

# Why Are Feminist Theorists in International Relations so Critical of UNSCR 1325?

Written by Georgina Langdon

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This essay will begin by summarising the key feminist critiques of UNSCR 1325. It will then pay special attention to the implementation of National Action Plans (NAPs) and the goals of the resolution to determine whether it serves a useful purpose. Finally, it will look at a case study of Brazil to provide a normative example of the resolution in action in a state. The essay will conclude that some of the feminist critique of UNSCR 1325 is valid as it has a limited impact on the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda on a local level. However, it has made some protective improvements, which is the main aim of the UN Security Council, as well as providing an important redefinition of women and girls as agents in armed conflict. Altogether it assists the gender mainstreaming process within the world's largest intergovernmental institution but did not filter through national state barriers.

UNSCR 1325 is a Resolution adopted by the UN Security Council on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2000. The provisions are based around four pillars: women's participation in peace and security governance; conflict prevention; protection from violent, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV); and post-conflict peacebuilding (UNSCR 1325, 2000). It aimed to include a gender perspective in all UN operations such as demobilisation, reintegration and state reconstruction as well as protecting women and girls by removing the impunity of SGBV and other crimes and encourage female participation in all levels of decision-making (Cockburn, 2007, p. 139).

The disappointment around the resolution comes from its huge 'transformative potential'. The UN Security Council included relevant NGOs and feminist thinkers at every planning stage. There was a long history of lobbying leading up to the resolution that left high expectations. After its unanimous acceptance at the Security Council, it became evident there was a gap between the articulated WPS agenda written into the resolution and the poorly implemented processes in the day to day work of the UN (Deiana & McDonagh, 2018). This is not to say that the resolution made no progress towards the WPS agenda, but that they were limited by the issues discussed in the next section.

In order to contextualise the feminist critiques and evaluate UNSCR 1325's purpose, the positive aspects must be considered. This resolution was vital in starting the gender mainstreaming movement and adding gender issues to the UN as a key concern and not an afterthought (Deiana & McDonagh, 2018). The Security Council has the power to make decisions that member states are obligated to implement under the UN Charter (United Nations, 2018), which showed that the institution made gender issues a priority. It also laid a solid foundation for future collaborative efforts between the UN, NGOs and activists, as their research and theories were a vital input at every stage. The publication and reviews of National Action Plans also keep the resolution influential in solving current gender issues. However, the resolution is attracting a lot of criticism which will be analysed in the next section.

### Feminist Critiques

#### *Failure to elucidate or attempt to implement structural changes*

The Resolution was set to be a collaborative effort between NGOs, the UN and civil society to make a real change to the lives of women and girls in war-torn and post-conflict states. However, it fails to deconstruct either international, national or local institutions which are preventing gender equality in the long run (Cohn et al., 2010). Instead, the

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focus of Resolution 1325 is an 'add women and stir' approach, where women are given a seat at negotiations but are unable to determine their own place and contributions in a male-dominated incumbent system. They remain the 'other' despite the increased participation, and therefore UNSCR 1325 received criticism for ignoring the structural changes needed to allow women to add progressive and transformative discourse (O'Connor, 2014).

One of the clear positives of Resolution 1325 is its place as the foundation for gender mainstreaming in the UN. However, this becomes contradictory, if the term is misrepresented as synonymous for 'women's issues'. Feminist thinkers believe this oversight contributes to the failure to address structural causes of inequality, as the focus is on adding women to conflict negotiations rather than amending the incumbent institutions that have been exacerbating the gender imbalance since their inception. Ignoring power relations and attaching women to existing power structures also perpetuates dismissive attitudes towards women unless their presence is appreciated and accepted. A common criticism is that agents within decision-making structures did not push for action due to misunderstanding the importance of gender mainstreaming aims, despite educational literature being available (Deiana & McDonagh, 2018). Some go so far as to claim that the UN uses the resolution to justify their inaction in tackling structural issues (Bosetti & Cooper, 2015), as despite poor results they believe the issue to be dealt with. Therefore, increased numbers of women do not create progress, if they are contributing within structures that work against them.

Misrepresenting gender as 'women's issues' also implies that there are no 'men's issues' that require attention. This is misguided as hyper masculinity is inherently problematic and men account for the vast majority of violence against women (O'Connor, 2014). Within the scope of armed conflict, damage is done through militarised masculinities that prevent peaceful negotiations and worsen the experience for both men and women (Pratt & Richter-Devroe, 2011). The masculinist institutions negate female agency and perpetuate essentialist constructs of gender (Charlesworth, 2008; Deiana & McDonagh, 2018). Therefore, Resolution 1325 does not reach its full transformative potential as it omits structural change.

## *Narrowing of objectives and insufficient change*

The development of UNSCR 1325 was in part due to the UN receiving criticism for being gender-blind and failing to see how conflict affects genders differently. The resolution included changes to the protection and participation of women and girls, as well as including a gender perspective in decision-making. Feminist thinkers were disappointed with the inaction that resulted as they hoped that male-dominated systems would transition and represent gender equally and make changes to represent all those affected by armed conflict and make a positive difference to men and women on the ground. The later narrowing of objectives in subsequent resolutions was criticised for rejecting these expectations and focusing on protection only.

The unanimous adoption of Resolution 1325 in 2000 was meant to be a turning point for gender mainstreaming in international politics. However, some critics felt that the supporting NGOs had over-compromised and the final recommendations were watered down and ineffective. Their high expectations may have been beyond the capabilities of a resolution which needed to be general enough to be supported by all member states. The effects of the resolution depend on how well the recommendations filter through from a national to local level, and each state was left to interpret them within their cultural and operational scope (Cohn et al., 2010). Therefore, feminist theorists argue that the resolution should have better demanded and supported the inclusion of gender perspective in national decision-making to improve results.

A barrier to significant change comes from the text itself and the lack of accountability mechanisms, monitoring measures and disciplinary cautions. This 'soft law' is still a binding resolution from the Security Council. However, without any punishments, evaluation of progress, or even a call for these to be created, it acts as little more than a strong message for governments to include a gender perspective in peacebuilding (Fujio, 2008, p. 231). It also fails to condemn conflict itself, and does not include repercussions for those guilty of violence against women in war zones (Pratt & Richter-Devroe, 2011). Although this was written into later resolution 1820, it is a valid criticism of Resolution 1325 on its own.

The later creation of resolution 1820 and resolution 1888 solved some of the issues of 1325 but drastically narrowed

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the focus of gender issues within the UN. The former calls for greater protection and support for victims of sexual violence and increasing participation, including trying wartime rape in the International Criminal Court (Dallman, 2009, p. 3), and the latter appointed special representatives and Women Protection Advisors, again narrowing the focus onto SGBV (Peace Women, 2018b). Supporters of Resolution 1325 were frustrated by this diversion as they felt that the participation and gender perspective elements were being ignored in favour of protection. This works against the WPS agenda to emancipate and empower women and girls, as it better protects women after crimes rather than prevent them with structural changes.

## *The language used reasserts female victimhood and prevents emancipation*

As mentioned above, the Security Council's priorities are conflict de-escalation and prevention, and therefore their focus around UNSCR 1325 is the protection of women and girls experiencing armed conflict (United Nations, 2018). While they made efforts to consider feminist literature and include NGOs in the drafting of the resolution, they do not have a strong incentive to focus on the long-term deconstruction of gender roles which led to the focus on SGBV and protection. This narrowing, and the language used in the resolution, reasserts women as victims and not agents of war in practise, despite the redefinition in theory.

The constant referral to 'women and girls' had been criticised for victimising women and insinuating their agency in conflict is that of children (Leyton, 2008). While the resolution was ground-breaking in officially re-defining women from victims to agents of war, in practise the language has been disempowering and there is a large divide between rhetoric and reality. Cynthia Enloe coined the term 'womenandchildren' in her work, arguing it should be amended to 'women with their dependent children' in official UN literature to prevent reducing women to the protective level of children and dismissing their influence and conflict preventing skills (Bates, 2017).

The resolution has also been criticised for missing the rights-based argument for women to be represented in peacekeeping negotiations. While it is a positive step to recognise how beneficial a feminine perspective is in conflict zones, an equally critical point is that women should be present to represent half the population, and it is their right to be as influential as men in decisions that affect them (Cohn et al., 2010). It suppresses any emancipatory potential, if women are redefined from 'victim' to 'peacemaker' as an equally restricted stereotype. This language does not show the full range of women's abilities in peacekeeping scenarios and fails to emphasise their equal rights, which is a disappointment to those who wanted the resolution to achieve gender equality.

To conclude this section, the feminist critiques show a frustration with the lingering patriarchal cultural bias and gender stereotypes that the resolution leaves in UN peacekeeping. Without the deconstruction of institutional barriers, the participation of women is severely restricted and the 'gentle pacifier' stereotype is reinforced (Bosetti & Cooper, 2015). The consequential resolutions avoided these issues by focusing on the protection of women in war zones, better suiting their priorities and understanding of gender issues. However, feminist thinkers will not be content until institutions on all levels allow equal participation of men and women and use a gender perspective to prevent SGBV through cultural changes, to make a real grassroots difference to women and girls.

## **Useful purpose**

### *National Action Plans*

The above critiques show that UNSCR 1325's recommendations had a very limited transition from policy to practise. The UN made attempts to prevent this failure in 2010 by calling for all member states to create a National Action Plan (NAP). They instructed states to clearly lay out how they will implement the key areas of UNSCR 1325: increasing women's participation in decision-making and peacekeeping; protecting women and girls; and gender training (IANWGE, 2010). Unfortunately, many countries took several years to publish their NAPs and 60% did not create one as of November 2018 (Peace Women, 2018a). There were also considerable limits placed on promises made, which was allowed due to the lack of accountability mechanisms written into the resolution. However, NAPs do show an attempt to bring the WPS agenda to the ground level and recall attention on gender issues.

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Of the published NAPs, only 29% include state disarmament plans and the aim to control the illicit trade of small arms, key points in the resolution. More importantly, only 37% included an allocated budget for the implementation of changes, and just 65% explicitly explain their chosen process for monitoring and evaluating state development (Peace Women, 2018a). The failures in the national level planning stages allows states to avoid real progress while appearing to pursue Security Council objectives. Therefore, the NAPs did little to forward the WPS agenda, keeping the main purpose of UNSCR 1325 a collaborative achievement and redefinition of women on the international scale.

The UN is not wholly responsible for the usefulness of the resolution. As mentioned above, a Security Council resolution commands authority and states are sworn to follow its recommendations. They therefore rely on states to act accordingly and holistically design NAPs to remedy issues working against the WPS agenda within the scope of local cultural and operational contexts (Rahmanpanah & Trojanowska, 2016). While it is a 'soft law' due to the lack of sanctions imposed for inaction (Chinkin & Lewis, 2015), the most important points such as including a gender perspective is difficult to measure and therefore is not cost effective for the organisation to attempt. The recommended actions are also a huge challenge to the traditionally masculine military practices in states (Rahmanpanah & Trojanowska, 2016), which will not be a priority from a national perspective. Therefore, the NAPs made some improvements by pressuring states to pledge to make changes, however the UN does little more than monitor any changes without punishing inaction.

## *Look at the goals*

The useful purpose of the resolution can be determined in context with the goals. The first goal is to protect women through justice for women and girls harmed during armed conflict and reinforce protective mechanisms such as Geneva Conventions (UNSCR 1325, 2000). It does this by redefining wartime rape and sexual assault as a weapon of war rather than collateral damage which is a significant change from the institutionalised values of the UN, especially after the ICC proceedings allowed by resolution 1820 (Dallman, 2009, p. 3). This has ensured better support for victims and more systematic reporting. However, high levels of sexual violence remain and the protection goal will always be limited while the focus is reactionary rather than developing female empowerment and agency. However, fighting cultural norms such as sexual violence in war zones is a huge task which requires more than a single resolution (O'Connor, 2014) and there are clear improvements therefore the resolution offers purpose to this goal.

The second goal of increasing female participation is relatively simple, although problematic. The resolution demanded the systematic, structural engagement of women in all levels of decision-making in post-conflict states. It particularly focuses on representation in resettlement, reintegration, rehabilitation, post-conflict resolution and protection of women in war zones (UNSCR 1325, 2000). However, the addition of women does not solve the structural problems causing gender inequality, and without changes to the institutional processes their voices largely go unheard despite their inclusion. However, despite these issues, the normalising of women in negotiations is a positive step and this gives the resolution some purpose despite the criticism that it could address gender issues better from a structural viewpoint.

The third aim of the resolution was to include a gender perspective in all areas of the UN. While this is a difficult goal to measure, it is clear that the most dominant gender norm in all levels of conflict management is hyper masculinity. Decision-makers wish to avoid looking 'feminine' or 'weak', the two being synonymous, which avoids the de-escalation of conflict (Deiana & McDonagh, 2018). Without a deconstruction of traditional gender roles, the narrow focus of Resolution 1325 prevents real progress in gender mainstreaming efforts. When looking at the goals of the resolution, it does have a useful purpose within the protection and participation of women and girls, however the critiques show that this has a limited effect on the grassroots level.

## **Case Study- Brazil**

To contextualise the critiques and goals of UNSCR 1325, this essay will now look at Brazil as a case study. It was chosen as it highlights the complicated balance the UN must navigate between progress and cultural imperialism and reasserts the conclusion that the resolution has a limited effect due to the policies being blocked from within the

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member states. Brazil released the state's first NAP in March 2017 to cover the following two years. There are several pitfalls in the document, such as the exclusion of an allocated implementation budget, but the prominent problems came from cultural opposition.

The NAP promised to increase the numbers of women in the military without a coherent national policy or any focus on the incumbent obstacles to female participation and rights (Rojas, 2017). Brazil's military suffers from inflated sexist values and they did not possess enough women in trained military roles to carry out international peace operations as requested (Kenkel, 2017). These structural barriers to progress were created by societal sexism and a male-dominated military that the resolution fails to tackle.

The resolution did create some progress, including a threefold increase in women in the armed forces from 2000-2014 (Giannini et al., 2017). However, this focus on increasing numbers alone does not empower women in armed conflict and most are restricted to 'feminine' roles such as administrators, doctors and translators. All currently deployed female personnel are coordinating with UN Mission MINUSTAH in Haiti empowering women through Quick Impact Projects. These projects have successfully reduced vulnerability in the area through lectures on women's issues including SGBV (Donadio & Mazzotta, 2010). This small-scale success demonstrates huge potential if Brazil can deconstruct its rigid gender norms. Women still only make up 7% of Brazilian military personnel and that figure falls below 1% when looking at those sent abroad (Giannini et al., 2017), showing the WPS agenda is desperately needed.

Another barrier for Brazil is that the responsibility for implementing Resolution 1325 falls on problematic political and military elites. There is a general belief that feminine presence negatively impacts military operational effectiveness (Giannini et al., 2017). The current President Jair Bolsonaro rose to power in October 2018 through a campaign of homophobic, racist and sexist remarks, including telling a congresswoman she was 'too ugly to rape' (Pires, 2018). The success of the resolution relies on state leaders to filter the goals through to the grassroots level. In Brazil, these leaders do not support the WPS agenda or gender issues, and UNSCR 1325 does not have the power to make it a priority (Deiana & McDonagh, 2018).

This case study also brings the resolution into the context of wider UN debate. There is a tendency for the institution to expect larger changes from developing countries than developed, as 'western' states publish NAPs that set themselves as the benchmark and look to other states to follow their example without considering internal improvement. All UN activities also tread a balance between improving lives, empowering women and respecting local practices (Deiana & McDonagh, 2018). Their power is limited by state sovereignty, especially over long-term structural issue within dynamic and complicated cultural practices.

## Conclusion

To conclude, UNSCR 1325 is a well-intentioned resolution that offered policy recommendations that failed to filter through state institutions and make significant changes to women and girls in areas of armed conflict. It serves a useful purpose through the redefinition of female agency within the UN scope and, aided by consequential resolutions 1820 and 1888, protected women by escalating wartime rape to the ICC. Looking at Brazil as a case study contextualises the feminist critiques as it shows the practical failures of the resolution's lack of accountability, narrow focus and language choices. It also shows how the introduction of NAPs helped implement the protection and participation goals and made some limited progress in introducing women to conflict negotiations. Altogether the most useful purpose is a demonstration of the UN introducing gender mainstreaming into the Security Council and setting a precedent of gender considerations in all future policy decisions.

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