

The UK's Approach to UNSCR 1325: Limitations of Gender Mainstreaming?

Written by Roberta Guerrina

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ROBERTA GUERRINA, OCT 31 2012

The main aim of this paper is to unpack hegemonic power discourses emerging from the implementation of the UNSCR 1325 in the context of UK foreign policy. Understanding national interpretation of the main objectives of the resolution provides interesting insights into the position of gender – and by association equality – in the external agenda of a state. This particular research agenda uncovers the values of key actors in foreign and security policies as well as the biases of the state apparatus in relation to the tension between “high politics” (security and defence) and “low politics” (social policy, equality, etc). The United Kingdom is now in the second iteration of its National Action Plan. This paper will compare the aims of each NAP with a view of comparing the document and tracing the development of gender mainstreaming in UK foreign and security policy. This type of analysis provides useful insights in relation to the following: a. institutional priorities; b. government priorities.

The adoption of UNSCR 1325 is supposed to represent a critical juncture in the mainstreaming of gender into areas of international security. Seen by many as a positive measure in response to a call for greater engagement with the core principles of the Beijing agenda in relation to security, it provides a useful starting point for discussions about women's position in processes relating to armed conflict, peace, stabilisation and post-conflict reconstruction. The Resolution was the result of sustained lobbying by feminist groups in the UN. Reflecting on the process, Cohn argues that ‘feminist insiders and outsiders at the UN have put tremendous, creative thought and energy into making [1325] a living document’ (Cohn, 2004: 8). Yet the methodical deconstruction of how key concepts are framed within the document draws attention to the ideological underpinnings that shaped it. The focus on women – rather than gender – allows for an essentialist reading of the Resolution whereby women's role in international security is framed within the discourse of peacemaking. Focusing on the productive power of the Resolution, Shepherd (2008) considers how it will crystallise dominant approaches to development, entrenching assumptions about the positive impact of the international sphere on domestic structures. Taking analysis further, we can see that although this approach succeeds in introducing women into security discourse, but does not account for the gendered nature of power.

Despite the inevitable weaknesses entrenched within a policy document that seeks to speak to a wide range of constituencies and that ultimately is framed by the hegemonic gender discourses that support state structures, the adoption of UNSCR 1325 is an opportunity for groups at the national level to raise the position of gender within the policy agenda. The responsibility is on the signatory states to produce National Action Plans detailing the implementation of the Resolution at the national level. This allows scholars to engage in an important discussion about the role of institutional actors in shaping gender in the external relations agenda. In the case of the UK, we should therefore examine the approaches of the Ministry of Defence (MOD), the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Department for International Development (DFID). Understanding the opportunities and constraints within the bureaucratic apparatus of the state contributes to feminist interrogations of “manly states” (Hooper, 2001).

Three government documents are important for the analysis presented here. The 2004 FCO policy paper “Inclusive Government: Gender Mainstreaming into Foreign Policy” sets out some of the key government principles for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 at the national level. Framed within the discourse of open government – a top priority for the Blair governments – it sets out how gender mainstreaming can help to achieve high level policy objectives. Jack Straw's (2004) foreword sets the tone for the document: ‘mainstreaming gender is about better policy-making. It

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isn't just about the advancement of women, but about recognising that policies and services may impact differently on women and on men. We can make realistic adjustments to minimise these effects. Gender analysis can also help us to devise more effective strategies, and make more effective use of our resources, leading to positive outcomes for the UK'. The rest of the document endorses a highly utilitarian approach to the inclusion of equality into the external relations agenda, which ultimately limits the radical potential of gender mainstreaming.

The 2004 UK National Action Plan is the first attempt at formally implementing UNSCR 1325. The document's main aim is to increase women's participation in decision making processes. This approach therefore acknowledges the importance of diversity for better quality decision making, yet institutional biases emerge through the implicit acceptance of traditional constructions of security. Focus on humanitarian emergencies, diplomacy, armed conflict and defence ultimately limits the scope and potential of the document. Women's position in the armed forces is therefore portrayed as auxiliary to peace support operations. The document is aspirational in nature, looking to introduce a gender dimension to policy areas that have traditionally been seen as gender neutral or gender free. As such, it is a significant statement of intent, though limited in scope by the bureaucratic politics.

The document focuses on increasing diversity for the purpose of operational effectiveness. The strongest policy statement relates to gender-based violence in post-conflict societies. Here the link between justice, social renewal and gender inequalities is made explicit and it is possibly the strongest part of the document. Training of UK personnel in relation to the law of armed conflict and increased number of women deployed as part of post-conflict reconstruction and stabilisation processes are the main vehicles for the implementation of the Resolution's core principles. Particularly notable is the document's attempt not to conflate "gender" and "women", though deeper questions about masculinities and values in the institutions responsible for implementing foreign and security policies are largely ignored.

The second iteration of the UK national action plan is a more comprehensive and confident document. It sets the agenda for mainstreaming gender in security for 2010-2013. The Foreign Secretary, William Hague's opening statement in the document sets out the agenda: "No lasting peace can be achieved after conflict unless the needs of women are met – not only justice for the victims of crimes of war, but their active involvement in creating a society in which their rights are respected and their voices are heard". Much like the previous version, this document is largely outward facing. It sets out how the UK government will use the provisions of UNSCR 1325 in the development of foreign policy and military strategy.

It reiterates the UK government aims, focusing once again on training, security and development programmes, and operational effectiveness. Assuming that increased awareness will change practice on the ground, the document ignores institutional constraints and the reward mechanisms within the state apparatus that often work against the full implementation of the principles set out in the document. One significant change is the focus on governance and transparency that identifies clear lines of responsibility in the delivery of key objectives.

The analysis of the UK's approach to gender and security entrenched in the documents implementing UNSCR 1325 provides a useful snapshot of opportunities and constraints for gender mainstreaming in areas traditionally seen as gender free. Interrogating how that state apparatus and its associated bureaucratic structures interpret the objectives of the resolution and implement them on the ground highlights the impact of institutional culture on the implementation of policy. The largely utilitarian approach to gendering peace and security ultimately limits the potential for radical change. What is clear is that UNSCR 1325 instigated a new debate at the national level, however, meaningful engagement with the gendered nature of state approaches to security is still a long way off.

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