



feminist dialogue series

#10

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The Women, Peace and Security Agenda: 20 years after

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Over the past two decades and with the historical UN Resolution 1325, women's roles as victims and actors in conflict received much scholarly, policymaking and practitioner attention. However, despite advances in terms of framework, structures and training, women remain marginal to formal peace and security processes and are continuously subjected to the scourge of sexual and gender-based violence in conflict and non-conflict situations. There is an urgent need to push the envelope so that we can become more innovative

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda emerged in a context in which the meaning of, and approaches to, peace and security were being redefined. The 1990s saw a marked shift from the interstate conflicts of the Cold War era to the intra-state conflicts that engulfed many countries in Eastern Europe and Africa. Realist interpretations for managing conflicts – through the projection of power and a balance of power – no longer held validity. A Human Security perspective, which drew on Peace Studies, Critical Security Studies, and Feminist International Relations, gained traction in the UN. Security became redefined as “freedom from fear and freedom from want” (UNDP, 1994). The security of the individual and people became as important as the security of the state (the two were seen as intrinsically linked), and the identification of security

issues and actors was broadened to take account of the many sources of insecurity. This conceptualisation of security presented a key moment in which sexual and gender-based violence could be conceived of as a peace and security issue, and in which women could be repositioned as peace and security actors.

Women's struggles in a changing conflict environment

A key characteristic of the intra-state conflicts was the disregard for the rules of war. Many civilians, including women and children, were directly targeted and displaced during these conflicts. Although war and the violation of women's bodies have always co-existed, the concept of ‘rape as a weapon of war’ was coined to articulate the strategic ways in which sexual violence was being perpetrated to further the



militaristic aims of national armies, rebel groups, and militia. Many women also suffered other forms of violence, such as being abducted into forced marriages and/or to perform duties of sex slaves, cooks, and intelligence gatherers (Meintjes et al, 2002). Children were being forced to become soldiers. In response, many women's organisations emerged to provide humanitarian assistance to those in need and to recreate peace in their war-torn societies.

Feminist scholars and gender activists highlighted the atrocities that were being inflicted on women during war, but also their role as actors (as peacebuilders or as part of armies/rebels groups or governments). Although women were both victims and actors during conflicts, their struggles were rendered invisible in mainstream International Relations studies on conflict and in the decision-making corridors of the UNSC. Women were also absent from national peace negotiations that sought to end conflicts, from peace-keeping missions that sought to uphold these agreements and from peacebuilding institutions and measures which were instrumental in forging new societal relations. Peace agreements determined the conditions for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) and Security Sector Reform (SSR), the distribution of representation in the transitional phase, and the principles that guide the formation of a new constitution and the reconstruction of the society.

The arguments put forward by women at the time were that if they were absent from these processes their interest would not be reflected in the peace agreements, and that they had a right to representation as they were actors during conflict. The decisions made at negotiating tables impacted all in the society, not only warring factions. If women were absent from peace processes where power relations were being renegotiated, and new constitutions and frameworks were being forged, their needs and interests would be overlooked. The opportunity for creating gender equality in the post conflict society would be missed.

The UN Resolution 1325 and the WPS

In 2020, we are celebrating twenty years of the implementation of the United Nations Security Council

Resolution (UNSCR) 1325. The Resolution is the landmark framework for conventionalising women's participation in peace and security processes. Each year, in October, the UN Secretary General provides a report on the implementation of the Women Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda. These reports seem to give a common message, namely that advances have been made in terms of frameworks, structures, and training, but that this is not translating into actual progress in terms of increased meaningful participation of women in peace processes and the prevention of violence against women in conflict and non-conflict situations. (also see, UN Women, 2015)

There is greater awareness and acceptance of the agenda, and many peace and security frameworks at international, regional and national levels refer to UNSCR 1325. Approximately 82 countries (41 per cent) have National Action Plans (NAPs); 26 of these countries are in Africa.¹ Gender advisors are deployed to peace missions, peace-keepers are trained on Sexual, Exploitation and Abuse (SEA), and there is a zero-tolerance policy for sexual abuse in place at the UN. The UN and the AU have adopted gender parity principles and we are therefore seeing more women in decision-making capacities in these institutions. Women currently comprise 35 per cent of heads, and 48 per cent of deputy heads, of UN Peacekeeping Missions and Political Missions. Monitoring and evaluation frameworks have also been developed. The AU, in 2018, produced a Continental Results Framework to track progress on the implementation of the WPS agenda. The AU Peace and Security Department have a Gender Programme and a Gender Task Force to facilitate implementation, and the Chairperson of the AU is supported by the Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security. All the REC's in Africa, except COMESA, also have Regional Frameworks for the implementation of the WPS agenda.

There are many global and regional initiatives to increase women's participation in mediation, for example: The Global Alliance of Regional





Women Mediator Networks, Women, Peace and Security Focal Points Network, the African Union's Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation (FemWise-Africa) or the Gertrude Shope Women's Capacity Building Programme, housed in the Department of International Relations and Co-operation in South Africa (DIRCO). The key question remains, how can this training be used with greater impact for sustainable peacebuilding.

Reality check so far rather discouraging

According to the findings outlined in the UN Secretary General's 2019 annual report (UNSC, 2019):

- women still make up only 4.2 per cent of military personnel and 12.8 per cent of police in UN peacekeeping missions
- record levels of political violence targeting women were demonstrated in new data published in May 2019
- over 50 parties to conflict are credibly suspected of having committed or instigated patterns of rape and other forms of sexual violence in situations on the agenda of the Security Council
- at least one in five refugees or displaced women experience sexual violence and nine out of 10 countries with the highest rates of child marriage are in fragile contexts.
- in 2019, nearly 132 million people needed humanitarian aid and protection, including an estimated 35 million women, young women, and girls who require life-saving sexual and reproductive health services, and interventions to prevent gender-based violence and respond to the needs of survivors.
- in the period 2016-2017, only 0.2 per cent of the total bilateral aid to fragile and conflict-affected situations went directly to women's organisations.
- between 1990 and the end of 2018, according to the Peace Agreements data base, only 353 of 1,789 agreements (19.7 per cent), relating to more

than 150 peace processes, included provisions addressing women, girls or gender. In 2018, of the 52 agreements across a range of issues included in that data base, only four (7.7 per cent) contained provisions relating to gender, down from 39 per cent in 2015.


We know that we have been witnessing a decrease in levels of peace and security globally. Many of the fragile states and conflicts are in Africa. With this rise in conflicts, at both national and local levels, and including violent extremism, we have seen an increase in conflict related sexual violence (an increase estimated by the UN at 56 per cent in 2017) and a decrease in women's participation in peace processes (and only a slight increase in peacekeeping). Globally, only eight per cent of women have participated as peace negotiators, 2.7 per cent as mediators, and five per cent as witnesses. These figures have remained relatively stagnant for the last five years (we noted above the decrease in references to gender equality in the actual peace agreements). These statistics depict a reality that is not commensurate with the resources and efforts invested in the process to further women's participation in peace and security.

Reasons behind the slow progress and ideas for innovation

There are a number of factors that can account for incongruence between the growth in terms of frameworks and resolutions and the slow progress in translating this growth into an increased participation of women in peace processes and improvements to women's security.

- **Women's peace and security is intimately linked to general peace and security:** We have seen, post 2010, a global increase in conflict and a changing conflict context. During conflict situations, women are more vulnerable, and sexual violence remains both a deliberate strategy and opportunistic undertaking, now by both warring factions and those sent to keep the peace. Governments in these contexts do not have control and





therefore channelling programs against sexual and gender-based violence (SGDV) through them will yield little results.

- *The existence of legal frameworks, policies, and institutions, as well as women's presence in the security sector, is not sufficient for prevention of, or protection from, sexual violence:*

Equally disconcerting is the increase in SGBV in countries not deemed to be in conflict, South Africa being a case in point. Much of the energy in the WPS community has been, and continues to be, spent on frameworks and policies and way too little on changing behaviour and inculcating norms and values that will change social relations and the ways in which men and women relate to each other.

- *The Agenda for Peace is fraught with challenges of adapting to the changing conflict context:*

The Agenda for Peace had been conceptualised to deal with state-based conflicts and less so with new types of violent conflict, as violent extremism and local level conflicts where governments may not be part of the conflict and/or are absent. We have spent too much time trying to be part of this peace agenda and not enough time thinking of ways in which we can create more sustainable peace through transforming the agenda's instruments.

- *To simply assert that women's presence will make the peace agreements more sustainable is stretching the argument for women's presence too far:*

The peace agreements do not hold because of the nature of the conflicts, the actors involved, and the cookie cutter type power sharing agreements that are generated. Inserting women into these spaces without transforming processes is unlikely to yield different results. In addition, because parties get to the negotiation table by virtue of their ability to do harm, the women who will be present as negotiators will be part of the actors to the conflict and will negotiate in their interests. The choice of mediators is one that parties to the negotiations have to agree on and they are usually sourced

from those who have held high office – very few women meet the criteria. While in some instances, women do attend as observers, no amount of training in mediation will get women to the formal peace table because training is not the criteria being sought.

- *The nature of the conflict, and therefore the negotiations, is also a determining factor in what the agreements will contain:*

The more the conflict is based on issues of human rights and oppression, as was the case, for example, in Sudan, the more likely there is to be stronger provisions for gender equality, irrespective of the level of representation of women (there was only one young woman negotiating in Sudan). The more a conflict has to do with personalised politics or access to resources, irrespective of the number of women present, it is less likely it is to yield to demands for gender equality and, even if included in the agreement, there are fewer chances of such demands being translated into practice (Democratic Republic of Congo and Madagascar suffice as examples).


- *Much time and resources have been invested into getting a few women into formal peace processes:*

Women have long asserted the right to be part of peace tables, and we should not negate this. However, we should highlight that under the current configuration of conflict negotiations there will always be only a few women.

- *More time should be spent in reconstructing multiple peace tables at continental, regional, national, and local levels:*

Women do not have to wait to be invited to peace tables as they have always been at the forefront of informal peace processes. They therefore have to invest more in spearheading peace processes themselves. These processes and peace tables can take multiple forms. In such ways, women exercise their agency once more in peace processes; they not






only participate, but they also transform the peace process in both conduct and outcome.

- ***We have to ensure active peacebuilding at all levels:*** There is now an increasing realisation of the need to use the trained peacebuilders (those that have undertaken short courses in mediation) for community-based conflicts. This is a welcome shift, but we must not swing the pendulum from high level to local level. Peace agreements are signed at the national level but sustained at local levels. We can also deploy peacebuilders more constructively outside of their local contexts (for example, when you know that the likelihood of conflict is high in a country, a few peacebuilders can be deployed to work for months in an area to assist with intermediation). One could also create an 'army of peacebuilders' for rapid deployment to areas where needed. These are the forms of engagement that can happen alongside, and mutually augment, formal peace processes.
- ***As more peace missions enter spaces where there is no peace to keep, and where they often stay for decades, the deployment of women will be challenging:*** There has been little progress in reconceiving how peace missions can be conducted in a way to ensure that women are enabled to participate. Issues in deployment include the frequency of rotation and access to families, measures to ensure that women

are not subjected to SGBV in the mission, and accommodations of women's needs.

- ***Effective women engagement in conflict prevention is needed:*** The international tide has now turned from a prior emphasis on peacebuilding to that of conflict prevention. There have been some concerted efforts in the past around mainstreaming gender into early warning and into developing women's situation rooms for elections (Kenya and Uganda are examples). There is, however, again not much out of the box thinking about what new tools can be added to the conflict prevention tool box that will make it more effective. How can women meaningfully participate, and how do we ensure that prevention of violence against women is at the forefront of conflict prevention measures? What is the link between a focus on the operational issues of conflict prevention (which is usually short term staving off of conflict) and the long-term interventions of structural conflict prevention?
- ***Peacebuilding should be conceptualised as an everyday occurrence that takes different forms during different phases of the conflict cycle.*** Establishing the peace architecture, more commonly referred to as the peace infrastructures, is key as the other architectures concentrate on security. Women have been excellent at forming peacebuilding organisations, but attention was diverted from this when the shift to a concentration on mediation began. UNSCR 1325 speaks about the need to support local women's peace initiatives. Much more should be done on this score so that we build a peace architecture that traverses all the levels - from local to international.
- ***Moreover, peace begins with the individual, family, and the community, and therefore working on inculcating norms and values and behaviour commensurate with a culture of peace is important for both building and sustaining peace.*** We have not spent sufficient time and resources on changing relations and





constructing this peace infrastructure. Where are the peace clubs, peace centres, ministries for peace, peace councils, and so forth?

Gender justice and sustainable peace

The debate on women, peace and security is a highly political one. Changes to the international ideological and conflict contexts sensitively impact the implementation of progressive policies and frameworks. Nationalist and conservative politics are [re]emerging globally, which weaken multilateral organisations and for which the gender agenda is less of a priority. The rise in violent extremism, too, reduces the emphasis placed on women's role in peace and security. There is an urgent need to push the envelope so that we can be more innovative. We should spend less time seeking to be included into the peace agenda and more on thinking through sustainable transformative peace processes where we are included from the start. We also should not have too narrow a perspective of what we are counting to show progress in the WPS agenda. Currently, we only measure progress by

counting the women involved in formal peacekeeping and peace-making processes. Yet if we cast our net a bit wider, we will find women engaging in peace processes in a variety of different ways. We need to find the methodologies and tools to capture, count, and reveal these engagements too. Gender justice is an important component of peacebuilding. We cannot have peace if gender inequality is perpetuated through patriarchy and the structural and systemic inhibitors of equitable gender relations. Moreover, respect for diversity, including sexual identity, is important. There is a correlation between the degree of gender inequality and homophobia, and the propensity for conflict. Creating peaceful societies therefore has to have a holistic approach in which all are included in their diversity. We therefore cannot bury our heads in the sand and continue to do more of what we have been doing, for we will achieve the same limited results. The conceptualisation of the WPS agenda needs to be rethought, and more innovative practices need to be advanced. •





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About the Feminist Dialogue Series

The Idea of the Feminist Dialogue Series was born during an International Workshop on Political Feminism in Africa organized by the Mozambican Feminist Platform Forum Mulher and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in October 2016 in Maputo. The gathering brought together over 50 feminist activists and scholars from all over the continent. Inspired by the stimulating discussions and interventions at the workshop, this series is intended as a platform to share important feminist reflections. In this way the series wants to contribute to the development and spreading of African feminist knowledge to transform political and economic conditions on the continent towards social and gender justice.

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