



Does Protection Lead to Peace? The WPS Agenda and Its Focus on CRSV

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Abstract

The WPS agenda, inaugurated by the UNSC Resolution 1325 in October 2000, has been lauded as a watershed achievement in the global feminist movement. Celebrated as a radical, institutional reform that provides a more inclusive and holistic approach towards peace processes and security governance through the incorporation of women's perspectives', the WPS agenda is portrayed as the bedrock for providing more sustainable peace and security on a global scale. Yet, is the WPS agenda really the radical, structural reform it is set out to be? Looking closer at how the agenda deals with the concept of conflict-related sexual violence, which presents a central issue in nearly half of the current resolutions, it becomes clear that an overly strong focus on the notion of protection and vulnerabilities of women can be utilised by states in a way to justify military intervention. Diametrically opposed to the core values of feminist activism, the resolutions as perceived from this vantage point therefore call into question the veracity of a truly revolutionary impact of the WPS agenda on a structural level.

Introduction

In October 2000 UN Security Council resolution 1325 set the foundation for what has come to be known as the Women, Peace and Security agenda. A watershed moment for feminist scholars and activists, the WPS agenda has nonetheless been a site of stark contention. 20 years and 9 resolutions later, what conclusions can be drawn? Has the WPS agenda been successful in its goal of creating a more peaceful and equitable world? This paper will draw its conclusions by focusing specifically on the WPS agenda's approach toward conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). Inextricably linked through its discourse to 'protection' as one of the four pillars undergirding the agenda, CRSV is a dominating theme in over half of the WPS resolutions. Emerging out of a position of silence 10 years prior to resolution 1325, CRSV, or the discourse more commonly framed as 'rape as a weapon of war', has been instrumental in pointing towards the detrimental effects war and conflict has on the lives of women. It created the precedent for incorporating feminist messages into international law and was therefore conducive in the constitution of the WPS agenda.

Although paradigmatic in its acknowledgement of the specific plights of women during times of war and conflict, this paper argues that the manner in which the WPS agenda approaches CRSV neither protects individuals from wartime rape, nor does it lead to sustainable peace more generally. Outlining the discourse of conflict-related sexual violence within the WPS resolutions illuminates not only the ineffectiveness of the UN Security Council in eradicating this issue brought to the table by feminist



activists, but also how certain feminist messages may be selected and subsequently appropriated into the patriarchal structures and concepts of the Security Council, reinforcing gendered stereotypes and dictating “the contours of the women, peace and security framework” (Heathcote 2018: 394).

I will begin the analysis by delineating the singular narrative through which the issue of conflict-related sexual violence is made intelligible and which, appropriated by the Security Council, perpetually places its focus on the bodily victimization of women and their need for protection, rather than enhanced political and economic agency. I will then outline how the strong fixation on sexual violence in the WPS agenda follows a more general trend within media, policy, and academia, presenting conflict-related sexual violence as the paradigmatic feminist issue to be dealt with. A hyper-focus on conflict-related sexual violence has emerged that arguably derives from US second-wave, white feminists’ assertion that the female body is the main site of patriarchal oppression which strongly neglects the intersectional inequity of women of colour and fails to acknowledge issues such as economic vulnerability or racial discrimination also as primary sites of oppression (Phipps 2020). This hyper-focus on sexual victimisation has created a “fetishization”, engendering a series of detrimental effects, both conceptually and practically (Meger 2016). I will conclude the paper by drawing attention back to the pillar of protection and outlining how the current, narrow conceptualisation of conflict-related sexual violence has failed to adequately address and combat the issue and, moreover, how the WPS agenda has been unsuccessful in perpetuating sustainable peace and more equitable gender relations within the international arena.

Conflict Related Sexual Violence and the WPS Agenda

With the media coverage of the war in Bosnia and the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda in the early 1990s, the issue of conflict-related sexual violence emerged from a position of silence and rapidly rose to the forefront of media, policy, and academic attention (Buss 2009: 146). The concept of rape as a ‘weapon’ or ‘tool’ of war gained traction (Copelon 2000; see also Baaz, Stern 2013) and a specific discursive shift took place that no longer perceived rape to be an unfortunate but inevitable ‘by-product’ of war (Copelon 2000: 220; Buss 2009; Seifert 1996) but a strategic ‘weapon’ to be deployed. The issue of ‘rape as a weapon of war’ was swiftly incorporated into legal frameworks, offering first convictions by the International Criminal Tribunals of the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and Rwanda (ICTR). This legal development culminated in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) which established wartime sexual violence as a war crime, crime against humanity, and tool of genocide (A/CONF.183/9). Two years later, in October 2000, the issue was incorporated into the landmark UN resolution 1325.

Although canonical in its narrative shift and watershed in its analytical value, the Rape as a Weapon of War discourse remains limited (Kirby 2013; Baaz, Stern 2013, 2014; Baaz et al 2018; Campbell 2018; Verweijen 2016; Wood 2009; Ní Aoláin 2016). The existing discourse, portraying rape as a ‘weapon’ of war, has been criticised on various fronts including its perpetuation of the female-victim/male-perpetrator dichotomy (Baaz, Stern 2013; Heathcote 2019), its racialised undercurrent derived from the



bias of white, western researchers basing their theories on the investigation of non-white, non-western subjects (Chakrabarty 2008; Mohanty 1988), the amalgamation of different theories into a single, seemingly cohesive, universalised discourse (Baaz, Stern 2013), and the detachment of CRSV from its root causes that can be traced back to the forms of domestic violence women experience during times of relative 'peace' (True 2012, Meger 2016).

The Security Council has uncritically adopted and perpetuated the dominant narrative of conflict-related sexual violence, adding to its distortion by appropriating it to its own, patriarchal structures. The image of the weak, vulnerable woman has been utilised for centuries to fuel nationalist causes and justify military engagement: "Women have served as symbols of the nation violated, the nation suffering, the nation reproducing itself, the nation at its purest" (Enloe 2014: 87; see also Heng 2004: 662). The narrative of sexual vulnerability and victimhood of women is threaded consistently throughout the framework of the agenda in its approach to CRSV which rests on a singular discourse that represents wartime rape as *the* paradigmatic experience of women during times of armed conflict (Heathcote 2018). This compellingly delineates the danger of certain feminist approaches being extracted from a broader feminist discourse and co-opted into masculinist legal systems which not only use myopic feminist messages to reiterate gendered stereotypes but deploy them in diametrical opposition to their original purpose, namely to justify military intervention under the pretext of protecting women (cf. Heathcote 2009, 2011, 2018). Although derived from their lived experience, conflict-related sexual violence has been warped into "a security issue for states, not for women" (True 2012: 120).

The securitization of conflict-related sexual violence has been subjected to strong critique by the academic community (True 2012; Meger 2016). Securitization "involves constructing a particular political issue", in this case wartime sexual violence, "as a security threat, necessitating a militarized response" (Meger 2016: 149). "Securitization theory understands security as a political process rather than an objective fact" and "is political in the categorization of certain issues as "extraordinary" and warranting a security response" (Meger 2016: 151). Sara Meger argues that the incorporation of sexual violence into a security approach leads to its "fetishization" and thus precludes successful preventative measures (Meger 2016: 149). "The concept of fetishization focuses our attention on how securitization produces commodified objects of security and, in turn, markets of exchange for securitizing objects" (ibid.). Meger identifies three stages through which fetishization operates, namely (i) decontextualization/homogenisation, (ii) objectification, and (iii) blowback (Meger 2016: 152).

The discourse of "Rape as a Weapon of War" and the dominating concept of conflict-related sexual violence has turned the issue into a "consumable, tradable object" (ibid.). The seemingly cohesive, universalised discourse, popularised by white, radical feminists' stark focus on women's bodily oppression, presents sexual violence as unchanging and uniform across conflicts (ibid.). By presenting wartime rape as a particularly egregious, 'exceptional' crime, it is detached from the continuum of violence where it is situated and thus decontextualized from the various "underlying social, political, and economic determinants of gendered violence" existing in the absence of conflict (Meger 2016: 152; see also Baaz, Stern 2013; True 2012).



Objectification is facilitated, again through the simple, singular narrative that clearly points out the “good guys” and the “bad guys”, the victims and the perpetrators (Autessere 2012: 207; Meger 2016: 153). Conflict-related sexual violence is commodified and given an exchange value, made explicit through campaigns such as “Get Cross” by the UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict, or in the way it is used by governments to rally popular support. Both the UK and the Australian governments, for instance, have made vocal their commitment to end wartime rape abroad, while at the same time scaling down funds to support domestic violence (Meger 2016: 154, see also True 2016 on the externalised focus of the implementation of National Action Plans toward conflict affected regions).

The most direct, detrimental effect on the lives of women, however, may well result from the third stage in the fetishization process which Meger terms ‘blowback’. Blowback refers to “the potential unintended, negative consequences of the securitization of conflict-related sexual violence” (Meger 2016: 155). Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern exemplify this by delineating the narrow focus of funding directed towards projects relating specifically to conflict-related sexual violence. This has resulted in a competition for financial resources between humanitarian organisations as they hinder each other’s progress in their efforts to secure subsidies. New projects are tailored to fit specific funding criteria rather than reacting to actual needs on-site (Baaz, Stern 2013; True 2012) and narrow resource allocation incentivises women to falsely report rape in order to access much needed medical services (Baaz, Stern 2013; True 2012; Meger 2016). This is merely an extract of the unintended ramifications of commodifying conflict-related sexual violence, yet it is sufficient in outlining the dangers of portraying wartime rape as the paradigmatic experience of women in conflict and the subsequent, myopic measures it may provoke.

Having outlined the singular narrative on conflict-related sexual violence adopted by the UN Security Council and the detrimental effects this framing has had on the lives of women, I will now draw attention back to ‘protection’ as one of the four pillars buttressing the WPS agenda. Jacqui True, in her seminal work *The Political Economy of Violence Against Women*, published in 2012, claims that “the UN failure to protect against sexual violence in conflict is conceptually, as well as practically based” (True 2012: 128). The conceptual weaknesses True refers to have been addressed in detail above. The practically based failure she insinuates succeeds the “narrow protection focus” of approaches to sexual violence in conflict mainly directed towards prosecutions and stigma rather than, for example, prevention (Experts’ Meeting 2016). Even where participation is addressed, it is often collapsed into what Gina Heathcote terms the ‘protective-participation model’, where women’s participation is reduced to the need of addressing sexual violence in conflict (Heathcote 2018: 10f.). True criticises that “states and the UN, in responding to sexual violence in conflict, have focused on legal prosecution and reforming juridical structures and hardly at all on alterations in economic and social structures” (True 2012: 133). While sensationalising, or as Meger puts it, fetishizing conflict-related sexual violence commands major resource allocations, root causes of sexual and gender-based violence – such as the persistent economic discrimination and vulnerability of women – are marginalised or overlooked. Prevention, tellingly, is one of the least funded sectors in the agenda’s work towards eradicating sexual violence in conflict (True 2012).



Conclusion

Butros Kalere from the international NGO Women for Women poignantly states that merely “treating the results of sexual violence is a catastrophe. No one is really treating the root or the entirety of the situation. If you just care for the raped women, you will be caring for them up until infinity” (Kalere in True 2012: 130). The current protective lens and judicial focus dictating the approach of the WPS agenda toward sexual violence is ineffective in preventing wartime rape from occurring and thus, ironically, from protecting women, men, girls and boys from the atrocities of this form of violence during both conflict and post-conflict settings. Rather than contributing to sustainable peace and more equitable gender relations, the approach of the WPS agenda towards conflict-related sexual violence isolates certain feminist messages from a broader debate of intersectional oppression, reinforces gendered stereotypes and reproduces a discourse that can be utilised to justify enhanced military engagement, hence actively working against the original objective of resolution 1325 and the WPS agenda. The agenda must proceed by reconnecting to feminist analyses of conflict-related sexual violence in all their differences and work to focus, not merely on legal and security aspects but on “practical, community based responses” as well (True 2012: 133). Diverse feminist methods must be apprehended just as much as their concomitant feminist messages (Heathcote 2019) in order to successfully protect individuals, especially women, in conflict and post-conflict settings.

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