

1325 And Beyond – Essay Contest

FIRST PRIZE

UNSCR 1325 and the WPS Agenda: A Feminist Response to Authoritarianism

Ana Laura Velasco Ugalde

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda has reached a new generation. Feminists who were children and teenagers when UN Security Council Resolution 1325 was approved are the new young voices upholding the responsibility to guard its accomplishments and commit to its advancement. These are particularly challenging times for such a quest. In the last five years, the world has seen the return of authoritarian, xenophobic, misogynist, and racist leaders in many countries both in the “Global North” and “Global South.” In addition, a pandemic has exposed the weaknesses of traditional security approaches, even as these authoritarian leaders capitalize on it to further their grasp on power. We know authoritarianism grows in crisis. This is the world WPS is encountering, and this is the challenge for my generation.

Having learned about the history, accomplishments, and struggles of the WPS agenda while working on my master’s degree and from my experience as a reporter and activist in Mexico, I write this essay to propose ways that civil society, journalists and UN Women can advance the objectives of UNSCR 1325 over the next decade. Underlying my proposal is the understanding that the pandemic provides empirical, powerful proof of the failures of the current system to keep every person in the global community safe. The return of authoritarian masculinist—and at times militaristic—figures represents an enormous test for the pursuit of an inclusive, feminist approach to peace and security, but a strategy that

fails to encompass 2SLGBTQQIA, indigenous, disabled people, immigrants, refugees, and environmental protection in the “Global North” and “Global South” will fail to deliver justice.

What is at stake?

Feminist critiques of traditional approaches to international security were right all along. Sanam Naraghi Aderlini, director of the Centre for Women, Peace and Security, rightly asks, “Why are we awash in weapons and military equipment but short on medics and masks?”¹ The rapid spread of COVID-19 is pushing the debate on the prioritization of military policies over public health services. The risk of a pandemic was foreseen, but the general unpreparedness of states reveals the dim attention the threat received. In contrast, consider the resources focused on traditional security debates over European defense and the relevance of NATO. Will the rise of military expenditure to 2 percent of GDP, as agreed by the allies and demanded by the current US administration, make Europeans safer? What actually saves lives? And whose lives are saved? One can only wonder if, after the devastating loss of human life in Spain and Italy during the pandemic, it is smart—and ethical—to invest fiscal resources to reach NATO’s goal instead of investing in health care systems, which women largely shape and staff. It is them, not soldiers, who are saving the most lives.

The supposed division between private and public, questioned by feminists for decades, is also contentious in the current crisis. The emergency measures most countries proposed for facing the pandemic ignore gendered, racialized, and economic violence. In a recent conference, scholar and activist Angela Davis stated, “This whole idea of ‘staying at home’ assumes we can retreat to a safe, nurturing environment, a refuge.”² A number of reports from countries around the world warn of the increase in domestic violence, and the UN Secretary General also called attention to the issue.³ Paradoxically, the call to stay home has exposed the violence in private spaces. A similar argument can be made about the supposed clear-cut division between peacetime and wartime. We must recognize that these alerts confirm one of the criticisms that the WPS agenda has received during the past two decades: its focus on conflict situations. As is being proved in this global crisis, women face structural violence in a continuum that does not end in “peacetime”.

Despite overwhelming evidence of the need for a different approach to security, authoritarianism is not in retreat. At the moment of this writing, there are indications leaders are abusing the crisis to acquire increased powers, as in Israel and Hungary. Another troubling outcome since the detection of the virus has been the harassment and crackdown on whistleblowers and journalists who question official narratives, as in China. Furthermore, some responses to COVID-19, especially in the “Global North,” have included eugenic approaches by discriminating against disabled and racialized bodies. Similarly, indigenous peoples are particularly vulnerable, given the systemic discrimination they suffer from health care systems. Therefore, it is important to contextualize the goals of UNSCR 1325 and the WPS agenda in this pivotal moment. I urge a change of paradigm in the next decade. My two proposals aim to strengthen the first line of responders to authoritarianism: those responsible for the accountability mechanisms of society and for transnational advocacy of the WPS agenda.

Proposals

Reconnecting UNSCR 1325 with its constituency must be a priority for the next decade. My first proposal is to significantly expand efforts to put civil society at the center of the WPS agenda.⁴ Civil society organizations (CSOs) were vital to UNSCR 1325. Yet they are often unrecognized, marginalized and undervalued.⁵ Women cannot only be represented or viewed through a gender lens, since their struggles also include other dimensions of the violence they may suffer. This is where CSOs come in, by embodying intersectional identities. But in order to execute this function, they cannot be left alone. It is precisely where they are most needed that they are most vulnerable. That was the case, for example, of queer activist Marielle Franco in Brazil,

murdered in 2018, and women’s rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul, who has been imprisoned in Saudi Arabia for almost two years. The persecution of human rights defenders is an ongoing global crime and a threat to the WPS agenda. I propose to powerfully expand the network of grassroots NGOs, with a deeply intersectional approach that creates platforms for endorsement and support between the “Global North” and the “Global South.”

In this regard, it is imperative not to perpetuate the focus on the “Global South” as “case studies.”⁶ The agenda must recognize that CSOs are doing indispensable work in the “Global North,” which has vulnerable populations as well, as in Canada, where they fight to end femicides against indigenous women and girls. The objective is not to further restrict the characterization of CSOs only as watchdogs, but to open channels for them to have the resources to fulfill this role effectively. This effort must be led by UN Women offices around the globe, since can reach a wider range of intersectional, grassroots CSOs. Importantly, UN Women should be a facilitator, not a sponsor. Also, this emphasis does not replace National Action Plans, or Regional Action Plans, as public policy instruments. Rather, it aims to provide an opportunity for CSOs to fully exercise the dimensions of accountability, expertise and ownership and to step up the pressure in countries that have not yet implemented the instrument to fulfill their promises.

The next decade is the moment of truth for the WPS agenda in more than one sense. The developments of the past years indicate that it is urgent to address the spread of misinformation. The hard-won gains that the agenda has achieved must not be taken for granted. United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres recently pronounced, “Our common enemy is the virus, but our enemy is also a growing surge of misinformation, so we need to urgently promote facts and science.” This warning could not be more appropriate, both in the context of the current crisis and to explain the larger picture. For example, in Mexico, religious groups are blaming the surge of the COVID-19 on feminism and queer people. This is not a new tactic. In Germany, the terrorists who attacked Halle’s synagogue last October blamed feminism for the lack of births and the arrival of immigrants. Furthermore, it is well known that many of these authoritarian, masculinist leaders are openly against equality, the core value of the agenda, and that they also thrive, and even actively engage in misinformation.

Therefore, my second proposal is to tap journalists as protagonists of the WPS agenda. This responds to two issues: Feminist stories are still framed as women’s issues, not as justice and intersectional ones, and, journalism continues to be a high-risk profession in many countries. Just like CSOs, they are directly responding to the threat of authoritarianism. Over the next decade, proponents of the WPS agenda must

ally with journalists around the globe to create a mechanism for sharing information related to the objectives. The focus of the alliance must be investigative journalists, small newspapers, and community radios that are concerned with intersectional justice, violence and conflict. UN Women offices around the world can lead this effort as a parallel project to that with the CSOs. Here, too, its role would be as a facilitator for enabling contacts between journalists and CSOs but also as a source of data related to the agenda. The latter would help open channels of communication that allow for quicker verification of information. Ensuring the flow of transparent, objective, verified information is essential to counter false news and other information that is used to spread fear and confusion.

Conclusion

The implementation of UNSCR 1325 and the WPS agenda in general has largely been through traditional security approaches, with actors such as police, military and UN Peacekeeping Operations reinforcing the centrality of the use of force and armed personnel in working for peace and democracy.⁷ The limitations of that approach, long emphasized by critical and feminist research, are impossible to ignore in the current crisis.⁸ As Ann Tickner argues, true security cannot be achieved until unequal power structures of gender, race and class are eliminated or at least diminished.⁹ This is why it is so relevant to privilege intersectional, decolonial approaches in the next 10 years. In order to achieve this, the agenda must reencounter its constituency and close ranks with those first responders who are not only in an unmatched position to push for inclusive change but are also most exposed to the attacks of authoritarian leaders. We need courage to embrace this moment, and we need radical alternative.

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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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