

The Problematic Evolution of UN Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security

Written by Sara Meger

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SARA MEGER, NOV 1 2012

This week marks the 12th Anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on *Women, Peace and Security (WPS)*. SCR 1325 was a watershed moment for putting women on the international agenda. The culmination of years of lobbying by feminists and women's groups, SCR 1325 adopted a broad understanding of women's insecurity and the gendered effects of armed conflict. In the 12 years since it was adopted, however, this understanding has significantly narrowed. The current Women Peace and Security Agenda, represented by SCR 1325 and the subsequent resolutions passed under the banner of 'Women, Peace and Security,' provides a problematic framework for addressing violence against women.

The current UN agenda on women focuses almost exclusively on the issue of sexual violence in conflict. The use of mass rape and other forms of sexual violence by armed groups in the wars of the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda brought international attention to the issue of rape as a weapon of war. The adoption of the second UN Security Council resolution on WPS, SCR 1820, was celebrated as a major achievement of feminist advocacy and the campaign of women's groups to include women's experiences of war on the international agenda. SCR 1820, adopted unanimously in 2008, explicitly recognised sexual violence as a tactic of war and a threat to international peace and security. This recognition opened up the possibility of an international response, including a military intervention, under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter for a situation in which sexual violence is used as a weapon of war and which poses a threat to international peace and security

As a result of the attention paid to sexual violence in these wars and, more recently, the conflict in eastern Congo, we are now accustomed to hearing about "rape as a weapon of war." This paradigm has been adopted enthusiastically by UN agencies under the WPS agenda, and by a number of advocacy and aid groups helping to respond to and combat sexual violence in conflict.

However, 'rape as a weapon of war' is problematic. As a way of characterising sexual violence that occurs during times of conflict or instability, this term has served to conflate all forms of sexual violence under this singular banner. It has enabled a disproportionate amount of attention on *forms* of sexual violence and little distinction has been made between the different perpetrators, or between the different types of victims. The new international attention is focused on the physical extent of abuse, the number of perpetrators per victims, and the social stigma faced by victims of sexual violence. It is never asked *why sexual violence?*

Since 2008, the Security Council has adopted 3 additional resolutions under the WPS agenda, all focusing on the issue of sexual violence in war. SCR 1888 (2009) reinforces the provisions of 1820 and urged the development of specific measures for responding to and preventing wartime sexual violence. This resolution established the office of the Secretary General's Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SGSR-SV), which oversees the unified efforts of UN agencies on the issue of sexual violence in war under the new umbrella group, UN Action (Against Sexual Violence in Conflict).

In outlining the evolution of the WPS agenda it is clear that the disproportionate concern for 'rape as a weapon of war' as a distinct issue strays from the original intention of SCR 1325 and provides a problematic framework for

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addressing issues of women, peace and security. Instead of broadening the scope of security to all individuals, the new UN WPS agenda does not concern itself with sexual violence as a threat to women's security. Instead, it frames sexual violence as a security issue for states.

The UN is not concerned with sexual violence as part of the continuum of violence that women and girls experience in times of insecurity – whether pre-conflict, during conflict, or post-conflict. The UN WPS agenda is only concerned with those acts of sexual violence that can be considered comparable in intent, extent and impact to any classical method of warfare. If the sexual violence perpetrated cannot be directly and causally linked to the objective of the armed group or purpose of the conflict, it falls outside of the scope of UN consideration and response.

Under SCR 1960 (2010), the UN established a Working Group on 'conflict-related sexual violence' for monitoring and verifying 'rape as a weapon of war.' The primary task of this group is to list armed groups who are suspected of using sexual violence as a weapon. The criteria for making it on this list are that the sexual violence perpetrated by members of the group are part of a 'methodical plan,' 'a system' and committed against an identifiable group of victims (Office of the SGSR-SV 2011). The assumptions behind this approach to sexual violence in armed conflict are that: rape is primarily committed by armed groups; and that it is used strategically toward rational ends.

However, the majority of sexual violence perpetrated during times of conflict does not fit this narrow criterion. A 2011 study by Peterman, Palermo and Bredenkamp found that a very high percentage of the sexual violence in eastern Congo, considered to be the "most dangerous place in the world to be a woman", was perpetrated by civilians and within marriages. But the UN WPS framework assumes that this type of sexual violence is not threatening, risky, or socially destabilising because it does not fit into the 'weapon of war' paradigm.

The overreliance on this blanket term 'rape as a weapon of war' obscures the social relations behind this type of violence. It also reinforces the idea that war, and the different types of violence used therein, is senseless and chaotic. Sexual violence is accepted as something armed men do, without questioning how it is that this particular form of violence comes to be an available weapon of war in those instances that it does actually reflect a strategic and systematic tool.

But perhaps a bigger problem is the way in which the new WPS paradigm completely separates forms of sexual violence committed in this particular way from all the other forms of violence (sexual and otherwise) that women experience as a result of conflict and political/social/economic insecurity. The UN framework on 'conflict related sexual violence' divorces this type of abuse from the wider, gendered social relations that produce gender-based violence and violence against women more generally. Sexual violence is made into an object of conflicting armed groups, rather than a subject of human relations.

We should be proud of the achievement of incorporating women's experiences of insecurity onto the international agenda. However, we need to be critical of the current UN approaches that focus disproportionately on 'rape as a weapon of war,' as it undermines the potential for effective action to address not only this type of violence, but all forms of gender-based violence that is perpetrated in conflict-affected societies. The current approaches under this new UN WPS agenda are unlikely to succeed in preventing future incidents of sexual violence in war. As Abigail Disney of the Daphne Foundation stated in a meeting of the Nobel Women's Initiative on sexual violence in war, "Rape is not the problem. Rape is a symptom of the problem. And the answer is not to attempt to stop men from raping women, but to categorically change women's values and status in their communities" (Nobel Women's Initiative 2011).

By adopting the narrower focus and understanding of sources of women's insecurity during times of conflict, the evolution of UN Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security has departed from the feminist ideas of 'gendered peace' that informed the original SCR 1325. Future resolutions must re-situate the problem of sexual violence back on the continuum of violence experienced by women pre, during, and post-conflict, which is borne out of and reinforces unequal gender relations and that makes women particularly vulnerable during times of conflict and insecurity.

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