

1325 And Beyond – Essay Contest

HONORABLE MENTION

How the Private Sector Can Advance UNSCR 1325 in the 2020s

Karla Drpić

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) was a watershed moment for women's rights and roles in international peace and security. It established the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, which emphasizes the importance of women's participation throughout the entire cycle of armed conflict. UNSCR 1325 and subsequent WPS-related Security Council resolutions call on all relevant actors to advance this agenda.

However, 20 years and nine resolutions later, the role of the private sector in furthering the WPS agenda and the goals of UNSCR 1325 remains underexplored. While gender equality is a centerpiece of most corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and the importance of business for promoting peace is growing, advocates for gender, peace and business have yet to form a coherent front.

This essay argues that the private sector has enormous potential to unlock opportunities to advance UNSCR 1325 and the WPS agenda. In it, I argue that the private sector can be particularly valuable for advancing women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. After exploring current private-sector involvement in the WPS agenda, I explain why it is good for business and offer recommendations on how to advance its role in the WPS agenda throughout the 2020s.

Private-sector potential and the WPS agenda

While many businesses worldwide operate in conflict-affected areas, the potential for the private sector to make a difference around WPS remains largely untapped.¹ This “missing link” is puzzling for several reasons.

First, gender equality is increasingly important within the corporate world. Given that so many global businesses with strong CSR commitments operate in conflict-affected areas, their apparent lack of awareness of how investing in women's empowerment in these environments might benefit them is perplexing.

Moreover, global CSR initiatives have shown that they can react quickly to new challenges related to gender equality. For example, the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC)—the world's largest corporate responsibility initiative—and the Women's Empowerment Principles have published timely recommendations for businesses to employ a “gender lens” to the COVID-19 pandemic.^{2,3}

Finally, platforms that could support WPS-related corporate initiatives already exist. For example, Business for Peace (B4P) aims to harness the preexisting role of business in fragile and conflict-affected states to deepen private-sector action in support of peace.⁴ Other platforms, like the UNGC, might also be good vehicles for driving progress on business involvement in this area.

However, conceptual links between this global CSR “infrastructure” and the WPS agenda are distinctly lacking. For example, a 2011 report on costing and financing UNSCR 1325 notes that while certain UNGC partnerships include projects on gender equality, they fail to contextually link these programs and women’s empowerment to peacebuilding.⁵

Progress on this matter has been slow, and there is a distinct lack of references to women or gender considerations in literature about business and peace in conflict areas. For instance, the 2010 UNGC-PRI *Guidance on Responsible Business in Conflict-Affected & High-Risk Areas* does not include any references to women. Their 2013 report *Responsible Business Advancing Peace: Examples from Companies, Investors & Global Compact Local Networks* fails to do so too.

However, certain NGOs and other institutions have made positive steps toward recognizing the importance of business for the WPS agenda. Cordaid, one of the biggest international development organizations and a member of the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, supports more than 60 female-owned enterprises in some of the most fragile contexts worldwide. Similarly, the World Bank has developed several initiatives to empower women entrepreneurs to promote peace and stability.⁶

Why advancing the WPS agenda is good for business

The business case for women’s participation and leadership globally is exceptionally strong: Female-founded businesses ultimately deliver higher revenue—more than twice as much per dollar invested—than those founded by men, making women-owned companies better investments for financiers.⁷ There is also a strong link between women’s participation in the labor market and GDP growth. The World Economic Forum predicts that if the global gender gap in labor market participation is closed by 25 percent by 2025, an additional US\$5.3 trillion would be added to GDP globally.⁸

These findings are important for conflict-affected economies, which tend to be fragile due to the lack of foreign investment, decreased living standards, mass emigration, and increased numbers of conflict-related disabilities and fatalities. As such, war is often referred to as development in reverse,⁹ underscoring the urgent need for GDP growth in these economies. Since studies show that women’s inclusion and participation in economic life can significantly boost various economic indicators—thus accelerating post-conflict economic development and reconstruction—there is a clear business case for promoting gender equality in these areas.

On this score, business has massive potential to enact positive change. The private sector provides nine in ten jobs in developing countries,¹⁰ which largely overlaps with current conflict-affected and post-conflict geographies.¹¹ Employing more women for these jobs would improve business performance and economic growth, which makes a compelling case for businesses of all kinds to advance women’s empowerment in fragile areas.

For instance, multinational companies (MNCs) operating in such areas may provide employment and promotions to more women, outsource services and products to women-owned enterprises, and provide locally relevant skills training to women. Such actions can help develop more skilled, empowered workforces, benefiting both employers and communities. For example, a graduate of Goldman Sachs’ 10,000 Women Initiative program, who runs a brick manufacturing company in Kigali, Rwanda, primarily hires local women and has invested in a water pump for her community.¹²

Furthermore, stability is good for business, and studies have shown that countries with higher levels of gender equality are more stable.¹³ Therefore, investing in gender equality in conflict-affected areas is not only an excellent way for MNCs to show their commitment to CSR on a global level, but it is also likely to create more positive business environments, thereby attracting investment and creating more business opportunities.

Empowering women by involving them in business activities during post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding may also build lasting societal stability, starting from the family unit. Economically empowered women can financially support their families, divert family members from conflict-related work opportunities, and reduce rates of domestic violence. International Alert’s Living with Dignity project in Tajikistan, which aims to build a socioeconomic environment that empowers women and protects them from sexual and gender-based violence, is a good example of this. It found that women’s earnings have increased fourfold since they started their own businesses as part of the project, and the percentage of women who report experiencing violence has decreased by 31 percent.¹⁴

The private sector can foster female entrepreneurship and contribute to the development of the local economy. For instance, Tupperware Brands’ Global Links Program helps Iraqi women develop technical and business skills. This project thus enables women to run their businesses more effectively but also to spread this knowledge to other female business owners.¹⁵

Finally, if women are empowered economically, they can increase their political negotiating power in reconstruction and peacebuilding efforts.¹⁶ This increased economic power could directly contribute to one of the key objectives of UNSCR 1325: “ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict.”

Outlook for the 2020s

The private sector can powerfully advance the objectives of 1325 and the WPS agenda more broadly. Moreover, the generational shift in attitudes toward CSR bodes well for implementing more meaningful, comprehensive corporate initiatives to promote WPS.

According to PwC’s *Millennials at Work*, the millennial generation will form half of the global workforce by 2020, and 88 percent of millennials prefer to work in companies that emphasize CSR.¹⁷ As this generation is promoted into positions of power, they are likely to push for change in their companies’ CSR practices. Corporate initiatives aiming to advance the WPS agenda could be a metaphorical gold mine for companies that already operate in conflict-affected areas and who want to improve their CSR performance in the 2020s and beyond.

There are several reasons this could be the case. First, advancing a worthy cause like WPS might be personally and professionally gratifying to the majority of the global workforce, PwC’s report suggests. Second, private-sector initiatives that explicitly focus on WPS are rare, and companies that start developing and implementing such initiatives may be recognized as innovators, raising their profile and motivating more companies to join the cause. Finally, this year’s 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 and the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development establish a highly symbolic 10-year period between 2020 and 2030 for companies to engage more in global causes that have not seen much progress.

Conclusion

Twenty years on, advancement of UNSCR 1325 and the WPS agenda remains slow on several fronts, including in the private sector. Global CSR platforms and practitioners have failed to recognize how the private sector might empower women in conflict-affected areas.

Most of these areas need economic growth urgently. As the main employers in many conflict-affected areas worldwide, the private sector plays a key role. Moreover, the private sector could accelerate and strengthen growth by increasing women’s participation in the labor market and committing to their empowerment. Evidence suggests that such initiatives may promote post-conflict recovery of local communities, creating a stable business environment, reducing violence against women, and fostering women’s political participation.

Although businesses may appear an unlikely advocate for advancing this agenda, there is a strong business case for the socially responsible millennial generation to start developing and implementing WPS-focused CSR projects within their companies throughout the 2020s and beyond. UNSCR 1325’s anniversary thus presents an ideal opportunity for businesses worldwide to capitalize on their potential by helping to achieve the objectives of UNSCR 1325 and the WPS agenda.

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1325AndBeyond – Essay Contest

In the run up to the 20th anniversary of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325 (2000)) Women In International Security (WIIS) and the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Washington, DC launched an international essay competition *1325AndBeyond*.

WIIS and the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Washington, DC are proud to announce and publish the winning essays. The essays highlight innovative and imaginative ideas and strategies to achieve the objectives of UNSCR 1325 in the 2020s.

FIRST PRIZE

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SECOND PRIZE

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ANNINA CLAESSION (SWEDEN)

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