongly contributed to the emergence of CSR and companies' exposure to it in the developed world, more than that of the developing countries. It drew this progress back to the pressure northern-based NGOs had put on shareholder and consumers through the media. This is considered a good practice, but whether this could be applicable in the context of post-conflict situations, where even NGOs are not always that organized, and developed is important to question.

Within the same vein, (Zhao, 2021) showed that for CSR to be sustainable, the focus should go beyond philanthropic responsibility whereby companies solely engage in charitable activities. Instead, companies can fulfil their CSR by embedding resilience, and using their strengths creatively. (Zhao, 2021) also argued

that the COVID-19 pandemic has helped increase corporate public consciousness, and stressed the importance of achieving a more robust CSR awareness and practice to mitigate vulnerability. Similarly, companies' partnership with governments in complex settings like in conflicts and post-conflicts can build an institutional basis for sustainable growth.

Moreover, there are various possible forms of engagement for the private sector to take part in the reconstruction phase of post-conflict situations. A growing body of research focuses on the role of businesses in this mission, particularly through CSR, and this is in light of the world's renewed interest in businesses' role in promoting welfare. According to (Dahlsrud, 2008) who analyzed 37 different definitions of CSR, there is not a single unbiased definition, but there are similarities between them in the concept. (Dahlsrud, 2008) explained that business does not only have economic impacts, but it can also have social (and environmental in some definitions) impacts. Hopkins, for example, focused on the economic aspect of the term, explaining that the concept means treating stakeholders in an "ethical or social" manner including through creating higher standards of living while preserving the profitability of the corporation, for peoples both within and outside the corporation. This definition is relevant to the subject of the thesis, as it positions outsiders to corporations as "stakeholders", follows the stakeholder theory and sees them within their sphere of interest. Corporations can have impact on social, environmental, and human rights aspects in pursuit of corporate aims, including in the contexts in which they operate. For example, it is important to understand that sometimes, CSR's longstanding philanthropic tradition is rooted in religion, especially in religious societies.

Nevertheless, when it comes to fragile contexts like post-conflict situations, literature shows opposing scholars' opinions about asking the business community to engage in social activities that don't necessarily fit within their mandate. Some argue that non-profitable engagement is hardly perceived as a priority in post-conflict situations, particularly in light of the often-disrupted operations because of the conflict, and hence the difficulties in meeting their economic and profit targets in the first place. According to (Bray, 2009), there is a need for a nuanced approach towards the private sector to understand its actors' various

contributions to economic recovery. (Bray, 2009) explained that the private sector cannot be perceived as a homogeneous group, and that its actors' risk assessment and behavior in post-conflict recovery differ from one actor to the other. Furthermore, it argued that local entrepreneurs are the most motivated to set up businesses in post-conflict recovery, but they lack the finances, whereas the diaspora investors have the local connections and want to contribute to their country's reconstruction. In line with this argument, comparing between the MNC's and the local business's incentives to contribute to CSR, (Nielsen & Riddle, 2010) had issued an elaborate study that investigates the drivers and incentives influencing the diasporas' investments in their country of origin. Their study revealed three types of motivations pertaining to the diaspora's investment decision making process namely: financial, social and psychological drivers. The study also highlighted that in countries affected by conflict, the key driver for diaspora investment is psychological and non-financial. It clarified that this investment is justified by generating a "warm glow" or "psychic income" as these diasporas feel that they are part of building stability and development of their home nations and people living there.

In contrast, global companies or MNCs would not take the risk of investing in a "dangerous" market unless they see commensurate 'global' opportunities. Understanding (Bray, 2009)'s argument is crucial in order to manage the societal expectations from the different private sector actors. Scholars explained that the recovery phase offers a plethora of opportunities and argued that post-conflict recovery presents an opportunity for reform that is important to be seized; (M., 2007) referred to the 'golden hour' in the world of post-conflict transformation. He described it as an opportune phase where the international community can adopt legal and regulatory reforms at the early phase of the reconstruction process for a full economic recovery from conflict. Through CSR, businesses are expected to give back to the community given the weakness of the other players. However, the society should always remember that the responsibility of peace processes is inevitably political and cannot be replaced by economic initiatives. Economic and developmental initiatives, led by the private sector's actors can only alleviate some post-conflict issues as a key player for post-conflict



economic recovery. Particular attention can be given to women's issues in this context. As explained by (Karam & Jamali, 2013), CSR can contribute to developmental change that supports women.

A crucial factor to be considered by the private sector operating in conflict-affected settings is context-specificity. (Sorensen, 1998) discussed the dominant sensitivity of post-conflict settings and the war-time propaganda which tends to fuel stereotypes of the "ethnic other". It explained that the focus on women's shared experiences and inter-ethnic interaction and reconciliation could possibly help promote solidarity among women instead of reinforcing divisions based on ethnic, cultural or religious factors. It also provides examples of multi-purposed projects in Bosnia-Herzegovina that served as both income-generating projects and healing projects as they gather women of different ethnic backgrounds in a shared space based on structural similarities. Furthermore, (Herath, 2016) explains the concept of "peace" as a multidimensional one. Positive peace is characterized by the absence of structural violence (linked to poverty, discrimination etc.), it is therefore a positive condition for a lasting peace, where social justice exists. Whereas negative peace is the absence of direct personal violence (assault, war etc.) but the possible presence of structural violence. It is therefore a deeper type of violence that could be cultural, or even inherited especially as a result of ethnic conflicts. It is the case when conflicts were never reconciled and tension remains between the people. These factors are all instrumental to understand that the private sector in such contexts can also contribute to either help strengthen the reconciliation efforts, or discriminate further by marginalizing some women, based on other factors like ethnicity. The concepts of positive and negative peace are important factors to take into account while designing business's engagement activities with communities in such contexts.

## Chapter 3: Contextual Framework

### 3.1. Examples of private sector's engagement modalities

#### **3.1.1 Growing partnerships between the developmental actors and private sector**

The attention to the private sector and the benefit of its engagement for women's economic empowerment has increased exponentially over the years, both at the normative and practical levels.

The operationalization of the normative frameworks that promote the private sector's engagement to advance women's economic empowerment, with a developmental lens resulted in concrete examples like the reiteration of the African Development Bank (AfDB) of its commitment to assist in the promotion of women entrepreneurship mainstreaming in Africa through its African Women in Business (AWIB) initiative (African Development Bank, 2020). Similarly, in 2023, the European Development Bank (EBRD) signed a memorandum of understanding with Beyti - An Almarai company subsidiary - to entrench women's equal economic inclusion among all its practices, workforce, and operations, in compliance with the EU's standards and the UN's Women Empowerment Principles (UN WEPs) (Zawya, 2023). Furthermore, for the conflict-torn societies, the need to activate the role of the private sector in advancing WPS issues has been repeated at several policy debates and in policy documents. There is a strong business case to start developing and implementing WPS-focused CSR projects within companies, particularly in conflict-affected settings as highlighted by (Drpic, 2020)'s policy brief. Similarly, the United Arab Emirates during its presidency of the UN Security Council in March 2022 stressed the role of the private sector in advancing women's critical influence in the relief and recovery efforts and emphasized that this area is underleveraged and still requires further work (Kossaify, 2022).

Notwithstanding, the world of business and the world of peace and humanitarian support remain very far from each other, working in silos, despite the existing common platforms, developed guides and shared goals. Although businesses adopt an inclusive approach whereby women's empowerment is one key principle in their responsible actions at times of peace, there is a need to reestablish this link in post-conflict settings to understand the private sector's contributions in practice.

Furthermore, the conversation about the private sector's engagement in advancing the WPS agenda has been growing in light of the shifting national priorities of donor countries, and the decreased flexibility in ensuring sustainable funding because of the changing geopolitical dynamics. This situation has pushed the WPS

stakeholders (relevant UN agencies, experts and practitioners) to propose innovative financing solutions to the different programs, as well as leveraging synergies between the business world and the peace, security and humanitarian world. Optimizing the existing principles, platforms and agendas to ensure that governments effort to implement the WPS agenda is mainstreamed and perceived as a multidimensional framework is in this regard important to enhance the private sector's engagement in women empowerment activities.

### **3.1.2 UN Programming**

During the dire humanitarian situations that many countries are witnessing, UN agencies, among other international organizations have been widening their scope of partnerships, to include private sector actors. For example, UNICEF Sudan shed light on the role of the private sector in advancing its mandate vis-à-vis children and indicated the different Sudanese corporate partners of its various initiatives, while calling on all businesses in the country to adopt the Child Rights Business Principles. UNICEF Sudan has also announced its partnership with a key leading Sudanese corporation which “through its Zakat donations” supported projects targeting Sudanese children (UNICEF, 2021).

Such UN initiatives are worth recognition, and require further analysis with a gender lens, in order to understand the barriers and gaps in connecting business partners to the women empowerment and gender equality stakeholders in these contexts.

### **3.2. Government policies encouraging the private sector to engage: WPS National Action Plans**

On the other hand, at the national levels, governments adopt National Action Plans (NAPs) for the implementation of the UNSCR1325 and some even note the private sector among the implementing actors expected to deliver the plan's objectives. Sudan, in its NAP for the year 2020-2022 had included the private sector among the envisaged stakeholders to implement its “Participation of Women in the Processes of Sustainable Development”, and the “Relief and Reconstruction” goals. It also called on the private sector to

endorse laws that address sexual violence and harassment in the workplace towards “Ensuring the enactment and enforcement of national laws that comply with international standards for the protection of women and girls” (Sudan NAP, 2021). Other governments around the world also adopt NAPs in order to list their goals and vision towards the implementation of the WPS agenda, and seek strategic partnerships to finance this process. According to a study by the Cordaid and the Global Network for Women Peacebuilders aiming to draw a financing landscape for NAP UNSCR 1325 implementation, based on a survey sent to governments with NAPs in July 2013, the majority of interviewed governments (16 out of 17) believed in the role of the private sector in implementing WPS NAPs (Raaber, 2014). Governments of conflict-affected countries with WPS NAPs also referred to the private sector as a stakeholder in the implementation of the WPS agenda. Nigeria for example through its WPS NAP, referred to the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development’s cooperation with the “private sector” to fulfill the NAP commitments and to implement projects linked to UNSCR 1325 as part of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). In a similar vein, Liberia referred to the private sector in its WPS NAP implementation plan and established a “1325 Taskforce” which includes specific companies representing the private sector. Iraq has also referred to the private sector in its WPS NAP among the implementing bodies in advancing “women's efforts in relief efforts and all stages of reconstruction” (Iraq NAP, 2022). Nonetheless, despite the fact that adding the private sector on the policies is a positive sign of governments’ acknowledgement of the private sector’s role in implementing the WPS agenda, information on whether this practice by governments has been effectively implemented, and succeeded to achieve the desired impact or not remains a gap. There is a need for concrete stock taking exercise for the implementation of these goals by the private sector. This would either promote this practice or draw lessons from this engagement for future WPS NAPs.

Furthermore, the choice of post-conflict countries in this thesis was made to show the variances between two types of post-conflict countries: 1) Cambodia and Liberia, whose peace agreements date from two decades but whose socio-economic status was heavily impacted by the conflict, and have developed legal frameworks that support women empowerment and rights, the first without a WPS NAP, and the second with WPS NAP

and 2) the example of South Sudan, whose post-conflict status is more recent (peace agreement was signed in 2015), and hence its post-conflict reconstruction and development infrastructure and institutions are still in their early phases, and its government has developed a WPS NAP.

### **Background about the interviewed contexts**

#### **South Sudan:**

South Sudan is a relatively recent country being established in 2011 after its independence from Sudan. The country experienced a civil war between 2013-2015. South Sudan is composed of 32 states, and it is also characterized by strong ethnic dynamics leading to a disparity between the South Sudanese people's socio-economic status, and political power. It is a country where hopes rose high for achieving progress in gender-equality and women's empowerment. The government of South Sudan has exerted efforts to show commitment to promote women's meaningful participation in the peacebuilding process and together with the regional and international partners (UN and international community), it has pushed for women's participation in the statebuilding process (including national planning, institution-building). The peace agreements were gender-sensitive, women were represented in the fluid Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU)'s Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing, in addition to a reparation for victims of GBV and a guarantee to address those issues through the transitional justice mechanism. Furthermore, the government of South Sudan has adopted a WPS NAP, and women's economic empowerment has also been among the top priorities of the Ministry of Gender in South Sudan which received several fundings from the World Bank and invested in training women on entrepreneurial skills, and financing more than 100 small businesses led by women. However, South Sudan is both a tribal and patriarchal society which still struggles with rigid customs and norms, including cultural practices that are harmful to women. It is also characterized by severe poverty, and a high-illiteracy rate which all constitute barriers to women's positive role in achieving the aspired prosperity, and post-conflict reconstruction and development, and represent impediments to even benefit from capacity building programming (Poni, 2017).

### **Liberia:**

Liberia's 14-year-long civil war devastated the country, displaced millions and left the society traumatized. Women had a crucial role in bringing warring factions into a peace agreement in 2003. Moreover, Liberia is a best practice in breaking glass ceilings with President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the country's former president, the first female president in the African continent, and a Nobel Prize winner for her efforts and courage greatly contributing to the end of the civil war (Gallo-Cruz & Remsberg, 2021). Nevertheless, the country's economic scene is more torn towards male-dominated opportunities, women work mainly in the informal sector, and still greatly in the agricultural sector. The government has shown commitment to enhance the economic status of the country and connected communities with corporations but women remained rarely included. Liberia has a WPS NAP.

### **Cambodia:**

This Asian country is known for its three decades of war. It suffered with the Vietnamese War and the regime of the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot. Its various phases of wars and instability led to the complete devastation of the country's economic systems, and had significant effects on women and girls. Cambodian women have been traumatized by the cruel war, which was characterized by extreme violence and sexual abuse. However, (Kumar et al., 2000) explained that rape was not as severe or a weapon of war as it was the case in Rwanda or Angola, although it was common especially as committed by the Khmer Rouge officials. Furthermore, victims of such violence remained silent out of fear of social stigma. Economically, poverty remains the foremost issue facing Cambodia. Women have traditionally dominated petty businesses, mainly selling fish, vegetables, fruits etc. and 39% of the employed women work in the agricultural sector (ILO, 2021). From a gender-equality perspective, a legal framework that promotes women's equal rights exists, but the law enforcement remains slow. Cambodia did not develop a WPS NAP.

### **Somali Diaspora:**

Around two million Somali descents are living outside of Somalia. Their families have originally fled the civil war which began in 1991, and settled across the globe. The current conflict is mainly between the forces of the Federal Government of Somalia and al-Shabaab extremist group.

In 2012, the first permanent central government marked the beginning of a transition towards stability despite the ongoing incidences of violence (Horst, 2017).

In the post-conflict Somali society, a “bottom-up” strategy for development is discussed in the literature given the great impact that Somali diaspora can have as a great source of economic growth as they invest back home. The diaspora investments can create important employment opportunities for Somalis. Since 2017, Somali governmental policies recognized the importance of the Somali diaspora in the country’s reconstruction and development. The National Development Plan in its two editions (NDP8 and NDP9) dedicated a section to the diaspora’s role in building the country’s resilience through exploring the link between the remittances and social and economic priorities (European Union, 2020). It also shed light on the diaspora’s role in transferring expertise to public sector initiatives among other things. It acknowledged the importance of understanding the humanitarian-development nexus in this regard. Nevertheless, the Somali diaspora’s engagement in the developmental projects and economy remains ad-hoc and informal. One of the government’s current targets is to make it formal in order to harness resource mobilization initiatives, philanthropy, investments and to allow the transfer of skills and knowledge. In 2022, the Somali government launched the country’s first WPS NAP.

## Chapter 4: Conceptual Framework

This chapter presents the conceptual framework developed for this thesis and identifies the key concepts studied throughout the research, namely the Women, Peace and Security agenda (WPS), the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and the stakeholder theory.

Under the Women, Peace and Security agenda, the thesis focuses on women's economic empowerment and the prevention of gender-based violence. It is based on (Kabeer, 1999)'s of women's economic empowerment which is women's ability to have control over economic resources, but it also follows (Mayoux, 2000)'s definition of the term which stresses women's ability to make strategic choices and shape the change in their societies through the 'trickle down and out' effect given the interlinkage between their economic, social and political empowerment, which also echoes (Duncanson, 2018)'s "liberating" concept of the term. As for the gender-based violence, it is used throughout the thesis in its large meaning by UNWomen which defines it as any harmful act that is against a person's will and that is based on gender differences rooted in the abuse of power and harmful norms. Examples of GBV include sexual violence, forced prostitution, domestic violence, trafficking, in addition to psychological violence.

The figure below depicts the conceptual model adopted for this thesis and presents through a diagram the input-output framework which represents the connections between the various actors, also called "stakeholders" by the stakeholder theory.

This framework is consistent with (Carroll, 1991)'s explanation that CSR and the "stakeholders" concept which delineates the corporation's responsibility by identifying the societal groups that a corporation should consider and be responsive to, are naturally linked. He put the stakeholders' legitimacy and their power as the criteria affecting the corporations' decision on which stakeholder's claims to include in its work planning. Edward Freeman first introduced the stakeholder theory in 1984. However, throughout the years, along with other theorists, he re-interpreted the theory with a feminist lens to promote the corporations' social responsibility based on the moral contract between the corporation and society. The stakeholder theory is presented in the diagram because Freeman's interpretation in (Wicks et al., 1994) was based on two purposes that are very relevant to the research question at hand. The first is the moral purpose where he values the importance of seeing the corporation as a means not only an end; and the second purpose is that by transforming the masculine language in the stakeholder theory, corporations have bigger chances to respond effectively and adapt to the fast-changing environments and global economy. The original "masculine"



version of the theory perceived change as a threat to corporations whereas the feminist re-interpretation of the theory positioned it as a “vehicle” for diversity and new opportunities; which are also in accordance with the approach adopted in this thesis. On the other hand, (Awan et al., 2020) recognized the “stakeholder salience” theory as a tool that tends to exclude groups based on the level of salience which distracts the theory and removes it from its core ethical purpose. In this thesis, the stakeholder in question is women in post-conflict situations, and NGO or CSOs who support them, who according to the stakeholder salience theory, would constitute a fringe stakeholder. The thesis therefore agrees with Freeman and (Awan et al., 2020)’s critique of the stakeholder salience theory and believes that it would make corporations overlook women’s needs and potential in these vulnerable situations and exclude them instead of supporting them. The thesis follows (Wicks et al., 1994)’s feminist re-interpretation of the theory which if adopted by firms, would increase diversity, inclusion and help strengthen women’s position at the core of a transformative change to the whole society and market, regardless of the level of salience.

Furthermore, the figure also demonstrates the tools to reach the WPS agenda, and it illustrates partnerships. While CSR initiatives are some of the tools used by the private sector to achieve the key identified components of the WPS agenda in this thesis namely: women’s economic empowerment and the prevention of GBV, the National Action Plans (NAPs) are the tools used by governments to achieve the implementation of the WPS agenda. As for the NGOs, they employ programming strategies, tailored projects to achieve these same goals but are usually requiring external funding and partnerships to execute such projects.

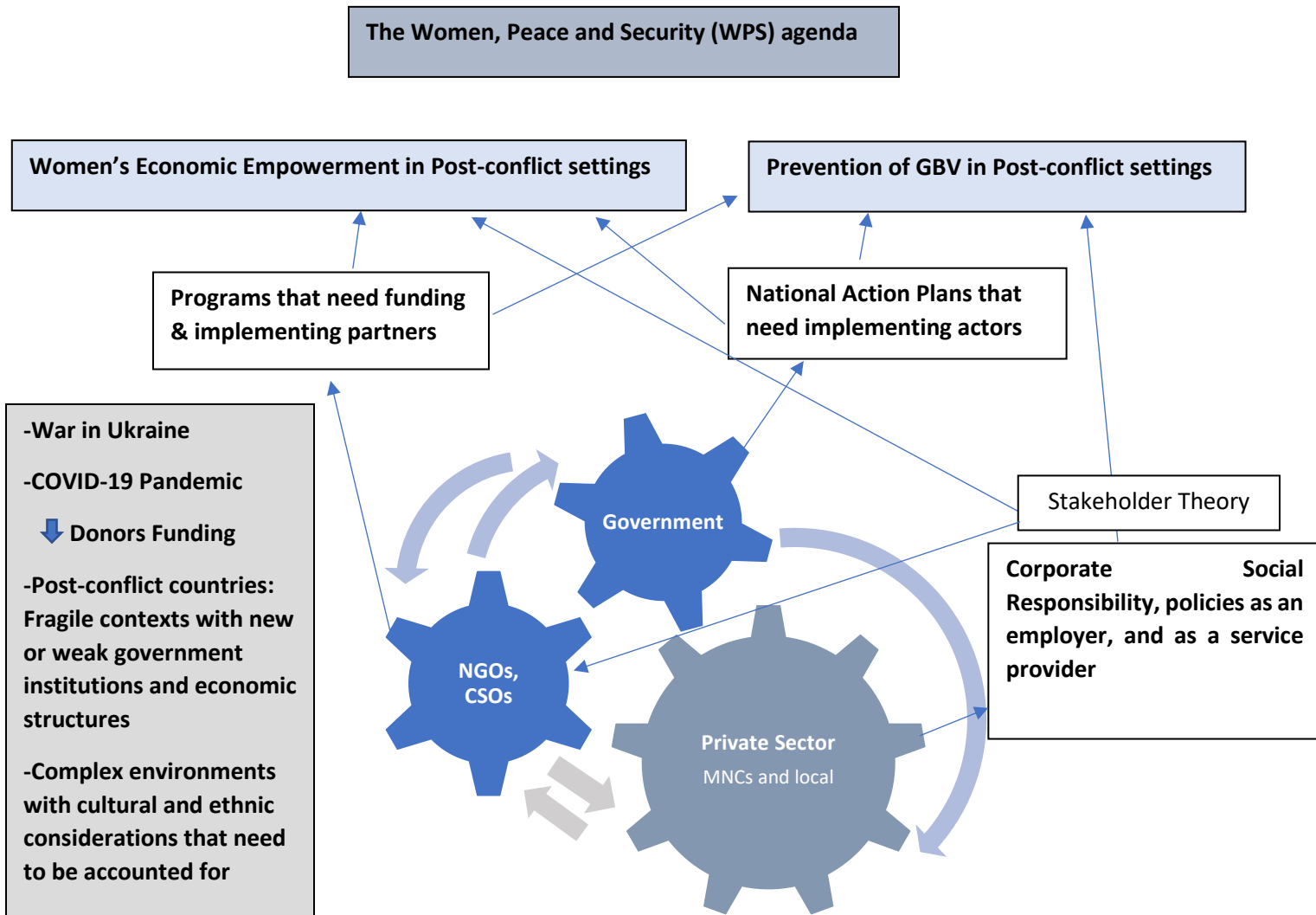
Factors characterizing the post-conflict situations are also presented in the diagram to explain the incentives, opportunities, as well as business enabling environment, which together influence the private sector’s activity.

As per this conceptual framework, all three actors: private sector, governments and NGOs collaborate together. The link between the NGOs and the governments is well-presented, whereas the connection between the private sector and the NGOs, according to research, still requires further analysis. This thesis

will help understand the challenges and limitations to this particular partnership from the outcomes of the interviews conducted with NGOs.

The figure also reflects the tensed political landscape and international relations. These are key factors influencing the decision-making process and the traditional modus operandi in the WPS agenda (which mainly is that governments adopt WPS NAPs to be funded by international donors and implemented by NGOs). These factors, such as the tight budgets because of the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the changing funding patterns because of the war in Ukraine, the complex environments in post-conflict settings that could be prone to conflict recurrence and therefore require a deep understanding of the business market and society with a conflict-sensitive lens (including ethnic and cultural knowledge if relevant to the context), affect the collaboration between governments and NGOs to achieve developmental goals. The need for more sustained forms of partnerships in light of a foreseen decrease in donor countries' funding is therefore advisable. Thus, these factors together would open new partnership opportunities for the private sector. It is within this context that governments are expected to engage further the private companies, and incentivize them to play bigger roles in the society including through facilitating their collaboration with the NGOs and positioning them as active players. It would then be expected for private firms to increase their investments in women's economic empowerment including through their modes of operations and their CSR. This can also entail shifting their engagement modalities in these topics from ad-hoc, occasional, and superficial to ones that are more structured, sustainable, and needs-based.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Diagram



## Chapter 5: Research Design

This chapter justifies the choice of the qualitative research methodology and objectives in its first section. It then portrays the data collection plan in the second section and discusses in the third section the sample as

well as the logic behind its choice. The fourth section includes the data analysis. The chapter is concluded with section five and six explaining the ethical consideration and the research limitations.

### 5.1 Research Methodology: Qualitative Research

The qualitative research methodology was selected for this study given the nature of the topic, the limited available research on it and the substantial importance of understanding the opinion and perspectives of the various stakeholders relevant to the topic. In other words, the data collected and the human interaction in this process are the basis of the knowledge-building in qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Hence, the choice of qualitative research came with the objective to capture the possible opportunities based on different views globally about the proposed research question. It is also in the researcher's view, the best method to embrace the complex environment of policies in this particular study.

The qualitative research will help understand the perception of women in post-conflict settings of the role of private companies in advancing their issues, the efforts of the private companies with their nuances in the studied contexts, but it will also allow for concrete recommendations from the WPS experts on means to capitalize on the private sector's community engagements to advance the implementation of the WPS agenda. For the data analysis, I first transcribed the audio recordings of the conducted interviews using "Otter.ai" transcribing system. I then followed an open-coding approach whereby I color-coded the raw transcripts of the 11 interviews grouping them based on similarities. This process was first guided by some of the already identified themes in the literature review chapter such as women's economic empowerment private sector's incentives, and NGOs' partnerships. It was then analyzed based on the coding technique which helped grouping the data into themes and subthemes based on similarities.

### 5.2. Data Collection

Primary data has been collected through online interviews with key informants. In order to capture the strategic approaches adopted in response to the question at hand, a total number of 11 one-on-one in depth

semi-structured online interviews were completed with higher level corporate personnel within a diverse range of sectors all actively working in post-conflict countries, founders and directors of NGOs active in the topic, as well as WPS experts. Following purposive sampling approaches, the interviewees were conducted online given the research topic's focus on post-conflict countries, and the difficult accessibility to international examples. Reaching out to the informants was done through LinkedIn messages and through emails.

A set of in depth semi-structured interview questions was prepared for each category of interviewees namely: private sector companies, Women's NGOs in direct contact with women beneficiaries and senior experts in the topic. Regarding the triangulation, the findings from the collected data were fact-checked for reliability and accuracy purposes through desktop research (by checking their entities different online records, press releases, websites). The online interviews were undertaken from 11 May 2023 to 20 July 2023. The duration of the interviews was set for a maximum of 40 minutes each.

### **5.2.1 Sample**

Interviews were conducted with 1 senior expert on the topics of WPS, and whose work include analyzing the future and effectiveness of the WPS policy framework globally. In order to capture the various trends by governments adopting WPS NAPs and exploring the means of engagement for the private sector, an interview was conducted with 1 senior international WPS NAPs consultant and expert with experience working on more than eighty NAPs. 1 interview was conducted with the Executive Director of a leading African policy platform that discusses issues of conflict and post-conflict situations. Furthermore, 1 interview was conducted with the director of an NGO working on issues of women empowerment and GBV prevention in Cambodia, 1 with the founder of a regional NGO working on women empowerment in the Horn of Africa region and 1 with the founder of an NGO working in Liberia. 5 interviews were conducted with corporate professionals in different post-conflict countries namely in South Sudan and Liberia: 1 managerial level employee at a telecommunication multinational, 1 founder of a hospitality services business in South Sudan,

1 managerial level employee at a local telecommunication company and 1 founder of a leading FMCG company in Liberia. In order to understand the perspective of business owners from the diaspora of a conflict-affected country, 1 interview was conducted with a Somali entrepreneur based in the United States of America.

All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed afterwards.

### **Sampling Criteria:**

The sample was designed carefully to capture the perspectives of different types of private sector companies: the local and the multinational. It also included experts in the topic to help understand the possibilities and potential challenges for all stakeholders from their extensive experience.

This choice of sample allows for a richer analysis given the diverse contextual challenges and opportunities facing the government, the private sector, the civil society in addressing women's needs.

### **Background about the informants**

#### **Subject-matter experts:**

1. Executive Director of a leading African forum for issues of conflict and post-conflict policymaking  
The choice of this forum came based on the fact that it is the first of its kind platform looking to address key inseparable issues namely peace, security and development. The Forum also brings together policymakers from Africa, as well as the private sector, and civil society, with the aim of providing action-oriented discussion on the challenges and opportunities of all these actors together.
2. Senior international expert on the issue of WPS and NAPS with experience supporting more than 80 governments around the world to develop their NAPs including the setting of objectives, actors, implementation matrix.
3. Senior expert in the topic of women in conflict and post-conflict situations, and founder of an African women's NGO.

#### **NGOs in post-conflict countries:**

4. Founder of a small-scale women's NGO in Liberia.
5. Founder of a women's NGO active in WPS issues in the Horn of Africa.
6. Director of a leading NGO in Cambodia working on women empowerment and development.

Private Sector in post-conflict countries:

7. Management of a multinational telecommunications company in South Sudan (has a CSR department); the choice of this company was made based on its record in corporate social responsibility and its presence in different countries. The choice of telecommunications company in specific came to shed light on the possible challenges and opportunities facing telecommunications companies in post-conflict and fragile settings.
8. Management of a leading telecommunications service provider in Africa, focusing on Liberia (does not have a CSR department, but has CSR projects)
9. Founder of a leading local FMCG company in Liberia (does not have a CSR department, but has CSR projects)
10. Management of a local hospitality business in South Sudan (does not have a CSR department, and does not have any CSR contributions)
11. Somali entrepreneur based in the US

### **5.2.2. Ethical Considerations**

In line with the American University in Cairo (AUC) guidelines and ethical standards for data collected from human subjects, a rigorous assessment and approval from the university's Institutional review board (IRB) was received on 8 May 2023. Thus, the data collection only started after this date.

Whilst conducting the research, I clearly introduced myself as a graduating student at AUC, presented the aim of the research study and its context being academic.

With respect to the validity of the study, following (Creswell & Miller, 2000), the triangulation technique through the interviews versus the available literature (including through checking official websites) was used.

Not to pose any risks on the participants, prior to the interviews, participants were sent a written consent form including the purpose and risks linked to this study. The interview data was also made confidential whereby the name of the entity was not revealed at any of the research stages, and whereby the name of the interviewee was also made anonymous.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed after having informed the participants and received their agreement. The recordings were made through Zoom and will be kept safely for three years.

### **5.2.3. Limitations**

One of the key limitations that were experienced during the data collection was the accessibility difficulties in conducting online interviews through Zoom with some of the informants in post-conflict countries given the poor internet connection where they are based. Moreover, given the sensitivity of post-conflict contexts, especially with high-political awareness, some informants were skeptical, despite the consent form and the reaffirmed confidentiality. For example, some MNCs refused to conduct the interview claiming the



sensitivities of their projects in post-conflict countries and their inability to discuss any of their projects in these fragile contexts. Some other informants were conservative, vague, reserved and sometimes inaccurate in their answers especially when it came to describing their achievements, and explaining the challenges they face while designing their community development and corporate social responsibility work.

## Chapter 6: Findings & Data Analysis

This chapter presents the findings and analyses of the collected data from the 11 conducted interviews. The findings are grouped into the five following themes:

**1) The Private Sector as an Employer; 2) The Private Sector as a Service Provider 3) The Corporate Social Responsibility 4) Challenges and implementation gaps and 5) The opportunities: “How can the role of the private sector in advancing women’s economic empowerment and GBV prevention be facilitated?”**

Within the first theme, the role of the private sector as an employer is explored, pertaining its engagement for women’s economic empowerment and the prevention of GBV. The second theme focuses on the role of the private sector as a service provider, as well as its role as a consumer in light of procurement practices in this regard. The third theme presents the data about the private sector’s contribution as a developmental partner, with focus on CSR initiatives. Furthermore, it illustrates the different behaviors towards CSR initiatives as well as the analysis based on the different stakeholders’ opinions on the topic. The fourth theme presents the various noted challenges throughout the collected data. The challenges vary between those hindering the private sector’s engagement in CSR and advancing women’s economic empowerment and the prevention of GBV in general, the private sector’s difficulties working with NGOs and CSOs, including awareness of WPS agenda, and priorities while shedding light on bottlenecks. The fifth and last theme proposes areas of opportunities that could be leveraged by the different actors, including governments, private sector (local and multinational corporations) for sustainable business practices.

The private sector actors behave differently from each other and there is no single homogeneous private sector group. Their activities are different, their incentives are different, their prioritization also differ from each other. The factors that distinguish them vary between leadership and management styles, extent of strictness; for example: more consistent for those who report to headquarters conform to an existing global policy, whereas it is more flexible in terms of decision-making, and budget-sensitivity for local companies.

It was noted throughout the thesis that MNCs have strategies and global policies setting their contributory agendas to women's economic empowerment whereas local businesses showed more flexibility and ad-hoc individual initiatives rising from their management's beliefs.

Within each category of private sector actors, different roles are played to advance women's economic empower and GBV prevention. The identified roles are as follows:

### 6.1. The Private sector as an employer

Conflicts and wars disrupt livelihoods and cause income poverty. It is within this vein that post-conflict situations' economic recovery is crucial to examine from a practical point of view in light of the complex environments that are characterized by weak legal frameworks and accountability. Employment helps generating quick peace dividends. All interviewed private sector informants shed light on their contribution to women's economic empowerment as employers, in an attempt to be the best possible version of employers they could be. Nuances were noticed given the drivers of each type of private sector (MNCs, local or diaspora). It is also worth mentioning that depending on the stage of post-conflict, the level of development of countries' legal frameworks varies. Most of the private sector interviewees described their employment strategies as voluntarily, and out of proactivity and not to conform with a national law. Furthermore, features of employment as a source of income generation for women, and consistent payment of wages were presented in the findings, whereas issues like a minimum wage, pension or even protection policies were absent in all

of the answers. All informants stressed their hiring strategies, be it through imposing equal hiring processes that do not discriminate between men and women, or by ensuring that women have no barriers occupying leadership roles in the business's hierarchy, or even by providing fully paid maternity leaves. Furthermore, some companies expressed their investment in women's skillset by preparing them through training courses for early recruitment to join their company at later stages.

### **Investing in securing women's income and equal hiring opportunities**

In the contexts where governments and societies are still recovering from conflict and struggling with weak institutions, the hiring process at the private sector depends fully on the employer's decisions. This requires private companies, locals or multinationals, to take initiatives in order to secure a balanced labor framework with an equal hiring process between men and women. This is of particular importance in patriarchal societies where norms would favorize men over women. The interviewed owner of a hospitality business in South Sudan highlighted the below in response to the question about the business's contribution to women's economic empowerment:

***“There aren't any minimum wage requirements and there isn't any legislation currently in South Sudan that says that there's any kind of equal pay. So when I first started this company, and I had somebody else handling labor contracts for me, I did find that they were paying women less than men. That's something I don't do, I made sure that women are paid the same as men at the same level at the same grade.”*** [...] Owner of a hospitality business in South Sudan, June 2023

Offering paid full-time jobs to women represents security, which goes beyond the employed woman herself. In fact, it was repeated by different informants that it helps the woman sustain her family's livelihood. This finding mirrors the literature which also links women's economic empowerment to improved household's income and welfare; (Justino, 2012) explained that women's participation in labor market leads to higher investments in education of children, health and food consumption. Furthermore, beyond the impact on their household, women's economic empowerment, and participation in the labor market enhances community recovery as it generates wealth, helps create and maintain a functioning market. (Justino, 2012)'s study also referred to the enhancement of institutional quality based on an improved trust between the members of the

community in result of women's activity in the public social and political spheres. Hence, women's economic activity is therefore not only beneficial for women, or their households but it can have a positive effect on the whole community.

This factor is well-acknowledged by many private sector employers, especially local businesses' managers in the interviewed post-conflict countries. Moreover, the owner of a hospitality business in South Sudan, followed in the answer while giving a particular attention to the importance of this business's role as an employer for its female employees:

***“This business existed here for 10 or 15 years, and a lot of the people who worked for it worked here for the duration of that time. And they were able to earn a steady wage, they got paid on time, they were able to educate their children, they have access to health care, they had predictability, and they had a dignified, honest living wage.”*** Owner of a hospitality business in South Sudan, June 2023

The informant highlighted a few notions that relate to “security”, such as “steady wage”, the fact that they have been employed for a long time, meaning continuous financial income, as well as terms like “dignified, honest living wage”, all elements referring to the impact that this business does to its employees by hiring them. Furthermore, an emphasis has been put on two key necessities namely: children's education, and access to health care. The informant also insisted in the choice of words on how this business's contribution can go far beyond being seen as a normal remuneration for a job done, by becoming a push factor for a bigger circle of impact on the employee's family's livelihood. As explained by (Duncanson, 2018) the liberal economic empowerment model which entails employment creation is very-much welcomed by women in the post-war phase whereas empowerment that follows the liberating approach (such as collective advocacy to restructure gender roles in institutions for example) provides more sustainable peace and prosperity. Local businesses showed more individual initiatives by their owners and managers in shaping how they manage the hiring processes of women than MNCs. For example, due to some laws, in this same South Sudanese context where the government does not prohibit unequal pay between men and women, employers are obliged to respect the paid maternity leave. Although this applies to many societies around the world where governments adopt such progressive laws, in societies where traditions are prevalent, and where local customs are widely

respected like in South Sudan, the employers' profitability may be challenged as explained the owner of a hospitality business in South Sudan:

***“There are laws about mainly maternity pay and I think the average birth rate for a woman in South Sudan is something like eight children, and I am obliged to keep any woman on full pay, I think, for three months as maternity pay. So that is a huge burden on a company like mine. But I’ve taken the decision and a lot of companies haven’t, I’ve taken the decision that I will employ women of childbearing age. That’s certainly against the advice of my accountant. [...] So there’s no way that I am willing to discriminate against women for that reason.”*** Owner of a hospitality business in South Sudan, June 2023

The informant highlighted the importance of contextualization by describing one of the practical examples of support to women's economic empowerment that could be against the profitability of the business. The fact that the local traditions are complemented by the law make the choice of hiring women less profitable in this regard. Businesses could choose not to hire South Sudanese women of childbearing age to avoid paying up to eight maternity leaves, but they still voluntarily choose to employ women and sustain their income generation. In that sense, (Duncanson, 2018)'s liberating approach would help enhance the existing policies in order to be beneficial for both, the women employees and their employers. It would therefore help establish more sustainable incentives for the private sector's employment habits that support and empower women by tackling the structural barriers.

Furthermore, employers use different strategies to also support women's economic empowerment including fighting stereotypes that could hinder women's occupation of leadership positions at the company, or working in a non-traditional function based on gender discrimination. The founder of a leading FMCG in Liberia also reflected showing how these efforts are essential for breaking structural barriers, and helping empower women and enhancing their sense of equal social mobility.

***“I value the role women play in my life and in our society. My wife helps me out as a counterpart, as a partner and I try as much as possible during the process of deploying, and make sure that I give added consideration to qualified women candidates. In fact, in my factory, I made it a mandate where at some point in time when I just started my food production plant, it was the idea, the misconception in the society that women cannot get into engineering or into working on food lines and a couple of technical areas and I’ve made it mandatory that those positions will be open to anyone based on that person’s competence, ability and desire to move forward. [...] So right now,***

*I've got a factory...I have about 55% women and about 45% Male.*” Founder of a leading FMCG in Liberia, June 2023

The contextual factors, such as the political role of women, the economic status of women and their activity in the society, but also the role played by women in the end of conflict, especially in Liberia, have proven throughout the study to show strong influence on the position of the women in the society, and consequently on how women are perceived. All of these factors have contributed to shaping their behavior towards women. However, although employers should be expected to treat women equally to men, without the need for a justification, or a particular exemplary role in the society to do so, the interviews conducted with informants in Liberia showed high attributions to women's roles in the society at large, before being positioned as employees. The informant started his argument and stand on how he values women's position and role in the society with his wife. From a feminist point of view, this indicates a patriarchal approach of bringing any woman back to domestic roles she plays like being his wife, his good wife who helps him as a counterpart and partner. However, it is worth noting that the informant seemed to be more integrating his personal experience at the individual level to the recruitment system he put in place, than limiting the role of women to his wife. This informant showed knowledge about the societal stereotypes related to women in non-traditional jobs, and chose to enforce a recruitment process that fights these socially-constructed roles. Being from Liberia, and coming from a family that has significant contribution to women's empowerment gains in the country, the informant presented an example of how structural change could start by individual behaviors based on personal beliefs and experiences.

It is also worth noting that the informant's expressed efforts to advance women's empowerment, or at least not to discriminate against women in the hiring processes such as ensuring that qualified women have equal access to work show positive stands towards women's status. The informant explained that he ensured that the employment criteria are non-discriminatory against women, by keeping it mandatorily competence-based. However, by keeping it competence-based, this policy could also offer higher chances for men than women given the already existing inequalities between men and women's qualification and education.

Offering training and allowing for capacity building phases would therefore complement competence-based hiring policies and help women compete.

**a) Investing in training and educating women**

Capacity building and training to boost women's technical skills in post-conflict situations has been crucial for strengthening women's economic capacities. The informants highlighted the impact that training could have on women in such contexts. In this regard, the director of an NGO in Cambodia provided an explanation from the NGO's wide experience in the field of women empowerment and development, to stress the major role of the private sector:

*“A lot of women would really need a scale of like finance or management skill on doing some like real work in Cambodia, we depend a lot on agriculture. So this is also part of private sector's role [...] make sure that women also get trained [...] So during wartime... during the conflict time, most men were there to be in the military, and so we lost a lot of men in the battle wars and women also became visible because of the conflict. So women played that major role in going for labor, going for economic trend, but because they have no skill, so they cannot really build the society, right? Like in Cambodia, we have a lot of women as the backbone of this country, but because they have no skill, they have no education, they have no rights and kind of high training, and education like men...so we built a society very slowly, in this kind of case, the private sector play very very important role to sustain the economy in this country, and also along with their benefit, they have to work with women more by providing scale, providing space of work, providing the opportunity, especially right now because the digital platform is going forward a lot.”* Director of an NGO in Cambodia, May 2023

The informant refers to women's entry into the workforce during the war without necessarily having the skills or the knowledge to do so, in order to replace the men that were lost in the war. This is widely known as a phenomenon in conflict and war-affected societies as there is evidence that women's workforce increases in wars and conflict times with the absence of their husbands, brothers and fathers. (Goldin, 1991) and (Rose, 2018) had analyzed the significant rise of women's workforce in the U.S during and after World War II due to men's departure to war and consequently the drop in the family's income met with shorthanded factories. However, their studies concluded that despite the positive propaganda that is around World War II having resulted in the transformation of women's workforce in the U.S, having led to almost 50% increase in women workforce, both researches explained that this boom was short-lived. It is argued that this surge was primarily

because the war had created a demand for women workers for military production but that these jobs were taken away from women afterwards because of the restrictive social norms that persisted after the end of the war with the return of men into the society and the re-hiring processes. The studies also elaborated on the efforts to keep women in labor force after the war, especially that they worked in sectors they did not want to enter prior to the war, and jobs that were occupied by men such as clerical and manufacturing tasks, as well as munitions' assembly. (Goldin, 1991) also spotlighted that the married women in particular have exited the labor force right after Pearl Harbor. Women, according to the informant from Cambodia, constitute the “backbone” of the society given the pivotal roles they played replacing their husbands in the agricultural sector. Therefore, they cannot be left behind after the war. Thus, the quote explains that women should be equipped to help build the society and the economy after war. One of the key roles played by private companies vis-à-vis women in post-conflict societies is building their capacities, and investing time, mentorship and resources to enhance women and girls' knowledge and skillset. Be it through educating women, or by preparing them to enter the job market (in a society where they are predominantly in the agricultural sector and low-productivity jobs), the private sector enhances their technical skills, hence its contributions are indispensable for the reconstruction to take place. From a wider view, helping women to move from informal workers to formal ones in order to gain social protection is a valid battle for developed countries, where legal frameworks are there, but for the self-employed women (including in fragile contexts), different type of support could be provided to help them upgrade. For example, improving their access to trainings, their access to financial resources and credit could help them match the market demands, and become more productive, moving from agricultural sector only to various other jobs. Nevertheless, (Gellman, 2010) explained that in Cambodia, NGOs are instrumental in training in the reconstruction phase as they are leading the capacity building projects. This is particularly central to the possible recommendations for a bigger role for the private sector; encouraging their partnership with relevant NGOs, and promoting the digital transformation, as highlighted by the informant.



The importance of investing in women's education has also been reiterated in the Liberian context as the Founder of a leading FMCG in Liberia had this to say about his business's contribution

***“We have scholarship programs in my hotel, in all my businesses, particularly for women who want to move forward with education, once you meet the minimum grade point that we set, we pay your tuition. And that extends also outside, we have a scholarship program where we provide support to disadvantaged youth in our society for college education for high school education and again, women are benefiting there.”*** Founder of a leading FMCG in Liberia, June 2023

Education has been repeated in the various interviews. As per (Carroll, 1991)'s pyramid, this type of engagement by the businesses is their philanthropic contribution. The overall act of promoting goodwill either through financial provision or health and education is considered as such. Informants emphasized the importance of education to support women's economic empowerment. In many of the post-conflict countries, women are disadvantaged, and have unequal access to education. This could either be caused by the limited financial resources making parents in patriarchal societies invest in male children rather than females; or it could also be due to child marriage. The private sector does not only receive qualified and educated women in order to hire them, but it can also be part of their qualification process, boost their education, incentivize them to continue schooling and facilitate this process through offering scholarships, and securing the funds by paying their tuition fees once they meet a grade requirement set by the management to encourage academic excellence and motivate the students to perform better.

Beyond being just a target for philanthropic interest, the other informant from Liberia, coming from the management of a leading telecommunications service provider company in Africa that's focused on Liberia, referred to the company's educational initiative bridging women's low-skill weaknesses through the following:

***“We are working with a university in Liberia to see how best we can tap out the young talented females to be able to bring them into employment.”*** Management of a leading telecommunications service provider in Africa, focusing on Liberia, June 2023

It is worth noting that by targeting university student and fresh graduates, the company is helping the youth employment, and encourage young women to join the formal sector.

Furthermore, and similar to the informant from the FMCG in Liberia who adopted an employment strategy that refutes gender discrimination and allows women to apply to all types of jobs, a particular focus was stated by the informant from the telecommunications company in South Sudan to encourage women to be qualified in STEM:

*“We do encourage women to apply for them, get a chance to work and also capacitate themselves. Also, we have a strategy that is related to women in technology, women in tech, which they are being educated through a STEM program, that is science, technology, engineering, and then mathematics for them to capacitate themselves at the university level, at the grassroots on how best they can also use mobile data, they can also explore more, especially those who are studying engineering [...] we engage them in our internship program, take them to the field and that internship program, a woman is payable. So they are being paid for that they do support our technology department.”* Managerial employee, telecommunications multinational company in South Sudan, May 2023

As per the informant, this telecommunications multinational supports the qualification process of women in South Sudan, and it also helps through early recruitment to strengthen their capacities, and help them be employed in their technology department. By doing so, this company is also contributing to widening the scope of work of women, beyond the traditional and informal jobs, as an attempt to prepare them for such jobs, and contribute accordingly to bridging the gender gap in women’s employment in this male-dominated field.

#### **b) Policies to prevent GBV in the workplace**

Several informants referred to their internal policies that prohibit GBV, among other types of harassment in the workplace. Some ad-hoc initiatives and collaborations between private companies and specialized NGOs were also noted as good practices in this regard, as put forth by the director of NGO in Cambodia

*“We are also providing training to a beer company in Cambodia, because the beer promoters are normally young women, and they are facing a lot of sexual harassment, gender-based violence in their workplace. So we are working with them to make sure that they have a policy at hand on ending sexual violence at workplace and also promote more women’s in the leadership position at the company.”* Director of NGO in Cambodia, May 2023

It was noted from the informant's response that this ad-hoc training provided to a beer company in Cambodia, came in the context of the nature of the company's products, and the promoter's exposure that requires such knowledge. Although this collaboration shows progress in terms of embedding and integrating a policy in this workplace against sexual violence, it is important to recognize the company's choice, and work on expanding this approach further, to include all companies, regardless of their products. MNCs usually have integrated policies against harassment and GBV, and might not require the same type of training, however, other projects could be implemented to serve this purpose given that it is a key threat of women's wellbeing in the context where they operate. The owner of a hospitality business in South Sudan commented with the following on the GBV policies:

***“It hasn't come up yet. But like I said, I'm a very new company. So if you have a template for a policy that you'd like to send to me, then I would incorporate it into my contracts; and how the people who work here sign it. I mean, fortunately, nothing like that has come up. [...] I mean, we have bar and restaurant here. So we get some drunk people who is violent [...] So that is something that we deal with not so often. But in terms of gender-based violence, I mean, I'm only horrified if something like that came on.”*** Owner of a hospitality business in South Sudan, June 2023

As explained by the informant, in principle, there is no problem with setting a policy to prevent GBV in the workplace but that it has never been an issue discussed to that level. The policy is not there but if a template or reference is available, it would be adopted. Therefore, a key role for governments and other stakeholders is to increase awareness about the importance of such policies, but most importantly, to allow for an experience-sharing on such topics so that local private companies, that do not follow any global standards as opposed to the multinational ones, can have reference, and good practices to learn from and get inspirations. (Allan, 2019) also indicated that companies do not lack the will but lack the guidance on where to begin for addressing GBV. Mindful of the weak rule of law and usual impunity state that exists in fragile contexts like post-conflict countries at their early stage, for such internal policies to be effective, they should be complemented with the whole of government approach to fight GBV nationwide, and awareness raising campaigns that would help change the gender norms.

## 6.2. The private sector and its service provision and procurement

### 6.2.1. Services & procurement practices that empower women

While they continue to perceive their role in women's economic empowerment primarily within the frame of ensuring the provision of wages, as a key to a bigger circle's livelihood, business owners and managers explained during the study that they adopt several other strategies and practices that promote women's sustainable source of income.

For example, some informants explained that they give women suppliers a preferential advantage and buy from them, in respect to their overall economic vulnerability, as indicated by the founder of a leading FMCG in Liberia:

*“We purchased all our fish products, our seafood products from women vendors, for me purveyors. And I know, we have dealt with them for the past 20 plus years, and I see how they have changed their lives. Again, from our factory, we're dealing with more than 400...you know... women suppliers of palm oil, products of fruits and vegetables that we use in our plant. And statistics show that with every woman that you support and empower, you're actually feeding about 10 other persons in our society because of that kind of patronage system. So there's a trickledown effect.”*

Founder of a leading FMCG in Liberia, June 2023

The informant shed light on a different role of the private sector than the role of the employer in support of women's economic empowerment in Liberia, which is the adoption of procurement strategies that benefit female farmers and suppliers. To describe the impact of such initiatives, the informant said that these purchases “changed their lives” and discussed the “trickledown effect” to stress the value of this initiative and to explain how this impact does not only stop at the female farmers but that it also extends to the bigger circle of impact, including their families' livelihoods, their health, education and perhaps also opening new entrepreneurial initiatives that these women could do on the side. This initiative is also in harmony with the “stakeholder theory” where the company addresses and engages with the women farmers as its suppliers, and it also echoes (Justino, 2012)'s argument on encouraging women's economic participation in order to impact their household and community. While this procurement initiative is in itself a positive step towards short and long-term impact on women's economic situations by ensuring these women have a consistent source of income, more efforts are needed to change the rhetoric of the business owner or manager's views of female

suppliers as shown from the informant's choice of words that could still allude to a paternalistic approach to the activity, simply because they are seen as women, in their vulnerable capacity. The usage of term "patronage system" does not reflect the "liberating" concept discussed in (Duncanson, 2018)'s argument of women's economic empowerment, but it rather shows power dynamics between the decision-maker and the female supplier. The decision-maker voluntarily chose to avail the female suppliers because of their need. While the informant chose to buy from female suppliers to encourage them and to achieve the "trickledown effect", nothing is said about these suppliers' quality of work to merit this business deal that continued for "20 years". Discussing this initiative as a "business-to-business" experience, and promoting female farmers' work and products based on their quality in addition to what the money they get in return can do, would widen the impact of such initiatives by opening new avenues for similar steps to be replicated by other companies, and serve women's economic empowerment in its "liberating" sense.

### **6.2.2. Services that prevent GBV**

Preventing GBV could be done through various strategies. The informants elaborated on some of these examples. The telecommunications service provider in Liberia stressed the intervention to help prevent GBV through CSR:

*"We have been working with a lot of media entities to specifically support the CBO aspects of their program [...] we provide them with our corporate social responsibility to provide space for women to come in the program to be able to speak about the violence against them to be able to interact with other stakeholders. "Management of a leading telecommunications service provider in Africa, focusing on Liberia, June 2023*

Given the nature of the service provided by the telecommunications company, mainly providing internet services, the intervention to prevent GBV is related to broadcasting. It consists of supporting women to speak about this taboo topic albeit not uncommon in Liberia given that the crimes of rape, GBV and harassment were widespread during the war, and persisted post-war. The telecommunications company uses its internet service to support the provision of a platform for women to discuss such issues and hence, help raise

awareness about these crimes, and propose solutions. The informant from an NGO in Liberia also helped describing how the topic of GBV is viral in Liberia:

***“We are now where we need to be for this, we have audiences not like before those ... like taboo topics, people talk about videos people put in for a public one. Now, it’s not the case anymore. There are jingles, you know [...] on videos on national television on local television...So for that, I will say yes, we’ve made a map”***. Founder of an NGO in Liberia, May 2023

Similarly, in South Sudan, the multinational telecommunications company reflected as follows when asked about the company’s interventions to prevent GBV:

***“We have a social media platform where we sensitize people, we also send text messages to our subscribers over 1 million 400. So they receive messages about the importance of Child Protection, they receive messages about gender-based violence issues, we address it at all levels, at the grassroots and how best we can also through the system to block other issues related to gender.”***  
Managerial employee, telecommunications multinational company in South Sudan, May 2023

The telecommunications company uses its services to raise awareness about the GBV issue in South Sudan, it sends text messages to shed light on the importance of Child Protection and GBV. The informant also explained that the social media platforms have been utilized to promote these issues, as channels for sensitization. It is however worth noting that in such complex environments, the reach through internet or text messages might have limited impact as they only reach the literates, those who have internet access, and social media access.

### 6.3. Corporate Social Responsibility

While the purpose of this question was to understand and analyze the CSR practices that aim to advance women’s economic empowerment in conflict-affected situations, the findings shed light on the differences in behaviors, perceptions and practices of corporations depending on their types. MNCs in post-conflict situations offer more than the mere financial resources and beyond philanthropy to women as they provide structured projects that aim at fully equipping women in these contexts. Moreover, the CSR concept is not equally perceived by the different types of private sector. For example, the interviews demonstrated that MNCs are more active, and exert efforts whereas some local businesses can be critical about the CSR

concept, its effectiveness, and its presumed impact, especially in complex environments where financial burdens require sustainable solutions.

The interviewed local companies explained that they do not have a fixed budget for CSR, or a CSR department whereas the multinational (telecommunications company in South Sudan) elaborated on its budget, representing less than 0.5 % of the company's total budget.

The interviewed local companies in South Sudan and Liberia expressed concerns about engaging with other actors in CSR out of lack of trust, lack of effectiveness and practical experience. The owner of a hospitality business in South Sudan had this to say about CSR:

***“I don't believe in CSR, I don't believe in giving things away. I don't believe in handouts. I think that the aid model has been demonstrated to fail over a very long period of time, what has been demonstrated to work, and I think the most economists in the world now agree, is private sector development. So I don't go around giving out money or food or anything. What I do is try to be a fair and equitable employer. I pay people a decent living wage. I'm a very good payer. I pay on time and make all of my social security contributions. I make all my personal income tax contributions. I pay what I owe to the state in the hope that one day they'll use that for the benefit of their populace. I don't have any interest in finding beneficiaries who need free handouts. What I am interested in doing is finding people who work hard, and paying them a fair living wage and doing that consistently, and building a viable business that can be here for a long term, so that it can develop the community around it and the people who work here, and that is my own personal belief in what will be the engine of development, I don't have any interest in going and finding people who need free pens, or giving them food... hasn't worked so far. “*** Owner of a hospitality business in South Sudan, June 2023

The owner of a hospitality business in South Sudan opposed the CSR projects, doubting their impact. This informant confined CSR to the philanthropic purpose using limiting terms like: “giving things away”, “free pens”, “giving them food”, “free handouts” and elaborated on the argument by putting this in contrast with what this hospitality business does to its female employees instead. Moreover, the informant firmly put the business's contribution in the sustainability frame: “building a viable business that can be here for a long term” referring to this as “the engine of development”. The informant is against CSR based on a traditional misconception of what CSR projects can do. As explained in the literature review, and argued by (Wieland, 2009), CSR could actually serve a long-term developmental purpose as opposed to the informant's views. The informant's limiting philanthropic meaning of the term is a common practice based on misinformation

or misconception. Confining the CSR concept to a short-term only impact neither reflects the true meaning of the concept, nor (Carroll, 1999)'s CSR pyramid. Furthermore, putting CSR in comparison with the provision of equitable employment measures reflects the informant's perspective of the employer's role towards the society and employees. Comparing the provision of equitable employment processes and conditions with the CSR initiatives limits the business's role as an employer; thus, an employer's adoption of policies that are non-discriminatory to women is not sufficient, not a reason to deny its possible contribution through the CSR form. Both could happen at the same time, and they both have long-term and sustainable outcomes on the beneficiaries. Therefore, awareness efforts, and promotion of CSR impacts are fundamentally important to encourage the private sector to contribute, beyond its responsibility as an employer. Being a good employer should not cancel the other roles that a business can play.

Similarly, the founder of an NGO working in the Horn of Africa on women's empowerment explained that conceptually, CSR is immature in many regions of the world, and mainly in Africa:

***"In Africa, we are still understanding CSR, because only a few companies embraced the meaning of CSR, but for some, they just build a tree [...] Road repair, tree planting, they come, but they need to seek out to understand what social entrepreneurship is, how can they engage better, achieve in a community that is peaceful"***. Founder of an NGO in the Horn of Africa region, June 2023

In addition to the conceptual challenges facing the implementation of CSR activities targeting women in post-conflict countries, some informants shed light on the lack of consistency in CSR initiatives, despite it being a sort of commitment between private companies and their implementing partners (like NGOs). For example, according to two of the interviewed founders of NGOs, the few CSR projects they implemented in collaboration with a local company were ad-hoc projects, only resulting from their personal connection rather than an institutional process whereby the companies communicate with the NGOs, their potential beneficiaries or vice-versa. This finding goes in line with (Wieland, 2009)'s argument comparing CSR in the developed countries to the developing ones. Accordingly, one could argue that for CSR to flourish in Africa, NGOs should play bigger roles in putting pressure on the companies, including through the media and exposing them further to the concept.



On the other hand, the question of CSR contribution has also been directed to the founder of a leading FMCG in Liberia, who explained:

***“My mother led the largest women’s umbrella group in Liberia, and she was a lead on the fight against rape. [...] So a lot of my activities from the corporate social responsibility development, you know, is based on what I saw her do... We currently have an orphanage, we built an orphanage, and the school that she manages in her retirement. The purpose of that stemmed from providing support to remnants of the abused women and girls from our war. But the war has ended [...] two decades ago... So a lot of that support that was initially dedicated towards abused women and girls have evolved to generally children... you know... children and women.”*** Founder of a leading FMCG in Liberia, June 2023

The founder of a leading local FMCG in Liberia elaborated on his background which greatly influenced his company’s CSR initiatives. It is thus important to note that local private companies have more flexibility, and more space for individual beliefs to shape activities and contributions. The informant had been influenced by his mother’s leadership and her contribution to women’s empowerment movements in Liberia. All the discussed types of CSR initiatives targeted social causes varying between an orphanage, a school and support to the survivors of abuse related to the war. CRSV is in fact a type of this prevalent violence against women in wars and conflicts; hence initiating a CSR initiative that targets those women is of great impact on such society. The informant also noted that the support that has initially targeted women only, has now been targeting children too; it is an initiative that targets the vulnerable groups of the Liberian society. Widening the scope of work is recognized as a better strategy than limiting it, this is also an indicator of the continuous needs in the society for such contributions. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that regardless of the conflict or war, the Liberian society still struggles with high levels of rape; the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a spike in domestic violence and rape leading to the President’s declaration of rape as a national emergency in September of 2020 (Rodriguez, 2020).

#### 6.4. The challenges and limitations of the private sector’s engagement to advance women empowerment

### **6.4.1. Difficult funding landscape for women’s organizations in post-conflict settings yet limited engagement of the private sector**

With the changing financing priorities, women’s organizations are feeling the de-prioritization of women’s issues and started to look for more innovative financing and fundraising modalities, including reaching out to businesses as they represent important mechanisms for post-conflict economic rejuvenation and reconstruction. All of the interviewed NGOs active in the issue of women’s economic empowerment and GBV prevention in post-conflict countries stressed that they depend almost entirely on donor countries like Sweden, US, Norway and others, whereas very little attention is given to the private sector. Nevertheless, all interviewed NGOs insisted on the financial pressure they are facing with the changing funding priorities globally and the need to look for new partnerships. These challenges felt by NGOs also resonate in the difficult financing process of the implementation of the WPS agenda. The senior international expert on issues of WPS and NAPs also expressed:

*“This dependency on the official donors. [...] The war in Ukraine has shifted European priorities where most of the money comes from.”* Senior international expert on the issue of WPS and NAPs, May 2023

This dependency on the official donors, and the emphasis on the European money were described by the the informant as timely challenges. These have also been subtly repeated by the various NGOs interviewed in this study.

(Zhao, 2021) saw that the COVID-19 pandemic would help increase private sector’s consciousness of their role in promoting wellbeing and investing further in community development. On the contrary, the informants constantly referred to the pandemic as a period that reversed gains and worsened the private sector’s engagement in social projects. The founder of an NGO in the Horn of Africa region elucidated:

*“One of the challenges, I think the biggest one is financing, I think people still give it a lot of service, we do have a lot of support, not only local, mostly global, just economic empowerment in different sectors, but then you hardly see it coming to action.[...] COVID took what has been done backward, other than the financing, I think the commitments, leaders use feminists in conjunction with women empowerment agendas but the action is still not louder than their words. There are*

***women economic funds but women can still not access it, applying to them is not easy, and sometimes they don't even know about them***". Founder of an NGO in the Horn of Africa region, June 2023

As per the founder of an NGO in the Horn of Africa region, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the financing patterns of donors, but it has also its effects on the governments' commitments. Governments employ feminism and women empowerment terms, and started to address them as one objective. This alludes to governments' tendencies to merge projects for budgetary purposes. At the private sector level, the decrease in funding because of the pandemic has also been mentioned:

***"So before COVID, we had a minimum budget of about 12 grand we have allocated towards corporate social responsibility. But again, after COVID because of the impact of COVID, it's a little bit more subjective, I provide support where I think is necessary and why I think is most important. So it's no longer fixed."*** Founder of a leading FMCG in Liberia, June 2023

The negative impacts caused by the COVID 19 pandemic are not confined to having affected the financial amounts but they have also reshaped the overall private sector's behavior towards CSR projects that target women. Prior to the pandemic, such projects followed a clear trajectory and planning with a specific budget, whereas after the pandemic the informant explained that this behavior has become "subjective" and dependent on the informant's perception and own judgement: "no longer fixed".

Within the same context, also in Liberia, an NGO was asked to elaborate about its funding challenges, and it was then highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic has hit the businesses, and had a key impact on limiting the private sector's support to any work out of their operational scope with no profitable return:

***"During COVID-19, a lot of businesses suffered and that meant for some of them even reducing the number of staff members, they had reducing salaries, reducing operations. And so there were a lot of things that were not top priorities for them. And of course, if I'd be a general manager, somewhere, giving money to a nonprofit at that point, when I'm not making profit wouldn't be a priority."*** Founder of an NGO in Liberia, May 2023

The founder of this NGO explained the possible rationale for private sector's reduced contributions by explaining the businesses' journey during the pandemic. This informant also put it as a matter of prioritization, the private sector has been greatly affected by the pandemic, and its top priority would then be

to primarily ensure profitability. This argument would also be natural within the context of (Carroll, 1991)'s "economic responsibility" concept which affect all of the other responsibilities. In other words, he argued that without the economic responsibility, the ethical, legal, and philanthropic would be moot. Furthermore, this informant described the relationship between the private sector and the NGOs using "giving money to a non-profit". This simplistic perception of the collaboration confining it to "giving money" undermines its potential in achieving the end goal: empowering women to help the economic recovery, and help achieve overall prosperity.

This profit versus non-profit relationship has been repeated also by the founder of the NGO in the horn of Africa region.

#### **6.4.2. The "profit" & "non-profit" are two different worlds with lack of communication**

One of the key constraints said to be hindering the collaboration between private sector companies and between the NGOs working on advancing women's issues is the lack of communication. The mutual interest of these two worlds, and the potential of their collaboration remains undermined, and sometimes not even thought of, as demonstrated by the founder of an NGO in the Horn of Africa region:

*"They don't understand NGOs, like we don't understand them...we assume they are profitmaking and we are the non-profit making... two different worlds."* Founder of an NGO in the Horn of Africa region, June 2023

As stressed by the informant, the assumption is that they are "different worlds", because their purposes don't meet. NGOs are seen as non-profit, their motivation is therefore different than private sector actors, mainly looking after making profit. Accordingly, it is clear that an increasing gap in understanding the possible engagement modalities between NGOs and corporations exists.

This clear gap was also brought up by the senior international expert on the issue of WPS and NAPs:

*"Private sector company that does corporate social responsibility, that does want to maybe invest in community, technically, most times, because they don't have direct connections with the women leaders or civil society organizations. The key question is how we go about it how do we do it? How*

*do we implement it[...] if you get through the conceptual and political, that's where we need to do a better job to also help our organizations, either women in civil society, or our colleagues in the government and civil ministries, to really explain this is how this work can be supported and organized and done.”* Senior international expert on the issue of WPS and NAPs, May 2023

Given the interviewed expert's background, and practical experience working with governments and women's NGOs and CSOs, the answer stressed that the problem resides within the lack of “direct connections”. This also alludes to the need for the bridge between the two worlds of profit and non-profit to be established. Within this context, the role of the different players like the government, its agencies, as well as technical experts, academia and international organizations comes into play.

This is also why convening efforts are crucial for bringing actors together. Policy platforms represent a relevant good practice to follow in this sense. In this regard, the executive director of a leading African forum for issues of conflict and post-conflict situations responded with the following:

*“On top of these challenges in Africa, we find... you know... issues relating to relapse in conflict, to challenges of peacebuilding, to challenges of building viable economies, institutions, and I think there is a growing realization from the private sector that they have a contribution to make, and they should become actively involved in such efforts. So I think that is overall the important or the major reason. In addition, the forum is a space for also engagement with a diverse range of stakeholders from governments, international regional organizations. So it creates new opportunities for engagement, collaboration, partnership, networking, that can also be of interest to the private sector.”* Executive Director of a leading African forum for issues of conflict and post-conflict situations, June 2023

Supporting governments and private sector actors to discuss opportunities together in such context is also among the possible good practices to be replicated and strengthened. Enabling and allowing for these stakeholders to discuss specific opportunities could be done through convening and designing action-oriented platforms where the subject of women's economic empowerment and GBV prevention could be the primary focus. Such platforms lead to regenerating momentum about the topic and proposing partnerships. This will not only respond to the government's engagement with the private sector, but it will also help bridging the gap with other stakeholders like NGOs, in response to the above-mentioned non-profit versus profit gap.

### **6.4.3. NGOs expected to come up with projects and approach the private sector**

Despite the little effort made by the different NGOs to either approach private companies, or consider them as potential implementing partners, the collected data showed that this approach is also relatively new and an unusual thought. The first response of the founder of an NGO in the Horn of Africa region was:

*“We have never tried; we haven’t tried enough as an organization.”* Founder of an NGO in the Horn of Africa region, June 2023

This NGO works on issues of WPS across the Horn of Africa region, which includes several conflicts torn societies. It was however an unusual thought to discuss the engagement of the private sector as a partner in their work. It seemed that this area could possibly offer a new fundraising strategy for such organizations. However, there are also expectations from the private sector end, of existing and ready projects to be presented to them by these organizations. Management of a leading telecommunications service provider in Africa, focusing on Liberia justified:

*“We know that people will come up with their whole programs for which we will be able to support”*, Management of a leading telecommunications service provider in Africa, focusing on Liberia, June 2023

The private sector might not necessarily have the technical resources and knowledge to design projects targeting women’s economic empowerment or GBV prevention. The approach seemed less like a mutually reinforcing for a common interest and more like a supply and demand sort of relationship, as the informant use the term “support”. The NGOs are expected to make the effort of connecting with the private sector and seek support on specific projects. Despite the stakeholder theory’s focus on the importance of engaging with the different actors, and the literature’s emphasis on the potential enhancements in corporates’ CSR programs if they collaborate with NGOs, all the three interviewed NGOs expressed either a complete absence of relationship with private companies, or very limited ad-hoc engagements of which they were the initiators in the first place and not the corporation.

#### **6.4.4. Individual and seasonal engagement of the private sector- international women’s day**

According to the director of an NGO actively working on women's economic empowerment and GBV prevention in Cambodia, the private sector's engagement in these topics is seasonal, and comes in specific high-in momentum- periods of the year:

***“Most funding is used for short term campaigns like International Women’s Day and 16 days of activism against GBV”*** Director of an NGO in Cambodia, May 2023

Furthermore, other informants expressed their perception of the private sector's investment in women's economic empowerment as a short-term marketing stud rather than a long-term and sustainable one. It is therefore important to understand how the private sector think of these issues, how they link it to their reputation and marketing. The International Women's Day is in fact a season where social pressure and comparisons take place, the public is attentive to any published content, and this justifies the obvious attention of the private companies on that particular day.

#### **6.4.5. Infrastructure and security barriers to private companies' engagement with women beneficiaries**

The private companies can be expected to deliver projects to women in post-conflict countries within the range of their resources and access. However, most of the interviewed informants from the private sector in Liberia and South Sudan discussed particular geographical concentration of women in areas that are either rural, or not fixed, or underdeveloped. The informant used these arguments blaming these barriers for making them only capable of reaching those around their areas of operations. The following limitations were noted as barriers hindering their possible contributions:

##### **“People are on the move”**

The causes for the limited engagement between the private sector and women's NGOs drawn by the interviewed private sector's actors show an emphasis on the accessibility challenge.

For example, some common factors characterize the interviewed post-conflict countries: those that recently experienced the end of conflict and are at their early phase of post-conflict reconstruction and recovery are still experiencing fragmented societies, where the structure of engagement with NGOs and communities remains unorganized. Moreover, in these contexts, compounded risks such as climate vulnerability, and poor infrastructure and roads continue to challenge the companies to engage and support women, beyond their mandated scope of work. In addition, other factors like the insecurity challenge driven by the fear of instability and conflict eruption, some companies might not exert any effort beyond their area of operation.

The managerial employee of a telecommunications multinational company in South Sudan explained:

***“If you want to implement any activities, you will find that the same group is disintegrated ... also it has migrated somewhere ...they leave the group and no money [...] Looking at the issue of communication also in some of the areas...remote areas, where there is a need for them to pick up, it is a challenge in terms of growth for us to access them, no possible network, some areas where women are there looking also at the context of post-conflict, especially in areas where there is massive child abduction, there is no access and insecurity is there. There is no peace over there. People are on run.”*** Managerial employee, telecommunications multinational company in South Sudan, May 2023

In post-conflict situation, some instability could also be present in areas, usually beyond the capital city. As per the informant, the concept of “peace” is not necessarily present in all post-conflict situations, some areas could still be vulnerable to the relapse into conflict and violence. (Hearth, 2016)’s negative peace is very relevant to this observation. Not all post-conflict situations are at the same level of stability. In South Sudan, which is highly characterized by its tribal and power-rooted conflict, “insecurity” is still prevalent. The informant also emphasized the lack of accessibility to the women beneficiaries.

***“I think the issue of you know is engaging women at the grassroots, it is one of the challenges because the highest populated areas are very far and also access to them is a difficult issue. So I do urge our company to also expand the network, so that we can also explore more experience from women, and the challenges they’re facing. [...] And I think if we plan for going to those areas, you know it’s not cost effective, was also costing a lot of resources.”*** Managerial employee, telecommunications multinational company in South Sudan, May 2023

It is also interesting to note that the informant urged his company through the interview, and not the government, to expand the network in order to be able to reach the women who could possibly be in need.



While it is unclear whether this demand had already been brought up to the decision-makers at the company or not. The informant's answer also shed light on an important gap where the companies could be part of the solution, and could help remove the discussed accessibility barrier, but it never did. This lack of accessibility is a key factor said to be hindering the company's understanding of women's experiences in the first place. While the informant's answer was essential to analyze the complexity of the types of challenges faced by the private sector in South Sudan, it also stressed a key gap between the private sector and women's NGOs. In fact, NGOs could help such companies understand women's needs given their outreach, if they choose to cooperate with NGOs that work at the grassroots level across the South Sudanese states.

### **Disparity between urban and rural areas**

Moreover, the management of a leading telecommunications service provider in Africa, focusing on Liberia was asked about the challenges hindering its engagement in CSR projects that target women and stressed the following obstacle in response:

*“We are in Monrovia [...] So as we are expanding our services, we have bottlenecks when it comes to national infrastructure. We talk about towers, we talk about electricity, we talk about rural connectivity, because the more we go into the rural area and take technology, the more people get empowered to the social media to the network, so we have a challenge when it comes to infrastructure, the fiber optic cannot go beyond Monrovia so it makes it difficult to go beyond Monrovia [...] So we look at that and it's like a hinder to our extension, the fact that we are not there, we cannot be able to identify those corporate social responsibilities, those women who are considered vulnerable to be able to have access to as much as possible or to support as technically.”*  
Management of a leading telecommunications service provider in Africa, focusing on Liberia, June 2023

Similar to the answer of the managerial employee of the telecommunications multinational company in South Sudan, this informant from a leading telecommunications service provider in Liberia stressed the inadequate infrastructure, roads and network.. While citing the challenges facing the company to engage with women in post-conflict Liberia, the informant elucidated the disparity between the women living in the urban areas and those living in rural ones by noting the lack of accessibility to those in the rural areas, outside of Monrovia. The informant also explained that it is not possible to identify CSR initiatives or even reach or support the vulnerable women. While these companies could have exerted efforts to design and implement CSR projects

to be implemented on the short-term targeting women within their reach, the answers were more torn towards ambitious visions to help women in need, that are currently not accessible. Critical efforts are therefore needed from the governments, together with private partners (PPP) in the reconstruction phase to ensure roads, electricity and networks are available both in South Sudan and Liberia.

6.5. Opportunities: “how can the role of the private sector in advancing women’s economic empowerment and GBV prevention be facilitated?”

### **6.5.1. Learning from the non-profit: no one fits all and no business-as-usual mindsets, understanding the context of conflict-affected countries**

#### **Taking ethnic dynamics & root cause of conflict into consideration: promoting conflict-sensitive analysis for private sector actors**

In practice, some private sector actors still do not embrace the existing tools to reach effective projects and policies. As explained earlier, post-conflict countries are not uniform. Not only do they depend on the phase in which these countries are whether the conflict has recently ended or long time ago, but they also depend on the type and origin of conflict it experiences, the level of trauma lived by its people and cultural sensitivities.

Within this vein, the founder of an NGO in the Horn of Africa region gave the following insight:

*“This is a post-conflict setting, some things are considered taboo because new forms of governance have come in, so it takes time to reeducate, whether they want to pick up new micro activity like cafes, small teas, etc. but in other post-conflict settings it’s the ethnicity. So one ethnic group that fought with another ethnic group, so the challenge there is to encourage one ethnic or x ethnic group to hire y ethnic group, to bridge whatever challenges were there and to promote peaceful coexistence etc. [...] economic empowerment happens as a form of weaving peaceful coexistence. [...] So in post-conflict it’s to understand that, and sometimes it includes also trauma, you know related healing, conversations, so that people can even buy from your shop. You can have a small business but no one comes because of either ethnicity, or past events.”* Founder of an NGO in the Horn of Africa region, June 2023

The informant explained the complexity and volatility of conflict-affected societies and markets. The quote refers to the circumstances and characteristics of such societies, and the specificity of each conflict depending on its root causes. For example, the informant discusses the challenge of co-existence when the conflict was

originally driven by ethnic problems. For a private sector actor to be able to manage businesses and adopt effective hiring processes, ethnic considerations are important to be accounted for. This goes in line with (Hearth, 2016)'s concept of negative peace; a post-conflict situation can easily relapse into conflict if structural, cultural or ethnic violence still exist. Hence, the informant shed light on the challenges that could face the private sector in hiring candidates associated with previously conflicting ethnic groups in contexts emerging from such conflicts. The informant also indicated that the economic empowerment in these contexts can act as a form of weaving peaceful coexistence and as a tool to reinforce and rebuild social fabric. However, in order for the private sector including SMEs to be able to leverage this role, it should be equipped with tools to analyze the situation, and know what to expect in order to ensure profitability.

The informant shed light on the fact that private sector's engagement in post-conflict situations might not always succeed if it is following the "business as usual" strategies. As per the informant, who has a wide experience in these contexts, ethnicity or past events can have a great influence on people's purchasing behaviors and these require understanding the contexts of traumatized people. It is therefore important for private sector actors that are actively engaged in post-conflict countries to institutionalize conflict-sensitive analysis and ensure that their policies match the context they are operating at.

### **The power of women's position in the society & how the private sector perceives them**

In Liberia for example, the society is aware of the importance of women in the society because of their crucial and pivotal role in the end of conflict. The founder of a leading FMCG in Liberia reflected on the effects of the war saying:

*"I think it is one of the positive things that resulted from the war because during the war, when to the occasion of leading most of our national structures were led by women, most of our civil society organizations were led by women, women became the breadwinners when men were hiding. So naturally, women were empowered more post-Liberian war than ever before in our history."*

Founder of a leading FMCG in Liberia, June 2023

As highlighted by the informant, the Liberian war allowed women to play key roles in the society, including leadership positions and breadwinners. Although the informant uses the term "naturally" to explain that they

are empowered post-war, research shows that women tend to fail to maintain this positive role in post-conflict situations, and reverse their gains. However, a pattern could be identified in Liberia, as both interviewed private companies explained that their consistent gender-sensitive approach, and strategies to empower women economically. This awareness might come from their experience living in the Liberian society and acknowledging the trickle-down effect of empowering women. They don't wait for the government, or NGOs to propose projects but would rather serve women as the management sees best.

### **Understanding that women's economic empowerment in post-conflict countries represents dignity**

In the very complex environments of post-conflict countries, as stressed by some informants, the financial burdens experienced by women given their vulnerability in such situations make their economic empowerment an act of bringing them dignity.

While a total funding of USD 767.4 million (OCHA, 2013) from various donors, developmental and humanitarian actors is spent in South Sudan, the effectiveness on the ground remains questionable. The answer of the hospitality business owner in South Sudan also indicated a critical view of the situation:

*“I realized that if you want to make a difference in a place like South Sudan, opening a business is the way to do it. And so when it comes to women, I have the same difficulty here as exists all over the world”. [...] I also observed a lot about what goes on the humanitarian sector and with the UN and NGOs, what became very clear to me was that the private sector is what is the engine of development in a country like this, like in a developing economy like this, the NGOs, they don't necessarily contribute, I think as much as they think that they do, or we never get to doing things like handing out vaccinations, but their funding cycles were erratic, their programs come and go. But they often distort the marketplace by paying over the going rate. And then this creates problems. If 'ou talk to anybody in the private sector, they'll tell you what problems this creates, because you ge' people who maybe they get a six-month contract with the UN and the UN \$1,000 a month, and then that contract comes to an end, the funding for that particular project goes away donors cut their funding, but then that person is accustomed \$20,000 a month and won't work for any less than that. And that isn't a sustainable amount. I'm just taking \$1,000 as an arbitrary figure. And what I saw with the private sector, if you have a business that's viable, is likely to be here long term, as opposed to an aid project, which is fixed to a funding cycle, and generally will reach an end.”* Owner of a hospitality business in South Sudan, June 2023.

Informants insisted on the importance of earning a stable income as a key factor that matters for women in post-conflict settings. The owner of a hospitality business in South Sudan explained that businesses can make

a real difference by providing jobs and securing a fixed income for women, in contrast with international organizations that work on a limited contract's basis which lacks the sense of sustainability, the founder of an NGO in the Horn of Africa elaborated that stability requires the ability to earn a living:

***“In order for you to be stable you must be able to earn a living, it changes someone’s mindset and gives someone dignity and people in these settings have to remember that and I think as private sector they have to also remember that one of their primary values is to promote that person’s dignity... they have gone through a lot and that they are now working for you so it is important to remember their right, and give them that sense of dignity and it doesn’t just come by giving that pay-cheque but it is also that feeling that you get when you are able to get when you work in an environment that is conducive, to give that decent work that at the end of the day every human needs.”*** Founder of an NGO in the Horn of Africa region, June 2023

The informant stressed the “ability to earn a living”, and this has also been repeated across the various researches on women in post-conflict situations, as economic empowerment grants women power over their own lives, but also helps them. The private sector’s role is evidently important in securing a fixed income for women in these settings, who as per the informant “have been through a lot”, but it is also worth noting that this income represents dignity. This requires the private sector to perceive its employees differently; its role is therefore not only to pay these women, but also to ensure that they work in a positive environment, and have a “decent” work.

Within a similar vein, the Somali business owner who is based in the U.S elaborated on the practicality, and logic behind investing in women’s economic empowerment back home:

***“In Somalia, it's the opposite. You don't get access to any type of capital, if you want to grow your company. So unless you have some sort of collateral, and the collateral status would have been a male, you know... it's not about what you have, it's about who you have in your life, you know, you have to have a man in particular, for you to get access to funding. So I've been involved in a couple of different programs where we created microlending, because a lot of times women only need \$1,000 to grow their company, but the banks require for them to take minimum of \$10,000. Or you have to have a man as a cosign”.***

***“Maybe 5 to 10 women who need help, they already have, you know...small shops, they sell tea, they sell whatever, they just need that extra like few \$100 to get more supply. In the first...you know... few months after that they actually become so successful. And not only that, they create jobs for the community. [...]***

***“I think that for me this makes the impact instead of going through these big companies and big NGOs. [...] I believe we’re having the right relationship with the people that need the support [...]***

*so for example, a lot of NGOs go to Somalia, but by time they get there [...] you know, they drain the resources so what gets to the actual people is very little, and there's a lot of conditions even with that. You're setting up a shop to make tea and bread every morning, all you need is \$500...I can make that impact. It's not too cumbersome. For me, it's something that I can afford. But then I could also see the return because I have that direct relationship with the person with the people on the ground that need the support. [...] By helping individuals at the individual level I could see the impact not only in her family, you know, some of them, they were able to put their kids through school because the schools cost money. They were able to pay the school fees. I could see them, you know, not only supporting their family, but creating jobs and supporting that next woman. [...] Somali diaspora sends you know much every year they sent I think at one point something like billion dollars ...it is more than all of the aids from World Bank, you know, USAID, whatever you name it combined. Somali diaspora actually sends money back yearly."* Business owner from the Somali diaspora in the United States of America, July 2023

These three quotes by the Somali business owner confirm (Nielsen & Riddle, 2010)'s analysis of the diasporas' investments and how by investing in their home country they consider this contribution a sort of help to those still living in the country. Furthermore, the informant explained that this amount of money sent to the women in need in Somalia are done on an ad-hoc basis because banks still have structural barriers that prevent women from taking loans without a male guarantor. This restrictive requirement has also been emphasized by (Friedson-Ridenour, 2022) as one of Somalia's key obstacles hindering women's engagement with financial institutions; Somali women entrepreneurs only rely on savings groups or loans from relatives. Women require permission from men to do any financial transaction which again is a symbol of the patriarchal society. Also, the informant has again stressed the lack of efficiency that exists in the business-as-usual developmental projects by putting the direct ad-hoc provision of money in contrast with the support provided by "big NGOs and big companies" which the informant describes as "draining the resources". The investment that the diaspora provides through individual connections is therefore explained here as a more flexible, convenient and of quicker-impact than other types of money-lending like grants and loans. It is however less clear in the informant's comments whether this contribution is also seen in a bigger picture as a way to help the future stability of Somalia.

In an attempt to understand how the informant gets the information about the communities' needs back home, and the investment environment the follow-up question was posed to the informant to clarify:

*“My family is very much involved in Somalia in many different levels, like in the government, in the private sector. So there is a lot of issues still within Somalia’s government that need to be worked on, in terms of policies that protect private sector; there is not enough policies...I believe, or laws, they have not passed laws to support private sectors who are not...you know...Somali-based... So also in Somalia right now there is not a lot of banking correspondence between Somalia and the United States.”* Business owner from the Somali diaspora in the United States of America, July 2023

Furthermore, the informant referred to ties with the family members who still live back in Somalia as means to know about peoples’ needs. A behavior that was also mentioned by (Nielsen & Riddle, 2010) while discussing the scarcity of investment information except from the diasporas’ social contacts back home.

### **Tackling the lack of information, enhancing CSR marketing:**

Furthermore, the different findings highlight a problem with information; several informants emphasized that there is not enough information about the available funding opportunities or projects in the media, and this then becomes a burden for women to access this. The founder of an NGO in the Horn of Africa region put forward the following suggestion:

*“They should use media to talk about access to what they have in CSR, product to support women, they should embrace media better, rather than what they are selling all the time.”* Founder of an NGO in the Horn of Africa region, June 2023

One of the possible tools to seize for a bigger social awareness of the private sector’s contributions among the public is the media. If the media showed the private sector’s initiatives, and publicity did not only show products to buy, the society would be more familiar with the private sector’s social interventions, would engage better, and this would also encourage other private sector companies to contribute. This logical flow was suggested by the informant, who stressed that the private sector’s image and reputation is consumed with its economic and financial purposes; “selling all the time”.

### **6.5.2. Enhancing governments’ strategies vis-à-vis private actors in such contexts and incentivizing the private sector:**

As a starting question to set the scene, all interviewees were asked about their familiarity with the Women, Peace and Security agenda. Local business owners in South Sudan never heard of the agenda, whereas the interviewed MNCs recognized the agenda with very generic knowledge. In contrast, all interviewed informants in Liberia were aware of the agenda, and the country's WPS NAP, as a government policy towards it. The interviewed NGO in Cambodia also expressed knowledge of the agenda. Testing the awareness of the private sector was especially important for setting policy recommendations for governments to be able to see the silos and possible interventions, presuming that the implementation of the WPS agenda is one of the governments' solutions, and commitments to address women's needs in these contexts, together with the governments' various other developmental initiatives.

The challenges facing governments, particularly in post-conflict situations stress the need for governments to capitalize on their already-existing resources and partners. The study revealed that governments, including responsible national women machineries in these contexts don't engage the private sector in a systematic manner. They support and facilitate the implementation of the companies' preplanned activities, but their engagement remains of an ad-hoc nature rather than a structured partnership.

Many of the governments in post-conflict countries are recovering both economically and socially, reestablishing social contract, building and rebuilding institutions. In this regard, the private sector is perceived as the strongest body capable of lifting governments by contributing to economic recovery and post-conflict reconstruction and development. These are the noted priorities from the findings of this study:

***“The private sector first has to be empowered post conflict, they are the ones that will shoulder the main responsibility, because usually, the government has other priorities in order to regain power over its institutions. So, usually all the national income goes to the government institutions, but the main role for empowering women after the conflict would should be to the private sector, because the private sector has a possibility of training women, empowering women [...] they are dedicated, they want to overcome what happened to their families so they are looking for any job, they are able to give hours of work for less income. So, that is from the point of view of the government, in the post conflict situation, they have to empower the private sector give them a bigger role, because they are the ones who will be doing reconstruction.”*** Senior WPS expert with longstanding experience in Africa, conflict prevention and mediation processes, June 2023



Some practical strategies have also been adopted by various governments around the world to help incentivize the private sector's engagement in the community development level. An interviewed WPS expert has also referred to such incentives as a policy that could be replicated in post-conflict countries:

***“Deducting the taxes or taking even abolishing all the taxes, relieving them from the responsibilities of financial obligations, opening the market for them, giving them the possibilities of exporting and importing their goods, giving them a golden license for investment if they are engaging more women”.*** Senior WPS expert with longstanding experience in Africa, conflict prevention and mediation processes, June 2023

In line with (Wirba, 2023)'s proposed strategies to be adopted by governments to attract the corporations' investments in the society and in CSR, the informant also explained that governments in post-conflict countries could look for tools to attract private sector companies' investments like adopting strategies of tax reduction for those supporting women's economic empowerment or GBV prevention. This could also be done through research projects that showcase the various possible tools that governments could use to incentivize the private sector.

As per the answers of the WPS NAP senior expert, research has in fact been drifting the attention to some actors over others. Closer ties between scholars and experts would lead to more concrete and impactful partnerships. The expert also stressed two notions of interventions: “hard core” and “soft-core” developmental interventions. For instance, the focus on private sector's engagement to support women in post-conflict contexts, and its possible impact have been overlooked and under-researched:

***“I think part of the problem we have is research the field right, we've just done a lot of research, focus elements, papers, etc. but not really in practical terms for both governments and private sector, but also women leaders themselves. [...] for example, the World Bank had done a lot of work on really just literally quantifying, doing the measures to prove that if you don't enroll women in economy of a nation, you will lose billions of dollars, right? We need to do the same if you don't involve women in post conflict, and any stage frankly, of peacebuilding. Here is what you would lose, right? So there's that conceptual problem. [...] There is a connection between government and private sector, it tends to focus on development, it tends to focus on let's build something, let's open schools, let's build roads, let's provide, and that kind of economic empowerment is important. But sadly, as I had witnessed firsthand, and I lived and worked hard in Afghanistan, or we are seeing this now in Sudan, no amount of schools that were opened had prevented Taliban from coming back. So if you do this kind of blind development, when you just focus on, let's build things,***

*without really broader social, political and conflict analysis and context, you actually are not going to make a difference, right? So for me, the soft power of what we work on, is a more sustainable economic element, again, of really building not just what I called hard core development work to produce something that you can show, but things that are harder to show, such as building trust, building social cohesion, building economic strength of a community, building resilience of a nation, that is not often explained, and by again, political context.”* Senior international expert on the issue of WPS and NAPs, May 2023

The collected answers from the WPS experts about the role of the private sector in advancing the implementation of the WPS agenda confirms the practical gap that has been referred to in the contextual framework about the expectations versus the reality of that role in conflict and post-conflict situations. While some governments around the world developed WPS NAPs that refer to private sector actors in the implementation, and while a growing momentum has been noticed around the involvement of businesses in the programming for the implementation of the agenda, the senior international expert on the issue of WPS and NAPs confirmed the little evidence about the role of the private sector in reality:

*“Well, the most direct answer is I don’t see it, I would say it’s a frontier that is often talked about and mentioned[...] And very often this is talked about and mentioned as something that should happen. So I have worked pretty much with everybody. And again, across the board, I see it as a normative concept. And again, something that is very often mentioned, as this should happen, we need to do this, we need to bring the private sector, there is clear value of connecting private sectors, corporate social responsibility, activism, right, because we see that in some other elements.”* Senior international expert on the issue of WPS and NAPs, May 2023

The insights from the senior international expert on the issue of WPS and NAPs were of particular importance given the vast expertise and knowledge of the dynamics between governments adopting NAPs and their stakeholders, as well as their priorities when drafting such policies. The expert explained that the engagement of the private sector is yet to move from a “normative concept” to a real practice. It is however common to hear this role mentioned, so the awareness on its importance is present but perhaps the working modalities still need to be reinforced and investigated.

*“But for me, personally, I am again, yet to go to a country where I facilitate the NAP process and there are all these stakeholders, there are women’s groups, there are many ministries, there is UN, there is academia, etc., media, I have never had a single representative of the private sector in any of these workshops.[...] Silos are real. Again, I am not familiar with private sector direct engagement with SDGs. So they could play that bridging role but I can speak to what I see. [...]”* Senior international expert on the issue of WPS and NAPs, May 2023.

Governments mention the private sector while developing their relevant policies such as the WPS NAP, but they disregard them in the practical phases of the development process, consultations and drafting phases. Involving the private sector could also happen by inviting them to the technical workshops that inform the development of WPS NAPs. Their insights, and experience-sharing would be crucial to make them feel part of the process, and to also facilitate their engagement later on in a more coordinated manner.

The findings also revealed a gap between WPS experts, and SDG progress, due to the silos between the peace and security world, and the development world. Thus, experts working in the field of WPS are not familiar or exposed to the efforts exerted by those engaged to achieve sustainable development. This is particularly interesting to notice in the context of this thesis because in post-conflict situations, these actors could be the same, could be working towards the same goal, and could even have valuable overlapping experiences. Nevertheless, policymakers continue to engage the private sector for example on issues related to SDGs but not WPS, although both encompass efforts to advance women's economic empowerment. This silo-ed approach is noted across the very scarce literature that tackles both UN frameworks together, and it is also noted from the limited knowledge of the WPS informants on the private sector's work and vice versa. Furthermore, the senior expert referred to these silos in the context of WPS NAPs and said:

***“For the first time ever, really, there is now attention in many governments in their planning ministries and departments that are designing, that are in charge etc., to do what most governments had never done, which is monitoring and evaluation. And that I see as a great new frontier, because let's be clear, right? It's still a new thing. But most governments have never really been held accountable. Right, they will do programs, they will do project. But it was mostly driven by elections by political cycles, by political priorities, it was not driven by development agenda.”*** Senior international expert on the issue of WPS and NAPs, May 2023

One crucial element discussed by the informant in this quote is the lack of governments' accountability in WPS NAP development and implementation. The informant explained that there is some progress in focusing on accountability frameworks and adopting monitoring and evaluation processes by governments. The commitment is now moving from advocating for governments to adopt WPS NAPs to, implementing and ensuring that the targets are met. Moreover, governments' adoption of WPS NAPs is not driven by the development agenda, but as per the informant, it was usually related to other interests such as elections or

political priorities instead. Hence, the informant explained that discussing monitoring and evaluation and accountability frameworks of WPS NAPs is a relatively new approach to be adopted by many governments and could offer new room of cooperation between governments and the private sector. Harnessing the private sector's added values is key for governments to progress, and to achieve comprehensive solutions, and responses to women's various needs in post-conflict situations. In this regard, companies have embedded features and characteristics that could enhance the implementation of the WPS agenda, namely the strict M&E systems which are perceived as more rigorous and firmer than those employed by the traditional WPS programs implementers (International organizations and governments).

***“So again, all of that is a new, exciting thing...there are again planning departments in most governments that sit in the office of the Prime Minister in that statement, and some kind of minister where somebody is tasked with, we need to not only look at this, but we need to report. So that’s the first element. Second, for the first time we are connecting these different agenda. So for example, I was just finishing in Uganda, we are starting new NAP in Liberia. We had done this in Namibia. It’s hard. And it is also the reality of siloed government approach, not just the silos, you talked about even just how most ministries are designed, they are just focused on their lead. There is not a whole of government approach.[...] Everybody talks about private sector engagement. Everybody talks about whole of government; everybody talks about connecting the development with peace that you mentioned. But I’m yet again to see that really done in practice. So the challenge is, how do we actually go about but let’s break down the silos.[...]We need to focus on implementation and that is where I think we can learn from partnering with private sector, because private sector at the end is all about delivery. Right? You either succeed in your project called your business, or if you don’t, you fail, you have to close down. And I think sadly, how sometimes development aid including aid like donor support for the NAPs, it’s really not done as efficiently, as effective and sustainable as it could be if we were to really partner with private sector, and use sometimes a very strict kind of investment criteria, right?”*** Senior international expert on the issue of WPS and NAPs, May 2023

The informant discussed the crucial problem of silos in governments' approaches, and put it into perspective with the common concepts of “whole of government” approach. The informant explains that in practice, this holistic approach is non-existent. The informant also criticized the way development actors including donors, governments and aid providers work saying that their work is not done “as efficiently, as effective and sustainable as it could be” because while they work in silo-ed approaches, and plan for policies more than for their implementation, the private sector is seen as a deliverable and outcome-oriented body that is “all about delivery”. The informant also explained that governments' partnership with the private sector in the

context of WPS NAPs would therefore be more productive, as it would change how these policies are dealt with and would help impose “strict investment criteria” that looks more into making these plans actionable and implementable.

Furthermore, on the possible advantages that the private sector has, the senior international expert on the issue of WPS and NAPs shed light on governments’ behaviors based on his experience pointing out that together with the different stakeholders, governments continue to confine the role of the private sector to the provision of financial resources and funding. The senior international expert on the issue of WPS and NAPs emphasized:

***“I think, again, very often we view private sector only through one lens, how do we get money, and that is a wrong approach. Because again, let’s recognize that many often people in these companies are very, very advanced in their skills, in their knowledge in their understanding, they might not know women peace and security, but they certainly know how to make things work.”*** Senior international expert on the issue of WPS and NAPs, May 2023

The expert also insisted on the need to understand the private sector’s advantages beyond the mere provision of money. The private sector’s ability to perform and deliver on its objectives by delivering entails skills and knowledge that could benefit governments adopting WPS NAPs, and could also be of use to NGOs and other relevant actors in response to the research question.

The choice of a leading African forum in partnering with the private sector, and inviting private sector representatives to address panels with government officials, and subject-matter experts that discuss topics of post-conflict reconstruction, WPS and development was investigated:

***“The private sector brings a lot of innovation solutions, finance, technological know-how that could all be very valuable from the point of view of strengthening resilience, economic empowerment, creating better access to finance and all these are important contributions that can strengthen peacebuilding efforts to strengthen post conflict, post conflict reconstruction and development efforts, particularly in fragile and conflict affected settings.”*** Executive Director of a leading African forum for issues of conflict and post-conflict situations, June 2023

As confirmed by the informant, the private sector is expected to play a key role in utilizing its added values to serve the post-conflict reconstruction phase and development efforts. One key term used by the informant is: “resilience”. This phenomenon is central to the sustainability of peace, and the success of post-conflict

reconstruction. Women naturally play the role of building community resilience to shocks, as peacebuilders, but the private sector could bolster this role further by creating enablers to sustainable peace and development, like creating better access to finance, or transferring innovative solutions to women.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion & Policy Recommendations

### **Conclusion:**

With the changing funding dynamics, the shifting priorities of the donor countries, and the tensed political scene, it was essential to explore the untapped partnerships of the private sector and governments in the context of WPS agenda in post-conflict settings. There was a need in the literature to investigate the roles that the private sector could play in advancing women's economic empowerment and GBV prevention in the complex environments of the post-conflict countries in particular. This thesis explored the role of the private sector in this regard, based on data collected from different stakeholders from conflict-affected countries like South Sudan, Liberia, Cambodia, and Somalia, including local private businesses, MNCs, NGOs working on issues of women's empowerment in post-conflict countries, as well as senior experts in the WPS agenda as a policy framework. These were fundamentally important to provide insights about the engagement of governments with the different actors and to put forward recommendations that would facilitate the role of the private sector.

A clear silo was seen between the different types of actors. Regarding the overall understanding and awareness about the WPS agenda: while all NGOs were fully aware of the agenda, private companies were less familiar with it, some had even never heard of the WPS agenda despite operating in countries where the government had adopted a NAP to implement the agenda. This stressed the need for governments to put

more efforts seeking the implementation of the NAP, including identifying clear roles for the private sector to play, and in communicating the NAP different objectives nationwide and across the sectors instead of putting the development of the NAPs itself as the target. In terms of priorities, a substantial difference between the informants discussed' economic empowerment angle of the research question, and the prevention of GBV, it was observed that the informants were more comfortable and familiar with the first than the last. This significant disparity also stresses the need for awareness-raising among the private sector actors about the different societal issues especially if they operate in post-conflict situations. In terms of workplace policies for anti-harassment and GBV, experience-sharing exercises were recommended by one of the interviewees.

The findings of this thesis were grouped into what the private sector informants do, the challenges hindering their involvement and impact, and the opportunities to facilitate this role. The findings revealed a number of roles that are played by the private sector actors in response to the research question: the private sector actors as employers where the informants from the private sector explained their adoption of non-discriminatory practices towards women's hiring processes and maternity leaves, despite the sometimes-challenging cultural norms. They also presented examples of their investment in women's education and capacity building, to help women's employment upon graduation, and hence support their mobility from the low-pay and low-skill jobs to better ones that match their qualifications so that they could help women benefit their households and community. The private sector informants also elaborated on specific examples as service providers which provide women with a sustained source of income, or that raise awareness about issues of GBV. Other companies also showcased their procurement policies that give women preferential treatments. When it comes to the private sector's role as a development partner, the thesis discussed the types of CSR initiatives put in place by private sector actors and the difficulties faced by actors operating in such contexts. The concept of CSR and the stakeholder theory were therefore tackled both theoretically and practically to establish a link between the business literature and that of the WPS agenda through discussing it at times of post-conflict situations.

Moreover, the thesis highlighted the challenges and perspectives of both the private sector and the relevant NGOs pertaining to the underexplored opportunities, as well as bottlenecks in result of the post-conflict countries' conditions, such as the difficult accessibility to women beneficiaries because of the weak infrastructure, or the adverse impacts of conflict leading to displacement due to insecurity, hence "people are on the move". Throughout the thesis, a number of cross-cutting observations have also been insightful for the analysis, namely: the private sector is not a homogenous group, the post-conflict countries are also very diverse despite having similarities. Each type of business has its own enabling factors to invest in women's economic empowerment depending on their motives, interests and drivers. MNCs follow global standards and policies, and have a dedicated budget for CSR projects, whereas local companies have less systematic interventions. As for the diaspora business owner, the thesis revealed limitations that face women because of patriarchy values which prevent them from accessing financial resources, such as the need to have a male guarantor to take a bank loan. It was therefore observed that diaspora ad-hoc, informal funds that were sent back home in conflict-affected areas help women at the local level by providing them with a more flexible and accessible financial support that help them sustain their livelihoods. Despite being small amounts that do not necessarily empower women to open a business, they are considered valuable resources in such complex environments. Overall, the informants showed a general interest in the topic, proposing a number of recommendations that would help governments fill in the gaps, and support the private sector to engage in a more systematic manner, but most importantly, in an informed way, through learning from other actors' expertise and leveraging existing opportunities. The thesis also highlighted the minimal efforts that governments in post-conflict situations exert in the topic to strengthen the cooperation and interplay between the different players. While some experts explained that governments are in weak positions post-conflict, as they are usually focused on the reconstruction phase, others emphasized the pivotal role of the private sector in boosting the economic recovery of such countries. In order to fill in the gap between these two worlds, and support the government in the reconstruction mission of these post-conflict countries, the thesis concluded that the government should not suffice in developing WPS NAPs or adding the private sector as



an implementing partner on these NAPs, it should rather facilitate this engagement by developing actionable policies and establishing platforms for engagement and consistent coordination between the private sector and the relevant NGOs. It is within this vein that the role of the NGOs has been noted to be often-overlooked despite being possible stakeholders that can close the accessibility and communication gap between the corporations and women in need in such complex environments. This thesis is timely for NGOs working to advance women's economic empowerment or GBV prevention in post-conflict countries as it highlights their potential, as a possible executive arm for the private sector's CSR initiatives and needs assessments, at a time where NGOs sustainable funding is at risk because of the shrinking donor funding.

The thesis came to conclude that the business enabling environments and peace, security and development frameworks do overlap and complement each other when it comes to women's economic empowerment and GBV prevention, and that these areas should be harnessed by the different actors to reach sustainable outcomes. Governments and policymakers have a role to play vis-à-vis women in post-conflict countries, but amid the various noted constraints facing the traditional development and humanitarian actors, including the questionable effectiveness at the grassroots levels despite spending huge amounts of resources, reforming this business-as-usual development model is becoming necessary. The private sector remains an underleveraged player that requires tools, guidance, incentives and more strategic interventions that promote it as such, particularly in the realm of the WPS agenda programming.

## **Policy Recommendations:**

This study could serve as a roadmap including policy recommendations that would support governments of post-conflict countries to draw on the lessons learned to enable the role of the private sector in advancing women's economic empowerment and GBV prevention, as well as enhance their contributions to the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. It proposes means to maximize the effectiveness and impact of private sectors' engagement. Accordingly, these recommendations are considered timely in light of the policy & practice vacuums on this specific topic.

- Echoing the observations presented by (Brown et al., 2008) about the variance between the different post-conflict countries, the UN and multilateral worlds must recognize the need for context-specificity and promote such analysis with a gender lens to identify women's needs.
- Governments should break the silo between Women, Peace and Security actors and Development actors. They should enhance the private sector's awareness of the governments commitments and explore potential areas of collaboration (including inviting them to WPS-related meetings and consultations)
- Governments should incentivize the private sector companies to partner with NGOs, and implement activities to support women in order to ensure the sustainability of funding, and operations of such NGOs and CSOs. Hence, in accordance with (Wirba, 2023)'s proposition, governments should consider adopting a tax-reduction policy where the context allows and the institutional pre-requisites are available.
- Governments should also work together with private sector actors to raise awareness about the concept of CSR in developing countries affected by conflict, and showcase good practices to encourage the long-term investment in CSR projects, beyond the misconception of a philanthropic only strategy. Experience-sharing is therefore essential.
- Researchers, policy experts and UN organizations should work towards making good practices available as references for governments and private sector actors to adopt. This recommendation goes in line with (Allan, 2019)'s analysis.
- Governments should capitalize on the private sector companies' technological advancements and resources and should also aim to learn from the private sector's monitoring and evaluation frameworks and enhance its accountability frameworks to serve its women empowerment agenda (including WPS NAPs). (United Nations, 2003) discussed the need for enforcement and monitoring mechanisms twenty years ago. Subject-matter experts are today still calling for robust monitoring and accountability systems in the gender-equality and WPS agenda contexts.
- Governments should work on enhancing the infrastructure beyond the capital cities (or seek relevant partnerships to achieve this, in order to allow for the private sector to access women in need, and support them). This could include both physical access such as building roads, but also in terms of connection, by expanding the fiber optics to allow for telecommunication companies to extend their services. Governments could collaborate with relevant private sector actors to implement such projects.
- Governments should close the gap between private sector actors and women machineries, and NGOs actively working on women's empowerment issues by adopting a participatory approach and ensuring a consistent co-ordination, and planning are in place (United Nations, 2003). They can also do so by connecting NGOs that focus on women's empowerment with private sector companies (through inviting

the private sector to be part of the women empowerment networks; because in post-conflict situations, these are mainly done on an individual level through personal connections). Thus, governments should promote the active role of the private sector beyond the mere provision of financial support. By doing this, the private sector companies would be encouraged to engage more regularly, stay aware of the governments' priorities vis-a-vis women's empowerment. This also goes in line with (Zhao, 2021)'s argument that for corporations' contributions to be of a sustainable impact, their role should go beyond philanthropy.

- Women's empowerment NGOs should look for innovative partnership modalities, including designing projects to be implemented with the private sector. To do so, they should aim to design informative tools to match the private companies' targets, needs and CSR priorities.
- The private sector development and CSR engagements should be designed based on conflict-analyses when they operate in conflict-affected settings. In this regard, women's empowerment NGOs are well-positioned and equipped to design projects that enhance private sector operations in conflict-affected contexts based on tools like gender-sensitive conflict analysis.
- Private sector existing CSR initiatives need to be better promoted and communicated to the public.
- The private sector is not uniform. Multinationals and local businesses are very diverse. Governments should help local companies learn from the multinational companies' policies for equal hiring, and anti-harassment policies. Following (Allan, 2019)'s recommendation, designing experience-sharing exercises between local private companies and multinationals would help institutionalize GBV prevention policies, gender-equality policies, and overall internal rules and regulations in workplaces.

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