

IN DEPTH

1325 and the notion of security: dilemmas and significance

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Are women safer today than two decades ago? I ask this question on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the adoption of a historic resolution by the United Nations Security Council. On 31 October 2000, for the first time in the history of the organization, the debate addressed the role of women in international peace and security. In Resolution 1325, the Security Council urges governments and other actors to take measures to implement a series of actions on the participation and protection of women in conflict and post-conflict settings around the world. It is also the first in a series of ten resolutions in what is now known as the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. But the real merit of 1325 lies in the long and hard work of the feminist activists who pushed for the resolution's passage.

Resolution 1325 began as a project that follows two paths. One lies within the scope and limitations that it has as a legal product of the Security Council, an organization that has "primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security".¹ It is binding, but it lacks mechanisms to ensure its compliance. The other path is due to the conception and expectations that its promoters had about its achievements and applications. However, this double affiliation is not exempt from conflict. At the heart of Resolution 1325 is what Cynthia Cockburn describes as the "delicate language of security."² What does Resolution 1325 say about this concept? What vision and context does it respond to? Where does "security" stand twenty years after the Resolution was adopted? In the following paragraphs, I intend to answer these questions, while putting the validity of the document in perspective.

“ At the heart of Resolution 1325 is the “delicate language of security.”(2) What does Resolution 1325 say about this concept? ”

Apart from references to the Security Council as the author of the Resolution, the word “security” is mentioned only three times in the text of the 1325. These references go hand in hand with the concept of “peace” and with the connotation “international” for both of them. From this perspective, the interpretation of the concept is clearly framed by the objectives of the Council: “To determine the existence of a threat to peace or an act of aggression” and to act, through diplomatic channels or by authorizing the use of force, to “maintain or restore international peace and security”. This means that security is understood as control, military if deemed necessary, over threats or those acts identified as acts of aggression by member States towards the international system, i.e., towards the status quo and, in essence, towards the exercise of their sovereignty. Along these lines, the contribution made by the Resolution is to link the protection of that system to the acknowledgement of the differentiated impact of armed conflict on women and girls, and the importance of their participation “in peace processes for the maintenance and promotion of international peace”.³

The prelude to the Security Council finally admitting what feminism, especially pacifist, had been denouncing for decades was the overwhelming evidence of the armed conflicts of the 1990s. First of all, the “peace” that the end of the so-called Cold War should have brought, according to some interpretations, was called into question by the wars in the former Yugoslavia, the genocide in Rwanda and the wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In these places, women suffered in particular ways. Cases of mass rape as a tool of genocide and, more generally, sexual violence as a weapon of war had already occurred in other conflicts, but this was the first time they gained relevance in the international media. This visibility was in turn driven by activists who denounced them in multilateral forums and demanded the implementation of mechanisms to stop them and, especially, to prevent them from happening again.

The activists who undertook the hard and complex advocacy work of the Resolution were the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security. However, in this group there were diverse views. For example, one of the participating organizations, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), has been working from a pacifist perspective since 1915. But there were also other organizations of a less specialized nature that did not share pacifist and anti-militarist values. They advocated for a pragmatic document that would be limited to protecting women in conflict situations without questioning the system that causes them. In other words, making war safer for women rather than preventing it.⁴ Despite these differences, that a group of women-led civil society organizations influenced the work of the Security Council is no small feat. The Council is the most powerful body in the UN system, the most statist, militaristic –and therefore patriarchal– and the least democratic.

“ Feminists adopted the human security paradigm shift and they also gave gender specificity to the concept ”

So what is the common understanding of the Group's concept of security? The starting point for answering this question is the concept of human security. In 1994, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) proposed this concept as an alternative approach to State-centered security. Among its characteristics is that it refers to human security as a universal issue, and places people at the center. In essence, it is a critique of military conceptions of security. Feminists adopted this paradigm shift and also gave the concept gender specificity.⁵ This was, for them, the meaning of the Group title and the Agenda: Women, Peace and Security. Other documents relevant for the 1325 are the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, specifically its chapter on women and armed conflicts, and the Namibia Action Plan.

However, the differences in interpretation that the Council's member States gave to the values of the Resolution were palpable just a year after its approval. In the autumn of 2001, the United States, one of the five permanent members, launched the “War on

Terror”. For the purposes of the Agenda, one of the most pernicious consequences of that imperialist initiative was the securitization of women. To begin with, the US government used the situation of women in Afghanistan as an excuse for the invasion of that country. Muslim women had to be “saved”, in the words of the then First Lady.⁶ The other angle was the propagandistic use of the deployment of women in the military as a test of the “moral superiority of the West” as opposed to “the enemy,” as illustrated by the rescue of Jessica Lynch in Iraq.⁷

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It is precisely the relationship with martial institutions where 1325 finds the most unstable ground. The Resolution does not literally mention the inclusion of more women in the military. In fact, as discussed above, some of the proponents have explicitly anti-militaristic views. However, it does emphasize the presence of women in decision-making roles aimed at promoting peace and security. Under the current functioning of most States, this includes high officials of the armed forces. For this reason, Cockburn believes that the wording and provisions of the Resolution leave it in a position to be coopted by militarism. But its proponents were already aware of this possibility. On the contrary, it has been said that, if the Resolution had adopted an emphatic tone against militarism, it would probably have not been passed. The fact is that, while some States and military alliances have approached this dilemma from a presumably feminist agenda, others have limited themselves to opening some spaces to women without thoroughly questioning the androcentric premises of the institutions.

The Resolution’s militaristic orientation also presents another complicated aspect. If security is understood as an external threat, something “out there”, the concept of security perpetuates North-South power dynamics.⁸ In an analysis of the operation of

global racial hierarchies in the Agenda's main instruments of implementation, the National Action Plans, Toni Haastrup and Jamie J. Hagen found that only "certain type of women" are considered to require the intervention of Peace Operation Missions and that, invariably, these women reside in the "Global South" (2020). This implies that women in situations of insecurity, according to these countries, are not to be found within their borders. However, it is enough to listen to local activists to question this premise. An exemplary case is the report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in Canada, published in 2019, which concludes that these women are victims of genocide. This country is, by the way, a leader in the implementation of 1325.

“ Resolution 1325 was a turning point in the discussion of women in conflict situations, but it has significant conceptual limitations ”

Another limitation is that (in)security does not mean the same thing in the "Global South" and "Global North". The case of Latin America is frequently mentioned in this regard.⁹ The region has had relatively few war conflicts between States since the 19th century compared to other regions, but it has the highest rates of violence in the world. Moreover, this violence is structural; it has a gender and women suffer from it in particular ways. For example, eleven women are violently murdered every day in Mexico. Such threats to the security of Mexican women do not escape the contextualization of gendered human security, but they do escape the dominant view of the Security Council: their deaths are not a threat to "international peace and security". But can anyone speak of "peace" in a country with such high murder rates and rampant impunity? As Claudia Card argues, a State that allows its citizens to kill others (whatever their character) without authorization, cannot provide basic security for any of them.¹⁰

With regard to the last sentence, this dilemma between what constitutes security for women versus that of States becomes clear if one reviews the concept of the *continuum*

of violence. Although the phases of war or conflict are often distinguished for methodological convenience, the reality is that this is extremely difficult to determine in practice. In other words, conflicts, from the point of view of States, can be events with a clearly defined beginning and end, but this is not the case for individuals. Moreover, gender is manifested in the violence that flows through all these phases and even in the process of pacification. An example of this is the assassination attempt this summer in Kabul on the Afghan politician Fawzia Koofi, one of the few women involved in the peace negotiations. The participation of women in these processes was precisely one of the cornerstones of 1325. However, the fragile concept of security is broken when women peacemakers themselves risk their lives to stop what in theory was resolved by “protecting international security” in 2001.

**“ Despite the obstacles, Resolution 1325 and the
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Finally, it is worth reviewing the contrasts of the concept in the face of COVID-19. First of all, it is clear that States were not ready to deal with a pandemic of these dimensions, that no effective prevention scenarios or containment actions were foreseen, or that they were given sufficient priority. What is the point of having trained and armed soldiers to intervene in the event of an “international security threat” if medical personnel lack the resources to save lives? And not only that: medical personnel also have a female face in most parts of the world. Due to prevailing stereotypes and precarious employment, women are overrepresented in the care sector. And, of course, it is impossible to ignore the rising rates of domestic violence. Women are not safe in their homes. The stories that have been reported in the press in recent months in Argentina, Turkey, the United Kingdom, South Africa, and in many other countries are far from being considered issues of “international peace and security”.

In short, Resolution 1325 was a turning point in the discussion of women in conflict situations, but it has significant conceptual limitations. In this essay, I have simply pointed out some of the most important underlying tensions with respect to the concept of security. One important point is that the 1325 is a resolution that has been fairly well diagnosed. Various authors in multiple contexts have dedicated themselves to identifying its problems and challenges, and providing solutions. Some of the most prominent, such as Laura J. Shepherd and Paul Kirby, have even pointed out that, due to the document's inherent tensions, it is almost impossible for the Agenda to push for a radical turn; in other words, that it could act as a trigger for a profound paradigm shift in how security is understood and pursued.¹¹

In my opinion, despite the obstacles, Resolution 1325 and the Agenda are pivots that allow us to continue naming the persistence and adaptations of patriarchy, and there is evidence that they open up spaces for the concept of (in)security to be (re)defined from a non-State perspective. Otherwise, as has been repeatedly criticized, leaving some women in decision-making positions will continue to be a small price to pay in exchange for the system remaining essentially unchanged. Evidence from the last twenty years proves that not all women are more secure. But more importantly, this task precedes the Agenda itself. The seeds of 1325 were planted prior to the dawn of the League of Nations, the predecessor organization to the UN. It is not a matter of waiting for tipping points, such as a crisis of violence against women, or the anniversary of the Resolution itself; it is that we cannot stop.

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3. UN Security Council (2000), Resolution 1325.

4. Weiss, C. (2011) "We Must Not Make War Safe for Women," *Open Democracy*, Mayo 24. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/cora-weiss/we-must-not-make-war-safe-for-women>

5. Cockburn, op. cit.

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