

Women's Empowerment and Atrocities Prevention

Written by Sarah Teitt

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SARAH TEITT, NOV 11 2014

At the sixth informal dialogue on the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) held in early September, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon reflected that the determination the international community expressed at the 2005 World Summit to decisively stem mass atrocities is 'being severely tested' (Ban Ki-Moon, 2014). Ban cited the tragedies in Iraq and Syria, and persistent and odious violence against populations in South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Ukraine, Nigeria, Pakistan, and elsewhere as illustrative of a failure to confront violent conflict and provide assistance to beleaguered populations. This failure is witnessed in the action of states that appear patently unwilling to protect their own populations, and the international community, which too often has been unable to broker or enforce effective measures to protect populations in the darkest hour of need. By dint of its unique role and responsibility to uphold international peace and security, the label of failure is applied most frequently—and vehemently—to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), whose political stalemate during recent crises has left the perception that the great powers fiddle while the world's most vulnerable populations burn.

Chronic shortcomings in preventive action is not a new theme of UN debate on R2P, nor is the reflection that the UNSC must do better to heed the signs of looming crisis and translate early warning into concrete action. What is notable, however, is recent emphasis the Secretary-General, the UNSC, and members of the General Assembly have placed on gender equality, the empowerment of women, and the suite of commitments associated with the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda as vital to realizing the preventive goals of R2P. This article draws attention to some important linkages recently made between the promotion and protection of women's human rights and the prevention of mass atrocities. It concludes by highlighting a series of recommendations for realizing the goals of R2P through: incorporating gender analysis in early warning frameworks, ensuring women's rights have a prominent place in the Rights Up Front agenda, and supporting efforts at the national and regional level to empower women as agents of peace and conflict resolution.

Gender and Atrocities Prevention

Since former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan called for the UN to move from 'culture of reaction' to a 'culture of prevention' in his briefing to the UNSC some fifteen years ago, the body has over and over again returned to the unrealized pledge to address the root causes of conflict and take early preventive action (United Nations Press Release SC/6759, 1999). Perhaps the most sober reflection on the failed promise of prevention came in April this year, when the UNSC marked the twentieth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide while simultaneously struggling to rise to the challenge of addressing the terrible human toll of festering armed conflict. Reflecting that the UN continues to fall short of its moral obligation and political commitment to protect populations from atrocities, the UNSC adopted Resolution 2150, which reaffirmed R2P and called on states to recommit to prevent and fight against genocide and other serious crimes (UNSCR, 2014). Less than four months later, in August 2014, UNSC attention again focused on bridging the chasm between the Council's commitment to conflict prevention and the perennial problem of slow and inadequate response to emerging crises.

This most recent UK-led effort in August to move from rhetoric to action resulted in one of the UNSC's strongest resolutions on prevention to date in the form of Resolution 2171. Under Resolution 2171, the Council pledged to better utilize the tools of the UN system to ensure comprehensive conflict prevention efforts including early warning, preventive diplomacy, mediation, preventive deployment, peacekeeping, practical disarmament, measures to

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combat the proliferation and illicit trade of arms, accountability measures, and inclusive post-conflict peacebuilding (UNSCR, 2014). This affirmation of the need to invigorate the full ambit of conflict prevention measures is important, but Resolution 2171 was perhaps most noteworthy for the strong language on the connection between promoting women's peace and security and successful atrocities prevention. Alongside a strong reaffirmation of R2P, the resolution called for better gender analysis, greater attention to gender-based violence, and the 'equal, full and meaningful, participation, representation and involvement' of women in conflict prevention and mediation, as endorsed in UNSC WPS resolutions (UNSCR, 2014). Emphasizing the important role of women and civil society in conflict resolution, Resolution 2171 linked successful conflict prevention to increasing the participation of women in all stages of mediation and post-conflict resolution, and making gender-related issues more visible in all discussions on conflict prevention (UNSCR, 2014:5).

Further still, Resolution 2171 acknowledged that sexual and gender-based violence can constitute a serious violation of international law, and can be 'an early indication of a descent into conflict or escalation of conflict, as well as a consequence thereof' (UNSCR, 2014:4). This connection between gender-based violence and greater risk of mass atrocities is important, as it builds on the wording of the Secretary-General's 2013 R2P report on Pillar 1 state responsibility and prevention, which noted that gender discrimination and gender inequality 'increase the underlying risks associated with sexual and gender-based violence' (Ban Ki-Moon, 2013:5). In other words, between the 2013 SG Report and Resolution 2171, there is now firm recognition of the connection between gender inequality, sexual and gender-based violence, and broader patterns of abuse that give rise to atrocity crimes.

The important link between realizing the preventive goals of R2P and women's empowerment resurfaced at the 2014 General Assembly dialogue on R2P, which was held just weeks after the passage of Resolution 2171. In discussing this year's SG report on collective responsibility and international assistance (Pillar 2 of the R2P framework), a number of states—including the UK, Germany, Italy, Finland, Canada, Norway, Namibia, and Thailand—linked the realization of R2P to women's protection, empowerment, and/or representation (Ban Ki-Moon, 2014). Norway, for example, noted the need to apply a gender perspective to the R2P framework, and (along with Namibia) called for the implementation of R2P to be in line with and informed by WPS commitments (Pedersen, 2014; Emvula, 2014). Canada asserted that 'societies which maintain social, political and economic barriers to the full participation of women and girls in the lives of their communities and countries run the clear risk of under-development and conflict' (Canada, 2014). Canada drew linkages between its R2P commitment and its efforts to end violence against women and girls, including child and forced marriage, which it argued should be addressed in the Post-2015 development agenda. Highlighting the systematic exclusion of women from peace processes as a barrier to lasting, equitable peace, the UK representative lamented that since the end of the Cold War, women have represented only 4% of the signatories of peace agreements, less than 3% of mediators brokering peace talks, and less than 10% of representatives at the 'peace table' negotiating on behalf of parties to conflict (Wilson, 2014).

The UK linked its collective responsibility under R2P to its recently updated WPS National Action Plan, which aims to ensure that the participation of women in conflict resolution is an integral part of the UK's foreign policy in conflict situations (United Kingdom Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2014:10-11). Thailand, too, linked the collective responsibility for assistance under Pillar 2 of the R2P framework to the crucial role women have in conflict prevention and conflict management, and called for more international assistance toward women's empowerment and capacity building. Specifically, Thailand pointed to the need for enhanced training for gender sensitivity in the security sector, with support for regional organizations and monitoring and evaluation systems (Sinhaseni, 2014). Together, these statements represent a clear recognition among states from both the Global North and Global South that gender equality and women's participation in conflict resolution is a vital component of the prevention and assistance responsibilities states bear under the R2P framework.

From Words to Deeds

There are a number of avenues for leveraging the recent recognition and affirmation of the link between realizing the preventive goals of R2P and the promotion and protection of women's human rights. Here, I focus on important initiatives that could be taken in the area of early warning, Rights Up Front, and supporting efforts at the national and regional level to empower women as agents of peace and conflict resolution.

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Gender and Early Warning

In her sunset speech to the UNSC at the end of her tenure as former High Commissioner of Human Rights in August 2014, Navi Pillay admonished that human protection crises seldom erupt without warning (Navi Pillay, 2014). Violent conflict comes on the heels of years, sometimes decades, of pernicious human rights abuses and political grievance: the signs of the next crisis are written in the legacy of corrupt governance and judicial institutions; systematic discrimination and exclusion; unequal and exploitative development; and the stifling of civil society. In all of these areas, there is a need for enhanced gender analysis that recognizes how the systematic violation of women's human rights, gender-based discrimination, and gender inequality can exacerbate the conditions that lead to violent conflict and forewarn mass atrocities. As colleagues and I have argued elsewhere, there is a need to develop and include gender-specific indicators—particularly economic, social, and political discriminatory practices against women—in early warning frameworks in order to improve the capacity to forecast future mass atrocities and craft appropriate and sufficiently early interventions (Davies, Teitt & Nwokora 2014).

The United Nations Joint Office for the Prevention of Genocide and R2P recently released a new Framework of Analysis for the Prevention of Atrocity Crimes, which recognizes that 'increased serious acts of violence against women and children, or creation of conditions that facilitate acts of sexual violence against those groups' is an enabling condition for the commission of atrocity crimes (United Nations Joint Office for the Prevention of Genocide and the Responsibility to Protect, 2014:16). The framework includes a number of other risk factors, including 'Weakness of State Structures' (i.e. 'circumstances that negatively affect the capacity of the State to prevent or halt atrocity crimes') and 'Absence of Mitigating Factors' (absence of conditions that could contribute to preventing or lessening the impact of atrocities) (United Nations Joint Office for the Prevention of Genocide and the Responsibility to Protect, 2014:12,15). Gender inequality, women's political exclusion, and inadequate legal framework for women's rights protection are not specifically referenced among the indicators, despite recognition by the UNSG in his 2013 report on R2P (noted above) that such conditions increase underlying risk of mass atrocities. While it could be argued that this connection is implied in the indicators, the framework would be strengthened as a tool of prevention if the Joint Office were to produce a gender analysis of its framework and incorporate gender analysis as a key module and cross-cutting theme in its outreach and training programs.

Gender and Rights Up Front

The UN's Rights Up Front framework featured in a number of interventions in both the Security Council debate on Resolution 2171 and the GA dialogue on R2P. Rights Up Front emerged from the 2012 Internal Review Panel findings of 'systemic failure' of UN Action in Sri Lanka during the final stages of the civil war in 2009 (Ban Ki-Moon, 2012:28-29). Rights Up Front is noteworthy for placing the protection of human rights as a core purpose of the UN, and consistent with the UN Charter. Rights Up Front recognizes systematic human rights violations as precursor to mass atrocities, and is flagged as the 'lens through which the Organization will examine and respond to threats of serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law and by that identify actions needed to prevent mass atrocities and armed conflict' (UN General Assembly: 2014).

The agenda entails six key areas of action: (1) ensuring that all UN staff understand their own and the UN's human rights obligations; (2) providing Member states with candid information regarding the people at risk of serious violations; (3) ensuring coherent strategies for the UN system to respond; (4) enhancing procedures for communication between UN headquarters and field presence to ensure coordinated action; (5) strengthening the UN's human rights capacity, particularly through better coordination with human rights entities; and (6) developing a common UN system for information management on serious violations (UN General Assembly: 2014).

As the UN works to implement the Rights Up Front agenda, the organization should ensure that gender analysis is integrated into all six areas of action, and recommendations pay particular attention to promoting and protecting women's human rights. For example, the UN's human rights protection and conflict prevention capacity would be improved if it were to, as a matter of standard practice:

1. Include a high level gender advisor on each team supporting a Special Envoy of the Secretary-General in

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- situations experiencing or at risk of mass atrocities;
- 2. Deepen the pool of gender experts with appropriate language skills to serve on Commissions of Inquiry, and for these gender advisors to be appointed at the very initial stages of investigation;
- 3. Highlight, in system-wide training, the link between the denial of women's human rights, sexual and gender-based violence, and the descent to more widespread and systematic violence, as recognized by the UNSG and UNSC Resolution 2171.

Gender and Resilience: Supporting National and Regional Action

In addition to incorporating gender analysis in early warning analysis and in the Rights Up Front framework, there is a need to reinforce that gender equality and women's empowerment is vital to building resilient states and societies. There are a number of initiatives that could be supported at the national and regional level in this regard, including:

1. Encourage States to ratify the Rome Statute and other key human rights instruments, including the Optional Protocol of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.
2. Encourage States to become party to the Arms Trade Treaty and take measures to implement its provisions, with particular attention to Article 7(4), which requires parties to assess the risk that arms will be used to commit or facilitate serious acts of gender-based violence or violence against women and children. This requirement includes the duty of due diligence to ensure that arms will not fall to non-state actors who are responsible for gender-based atrocities (United Nations Arms Trade Treaty:6). [i]
3. Target assistance, training, and capacity building at: developing national and regional WPS Action Plans; sharing good practice for establishing gender sensitive national criminal codes; increasing women's participation and gender sensitivity in the security sector; and supporting women's civil society groups and women's human rights defenders.

Furthermore, as Canada alluded to in its statement at the General Assembly dialogue on R2P, upstream prevention efforts would be augmented by ensuring that the post-2015 development agenda retains a strong stand-alone goal on gender equality and women's empowerment, and includes gender-specific targets and indicators across all other goals (Canada, 2014). Gender equality targets should include, inter alia, specific commitments to accelerate women's participation and leadership in peace and security institutions, and to ending violence against women and girls.

Conclusion

Next year marks a number of important milestones in global commitments to promote the rights and improve the conditions of the world's most vulnerable and marginalized populations. In 2015, twenty years will have passed since the Beijing Platform for Action, and fifteen years since elements of this Platform led to the adoption of UNSC Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. 2015 will likewise witness the Millennium Development Goals reach their maturity, and the tenth anniversary of the World Summit endorsement of R2P. Each of these landmark occasions will prompt world leaders to take stock of progress in implementation, and task them with renewing and reinvigorating their shared commitments to assist states and populations.

In the shadow of humanitarian tragedies in Syria, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, and elsewhere, looming heavily over these discussions will no doubt be how failure to prevent violent conflict undermines progress on realizing the aims of each agenda. As preparations are underway for a series of review conferences next year, now is an important time to ask how leveraging linkages between the agendas might contribute toward enhancing capacity for conflict prevention. As recognized by Resolution 2171 and statements at the recent GA dialogue on Pillar 2 of R2P, there are clear benefits in recognizing gender equality and women's empowerment as a vital component of realizing the preventive goals of R2P. Greater attention to gender indicators in early warning analysis, prioritizing women's rights as a key aspect of the Rights Up Front agenda, and targeting international assistance to empowering women as agents of peace and conflict resolution would lead to more resilient and stable states and societies and accelerate progress on translating commitments to conflict prevention into life-saving action.

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Notes

[i] For the impact of the small arms trade on violations of the rights of women and girls, see: Vanessa Farr, Henri Myrtilinen and Albrecht Schnabel (eds), *Sexed Pistols: The Gendered Impact of Small Arms and Light Weapons*, United Nations University Press: Tokyo (2009).

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