1325 And Beyond – Essay Contest

SECOND PRIZE

Mobilizing a Forgotten Sector: A Case for a New Media Code of Ethics on Gender and Conflict

Annina Claesson

How is UNSCR 1325 to be implemented if no one has heard of it? On the cusp of the resolution's 20th anniversary, this question may appear simplistic. Yet given the slow rate of progress in promoting the goals of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, we must revisit the question of who is supposed to be doing the promoting. The obvious answer is often curiously omitted in policy papers and research reports. Why is the media ignored as a change actor for the WPS agenda? More important, how can the media's transformative potential for implementing UNSCR 1325 in the next decade be unlocked? One answer involves reexamining the principles that determine how journalists cover gender-related issues in conflict zones and galvanizing actors around a new agenda: a code of ethics for journalists covering gender and conflict issues.

Too often, the media is simply thought of as a conduit through which the work of "real" policy actors can be communicated and promoted. Nonetheless, the crucial role of the media was recognized as early as 1995 in the Beijing Platform for Action as well as by UN Women's 2015 Global Study on the Implementation of UNSCR 1325.[1] The media can play a role in transforming social norms in the interest of preventing conflict by facilitating the open flow of information during conflict and contributing to justice and reconciliation in post-conflict contexts.

The media is shaped by the world around it but also has the capacity to change it. Thus media can promote gender equality and prevent conflicts but also can reproduce harmful social norms or even directly traumatize the subjects of their stories. Johanna Foster and Sherizaan Minwalla carried out a study in the aftermath of ISIS attacks on Yazidis, interviewing Yazidi women about their interactions with the international media.[2] Their findings were upsetting: 85 percent of the women reported that journalists engaged in unethical practices, often pressuring them to speak or failing to protect their privacy.[3] This unacceptable conduct is commonplace. Currently, the media overwhelmingly operates on a "gender-blind" basis, failing to consider gender perspectives in conflict reporting.[4]

Considering the key role the media plays in shaping the societies it reports on, it follows that it has a special responsibility to establish ethical standards for day-to-day newsroom activities. Journalists are no strangers to normative frameworks: The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics is taught in every Journalism 101 class.[5] As conflicts have become more complex and more publicized in the media, some have issued calls for stronger, more concrete frameworks to help journalists portray societies in conflict accurately while better protecting their safety and that of their subjects.[6] It is imperative that a gender perspective permeate every part of such a code.

In order to promote UNSCR 1325 over the next decade, media outlets, international organizations, and grassroots organizations must come together to draft a code of ethics specifically addressing gender in conflict. While such a code would not be legally binding nor intended as a one-size-fits-all solution, a consultative process supported by the UN and other relevant actors could help mobilize the media sector to further the aims of UNSCR 1325 and generate a snowball effect for further efforts.[7]

The Media as a Peacebuilding Actor

As UNESCO points out in its handbook for reporting on conflict in South Asia, it is not helpful to make distinctions between "conflict-sensitive gender reporting" on one hand and "gender-sensitive conflict reporting" on the other.[8] A new normative media framework aligned with UNSCR 1325 need not focus solely on better practices in conflict reporting with gender concerns as a side note nor concentrate on gender inequality without due consideration of the stakes of a particular conflict. Responsible journalism considers both elements as fundamental building blocks of its practice.

One of the most famous approaches to reporting in conflict settings is undoubtedly Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick's concept of peace journalism.[9] Originating in Galtung's approaches to positive peace, peace journalism is grounded in a simple idea: When journalists choose which stories to report and how, they need to consider how their work can enhance prospects for peace. The choices that journalists make in conflict settings affect not only how societies understand conflict but also what they perceive as possible solutions. Yiping Cai argues that genuine peace journalism inherently includes a gender perspective, but in 2020 such perspectives are still conspicuous by their absence in global conflict reporting.[10]

Most of the time, women's experiences of conflict take up no airtime and occupy no headlines. The 2015 Global Study on WPS concluded that women are virtually invisible in news reporting on peace and security, except where they are portrayed as victims of conflict.[11] In much broadcast coverage of conflict zones, the only women seen are crying in the background. Another analysis undertaken by the Global Media Monitoring Project found that only 13 percent of news media stories on peace and security themes included women as the subject. Women were identified as central actors in only 6 percent of news stories.[12]

A new code of ethics on gender and conflict needs to address structural concerns for the media sector at every level. One such concern is the lack of female journalists doing peace and security reporting. The simple presence of female journalists in newsrooms does not guarantee gender-sensitive journalism, but there are gendered considerations in the coverage of conflicts that may benefit from a gender-balanced media workforce. For example, Emma Barnett argues that in some conflict-affected Muslim countries, women and children only feel comfortable opening up to women reporters, as they are not allowed to be seen talking to men outside their families.[13] Gender stereotypes lead to women being underrepresented among journalists covering peace and security topics, as these are often considered "hard news" and coded as "men's work."[14] Addressing inequalities and stereotypes in the newsroom is an essential step not only to better coverage of gender-related issues in conflict settings but to improve diversity in journalism overall.

The Media as a Link in the Chain for UNSCR 1325 Mobilization

Another step in this holistic agenda is to build UNSCR 1325 literacy through partnerships between the media and CSOs. The past few decades have seen several success stories in this regard. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in Cameroon rallied owners of media houses to become allies in a widespread awareness-raising campaign that involved training and utilizing the media to reach a wider audience through op-eds and participation in TV and radio broadcasts. This campaign served as a catalyst for discussions to establish a UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan in Cameroon.[15]

Such partnerships can also function well outside traditional newsroom structures. Women- and youth-led Women's Situation Rooms and Women's Peace Huts have been established mainly in African countries to monitor, prevent and mitigate violence by engaging a wide range of stakeholders in constructive dialogue and peace advocacy.[16] Media outlets run by women and designed to focus on women's experiences in conflict provide another opportunity for such engagement. UN Women's 2015 Global Study highlights community radio stations run by women in Uganda and Fiji that organize "listener clubs" to bring in women from local communities to share their experiences, insights and ideas.[17] These initiatives highlight the need for and transformative benefits of community engagement through media.

Adequate resources are crucial to an effective media engagement strategy. The lack of funding is an endemic problem for implementation of UNSCR 1325 across all sectors. [18] This issue becomes even more pressing with the decades-long crisis in funding for the media industry as a whole, and particularly for the intensive investigative journalism required for true transformative work in high-risk settings.[19] The lack of resources needs to urgently be addressed at all levels of UNSCR 1325 implementation in order to make true progress possible in the 2020s.

A Code of Ethics for Gender- and Co-Sensitive Reporting

A new code of ethics for reporting on gender in conflict could galvanize new partnerships but should also build upon previous work. Handbooks and guidelines on the subject have been developed by Inter-Governmental Organizations and Civil Society groups targeting specific regions, including the African Union, the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, and UNESCO.[20] It is important to continue consultations with local organizations representing a wide range of world regions and cultures when drafting a new code of ethics in order to be mindful of how such a code may be interpreted in widely different contexts. However, adapting familiar frameworks such as the SPJ's code of ethics for journalists may be a good place to start. Drawing on civil society recommendations as well as codes of practice in peace journalism, a code of ethics for gender and conflict may include some of the following:

- *Seek Truth and Report It*
  — Establishing protocols for making sure that women's opinions and perspectives are included before, during and after conflict; systematically providing varieties of analytical lenses for how gender-related issues may be affected by the conflict; reporting on women's peacebuilding initiatives; debunking false news and myths that may result in gender-based violence or contribute to harmful gender norms; accounting for diversity within groups and differentiated impact of conflict (based on gender identity, ethnicity, age, class, education, sexual orientation, as well as conflict-specific categories such as refugees, combatants, child soldiers, or survivors of gender-based violence).

- *Minimize Harm*
  — Making sure that stories covering gender-based violence are used not just to depict the plight of individuals but to shed light on systemic issues.

  — Exercising special caution when reporting on gender-based violence in conflict, particularly sexual violence; considering and discussing impact of publishing such stories with subjects/sources; providing anonymity for victims and witnesses; taking all possible precautions to avoid retraumatizing victims.

  — Taking measures (rigorous risk assessment, emergency plans, psychosocial support) to ensure the safety of female journalists working in conflict zones bearing in mind that they are likely to encounter different types of violence than that experienced by male colleagues, such as sexual violence, harassment, or other forms of gender-based violence.

- *Act Independently*
  — Mobilizing wider support for press freedom and emphasizing gender equality as a key condition for overall freedom of expression.

  — Being honest and transparent about sources of funding, partnerships, or other ties that may affect how gender issues in conflict are reported on.

- *Be Accountable and Transparent*
  — Attend and organize regular trainings to address own prejudices and biases around gender norms; providing gender-disaggregated data on all things pertaining to human resources management in the newsroom, including gender parity at all levels.

  — Cultivating allies within and outside media organizations for overcoming gender bias in reporting and holding other media actors accountable when they fail to do so.

A code of ethics is not just a bullet point in a journalism school syllabus. It is a set of guiding principles that should direct every aspect of a journalist's work and provide a reference for accountability. A journalistic workforce committed to the principles of UNSCR 1325 is a vital asset for achieving a holistic, positive vision of peace.

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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.*

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