

UNSCR 1325 in Palestine: Strengthening or Disciplining Women's Peace Activism?

Written by Sophie Richter-Devroe

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SOPHIE RICHTER-DEVROE, DEC 28 2012

The UN Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, adopted by the Security Council in 2000, is considered by many a historic milestone. In it the Council dealt for the first time specifically with women's experiences in conflict situations, recognising their contribution to conflict resolution, prevention and management. Since the Resolution was passed, several mechanisms have been established at country and UN level to support its implementation in different contexts.[2] Yet, most evaluations find that UNSCR 1325 has had little impact on women's actual experiences of conflict on the ground.[3] In Palestine too, where women have had to cope with and resist political violence exercised by the Israeli regime for more than 60 years now, UNSCR 1325 has made little difference to women's everyday life under occupation.

The resolution has been added to the agendas of many international and local organisations active in the field of conflict resolution and/or women's rights in Palestine.[4] Most ordinary Palestinian women and men, however, tend to question the usefulness of 1325 for advancing the Palestinian national struggle. The fact that local actors, particularly in countries with a history of foreign occupation, remain sceptical of 1325, should raise critical questions, such as those proposed by Chinkin and Charlesworth: "Can an international legal framework be applied for the empowerment of women in the Third World that is not open to rejection as a further form of intervention and neo-colonialism?"[5] In Palestine the Resolution has not strengthened, but rather disciplined, women's political activism within a specific international feminist peace agenda.

The International Women's Commission

In 2005 the International Women's Commission (IWC), a tripartite body comprising Palestinian, Israeli and international high-level female delegates, was established. Tasked with monitoring the implementation of 1325 in Israel and Palestine, the Commission strived to introduce a gender and feminist perspective to peacebuilding, lobby for increased participation of women in formal and informal negotiations, and advocate the protection of women and their rights in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The Commission, however, had to close down due to strong political differences between the Israeli and Palestinian members. I conducted interviews with the Palestinian members of the IWC in 2009-2010. Already then the Palestinian members of the IWC faced severe difficulties to challenge the mainstream Israeli and international narrow feminist reading of 1325. They were unable to establish their more rights-based interpretations of the Resolution's main three themes: participation, protection and empowerment.

Participation

The IWC was tasked with strengthening women's participation in peace negotiations. The need for women's equal participation in formal and informal negotiations and peace initiatives is often justified by the argument that women experience conflict differently than men, and thus bring different gender-specific perspectives and demands to the negotiation table. Palestinian women activists, when lobbying the Palestinian Authority for increasing women's representation in negotiations and decision-making, often stress this point. One of the Palestinian IWC members, for example, told me:

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We think that there is a difference between the view of women and the view of men in negotiations. It is true that the national cause unifies [women's and men's positions], but I see, for example, a difference in how women and men talk about water, or the case of Jerusalem, where women might attach more significance to the issue of family reunification.

If women's standpoint and experience can usefully be contrasted to that of men, one must, however, also enquire about the different experiences *among* women: Do Palestinian and Israeli women have a similar experience of the conflict? Do they bring a similar "woman's" perspectives to negotiations? All Palestinian IWC members I interviewed were united in their answer to this question: They all stressed that their everyday life under occupation differs decidedly from that of Israeli women, and that consequently they also hold diverging ideas and political positions. One interviewee expressed this poignantly:

Everywhere in conflict you see that women have more the tendency to listen, to understand, to talk about the details, to try to find solutions, etc. but this doesn't mean that a Palestinian woman sitting with an Israeli woman would have a different position than a Palestinian man. Because the basics have to be solved, the *rights* have to be recognised.

Palestinian women's political positions, as this quote demonstrates, are dominated by national rather than gender-specific concerns. It is thus not in isolation, but in its intersection with class, ethnicity, race, nationality, political affiliation, etc. that gender identity impacts upon political positions and viewpoints.[6] The most significant dividing line between Palestinian and Israeli women activists – which cannot be easily bridged by gender – is that of occupier and occupied. This dichotomy of experiences and political positions constituted a severe problem for the IWC.

Protection

The Palestinian members of the IWC I interviewed unanimously found that amongst the three themes dealt with in the Resolution its call to ensure the protection of women and their rights under international law is most significant to their experience. Read from such a rights-based perspective, 1325, as one member clearly stated, "is not just [a way] to tackle the role of women in the negotiation process, pre-, during, and post-conflict. No! 1325 also talks about protection of women under conflict. It has many more components which advocate women's rights under conflict."

Palestinian members of the IWC found it imperative to anchor their IWC Charter in international law, UN resolutions and past Israeli-Palestinian agreements. The Charter, and the legal frameworks it refers to, however, have been interpreted very differently by Palestinian and Israeli IWC members, as the following account by a Palestinian member illustrates:

The Charter refers clearly to recognising our rights, international law, UN resolutions, and the two-state solution. We thought it was clear enough, [but] now we are reviewing the Charter. We discovered that some of the Israelis, members [of IWC] who signed the Charter, are talking about Jewish neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem. If you agree to 67 borders, then you cannot say that these are neighbourhoods. These are colonial settlements. This is Palestinian land. [...] So it is either that they haven't read the Charter or that they don't understand it. They have different interpretations of the Charter. For me it is clear. We thought that it was clear, but then we discovered that it is not clear for everybody.

The Palestinian members' difficulties to establish their international rights-based interpretation of 1325 as authoritative highlights a major shortcoming of international law: its lack of monitoring and enforcement.[7] The difficulty of enforcement is even heightened in the case of 1325 because, compared to other international legal documents, UNSCR 1325 has one of the weakest standing, depending on the good will of member countries to ensure its implementation.[8] Although the Knesset has adopted a law calling for the implementation of 1325 and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas recognised the IWC through an official decree, the question remains: Who is responsible for the enforcement of 1325 and who can be held accountable for its violations? The recurrent military attacks on Gaza, but also the daily infringements and violations of Palestinian basic rights in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, illustrate painfully that the Palestinian Authority has no means to enforce 1325, let alone guarantee its demand of providing protection for women.

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Empowerment

1325 stresses the need to include – and thus empower – local women in conflict resolution. Naomi Chazan, a Knesset and IWC member similarly finds that “women’s participation in conflict resolution is integrally related to the empowerment of women” (Chazan, 2004: 55). Yet, for the Palestinian women I interviewed empowerment is a political issue and cannot be achieved through mere inclusion in conflict resolution processes. Women’s and gender issues should not be dealt with independently of, or even prioritised over, political change, as one of the Palestinian IWC members stressed:

When we discuss issues of how we see peace and negotiations, we want a women’s perspective, but it is not our intention to turn [...] to the issue of what the situation of women in Israeli society is, and what they are facing. No, this is not the issue! Because first of all this is political. Now we talk about politics, but from women’s point of view.

Her argument makes clear that Palestinian women in the IWC, when interpreting and trying to make use of 1325, call for the empowerment of the whole Palestinian population. This is not to say that gender equality is not a major concern of Palestinian women’s activists. To the contrary, it highlights that women’s struggle for rights and empowerment is closely linked to their political and economic empowerment which can only be achieved by ending the Israeli occupation and continuous settler colonial policies.

The Palestinian and Israeli IWC members’ conflicting interpretations of international law, UN resolutions and even their own Charter, however, reveal that even in a peacebuilding initiative as the IWC the Israeli side does not fully support the realisation of Palestinian women’s political and economic rights. For Palestinian women living in East Jerusalem the Israeli settlements have devastating and strongly disempowering effects: economically, politically and socially. If maintained under the pretext that they are mere ‘neighbourhoods’, Palestinian women’s (and men’s) empowerment will continue to be blocked.

Conclusion

The UNSC Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security has rightly been considered a landmark in women’s struggles to mainstream gender in conflict resolution and prevention. However, the Resolution faces serious challenges in its implementation. The major obstacles that hinder 1325 from constituting a conducive framework for Palestinian women’s peace activism lie in the dominant (Israeli and international) interpretations of 1325 which derive from a narrow feminist perspective that prioritises *access to over transformation of* an unequal status quo. Women are invited to participate in and contribute to ‘peace’ negotiations which do not challenge, but rather preserve and even give legitimacy to the maintenance of Israeli control over Palestine. In this narrow access-based interpretation gender issues are presented and prioritised as ‘connecting points’ between the two national groups. But gender here is de-contextualised and de-politicised: the ways in which gender discrimination is related to and reinforced by political and economic oppression – an aspect which all of the Palestinian women I interviewed identified as most pertinent in dominating their lives – is lacking.

Palestinian women’s struggles for empowerment take place under continuous and prolonged Israeli settler-colonial and occupation policies, which strangle their entire society politically and economically, rendering it dependent on foreign aid and without the protection of a sovereign state. By detaching women’s empowerment from this broader context, using vague language and making no mention of social or economic rights (such as the right to basic living conditions or right to housing, for example), the resolution holds little relevance for women’s (and men’s) actual lives, concerns and needs on the ground. Most Palestinians tend not to put too much hope into UN Resolutions. If they use them at all as a framework for their activism, they tend to prioritise those Resolutions that directly acknowledge Palestinian national rights, or condemn Israeli violations of international law. Jumana, a women’s activist in Palestine, for example, asked herself (and me):

“For women on the ground, why should 1325 be more important than any other Resolution, like 194,[9] for example? How can it work without Israel ending the occupation? Israel doesn’t comply with any UN resolution, why this one?”

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While a narrow access-based feminist reading of 1325 holds little promise to realise Palestinian women's rights, the Resolution itself should not be dismissed entirely. If interpreted from a political rights-based perspective, thus recognising and addressing the historical and political root causes of the conflict and the inter-linkages between social (gender) and political (national) rights, the Resolution holds the potential to raise international awareness for, and thus strengthen, rather than discipline, Palestinian women's struggles for a just future.

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[1] This article relies on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2008 and 2010 in the framework of my PhD research on Palestinian women's formal and informal political activism in 'peacebuilding' and 'resistance' in the West Bank. Parts of it draw from my PhD thesis (completed 2010), in particular chapter 4 "Palestinian Women's Peace Activism", and from a jointly authored article Pratt and Richter-Devroe (2012) "Introduction to Special Issue on Critically Examining UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security" *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 4. All interviewees' names are anonymised.

[2] These include the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security, Country-specific Action Plans, UN System-wide Action Plans; a Peace Commission, and subsequent resolutions dealing with gender and conflict (UNSCR 1820 [2008], 1888 [2009], 1889 [2009]).

[3] See, for example, the Special Issue on Critically Examining UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, Vol. 13, No. 4.

[4] The Palestinian organisations which work(ed) with 1325 include, for example, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the Jerusalem Center for Women, The Palestinian Conflict Resolution Centre Wi'am, or the International Women's Commission.

[5] Chinkin, C. and Charlesworth, H. (2006) "Building Women into Peace: the international legal framework" *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 5, p 943

[6] For further discussions on the issue of intersectionality, and of heterogeneity of political position between (but also among) Palestinian and Israeli women peace activists, see e.g. Cockburn, C. (2007), *From Where We Stand: War, Women's Activism and Feminist Analysis*. London: Zed Books; Amar, N. (2004) "U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325: Declaration or Reality?", in Aharoni, S. and Deeb, R. (eds) *Where are all the Women? U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325: Gender Perspectives of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*, Haifa: Isha L'Isha and Kayan; and Richter-Devroe, S. (2009) "Here it is not about conflict resolution – we can only resist": Palestinian Women's Activism in Conflict Resolution and Nonviolent Resistance" in Al-Ali, N. and Pratt, N. (eds) *Women and War in the Middle East: Transnational Perspectives*, London:

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[7] See also Chinkin, C. and Charlesworth, H. (2006) "Building Women into Peace: the international legal framework" *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 5.

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[9] UNGA Resolution 194 establishes that Palestinian refugees have the right to return to their original homes and villages.

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