

# Re-Framing Gender Relations in Conflict Settings: UNSCR 1325 in Sierra Leone

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EFFROSYNI CHANTZI, AUG 20 2018

The passing of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) in 2000 mirrors an effort to conceptualize the gendered boundaries of international security within a human rights framework. The resolution calls on member states to mainstream a gender perspective into matters of conflict and peacebuilding under a profoundly political Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. UNSCR 1325 draws upon binding commitments grounded in international human rights law and can be regarded as an integrated part of an established and growing legal framework that upholds the rights of women and girls in conflict and post-conflict settings. Even though we cannot deny the document's symbolic value, its legal status remains unclear; UNSCR 1325 lacks the type of hard requirements that give laws agency to hold states accountable for non-implementation and hence ensuring its systematic enforcement. Therefore, it is perceived as an instrument of soft law (Shaffer, 2010, p709). As a means of adopting the resolution, Member States have adopted National Action Plans (NAPs) containing indicators and strategies that are meant to advance and facilitate the implementation and monitoring of UNSCR 1325.

The subsequent question then comes to the following; what is the capacity of the specific resolution to transform gender relations advancing women's status in conflict affected societies? We will examine theoretical approaches that articulate UNSCR 1325 as a transformative gender mainstreaming tool able to re-shape understanding of gender interactions in conflict affected settings focusing on broader objectives of women's mainstreaming in political affairs. Taking Sierra Leone as a case study, we will argue that prior to the adoption of UNSCR 1325, references to women's political participation were sporadic and inconsistent, favoring a return to the pre-war social conditions. The operationalization of the UNSCR 1325 into a NAP was a necessary, but not sufficient condition for transforming gender relations in the political arena and further actions need to be taken. Thus, as concluding remarks, we will highlight guidelines and policy recommendations as prioritized points of concrete prerequisites to promote effective implementation of NAPs and facilitate the visibility of gender in Sierra Leone's politics.

It is essential to highlight that the principal aim of gender mainstreaming is to achieve gender equality by implementing gender as a central component of policy making in conflict affected settings at all stages of design, implementation and monitoring (Pratt, 2013, p772). In contrast to other equality initiatives, premised on equal treatment and non-discrimination, gender mainstreaming is primarily designed to target equality of outcome rather than equality of opportunity ultimately reshaping gender relations within the society (Barrow 2010, p228). The concept of gender mainstreaming, like all vibrant visions, is not static, but it rather expands as people reconceive their needs and hopes in relation to it. Some scholars have pointed out that the idea of the "postwar moment," defined as a time of fluidity at the end of war within which the (re)negotiations of gender arrangements of the state can take place, to conceptualize that period after conflict when the state is being reconstructed and is therefore, theoretically, open to change (Cockburn, 2002).

This potentiality can inspire change on matters of social interaction, such as of the state's gender relations and the re-negotiation of women's participation in the political realm. However, the postwar moment can also result in a sociopolitical backlash hostile to notions of gender equality and women's rights in a post-conflict state related to the idea that states want to "return to normal" in post-war (Luintel, 2016, p 10). This is problematic because it assumes that gender relations prior to the conflict were "normal" purposefully ignoring the fact that in post-conflict

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reconstruction there is a tendency to reimagine a non-existing past, the traditional gender relations of which are idealized. We use Sierra Leone as a case study, because it constitutes a state that went through the process of renegotiating gender relations with regards to political participation after the adoption of UNSCR 1325; it has a relatively stable long-term post-conflict reconstruction process, which allows for an in-depth study of our research question (Sicard, 2015, p3).

There are at least two enabling factors that have served to put gender mainstreaming on the global policymaking agenda: the spread of a new language for promoting women's rights and its injection into a policy document. In this spirit, it would be useful to provide a solid background on theoretical approaches to WPS discourse to evaluate a) how gender is portrayed and reimagined providing a more radical framework with regards to gender relations and b) how UNSCR 1325 reflects these aspirations with regards to women's political participation in post-conflict reconstruction. Feminist scholars have argued that the conceptualization of security has been highly depended on binaries such as private/public, domestic/national, passive/ active (Reilly, 2007, p117). These hard lines define social interactions as a power game of the subordination where women, limited in their private, domestic, passive role ought to be protected by the male political leaders, seen as public, international, active actors, who regulated political affairs. An exposition of the gendered logic of the masculine role of protector in relation to women and children illuminates security as conditioned politics of control where the state wages war abroad and expects obedience and loyalty at home (Hunt, 2006, p122). I would argue that this conceptualization of gender interaction resembles much of the Hobbesian authoritarian security paradigm according to which state officials adopt the stance of masculine protector requiring citizens to entrust their lives to them without questioning the former's decisions about what will keep the later safe. The trope of "woman as victim" has long been critiqued by feminist scholars as essentially denying their ability for autonomous agency and opening the way for the "logic of masculinist protection" to be enacted whether at an interpersonal, societal, or state level (Young 2003, p5).

Under the WPS agenda, constructivist feminists challenged mainstream theory arguing that gender identities and gender relations are socially constituted through complicated interdependent processes (Sharoni, 2010, p5). As a result, the actual content of being male or female varies highly across cultures, contexts and eras (Arat, 2015, p678). Thus, understanding women's positionality within their system with regards to dominant discourses and practices of peace and security is seen as essential in re-shaping gender relations in post-conflict framework. The existing linkages between different, usually interlocking, systems of domination and oppression and between different cartographies of struggle are central to the analysis of conflicts and the exploration of prospects for their resolution. It is argued that the theory of positionality can be used as an analytical tool for studying, understanding and responding to the ways in which gender intersects with other identities and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of oppression and privilege (Symington, 2004, p3). Thus, if a post-conflict society does not effectively renegotiate these structural elements and dominant social forces, such as configurations of gender, race, class and sexuality, and their interaction within the existing status quo through a coherent policy, then we are not talking about a sustainable peace effort. To the contrary, a so-called neoliberal imperium is created defined as an overarching hegemonic project that encompasses states, governments, classes, and sets of ideologies that work in tandem to validate one another (Pratt, 2014, p780).

I would argue that UNSCR 1325 is highly relevant as a rights framework providing a more radical critique of gender relations in the context of conflict as it aims to the distribution or redistribution of institutional power resources through a process-oriented approach, namely NAPs such as in the case of Sierra-Leone. Considered "a profoundly political project," the document represents an attempt by feminists and other political actors to construct alternative conceptions of international security aiming at rethinking concepts such as violence, power, peace, and security adding a gender frame to peace building and conflict transformation (McWilliam, 2015, p129). It proposes alternative formulations that would resonate with the daily lives and struggles of women in different conflict zones around the world as gendered relations of agency and structure (McDonald, 2002, p295). Agency refers to "the capacity of women (either individually or collectively) to make an effective and meaningful choice indicating the need to recognize women as active agents rather than passive victims in the process of decision-making and participation in post-conflict settings (Luintel, 2016, p38)." Structure is defined as "the formal and informal contexts within which actors operate (Luintel, 2016, p39)."

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The two concepts must be seen as largely complementary and mutually reinforcing, with agency being dependent on individuals' potentiality and capability to act free of cultural norms or constraints reinforced within a specific sociopolitical structural. UNSCR 1325 acknowledges gender as a relation of power; in a world where the dominant image of the political actor is male, female agency is often invisible (Barrow, 2010, p250). Taking into consideration the gendered aspect of women's diverse experiences and complexities of oppression in conflict and post-conflict settings UNSCR 1325 highlights the absence, exclusion, and marginalization of women from the political realm. It recognizes that gender is still not fully integrated into the reconstruction process and promotes the concept of positive peace (Sicard, 2015, p21). Male-dominated structures and organizations hinder women's integration and the actual implementation of gender policies. This leads to the dilution and disappearance of policies and planning focused on gender equality as a result of the patriarchal social structure (Longwe 1999).

This is translated as a realization that the role of women is crucial in post-conflict reconstruction as it facilitates efforts to preserve social order during times of sociopolitical turbulence, ultimately recognizing women as constructive agents in peace processes (Independent Commission on Multilateralism, 2016, p6). If violence, domination and women's exclusion in conflict and post-conflict setting are understood as a politically constructed reality, it is possible to imagine deconstructing that system and building a more equitable one. However, good intentions often cannot affect meaningful social change. UNSCR 1325 is a relatively young instrument in policy terms (Barrow, 2009, p52). Examining UNSCR 1325's operationalization process through NAPs, a document describing a policy or strategy that a country plans to follow to fulfill objectives and reach goals concerning specific national, regional or global matters, making the State a central stakeholder, allows the evaluation of the enabling and constraining factors in the mainstreaming process (Bjørvik, 2017, p16). States fully committed to the full implementation of UNSCR 1325, such as Sierra-Leone, were only in the primary stages of incorporating the themes of the resolution into effort to reshape gender relations with regards to political participation and promote gender mainstreaming. We will argue that even though Sierra-Leone made some important progress, it did not manage to achieve substantial change in shifting of gender concerns from the margin to the center of policymaking in terms of women's political participation (Barrow, 2016, p261).

The political history of Sierra Leone cannot be told without mention of the role of women. Thus, it is necessary to provide a solid background regarding the nature of women's political status in Sierra-Leone in the period right before and after the conflict to assess its impact on the image of the political female. Gender relations in Sierra Leone in the pre-civil war period were extremely unequal and Sierra Leonean women faced high levels of exclusion, violence and poverty. The basis of this inequality was the patriarchal culture and the colonial history of the country which not only shaped women's relations to their male counterparts, but also power dynamics among women (Akiyode-Afolabi, 2013, p26). The masculinized culture dictated that women should not participate in public life or speak in public and "should always be at the back (Castillejo, 2009, p3)." The image of the "father-chief" masculinity was posited relationally with "motherhood femininity", relegating women to marginal political roles creating a system of male patronage (Sumah, 2014, p62). Women's roles have been limited in the political and economic spheres, and in Sierra Leone's hierarchical culture, it was primarily the male elders who exercised power largely excluding women from participation in customary governance systems (Hussaina, 2010, p63). It is also important to highlight that the colonial history of the country deepened even more the stratified gendered cultural divisions between different regions by unequal distribution of economic and educational opportunities, influencing the relative position of different groups of women within the social structure of Sierra Leone and their political potentiality (McFerson, 2012, p47).

Interestingly enough, it was the war conditions that brought the collapse of not just law and order, but also the social systems and structures that held women back (Rogers, 2011, p51). Sierra Leone was in a brutal civil war from 1992 to 2002, at first limited to some rural areas but later expanded to the rest of the country. The Lome Agreement in 1999 formally ended the civil war, but sporadic hostilities continued well into 2002 (Badjo, 2011, p36). The onset of the civil war and its devastating effects on the economy and society brought about dramatic changes in Sierra Leonean women's everyday lives, yet it also opened up spaces for women's voices. The extreme violence women in Sierra Leone were subjected to during the conflict and the inability of the status quo to effectively protect them created a space for them to challenge existing social norms. It was probably survivalism from practices of systematic terrorization, such as sex-slavery and gender-based violence, during the civil war that demystified male superiority. This "post war momentum" provided the agencies that the women of Sierra Leonean society exhibit today (Lumeh,

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2009, p118). Women's independent organizing became a new pathway of women's empowerment and opened new avenues for women to articulate their demands for political rights and social justice in the postwar environment under a WPS agenda and later by its operationalization into official state practices via a UNSCR 1325 NAP.

The post-war picture is a complicated one because it is seen as a quarrel between traditional political forces that were calling for a return to pre-war social norms as markers of stability and advocates who were trying to promote gender mainstreaming in political life. With the exception of the five year strategic plan of action (2002-2007) for the advancement of women incorporating the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Beijing Platform for Action, which however never operationalized, Sierra Leone did not adopt any international legal document in an attempt to fight gender discrimination (Government of Sierra Leone Country Report, 2014, p31). To the contrary, the post war political environment and the country's legal instruments were hostile to women's participation. The 1991 Constitution not only did not resolve the issue, but re-produced the longstanding and widespread discrimination against women (UN Women, 2015, p9). While the democratic structures at the time offered opportunities for the exercise of electoral rights, they had not been sufficient in assuring equity (Rogers, 2011, p50). Talks on the subject of gender quotas and women's inclusion in national politics were initiated at the end of the war, but agreement was never reached as the state did not take seriously the demand for quotas coming from the civil society (Ibrahim, 2010, p3). WPS advocates were pointing that the long-term effects of the war were exacerbated for women and girls by the continuing challenges they faced in the persisting structural gender inequalities in post-conflict Sierra Leone. It was a "continuum of violence from the battlefield to the bedroom (Akiyode-Afolabi, 2013, p62)." In recognition of these challenges, and under the high pressure of WPS advocates, the Government of Sierra Leone launched its NAP on the implementation of UNSCR 1325 in 2010 recognizing that gender mainstreaming in politics was essential in securing post-conflict social justice.

Only by operationalizing UNSCR1325's legal framework into a NAP, a radical critique of gender relations was crystalized emphasizing the need for women's political empowerment in the postwar environment, while committing the government to take action through an institutional reform (McFerson, 2012, p61). At the institutional level, the construction of a democratic system that promotes the rule of law, respect for life and equality before the law was an important pillar in gender mainstreaming efforts. This has also entailed the formulation of policies and initiation of programs and projects that foster social justice, including those that support women in politics and decision-making. Gender-sensitive legislative reform is specifically expected to responds to the particular justice needs of women and girls, increases the state's response to gender-based violence, eliminates gender-based discriminatory laws and practices, and ensures that the government exercises its responsibility to prevent and protect human rights of women and girls as stipulated in international law (UN Women, 2015, p35). Specific goals were set and expected to be achieved by 2012 including: a) increasing representation and gender parity in decision-making organs including 30% quota for political representation until 2012, b) legislation and regulatory measures ensuring gender parity or a minimum of 30% at all elected and appointed positions in government, as well as other governance structures are in place at all levels, c) organizing a number of advocacy and consultative sessions for stakeholders' political parties, legislatures, women's groups and civil society in order to further the dialogue on gender mainstreaming, d) trainings in gender issues, gender mainstreaming in peace consolidation/ recovery and security matters to enrich sensitization efforts (Badjo, 2011, p64).

Arguably, these measurements can be described as the first opportunity for women's numerical representation in Parliament and prove that a rights framework, such as UNSCR 1325, can indeed provide a more radical critique of gender relations in post-conflict context. However, today women constitute more than 51% of the total population, but occupy only 15 out of 124 seats in parliament (Chopra, 2016, p4). While this low response rate could be read as reflecting UNSCR 1325's failure to penetrate the public sphere, I would argue that UNSCR 1325 does not exist in a vacuum and NAPs during early stages tend to be relatively generic compromising prospects for actionable steps and accountability reflecting. In Sierra Leone, representation was seen as an instance and not as a practice meaning that it was seen in quantitative and not qualitative terms. However, representation is not only about securing seats, but also about eliminating the obstacles that exclude certain citizen groups while favoring others. This information has not yet been operationalized in the Sierra Leone context revealing a failure on behalf of policy-makers to recognize that political quotas and subsequent legal actions are a necessary, but not sufficient condition for equal distribution of power, or even access to power. The majority of Sierra Leonean women are uneducated, lack or have limited access

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to capital, education, land, etc. and live under discriminatory customary laws that assign them second-class citizenship (Chopra, 2016, p6). Thus, women's political empowerment must be seen as an intersectional issue; to alter gender balances Sierra Leone needs to give women, as we have already mentioned in our theoretical discourse, the agency they lack. To achieve this, further research is required which would investigate the so far neglected components of structural violence with regards to gendered social interactions and their links to women's political participation. However, some preliminary policy recommendations can be drawn from the existing analysis using UNSCR 1325 as a basis.

As previously mentioned, decisions over the issues of most importance to Sierra Leonean women's lives have traditionally been subjected to customary authorities based on values of custom and tradition. While practices vary significantly across the country, in general women's participation in customary governance is limited. Patrimonial interests remain and thus skew the manner in which political decision making occurs. This patronage system is also frequently gendered, in that women are less likely to be in positions of authority, given the dominance of patriarchy. As the individual's relationship with customary authorities is based on their family or community membership, these authorities rarely consult directly with women or young people, who are instead "represented" in consultations by male family heads and elders (Denney, 2012, p5). Those women who are in positions of authority often do not have strong ties to other women or gender issues, as patronage politics encourages fealty to their patrons or political parties. However, even though they are excluded from official government formation, women do in fact participate in community decision-making through grass root movements (Castillejo, 2009, p4). UNSCR 1325 reaffirms the importance of building gender expertise and the idea of promoting peace at the grass root level (UN Women, 2015, p204). Thus, Sierra Leone's NAP must facilitate and encourage the creation and involvement of such entities, while providing financial support and political legitimacy.

Violence and harassment inhibits women's equal participation in politics; even if women secure some short of political agency through civil society groups, it is important to remember that women are still seen as highly subordinated, passive subjects of the systems. While an increased awareness of rights and access to empowerment opportunities represents advancement for women's rights, women are targeted facing violent backlash, as men seek to reassert their authority in the face of what they perceive to be threatening for the "tradition" or the status quo. Violence against women continues to prevail in the society in the absence of law reform to address such violations and the continued application of discriminatory laws. It is necessary for Sierra Leone's NAP to include efforts of criminalization targeting cases of political harassment. To take this a step further, greater respect must be built for women, not only as political actors, but as social actors. UNSCR recognizes that targeting of women can deliberately hinder the effort to sustainable peace (UN Women, 2015, p222). Thus, violence against women in general must be combated and eliminated. Thus, Sierra Leone's NAP must provide a gender sensitive legal framework and secure the implementation of such provisions.

This progress remains deeply problematic, owing to poor knowledge of the law, cultural resistance, capacity constraints and limited penetration of state enforcement, as well as prevalence of institutional hybridity (Swaine, 2012). As we have seen, Sierra Leone's NAP introduced minimum standards for women's political participation which however, fail to be effectively implemented across all levels of government. There is no statute/law which requires political parties to give a quota of their party symbols to female candidates and political parties did not give financial assistance to female candidates so that they can run effective campaigns (UN Women, 2015, p32). Lack of political will deprives policy-making/legal initiatives to be implemented and bring about fruitful results. Thus, ensuring continued monitoring through an actively engaging process of Sierra Leone's government, reporting to treaty bodies and facilitating monitoring is essential. An independent international tribunal should be established to adjudicate on individual complaints of violation of political rights standards in Sierra Leone under the UNSCR 1325 agenda. Working together with local NGOs and government human right officers and state officials, holding consultations with municipalities and all minority communities, providing capacity building through targeted educational/professional programs will strengthen understanding on the limitations women face and enhance the state's commitment to promote gender mainstreaming in public and political life.

This paper has highlighted that the process of re-negotiating the terms of gender interaction in conflict affected societies is highly complex, and often quite difficult. In the case of Sierra Leone, the post-war momentum alone was

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not enough in affecting change with regards to women's political representation. Constituting a dynamic rights framework under a WPS agenda, UNSCR 1325 provides a more radical critique of gender relations and facilitates the implementation of gender mainstreaming. However, the operationalization of the UNSCR 1325 into a NAP was a necessary, but not sufficient condition for transforming gender relations in the political arena and further actions need to be taken with regards to combating discrimination and violence against women who actively (or not) are standing up to their rights as political actors. Only if Sierra Leone's NAP grants women agency they will be able to break the bonds of the patriarchal structure and revolutionize gender relations within the society.

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