UNSCR 1325: the challenges of framing women's rights as a security matter

By Natalie Florea Hudson

■ Executive summary

While UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 has certainly increased aware-ness among international actors about women's and gender issues in armed con-flict, opened new spaces for dialogue and partnerships from global to local levels, and even created opportunities for new resources for women's rights, successes remain limited and notably inconsistent. To understand some of these shortcom-ings and think creatively about how to move the women, peace and security agenda forward, it is essential to understand the conceptual assumptions underscoring UNSCR 1325. Framing women's rights and gender equality as security issues poses numerous limitations on how the international community conceptualises women's "natural" roles in conflict-affected societies and subsequently the options available for promoting peace and equality in societies rebuilding after war. This policy brief aims to unpack these conceptual challenges and consider how these concepts may be better utilised by national and international actors to foster greater women's participation in peacebuilding processes, enhance understanding of the diverse insecurities facing women, and improve the international community's capacity to be gender sensitive in conflict and post-conflict areas. The conceptual challenges underscoring this agenda are as relevant as the political and operational obstacles, and in many ways the former are essential for understanding the latter.

Introduction

In the 13 years since the passage of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, the critiques of the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda are all too familiar. From the lack of consistency, to the lack of concrete data, to the lack of political will and gender expertise, questions about how to move this agenda forward continue to be critically important. As this policy brief will demonstrate, the conceptual challenges under-scoring this agenda are as relevant as the political and operational obstacles, and in many ways the former are essential for understanding the latter. In particular, operationalising UNSCR 1325 has often necessitated approaches and policies that securitise women's rights and deal with gender equality in problematic or at least short-

sighted ways in conflict zones around the world. The aim of this policy brief is to present a better understanding of these conceptual challenges and consider how these concepts may be better utilised by national and interna-tional actors to create opportunities that will increase women's participation in the peacebuilding process, enhance understanding of the diverse insecurities that women face and improve the capacity of the international community to be gender sensitive in conflict and post-con-flict areas.

Applying security language to women's rights and gender equality

Simply put, UNSCR 1325 is a political tool. It is a language – an agenda – that reframes issues that women's human

rights defenders have long been advocating for. From protection against gender-based violence to women's right to participate in government and other decision-making bodies, the issues that emerge in UNSCR 1325 are not new. What is new, however, is the security language that policymakers and advocates are now using to address these long-standing challenges related to gender inequality. The strategic language embedded in UNSCR 1325 has certainly increased awareness among international actors, opened new spaces for dialogue and partnerships from global to local levels and even created opportunities for new resources for women's rights. But successes have been limited and the goals of UNSCR 1325 continue to fall short of expectations.

In order to understand some of these shortcomings and to think creatively about how to move the WPS agenda forward, it is essential to understand the conceptual assumptions that underscore UNSCR 1325 and how these concepts have been limiting, especially when it comes to challenging traditional gender roles and conventional ideas about what it means to establish "peace and security" in societies transitioning from conflict. UNSCR 1325 squarely situates women's rights and gender equality concerns in international security arenas, and it is important to consider how this particular placement of these issues might actually be limiting for women's emancipation over the long term. Where and how these issues are addressed matter, and it is critical to understand how this language can simultaneously create opportunities for equality and reinforce existing power structures.

Conceptual limitations of the use of security language

Framing women's rights and gender equality as security issues imposes numerous limitations on how the international community conceptualises women's roles in conflict-affected societies and subsequently the options available for promoting peace and equality in societies that are rebuilding after war.

Firstly, UNSCR 1325 relies on an instrumental argument for women's rights, emphasising the ways in which women "naturally" contribute to conflict resolution and how those positive contributions stand to improve the Security Council's efforts to maintain international peace and security. In other words, women's rights are not only presented in terms of the actual security needs of women in conflict, but also in terms of what women – and gender equality – contribute to lasting peace and security. This language promotes an essentialist and narrow view of women as communal peacemakers and mothers, and therefore has the potential to support post-conflict trends that often pressure women to return to traditional, more nurturing roles in the home. This justification can actually be at odds with those working for women's rights in public spaces as leaders or decision-makers. In this way, it can actually reinforce rather than challenge traditional gender roles and expectations.

Another significant underlying assumption in the WPS agenda is the notion that women bring a unified voice to the peace process. It is critical to recognise that while women may have been working for peace in various local and grassroots capacities in their communities long before international intervention, these efforts do not automatically or even easily translate into a coherent list of concerns or priorities for the international actors that are intervening. This assumption presents significant challenges to the international community as it tries to bring women's many and even divergent voices to the peace process as a unified policy agenda reflective of the entire community.

The second conceptual limitation of UNSCR 1325 and subsequent WPS resolutions relates to the traditional security approaches that are readily available to those engaged in this language and in these policy circles. More specifically, the security sector has been the primary – if not the only – means to achieving rights and equality in most societies transitioning from conflict. To date, the implementation of UNSCR 1325 has relied on UN security mechanisms, particularly through the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. While peacekeeping missions have made important progress through the institutionalisation of gender advisers and gender affairs offices, the increased use of gender training programmes in missions, and the deployment of more female peacekeeping personnel, these successes have largely relied on traditional security actors like the police and military. In this way, the use of security language reinforces the centrality and legitimacy of coercion, and the use of force and armed personnel in societies working toward peace, non-violence, and freedom. This tension cannot be understated in such contexts, particularly at such a critical time of reshaping societal norms and establishing democratic goals.

Seizing conceptual opportunities: non-negotiable principles and procedures

Despite these serious limitations, the WPS agenda does create political opportunities and critical entry points for reconceptualising ideas about women, insecurity and gender. These openings must be recognised and institutionalised as regular procedures and internalised principles.

To begin with the problematic assumptions about women as peacemakers and women's singular voice, the international community must continue the recently established practice of holding Open Day Forums. Starting in 2010, 25 dialogues on conflict resolution and peacebuilding were held with women from civil society and senior UN leaders in conflict-affected countries across the globe. These meetings enable women to directly share their priorities and concerns with high-level UN officials. This dialogue and interaction are key to fully realising the scope and diversity of women's priorities and understanding the most pressing insecurities women experience in their communities. These sorts of forums involving stakeholders and local

women themselves need to become standard operating procedures in all countries where the UN has any type of mission presence.

Relatedly, the international community needs to continue to push for consistent data collection by supporting the development of the 26 indicators central to the WPS agenda. This data is essential for understanding inconsistencies in implementation, identifying good practices, strengthening co-ordination among various actors on the ground and isolating areas in need of acute attention, such as women's lack of representation in formal peace agreements. The best way to challenge underlying assumptions about women and peace is to systematically collect such evidence-based analysis, like the indicators, and to include such concrete analysis in every decision that is made at the international and national levels.

Lastly, since the passage of UNSCR 1325 it has become very clear to the international community that gender expertise is a skill set that requires training, experience and resources. It is not a role that comes naturally to women. Thus, it remains critical to support the professional development of gender experts in local communities, in national governments and at international headquarters. Relatedly, national governments need to continue to push the UN to have a better presence on the ground in conflict-affected areas that provides culturally specific gender expertise. This is not only critical to the previous two recommendations (institutionalised forums with women's civil society organisations and more comprehensive and co-ordinated data collection on WPS), but it is critical to fulfilling the prevention mandate of UNSCR 1325 and the subsequent WPS resolutions. Further, member states must focus their resources and energies on developing gender expertise and promoting women into leadership roles internally so as to better equip the UN to appoint more gender experts and more women into senior positions within the UN system, particularly in political and peacekeeping missions.

Such efforts to take women's lives seriously and genuinely understand gender roles in all their diversity and complexity are not easy. Working with diverse groups of women to identify clear, actionable recommendations or priorities; collecting data on sensitive issues or in rural parts of the world; and developing gender expertise at home and abroad take considerable time, patience and resources. They also require creativity and convinced leadership to push options and approaches out of the traditional security sector box and engage other actors and other sectors of society. For example, how might the WPS agenda focus on creating employment opportunities for women post-conflict? Research shows that women tend to lose their jobs once the war is over and face pressures to return to traditional roles. This occurs despite the fact that the number of female-headed households increases after conflict. This only increases women's vulnerability and therefore issues like access to employment, type of employment and levels of income need to be better integrated into this agenda.

UNSCR 1325 must continue to be a political tool – one that mobilises and unites actors working on a range of issues. This conceptual rallying point is its strength, and one that the international community can better utilise in pushing the WPS agenda forward.

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