

Applying a Gender Lens to Security Studies

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ABSTRACT

The United Nations passed Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security (WPS), which acknowledged that gender pervades all facets of international peace and security, two decades ago. Nevertheless, there has been minimal effort to rectify the existing institutions and environments that render women insecure and manifest vulnerabilities within international, national, and human security agendas. This paper argues that applying a gender lens is vital to security studies because it provides an enhanced understanding of the complexities of conflict prevention, management, and resolution, which in turn strengthens international and national security. A gender lens is also applied to two human security issues – climate change and economics – to examine the unique vulnerabilities women face as well as the solutions they offer. The paper ends with a review of obstacles in implementing the WPS agenda and recommendations for members of nongovernmental organizations, international organizations, and academia to overcome identified obstacles.

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations (UN) acknowledged that gender pervades all facets of international peace and security with the passing of Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security (WPS) two decades ago, yet there has been minimal effort globally to rectify the norms and institutions that exclude and oppress women.^{1,2} Existing norms and institutions not only render women insecure but also manifest vulnerabilities within international

and national security agendas. A gender lens assesses “the institutionalization of gender differences as a major underpinning of structural inequalities in much of the world.”³ This lens sheds light on the different lived experiences of women and men and how masculinity and femininity are embedded within society. Applying a gender lens is vital to security studies because it enhances the understanding of the complexities of conflict prevention, management, and resolution, which in turn strengthens international and national security. Obstacles to implementing the WPS agenda include the misconception that existing norms and institutions are gender-neutral; the assumption that traditional state-centered security must be prioritized over human security; and the lack of enforcement mechanisms to implement the WPS agenda. The transformation of institutions and norms to strengthen security requires collective action from governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and academia to dismantle the barriers that impede women's inclusion in all decisions regarding peace and security.

BACKGROUND

Identities and power relations are informed by gender from the individual-level to the international-level.⁴ Gender refers to, “the socially learned behaviors, repeated performances, and idealized expectations that are associated with... masculinity and femininity.”⁵ In many cultures, associations with masculinity are valued while associations with femininity are devalued.⁶ This has created a gender hierarchy. As a result, men tend to hold the power within political, economic, religious, and societal spheres while women are viewed as subordinate.⁷ World leadership depicts this dichotomy. While many countries do not have legal barriers to women obtaining leadership roles, societal norms, such as the belief that men are strong leaders while women are irrational leaders, hinder women’s ability to become heads of state. Of the 193 UN member states, 119 countries have never had a woman leader.⁸ In 2020, women were heads of state or government in 21 countries.⁹ The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, known as UN Women, projects that it will take 130 years to reach gender parity in heads of state at the current rate of progress.¹⁰ In some instances, societal gender norms are incorporated into legal structures. Despite the Quran endowing women with identity and property rights, predominant interpretations of Islamic law dictate that women can only inherit half as much as men.¹¹ This interpretation restricts women’s ability to cultivate wealth and power relative to men. The global power structure that subjugates women is often overlooked in security studies and needs to be included to aptly understand all dimensions of conflict and create sustainable solutions that lead to longer-lasting peace.

The WPS Agenda was established with the passage of the UN Security

Council Resolution 1325 in 2000. Between 2009 and 2019, the Security Council passed eight additional resolutions to expand and strengthen the WPS Agenda framework. The UN and member states acknowledged and committed to rectifying the exclusion of women from international approaches to peace and security through the passage of the WPS resolutions. Four critical issues are addressed in the resolutions: prevention of violence against women; participation of women at all levels of decision-making related to peace and security; protection of women's security and rights; and access to relief and recovery support to women in need of assistance.¹² Collectively, these tenets seek to transform the peace and security fields by acknowledging the unique realities women face during a conflict cycle, as well as the importance of applying a gender lens.¹³

THE NECESSITY OF A GENDER LENS FOR NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

International and national security agendas traditionally prioritize state and military power while overlooking the individual.¹⁴ Supplementing this view with a feminist security studies approach expands the scope of security studies by examining how gendered assumptions, labels, and hierarchies affect an array of stakeholders and in turn are responded to in global politics.¹⁵ This approach is more flexible as it can be applied to both traditional security issues and non-traditional human security issues,¹⁶ thus facilitating a holistic examination of security threats and solutions.

CONFLICT PREVENTION

Women hold unique positions within conflict prevention that are underutilized due to the stereotypes placed on them. Women play a crucial role in identifying signs and changing dynamics at the familial and grassroots levels that could signal the onset of violence. For example, women often notice the building of arms caches in homes and changes in how men and boys spend their time, which can indicate if they are being radicalized or covertly training. Retrospective studies in Kosovo and Sierra Leone found that women often had valuable knowledge about planned attacks and the amassing of weapons, but lacked the means to report this information.¹⁷ There is growing recognition that it is critical to include women in early warning systems to accurately capture changes in social, economic, and political indicators.¹⁸ Dr. Aisling Swaine, professor of gender studies at George Washington University, cautions, "Without gender analysis conflict prevention and early warning systems fail to recognize that changes in gender norms and behaviors are critical indicators of erupting violent conflict."¹⁹ For instance, an increase in violence against

women is used as an indicator of the potential for conflict in Timor-Leste, Southeast Asia.²⁰ Early warning systems are vital to international security to ensure conflict does not erupt in a country or destabilize a region. The former United Nations Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Radhika Coomaraswamy, advocates that “conflict prevention methods are improved through directly engaging with women and providing avenues to capitalize on their knowledge.” The United Nations peacekeeping mission in South Sudan engaged women to identify early warning signs of conflict, which include increased pregnancy terminations, more expensive bride prices, and unusual movement of all-male groups.²¹ The mission also established a 24/7 hotline and distributed communication equipment to enable women to report conflict indicators. Women must be actively included in early warning systems to increase the success rate of conflict prevention.

CONFLICT OCCURENCE

A liberal feminist lens should be applied to security studies to examine the differential impacts of war on men and women,²² as enumerated in the WSP Agenda. Liberal feminism seeks to bolster female representation within existing legal and social structures to increase diverse viewpoints which strengthen security institutions.²³ The rise of intrastate conflicts in the post-Cold War era has resulted in more civilian deaths (often women and youth) and an increase in sexual and gender-based violence due to battlefields enmeshing with civilian populations.²⁴ Combatants deploy sexual violence as a weapon of war systematically and strategically in many armed conflicts.²⁵ Feminist scholar Carol Cohn demonstrates how mass rape is used as a tactic of genocide and ethnic cleansing.²⁶ Nationalist ideology often invokes terms such as “motherland” to portray the nation as a woman. Male soldiers are then called upon to protect the motherland from conquest, invasion, and violation. Under this ideology, women are viewed as vessels that reproduce the national, ethnic, or religious identity and repopulate the group. Women are severely afflicted by the symbolic coding of women as the nation. Through a nationalist ideology lens, the use of mass rape is “perceived as having the power to attack and destroy a national, ethnic or tribal group.”²⁷ Males used rape in Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur, and Bangladesh to destroy national bloodlines and identities.²⁸ Conflict-related sexual violence can occur in several forms, including rape, sexual torture, enforced prostitution, sexual slavery, mutilations, and sexual trafficking.²⁹ Victims' needs vary and require unique approaches to relief and recovery efforts in conflict or post-conflict settings.

Gender norms also impact perception of female combatants. The presence of women combatants is frequently unaccounted for, which can create vulnerabilities in defenses and undermine peace processes. Women can be

active agents in war, taking up arms to commit acts of violence.³⁰ Portraying women as victims of war can permit them greater mobility without being identified as a threat. Women have used this stereotype to their advantage, serving in diverse roles such as spies, weapons smugglers, messengers, and suicide bombers.³¹ Despite being effective active agents, when conflict ends, women are frequently omitted from disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs that provide former combatants with access to training, educational, and employment opportunities to transition into civilian life.³² Feminist scholar Laura Sjoberg warns “DDR programs that failed to take account either of the existence of female soldiers or the complexity of their lived gender roles were ineffective in demobilizing combatants.”³³ DDR campaigns that are not formed using a gender lens have the potential to alienate women combatants or prove ineffective in stopping the violence.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Organizations that deploy peacekeeping operations, such as the United Nations or African Union, should implement a critical feminist approach. This would account for prevailing institutional gender norms which foster militarized masculinity and transform peacekeeping operations to better meet the needs of women in conflict settings. Militarized masculinity, also referred to as hypermasculinity, is “an aggressive form of masculinity needed for warrior culture to flourish.”³⁴ This form of masculinity values aggressiveness, courage, loyalty, and obedience over feminine behavior. Feminist scholars also suggest that “a ‘hyper-masculine’ culture that encourages tolerance for extreme sexual behaviors has evolved within peacekeeping missions.”³⁵ Hypermasculine behavior is often attributed to how male-dominated institutions operate, without addressing the harm it inflicts on women.

In 2000, the UN applied a liberal feminist approach to reform peacekeeping operations following reports of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) in Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia.³⁶ Under this approach, the UN sought to improve peacekeeping operations by increasing the number of women peacekeepers. The underlying assumption was that “the pacifying presence of women in [peacekeeping operations] reduces aggressiveness and hypermasculinity.”³⁷ This assumption perpetuates gender stereotypes and places a burden on women to change their male counterparts’ behavior, rather than addressing the root causes of high SEA rates in peacekeeping operations. In 2015, the UN reported that “SEA allegations are still a major problem for peacekeeping operations.”³⁸ The continuation of SEA indicates that the inclusion of women in peacekeeping operations does not change the institutionalized culture that permits widespread abuse. Research demonstrates that women tended to assimilate to militarized masculine environments rather than change them, which sheds light on the

continued reports of peacekeepers committing sexual assault despite efforts to increase the presence of women.³⁹

To truly transform peacekeeping operations, institutions should adopt a critical feminist approach. This approach seeks to examine and alter the prevailing norms that perpetuate militarized masculinity.⁴⁰ Peacekeeping institutions should couple efforts to increase the number of women with measures to dismantle the gender norms that perpetuate militarized masculinity. These measures could include conducting gender sensitivity training, encouraging troop-contributing countries (TCC) to increase accountability for SEA by prosecuting perpetrators, and improving communication between the peacekeeping institutions and TCC to investigate sexual abuse cases.⁴¹ Peacekeeping institutions can improve their effectiveness and capability to protect women by acknowledging the hypermasculine behaviors valued within the organization and creating training programs and accountability mechanisms to establish inclusive gender norms and meaningfully empower women peacekeepers.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The rise in civil wars across the globe highlights the need for sustainable peace agreements.⁴² Resolution 1325, of the Women, Peace & Security Agenda, “seeks to enable gender-equitable restructuring of post-conflict societies” through inclusive peace processes.⁴³ To achieve this goal, women must be included in the peace talks that shape the post-conflict society. A study conducted in 2018, found that “women’s participation in peace negotiations with voice and influence leads to better accord content, higher agreement implementation rates, and longer lasting peace.”⁴⁴ The 1994-1996 Guatemalan Peace Process is cited as one of the most “inclusive, participatory, and human-rights oriented negotiation processes, in which women contributed to both the official and civil society-led parallel negotiations.”⁴⁵ Despite these findings, women continue to be excluded from formal peace processes. Formal peace processes often prioritize facilitating negotiations between the warring parties to end the conflict, without including members of civil society who are deeply affected by the conflict.

Males are primarily the leaders or representatives of the warring parties and often do not value the presence of women in peace negotiations. Political and societal gender norms frequently impede women’s entry to the negotiation table. Women are often used as a form of tokenism to signal inclusivity and democracy during the peace process but are not permitted to have an independent voice by the government.⁴⁶ At the societal level, women tend to be in compliant roles and sequestered to the private sphere, while males dominate the public, political sphere. During the 2002 peace talks to resolve the war

in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Congolese government officials stated, “war and peace are exclusively the business of men...Women did not have a right to participate...because they were not fighters.”⁴⁷ Policymakers have also justified excluding women from peace processes because “gender equality or “women’s issues” are “irrelevant” or “not suitable” topics for discussion at the peace tables.”⁴⁸ International institutions and member states should strive to support women in removing the institutional and social barriers that impede their meaningful participation in peace negotiations to increase the potential for longer-lasting peace through inclusive agreements.

OBSTACLES TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE WOMEN, PEACE, AND SECURITY AGENDA

Many nations and institutions deprioritize the implementation of the WPS Agenda due to a lack of recognition that security studies and society are gendered. Feminists have illuminated that the notions of security and its institutions have been presented as gender-neutral, when in reality, “international security is infused with gendered assumptions and representations”⁴⁹ as aforementioned. Constructivist theorists purport that society is socially constructed and is categorized by social capacities that are equated with power.⁵⁰ Traditional societal capacities placed men in the public sphere with political and economic power and women in the private sphere without political or economic power. These roles fostered historical and cultural connotations linked to masculinities and femininities to empower males and disempower females.⁵¹ This system of subordination can appear natural and unbiased because male and female social capacities are enshrined in society and its institutions. Sjoberg notes, “ignoring gender hierarchy gives inaccurate and incomplete explanations of how global politics works.”⁵² It needs to be recognized within the male-dominated security field that a gender lens is vital and that advancing the WPS Agenda will enhance global peace and security.

The WPS Agenda is often situated under human security because it focuses on the individual-level as opposed to the state-level. National security is traditionally prioritized over human security rather than recognizing that the two complement each other. For example, the United States and allies demonstrated strong support for the WPS Agenda initially, but their efforts pivoted to counterterrorism following the September 11, 2001 attacks and remained dampened.⁵³ Feminists scholars recognize that “Looking at the multifaceted and multidirectional influences of gender socialization and gendered expectations is key to understanding not only what is going on in any given security environment, but also how to improve security.”⁵⁴ Implementing the WPS Agenda is vital to international, national, and human security because it provides the mechanisms to expand the scope of analysis and creates the

possibility for new solutions to both traditional and emerging threats.

The UN Security Council cannot enforce compliance with the WPS resolutions, which has contributed to the lack of progress in implementing the WPS Agenda. Eight additional resolutions have passed to strengthen the WPS Agenda since 2000, but they have not catalyzed change or action.⁵⁵ Women continue to be underrepresented in national and international security deliberations.⁵⁶ Violence against women occurs at horrifying levels, particularly in conflict settings.⁵⁷ The WPS resolutions evoke weak language such as ‘request’ or ‘recommend’ that characterize them as voluntary rather than compelling action.⁵⁸ These resolutions are seen as ‘soft law’ and nonbinding because they were adopted under Chapter VI of the Security Council’s charter, rather than Chapter VII, which includes enforcement provisions.⁵⁹ Future resolutions should include enforcement mechanisms to ensure implementation of the WPS Agenda.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Implementing the WPS Agenda requires collective action by international organizations, NGOs, and civil society actors in the security field to enhance international and national security. International organizations, such as the UN, the African Union, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, must strive to meet a gender parity within leadership to serve as models for implementing the WPS Agenda. Resolution 1325 calls to “increase representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional, and international institutions.”⁶⁰ Radical feminism espouses that the inclusion of women will bring diverse perspectives,⁶¹ which will improve decision-making and in turn enhance security. International institutions are highly visible within the security realm and have the opportunity to propel change at the national and regional levels by leading the implementation of key components of the WPS Agenda.

Members of the UN can pressure the Security Council to enhance the viability of the WPS Agenda by creating enforcement mechanisms. Member states are legally bound to implement the Convention of the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, which focuses on upholding human rights components of the WPS Agenda.⁶² It provides a framework to create a binding resolution to implement the four pillars of the WPS Agenda: prevention, participation, protection, and relief and recovery.⁶³ A WPS resolution adopted under Chapter VII or one that contains stronger enforcement language would induce member states to prioritize it. Nations should submit and encourage each other to adopt national action plans (NAPs) that detail reform measures to meet the commitments under the WPS Agenda.⁶⁴ Nations that adopt NAPs will be required to report on their progress formulating and implementing

them, which will create accountability mechanisms and serve as examples for other nations working to implement the WPS Agenda.

Non-governmental organizations can create leadership networks to bring together heads of organizations who are committed to removing gender barriers and promoting the WPS Agenda. The Gender Champions in Nuclear Policy leadership network serves as a successful model. Each member pledges to remove the gender barriers within their organization and to work together to increase gender equality globally. These networks will work at a sub-national level to build skills, visibility, community, and leadership among women and allies in the security field. A commitment to augment women in the field by supporting the implementation of the WPS Agenda will change the non-governmental sector and have a multi-generational effect to enhance security.

Members of academia can commit to gender mainstreaming within their courses and institutions to promote the WPS Agenda. Security studies and international relations courses often cover a gender perspective in one-week, isolating it from the rest of the content. Professors are teaching the next generation of decision-makers and practitioners. These students will have the ability to champion gender equality in security studies if they are equipped with the proper tools. Sjoberg advises that for the full range of women's security concerns to be examined "would rely on the changed subject matter of security studies to change the conceptual and epistemological contours of current thinking."⁶⁵ Professors must integrate a gender lens into existing security studies courses to examine how power, policies, and institutions are informed by femininities and masculinities. In time, courses that implement gender mainstreaming will change the nature in which students interact with societal gender norms and create an awareness of the necessity of gender equality to improve policies, institutions, and society in the future.

CONCLUSION

A gender lens enhances security studies because it deepens the understanding of the complexities associated with conflict prevention, management, and resolution. A global reduction in violent conflict is vital to national and international peace and security. Women have unique positions within the conflict spectrum that contribute to longer-lasting peace. They play a crucial role in conflict prevention by identifying early warning signs of conflict, especially at the familial and grassroots levels. Combatants frequently employ sexual and gender-based violence as a weapon of war. Women's health, humanitarian, and security needs greatly vary, and are frequently not accounted for in conflict response planning. Post-conflict disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration campaigns that do not integrate women combatants in post-conflict programs risk alienating women or ineffectively ending the

violence. Prevailing institutional gender norms in peacekeeping operations foster militarized masculinity, which can render women vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers. International organizations, non-governmental organizations, and civil society should work to dismantle the gender norms and barriers that impede women's meaningful participation in all discussions and decisions on women, peace, and security issues.

The implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda faces obstacles, including the lack of recognition that existing institutions are gendered, the lack of support to prioritize national security over human security, and the lack of enforcement mechanisms to implement the WPS Agenda. Advancing the WPS agenda requires commitment from international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and academia. The UN and multilateral organizations can achieve gender equality at leadership levels to serve as models for governments and civil society. Member states can pressure the Security Council to create a resolution with enforcement mechanisms to ensure the WPS is implemented. NGOs can build leadership networks to gather leaders who commit to working together to achieve gender parity in the security field. Academia can prepare the next generation of leaders to dismantle gender norms and strengthen international and national security by gender mainstreaming all security and international relations courses. These recommendations can help dismantle institutionalized gender norms in the security field to increase individual, national, and international peace and security.

ENDNOTES

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