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Paper

UNSCR 1325 at 20

Reflections on the
Women, Peace and
Security agenda

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Introduction

On 31 October 2000, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325), a landmark decision for the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. The resolution put women at the forefront of peacemaking efforts, reaffirming the importance of women's contribution to all aspects of the resolution of armed conflicts – from protection against sexual violence to increased participation in peace processes. In the 20 years that followed, women have continued to push for more inclusive approaches and fought for their right to be at the table. Nevertheless, a lot remains to be done.

This short piece of reflection will point to some of the lessons learned over the last two decades and

propose areas in which the WPS agenda still needs to be updated, focusing principally on questions concerning the representation of women in peace processes, post-conflict development and international security.

These reflections are interspersed with anecdotes and excerpts from my work with women on the ground. My goal is not to distract from important analytical discussions, but rather to reconnect theory to practice, looking at the impact on women at the local level. I do not come from the field of development or humanitarian affairs; I have worked on human rights, women's rights and children's issues. My remarks will be primarily from within that framework.

The journey to resolution 1325

The 1990s saw two of the deadliest conflicts since the founding of the United Nations (UN) in 1945: the genocide in Rwanda (1994) and the series of wars for independence that led to the breakup of the former Yugoslavia (1991–1999). The brutality of these conflicts provoked outrage, strengthening calls for the UNSC to position itself and take action. As a result of systematic and sustained advocacy from women's groups all over the world, as well as growing support from UN staff and governments beginning to take a more proactive role, UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security passed unanimously.¹

UNSCR 1325 advanced a comprehensive view of the role of women in armed conflicts. But, in some ways, at its core was the legacy of Bosnia and Rwanda – accountability for sexual violence. Many subsequent resolutions focused only on sexual violence in order to create an extensive normative architecture for sexual violence within the Security Council. This resulted in major changes to international law and political resolutions that gave primacy of place to accountability for sexual violence, a primacy that has stamped the WPS mandate from its inception. This primacy is now being called into question, as Western powers put their full weight behind the issue. Increasingly, academics, especially from the Global South, are resisting this singular agenda. In their view, sexual violence should not be the sole focus of international concern, and the WPS agenda must expand to meet the other needs of women across the globe.

Despite notable milestones in normative standards and jurisprudence, UN Women's 'Global Study on

RWANDA

M was 38 years old and lived in the area around Taba. During the genocide she, a Tutsi, saw her neighbours' house being burnt with the neighbours inside. Her family fled for their lives. Like many Tutsis they rushed towards state sanctuary, the compound of the Mayor of Taba. However, the Mayor ordered that all Tutsi males be killed. The family ran from the compound and huddled in a house. The Hutu Interahamwe followed them and killed all the men and boys. They took them to a large pit full of bodies. The women were then asked to bury them. They took M's baby son and threw him also into the pit. Her older son was only wounded. He was also thrown in. He screamed for his mother. M and all the other women were forced to bury fathers and sons, some alive. Their pleas constantly playing in her ears, M went limp and fainted. She and the other women were then taken away and repeatedly raped and gang-raped. She did not know how many times and she did not care.

the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325', published in 2015, found that few women came forward at the national or international level to seek remedies.² However, justice remains a very complex issue. Recent studies show that survivors of conflict want accountability, but in many situations few have faith in the justice system. The stigma, the publicity, the intrusive cross-examination and fear of reprisal also deter women from coming forward.

Women's political representation and participation

The effort to confront sexual violence in armed conflict has recently been overtaken by advocacy for women's representation in peace processes, military settings and peacemaking institutions, particularly by Western countries. However, despite agreement on the normative principles, they are not easily applied in practice.

Conflict parties often show resistance even in the early stages of setting the framework for negotiations. When women are included, they may be present only for quota-filling purposes and prevented from taking an active role. Moreover, women's issues can be overlooked throughout negotiations in favour of other agenda items. Some successes, as in East Timor, show that more comprehensive engagement is in fact possible. But it remains the exception, rather than the rule. Yemen made significant strides with the 2014 National Dialogue, having 30% women's representation despite the Al-Rashad Union, the first Yemeni Salafi political party, preferring to have empty seats rather than include women. By 2018, passive resistance had become more active, and both Saudis and Houthis refused to have women at the table or to have a parallel process. What does one do then? We cannot stand by while the war continues until the parties are ready to accept women – or can we?

Activists working with the Security Council have insisted on the imposition of universal standards as well as a template of best practices. However, this may not be possible in certain contexts. It is beyond the scope of the Security Council to find a formula that adequately takes into account the subtle nuances and diversity inherent in the world's conflicts. In most cases, there is only one agenda and one template.

A great deal of time has been spent developing international, universal standards and practices. It is

perhaps time to finesse our understanding and plan for achievable representation in the diverse reality of actual conflicts today. For this, the playbook must be flexible and the targets set must be actionable. If parties refuse women access to the negotiation table and ignore parallel processes, peacemakers may have to think of more creative ways of working with technical teams, friends of the parties and local communities. The WPS agenda must focus on innovative ways to ensure women's participation despite dogmatic practices and resistance. The local must guide the international, especially as peace processes are increasingly complex.

A more simplistic analysis of women's representation centres on equality. In other words, women are 50% of the population and therefore should represent 50% of seats at any negotiation table or legislature. For many women's rights organisations, this is an issue of representation as a right. Those quick to question these demands tend to focus on the issue of operational effectiveness. Women are left having to demonstrate that more inclusive processes are also more sustainable and effective, in order to justify their place at the negotiation table. But, one might ask, why is that necessary? The obstacles to women's participation are political not technical.

Professor David Kennedy at Harvard University has spent a lifetime highlighting what he explains as the technical takeover of the UN,³ where technocratic policies and programmes go forward without concern for the political. Significant time is spent arguing that, once women are at the table, there is a paradigm shift. Experts insist that research has shown that the actual behaviour of parties changes, that certain issues such as health and education and other social concerns are taken up by the negotiations, and that humanitarian issues are treated with more sensitivity and concern. They focus on

convincing interlocutors that women's participation leads to a more sustainable and long-lasting peace. Many contest these claims, arguing that these views may stereotype women or that there is no clear evidence that peace is sustainable if women are present. The problem is that the heart of this debate should not be operational effectiveness but rather men's political resistance to women's equality.

Outside formal processes, women have already been active in shoring up peace processes through innovative and creative practices. In Liberia, for example, they encircled the site of the peace negotiations to put pressure on the parties to come to a conclusion. In Northern Ireland, they formed their own political party, ran for office and earned their seats at the table. In practically every peace process they have organised to ensure that women's interests are met. Relying on organic, spontaneous women's organisation at the local level should be the starting point for any discussion on representation of women in peace processes.

One major aspect of representation put forward by advocates of UNSCR 1325 is that countries and parties should include security-sector reform and women's representation in the military. Early feminists who were also activists in the disarmament and peace movements were deeply opposed to this. There is now a changing tide, so much so that one is afraid that it will become the main item on the agenda. The Australian defence forces stated clearly in 2016, along with the launch of the national action plan, that the WPS agenda was imperative to improving military capability and operational effectiveness. The number of female combatants around the world is increasing and we are faced with the question of whether certain provisions should be added to the Geneva Conventions for their protection.

Yet, in discussions for the 2015 global study on UNSCR 1325, the demands for women in the military seemed to be of greater focus for Western powers. For participants from Asia and Africa who contributed to the study, this was not as great an issue, although there were discussions regarding

UGANDA

T lived in Gulu in a small hut with a low roof. I hit my head on the roof and went spinning. She was a victim of Uganda's civil war, her legs injured by landmines. She had lived in fear all her life, being one of the children who walked miles to the capital every evening to avoid being recruited by the Lord's Resistance Army. Children crowded the roads and highways as they headed to safety and security, some clutching only a pillow. She was not recruited but lived in one of the camps forcibly created to separate the Acholi population from the Lord's Resistance Army. This was enforced temporary displacement that many welcomed. The brutality of the Lord's Resistance Army was legendary. In the camps, T lived a life free of horrendous abuse, but one of deprivation and dependence on aid organisations.

At the end of the war, T attended a course on tailoring offered by an international NGO. She specialised in one aspect of the craft, making the most beautiful cloth handbags. They were embroidered with the skill of an artist and great imagination. In another country, she could have become a successful designer. In Gulu, she sold her goods to the many visitors now arriving to assist in the peacebuilding process. The aid industry, as it is sometimes called by critical theorists, supported and provided her with the wherewithal to make a modest living.

peacekeeping operations and the need to include more women. In regions where military forces are strong and where militarisation is a serious problem, pushing for women to be in the military goes against the grain for many in civil society. The same is true with regard to military involvement in national plans and pushing forward the WPS agenda as a guard against excessive securitisation. It is important to remember the roots of the Women, Peace and Security movement – advocacy and promotion by groups focused on human rights and women's rights.

Post-conflict recovery – the right to livelihood

The other side of waging war is building peace. Battles about equal representation in political processes are no doubt important, but basic needs still have to be met. Many women are concerned about how they will live, where they will work and what they will eat, and post-conflict recovery packages sometimes fail to meet those priorities. There is a real need to look at post-conflict recovery in a more creative way, moving more decisively from state-of-emergency phase to longer-term development.

A study of post-conflict Sri Lanka shows that the post-war recovery framework was for women to be involved in home-based self-employment activities. Women were often involved in many of these at the same time: sewing clothes, poultry farming and maintaining food outlets. They looked for loans to start their enterprises. For this, they were often at the mercy of micro-finance projects and banks. A crippling debt problem soon became a way of life. Offering loans for self-employment entrepreneur schemes should be the framework for post-conflict recovery. This reflects the hope that strengthening

small and medium-sized enterprises will subsequently feed into the economy.

In the past, training has focused on food production, tailoring and dairy farming – the very traditional areas often identified with women. Other women have ended up as daily wage earners in the most exploitative sectors. There is a need for better alternatives for women, perhaps even introducing new forms of technology.

For donor agencies and Western powers, post-conflict recovery is once again based on a universal template. In every post-conflict situation I have visited for my work, women are tailoring or running food outlets, beauty salons or dairy farms. The most radical thing I have come across was a programme to train women in motor mechanics. The latter notwithstanding, all existing options have further trapped women in their traditional roles. In order to break the cycle, young women must be shown that there is an alternative life. Education and technology must be an integral part of post-war recovery.

Violent extremism and counter-terrorism

Violent extremism is not always one-way violence. Counter-terrorism operations come with heavy-handed military presence, aerial bombardment and the use of drones, and mass incarcerations, all causing great suffering to people caught in the crossfire. The international framework for peace must address violent extremism, but international law and human rights must also protect populations from the excesses of the response to violent extremism, both at home and abroad.

For women in the populations affected by violent extremism, this is a difficult situation. Sometimes one set of their children supports the extremists and the other set the government. Often, women play the part of humanitarian workers, with senior women carrying messages or leading convoys. Intelligence agencies have attempted to recruit women to spy and report on militant group activities – an exercise that is fraught with risk and divides the community from within. Extremists insist on one code of behaviour, and those fighting extremism insist on a different one. The people are caught in the middle. Communities must therefore be listened to, and engaged with, on their own terms.

However, rather than recognise the need for policy reform, Security Council resolutions and other political documents have attempted to co-opt the human rights and women's rights agenda in fighting the war on terror. Human rights groups and

AFGHANISTAN

In Afghanistan, I met A. She was a steely and determined young girl. The conflict had become extremely brutal. Her house was bombed from the air by the international forces – collateral damage we assume – and her school was bombed by the Taliban. She did not smile for a moment. I have learnt over the year that smiles are markers of peace. No one I met ever smiled in Afghanistan.

women's groups are not only watchdogs for actions by extremist groups, but also for the excesses of counter-terrorism. They have to maintain their independence and autonomy. Otherwise the narrative of human rights as the servant of imperialism will seem justified, especially in the Global South.

Women in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria and Yemen have seen their sons go to war, siding with different factions, as their communities burn around them and drones keep buzzing overhead. They are humanitarian messengers who engage both sides. They provide humanitarian relief and run health and educational facilities, and yet they are not protected against this security agenda. Therefore, any discussion on the tactics and limits of counter-terrorism operations must have women at its core.

Conclusion

As it exists today, the WPS agenda is not capturing the nuances, dilemmas and local realities that are absolutely crucial to confront in achieving a more fair and equitable society. To better protect and include women, I propose three key actions.

First, simply reiterating normative principles is not enough. Local communities must be consulted in the formulation of frameworks. Although finding a diversity of local partners is sometimes difficult, the international community must work within the constraints and continue to fight for the goals of the WPS agenda in a strategic and meaningful way, never forgetting that local communities play an important part. This must be accompanied by donor sensitivity to the local political context.

Second, tensions between the Global North and Global South – with the former emphasising sexual violence, participation and representation, and the latter emphasising internally displaced people, refugees, livelihoods and post-conflict recovery – must be managed carefully. The WPS agenda will get no traction in many parts of the world unless it deals with livelihoods and post-conflict economic and social recovery with the same enthusiasm that it shows for women's representation and accountability for sexual violence.

Third, women must be included in all levels and issues of international decision-making, including ongoing discussions regarding security. Women must be proactive on the most pressing questions of international concern. They need to contribute to strategies for fighting the rise in violent extremism and inform policies to restrain the use of force in counter-terrorism response. Furthermore, women's groups should play a major role in defining a new discourse, one that not only recognises the serious security concerns of today, but also helps to preserve human rights, human security and humanity.

The WPS agenda is now at a crossroads. We must go beyond technical issues of representation and security-sector reform. We must begin by building a comprehensive understanding of realities on the ground. We must move beyond a universal framework to better address the needs of individual communities. We must protect the human rights at the core of the agenda. Once, when I was speaking to a very experienced humanitarian in Cox's Bazar on certain aspects of the Women, Peace and Security agenda and other issues of armed conflict, she looked at me and firmly said, 'get real!' That is the message I also bring to you today.

Endnotes

- 1 United Nations, 'Security Council, unanimously adopting resolution 1325 (2000), calls for broad participation of women in peace-building, post-conflict reconstruction', 31 October 2000 (www.un.org/press/en/2000/20001031.sc6942.doc.html).
- 2 Radhika Coomaraswamy, 'Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325', UN Women, 2015 ([www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/UNW-GLOBAL-STUDY-1325-2015%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/UNW-GLOBAL-STUDY-1325-2015%20(1).pdf)).
- 3 David Kennedy, *A World of Struggle: How Power, Law, and Expertise Shape Global Political Economy*, Princeton University Press, 2016.

About the author

Radhika Coomaraswamy is a former UN Under-Secretary-General and Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict. She was the lead author of the Global Study on the Implementation of Resolution 1325, published in 2015, and Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women from 1994 to 2003. She served as Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka from 2003 to 2006.

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