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The Global Pushback on Women's Rights: The State of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda

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SEPTEMBER 2019

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The authors would like to thank Marta Bautista Forcada for research assistance, the reviewers who strengthened this piece during the revision process, and Albert Trithart for invaluable final edits. The views expressed in this publication represent those of the authors and not necessarily those of the International Peace Institute. IPI welcomes consideration of a wide range of perspectives in the pursuit of a well-informed debate on critical policies and issues in international affairs.

IPI owes a debt of gratitude to its many generous donors, whose support makes publications like this one possible. This project was funded by the government of Sweden.

Introduction

By many indicators, the global status of commitments to gender equality, including of efforts to prevent and end conflict, is under threat.¹ Despite recognition that the level of gender equality can be a litmus test of a community's capacity to eschew violent responses to threats and that women's leadership and women's status are inextricably linked to conflict prevention and resolution, mediators and negotiators in conflict resolution processes are rarely women, and women's rights are insufficiently reflected in agreements.² In the multilateral system, a growing number of states are questioning established standards of women's rights in venues from the Commission on the Status of Women to the UN Security Council. As xenophobic populism grows, threatening the multilateral system's ability to grapple with crises, the gender analysis needed to understand this trend is overwhelmingly missing.

For two decades, national and international policy frameworks have been built to embed a gender perspective in peace and security efforts. What we know as the women, peace, and security (WPS) agenda has been the subject of policy development internationally, regionally, and nationally.³ As of September 2019, eighty-two UN member states have adopted national actions plans on WPS, and a number of WPS envoys and ambassadors have been appointed at the national, regional, and international levels.⁴ New regional networks of women mediators are being established, with the goal of increasing women's meaningful engagement in peace processes.⁵ The UN Security Council has, to date, adopted nine dedicated resolutions on WPS and established an Informal Expert Group to receive timely information on and analysis of WPS in specific conflicts.⁶

1 Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "Women's Human Rights and Gender-Related Concerns in Situations of Conflict and Instability," accessed September 19, 2019, available at www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Women/WRGS/Pages/PeaceAndSecurity.aspx; OHCHR, "Civic Space and Effects of Shrinking Space on Women Human Rights Defenders in East Africa," 2019.

2 See WomanStats project, available at <http://www.womanstats.org/index.htm>.

3 Paul Kirby and Laura J. Shepherd, "The Futures Past of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda," *International Affairs* 92, No. 2 (2016).

4 Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, "Member States," accessed September 19, 2019, available at <http://peacewomen.org/member-states>. Special representatives, envoys, and ambassadors focused on WPS, include Canada's ambassador for WPS, the African Union Commission's special envoy on WPS, the UN's special representative of the secretary-general on sexual violence in conflict, and the secretary general of NATO's special representative for WPS.

5 See forthcoming IPI issue brief on the regional networks of women mediators.

6 The nine resolutions comprising the WPS agenda are Resolutions 1325 (2000); 1820 (2008), on sexual violence in war; 1888 (2009), mandating peacekeeping missions to protect women and girls from sexual violence in armed conflict; 1889 (2009), on women's participation in all phases of peace processes; 1960 (2010), reiterating the call for an end to sexual violence in armed conflict; 2106 (2013), operationalizing existing obligations and naming men and boys as victims of sexual violence; 2122 (2013), on strengthening women's roles in all stages of conflict prevention and resolution; 2242 (2015), on improving implementation of the WPS agenda fifteen years after its original adoption; and 2467 (2019), on justice, accountability, and a survivor-centric approach to conflict-related sexual violence.

This paper takes stock of the state of the women, peace, and security agenda in the current geopolitical context, with a view to supporting strategic advances at the upcoming twentieth anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000). It looks at characteristics of the current geopolitical context that are of concern to the defense of women's rights, including the changing nature of conflict and the contestation of international normative frameworks due to national and global trends toward populism. The paper then looks at what these changes have meant for how the international community seeks to build peace and improve security. How can we evaluate approaches to implementing WPS commitments in relation to these pressures on the multilateral system? Finally, the paper provides guidance on how the WPS agenda can address these trends.

Women's Rights at a Time of Geopolitical Change

Recent political shifts at the national and international levels have had a significant effect on the status of women's rights globally. These shifts, including the changing nature of conflict and growing threats to the multilateral system, have serious, gendered implications for peace and security, leading to increased attacks on efforts to maintain a gender lens on global security.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF CONFLICT

As numerous data sets and analyses demonstrate, there has been a shift in recent decades from conflict between states to intrastate conflict (civil wars), and these conflicts are more likely to recur than traditional, interstate wars.⁷ The actors involved, means of financing, goals of conflict, and methods of fighting have all shifted as the world has moved into a murkier reality in which non-state armed actors increasingly drive violence and the lines between war and crime are blurred.⁸

This trend amplifies certain gender dimensions of conflict, including women's forced displacement, political manipulation of civilian deaths (e.g., "saving women" used as a justification for violent action, as in the case of Afghanistan), recruitment of women to armed groups (as combatants or otherwise, and either forcibly or willingly), diminished access to healthcare, exclusion from peace processes at all levels, and increased rates of sexual and gender-based violence. In South Sudan, for example, rates of sexual violence related to the conflicts raging in the country since 2013 have been extraordinarily high, skyrocketing to double the global average.⁹ While the South Sudanese government had established a Ministry of Gender, Child, and Social Welfare in 2011, with the outbreak of civil war the government's entire budget for that ministry was moved to fund defense and security. Following that shift, the ministry has sat in limbo, unable to implement its robust policy framework to address the high level of conflict-related sexual violence.¹⁰ Thus even where resources exist to respond to the new gender dynamics of conflict, because they are still institutionally young, they are often seen as optional and easily rerouted.

The rise in non-state armed actors as parties to conflict, including that of violent extremist groups, has also had gendered implications. For example, while both state militaries and non-state armed groups have long relied on gendered recruiting, appealing to a certain brand of masculinity or femininity depending on the role they are recruiting for, the recruiting strategies of violent extremists have stymied international responses.¹¹ Governments have denied the families of extremists their citizenship rights, for example, which can itself become a driver of extremism. Such responses also perpetuate the misconception of female victims and male perpetrators; extremist groups criticized for oppressing women actually often recruit them, and women who are active in these groups are advancing the same restrictive political agendas (e.g., racial or religious supremacy).¹²

7 Håvard Strand, Siri Aas Rustad, Henrik Urdal, and Håvard Mokleiv Nygård, "Trends in Armed Conflict, 1946–2018," Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2019; Sebastian von Einsiedel, Louise Bosetti, Cale Salih, Wilfred Wan, and James Cockayne, "Civil War Trends and the Changing Nature of Armed Conflict," UN University Centre for Policy Research, April 2017.

8 Mary Kaldor, "In Defence of New Wars," *Stability* 2, No. 1 (2013).

9 Sam Mednick, "Violence against Women in South Sudan Is Occurring at Twice the Global Average Rate," *Independent*, November 29, 2017.

10 Example given by Letitia Anderson, current adviser to the special representative of the secretary-general on sexual violence in conflict, regarding the findings of a 2015 technical mission to South Sudan with the UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict initiative, September 2019.

11 Nick Cumming-Bruce, "Horrid Conditions in Syria Camp Where ISIS Families Fled Risk Fostering Extremism," *New York Times*, September 11, 2019.

12 Audrey Alexander, ed., "Perspectives on the Future of Women, Gender, and Violent Extremism," Program on Extremism at the George Washington University, February 2019.

Despite twenty years of international policy development and commitments to WPS, these gender dimensions of conflict are often siloed from more “traditional” analyses of conflict. While there has been attention to the effects of contemporary conflict on women, insufficient data is available to comprehensively assess those effects, and little effort is made to integrate gender analyses into mainstream research that does not explicitly have a gender focus. The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), for example, has conducted an extensive study indicating that while men are more likely to die *during* conflicts, women are at higher risk of death after a conflict is considered officially over.¹³ While this clearly shows that the international community’s engagement with peace and security cannot end at nominal peace, the data is unclear as to the driving forces behind that heightened risk. Similarly, even as protection norms and laws explicitly meant to protect civilians have become increasingly institutionalized, there has been little in-depth research on the gender dimensions of protection.¹⁴

THREATS TO THE MULTILATERAL SYSTEM

There can be no analysis of geopolitics and multilateralism without a gender analysis. While gender analysis is often siloed off from conventional political theories, it should be integrated into any analysis and “need not be an all or nothing enterprise.”¹⁵ Gender is at the heart of both the multilateral system and human rights frameworks. It is also at the heart of nationalist and populist policy and practice, from the literal reproduction of the nation through childbirth to control over who is “us” and who is “other”; for example, women are often “signifiers of ethnic/national differences—as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transforma-

tion of ethnic/national categories.”¹⁶

As the nature of conflict has shifted, so has the nature of geopolitics and the role of the multilateral system. With roots in the post–World War II period, this cooperative system has relied on the development of international norms and a commitment to international diplomacy. While not without their challenges, shared global agreements like the Paris Agreement on climate change and the UN’s WPS agenda set shared goals for, *inter alia*, international social improvement, violence reduction, rights recognition, and sustainable development. Many multilateral institutions have made significant contributions to building sustainable peace.

Global cooperation by means of the multilateral system, however, is under threat by populist and nationalist movements gaining traction worldwide.¹⁷ What some member states see as a robust system with strategic, diplomatic, and practical benefits others see as a threat to national sovereignty.¹⁸ While not every example of populism and nationalism fits this mold, in recent years there has been a surge of xenophobic, misogynist movements that are guiding many states toward isolationism and regressive policies on women’s rights.¹⁹ Reacting to global crises such as security or ecological threats, some political communities led by populist leaders have closed their borders, reduced funding for multilateral initiatives, pulled back on crisis responses, and tightened control over minority populations. All of this, in turn, has exposed existing and created new vulnerabilities for international security and undermined international efforts to prevent violence and conflict.²⁰ This increasingly means that the international community’s mechanisms for addressing conflict and global crises no longer reflect the current geopolitical context.

13 Christin Marsh Ormhaug, Patrick Meier, and Helga Hernes, “Armed Conflict Deaths Disaggregated by Gender,” Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2009.

14 Taylor B. Seybolt, “Significant Numbers: Civilian Casualties and Strategic Peacebuilding,” in *Counting Civilian Casualties: An Introduction to Recording and Estimating Nonmilitary Deaths in Conflict*, Taylor B. Seybolt, Jay D. Aronson, and Baruch Fischhoff, eds. (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2013).

15 R. Charli Carpenter, “Introduction: Gender, Norms and the Protection of Civilians,” in *Innocent Women and Children: Gender, Norms and the Protection of Civilians* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2006).

16 Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, “Introduction,” in *Woman-Nation-State*, Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, eds. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989). See also Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*.

17 Louis Charbonneau, “Multilateralism Under Threat,” Human Rights Watch, June 24, 2019; Richard Gowan, “Multilateralism in Freefall?” UN University Centre for Policy Research, July 30, 2018.

18 Anthony Dworkin and Richard Gowan, “Rescuing Multilateralism,” European Council on Foreign Relations, June 2019.

19 A non-exhaustive list of examples includes Brazil, Hungary, Nicaragua, the Philippines, Poland, the UK, and the US. The European Union recently renamed its migration portfolio “Protecting Our European Way of Life,” a decision that empowers and validates isolationist trends across the continent.

20 United Nations, “Rising Nationalism Threatens Multilateralism’s 70-Year ‘Proven Track Record’ of Saving Lives, Preventing Wars, Secretary-General Tells Security Council,” November 9, 2018, available at www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13570.doc.htm.

Recently, a number of UN member states—including some permanent members of the UN Security Council—have eschewed a variety of venues of international cooperation, instead pulling out of international agreements and institutions, rolling back women’s rights, and endangering existing progress toward gender equity and the WPS agenda. The United States, Brazil, Colombia, and a number of European states are seeing regressive, anti-internationalist policies take hold, including the United Kingdom’s 2016 vote to leave the European Union.²¹ Alongside this deliberate undermining of multilateral cooperation, we see an international erosion of women’s rights. Populist, isolationist leaders frequently rely on a “strongman” identity and invoke traditional, ethno-nationalist, conservative ideas about social organization and state-society relations and use misogynistic, xenophobic, and racist constructs in both public rhetoric and in policy. Nations swerving toward populism stress sovereignty and independence over international cooperation, rejecting rights-based policies that mandate equity and promise gender-based and sexual autonomy, as well as peacekeeping and climate sensitivity, all of which have significant gender dimensions.²² The ripple effect of these actions has the potential for long-lasting consequences for already-marginalized groups, particularly by emboldening other political groups with similarly restrictive ideologies.

This rise in populism has seen increased attacks on reproductive health, with significant effects on women’s economic and social security.²³ The resurrection of the United States’ “global gag rule,” for example, has limited funding for any organization, worldwide, that performs, promotes, provides information about, or provides referrals for

abortion. As these organizations downsize or shut down due to funding cuts, populations that often have no other option for affordable healthcare lose access to contraception, HIV and tuberculosis treatment, sexual health education, counseling, and other crucial health services.²⁴ In countries or regions experiencing conflict, such policies amplify risks to already marginalized communities in dangerous spaces where health resources are already limited.²⁵ Moreover, as these policies are often intended to galvanize political bases, they can enable behavior that further threatens individual women, racial and sexual minorities, and immigrants on a daily basis.

More broadly, many of these movements cite “gender ideology”—typically referring to the protection and valuing of LGBTQ+ lives and nontraditional family structures—as a direct threat to national values and acceptable ways of life.²⁶ Vilification of “gender ideology” tends to go hand in hand with threats to women’s rights, even though such vilification is frequently couched in the rhetoric of protecting the rights of women and girls as though those two (extremely different) demographics are the only populations that experience gender.²⁷ When women’s rights activists push back against these threats, they are often met with violent rhetoric against feminism and feminists—sometimes directly from world leaders’ mouths—reflecting a gross misunderstanding of their worldview as being “against men.”²⁸ Likewise, such campaigns can directly disrupt conflict-resolution efforts; some experts cite the “false narrative of gender ideology” as contributing to voters’ rejection of Colombia’s 2016 peace deal between its government and the FARC.²⁹

21 Paul Lewis, “Exploring the Rise of Populism: ‘It Pops Up in Unexpected Places,’” *The Guardian*, June 22, 2019.

22 Charbonneau, “Multilateralism Under Threat.”

23 Annalisa Merelli, “A Group of World Leaders Says Populist Politics Are Eroding Women’s Rights,” *Quartz*, March 1, 2019; Cat Duffy, “States’ Rights vs. Women’s Rights: The Use of the Populist Argumentative Frame in Anti-abortion Rhetoric,” *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015); Maya Oppenheim, “The Rise of the Far Right Is Costing Women Their Dignity and Human Rights around the World—Here’s How,” *Independent*, May 11, 2019.

24 Charbonneau, “Multilateralism Under Threat”; Gowan, “Multilateralism in Freefall?”

25 Vanessa Rios, “Crisis In Care: Year Two Impact of Trump’s Global Gag Rule,” International Women’s Health Coalition, 2018; United Nations, “Rising Nationalism Threatens Multilateralism’s 70-Year ‘Proven Track Record’ of Saving Lives, Preventing Wars, Secretary-General Tells Security Council.”

26 Renan Barbosa, “Brazil Inaugurates Policy against Abortion and Gender Ideology at the United Nations,” *Gazeta do Povo*, March 28, 2019.

27 See, for example, Julian Borger, “Trump Administration Wants to Remove ‘Gender’ from UN Human Rights Documents,” *The Guardian*, October 25, 2018; Grace Melton, “Don’t Erase Women at the United Nations,” Heritage Foundation, March 20, 2019; Bernardito Auzá, “Gender Equality and Gender Ideology: Protecting Women and Girls,” remarks at side event at the UN, New York, March 20, 2019, available at <https://holysemission.org/contents/statements/5c9511849e908.php>.

28 Examples include Rodrigo Duterte’s “joke” that martial law allowed for three rapes-with-impunity per soldier, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s statement that feminists do not understand motherhood and therefore cannot understand why gender equality is not viable. Ishaan Tharoor, “How Anti-feminism is Shaping World Politics,” *Washington Post*, January 30, 2018.

29 Roxanne Krystalli and Kimberly Theidon, “Here’s How Attention to Gender Affected Colombia’s Peace Process,” *Washington Post*, October 9, 2016; Michelle Gallo, “‘Gender Ideology’ Is a Fiction That Could Do Real Harm,” Open Society Foundations, August 29, 2017.

The threats to women's rights and a still young WPS agenda are serious. With much of the implementation of the WPS agenda still rhetorical and not yet institutionalized, incremental gains made in the multilateral system are mostly unprotected and proving vulnerable to regressive political attacks.

International Approaches to Peace and Security

What do these changes in the nature of international conflict and the current state of geopolitics mean for international approaches to building and sustaining peace, and specifically for the gender dimensions of these efforts? Women's roles in conflict are complex and vary across different communities. Considering the full spectrum of those roles is imperative for peace and security efforts. Negotiators, mediators, and peacekeepers should therefore frame peacemaking strategies to reflect a more holistic, political understanding of women's roles in conflict. This, in turn, can lead to more sustainable results.³⁰

But integrating this complexity into multilateral peace efforts has been challenging. The application of the WPS agenda to UN peacekeeping, for example, has been a story of both success and failure. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has argued that peacekeeping has been crucial for post-conflict recovery in many countries, with peacekeeping missions often serving as "critical bulwarks against chaos and bloodshed."³¹ These bulwarks can be vital in conflict-affected communities, not least for women and girls, who simultaneously are at specific risk of conflict-related violence and other rights violations and often struggle to have their voices heard in conflict resolution efforts, regardless of where their roles fall on a spectrum from peace activists to combatants. But the record of peacekeeping on these issues has been checkered, with peacekeepers committing sexual exploitation and abuse, failing to address

conflict-related sexual violence, and including insufficient gender analysis in reporting to the UN Security Council. While new initiatives to strengthen UN peacekeeping have included elements addressing WPS,³² threats to the multilateral system could reverse these gains; for example, as traditional donors reduce financial support to peacekeeping and some governments withdraw political capital from the fight for women's rights in the multilateral arena, efforts to include gender expertise in UN peace operations are at risk.³³

Given these challenges to WPS, how has the international community responded to the gender dimensions of changes in the nature of conflict and threats to the multilateral system? Have peace and security policy and programming reflected the lessons learned from the implementation of Resolution 1325? And have efforts to address new threats such as violent extremism put women's rights at the center?

INCORPORATING GENDER INTO EFFORTS AGAINST TERRORISM AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Grappling with the evolving threat of terrorism and violent extremism has become an increasingly prominent focus for governments, the UN, and regional organizations. Over the last two decades, counterterrorism, countering violent extremism (CVE), and preventing violent extremism (PVE) have started to move into the mainstream of international policy and programming. While this work remains deeply political, with areas of significant disagreement, it is nonetheless a rare space in which normally adversarial governments can find common ground.

For years, counterterrorism and CVE/PVE efforts either were essentially gender-blind or relied on reductive and inaccurate assessments of gender and conflict. Assumptions were often made that men are aggressive war-makers, perpetrators and perpetrators of violence, and the sole originators of

30 Marie O'Reilly, Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, and Thania Paffenholz, "Reimagining Peacemaking: Women's Roles in Peace Processes," International Peace Institute, June 2015.

31 United Nations, "Less Cooperation as Global Threats Grow, Secretary-General Tells Security Council, Calling for 'Networked,' Inclusive Multilateralism during Debate," November 9, 2018, available at www.un.org/press/en/2018/sgsm19335.doc.htm.

32 In the context of the Action for Peacekeeping initiative, specific commitments include the Action Plan to Improve the Security of UN Peacekeepers, the Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy, and the Voluntary Compact on Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. See Jake Sherman, "Action for Peacekeeping: One Year into the Implementation of the Declaration of Shared Commitments," International Peace Institute, September 2019.

33 Aissata Athie and Sarah Taylor, "UN Peacekeeping: Where Is the Gender Expertise?" *IPI Global Observatory*, October 27, 2017.

violent extremism, while women are peacemakers or victims of this violence. Due to these reductive approaches and the lack of gender conflict analyses, counterterrorism and CVE/PVE efforts missed critical insights, including on the drivers of radicalization and the role of gender inequality as an indicator of fragility.

This oversight of gender in counterterrorism and CVE/PVE changed in 2015 as the international community prepared to mark the fifteenth anniversary of Resolution 1325. Sparked in part by a 2009 UN report on gender and counterterrorism,³⁴ the slowly growing body of research and analysis on the topic was reflected in a dedicated chapter in the UN's report on fifteen years of the WPS agenda, in a number of operative paragraphs in Resolution 2242 adopted in October of that year, and in the appointment of dedicated gender experts in the UN's counterterrorism architecture.³⁵ These built up a normative groundwork of research and analysis emphasizing the need for a gendered approach to counterterrorism and CVE/PVE efforts across all countries.³⁶ This normative groundwork has added a needed complexity to how we understand the relationship between gender and violent extremism, including the role of gender in efforts to build peaceful and resilient communities. It has also signaled a movement away from a reductive and binary understanding of perpetrators and victims.

However, counterterrorism and CVE/PVE efforts have not yet fully grappled with the degree to which embedding a complicated understanding of gender underpins a transformative approach to human rights, including women's rights.³⁷ As some governments continue to use the counterterrorism and CVE/PVE agendas to repress political opposi-

tion, international norms on women's rights have thus far proved insufficient to counteract these political calculations. On the contrary, the global study on the implementation of Resolution 1325 notes that the "risk of backlash against women's rights defenders, in often already volatile environments, increases" in contexts of violent extremism.³⁸ In Pakistan, for example, women human rights defenders working to hold counterterrorism actors to account have been themselves accused of fomenting terrorism.³⁹ Similarly, the current UN special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism has noted that some newly proposed national legislation that purports to improve safety actually creates a "terrible precedent" and endangers women, men, and children living in already dire conditions.⁴⁰ This exposes a crucial weakness in the normative WPS agenda: its lack of a strong accountability framework that holds international actors to sometimes inconvenient standards. Instead, this agenda is often reduced to a secondary tier of adherence where it is deployed when convenient.

INCORPORATING GENDER INTO PEACE PROCESSES

Peace processes and negotiations have long been considered within the purview of international engagement, including through diplomatic efforts at multiple levels and the role of the multilateral system in bringing parties into dialogue and then guaranteeing the peace.⁴¹ Peace processes have also been a particular focus for the WPS agenda through consideration of women's participation in efforts to build and maintain peace—as negotiators, mediators, and advisers—and the inclusion of women's rights in peace agreements. However,

34 UN General Assembly, *Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism—Note by the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. A/64/211, August 3, 2009.

35 UN Security Council Resolution 2242 (October 13, 2015), UN Doc. S/RES/2242, paras. 11–13; Fionnuala Ní Aoláin and Jayne Huckerby, "Gendering Counterterrorism: How to, and How Not to—Part I," *Just Security*, May 1, 2018; Fionnuala Ní Aoláin and Jayne Huckerby, "Gendering Counterterrorism: How to, and How Not to—Part II," *Just Security*, May 3, 2018; Radhika Coomaraswamy, "A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325," UN Women, 2015.

36 See, for example, Security Council Resolution 2242 (2015), paras. 11–13.

37 Chuck Thiessen, "Preventing Violent Extremism while Promoting Human Rights: Toward a Clarified UN Approach," International Peace Institute, July 2019.

38 Coomaraswamy, "A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325."

39 Jeffrey Gettleman, "In Pakistan, a Feminist Hero Is Under Fire and on the Run," *New York Times*, July 23, 2019.

40 For example, "the Australian Parliament is considering new laws that ban 'extremists' from returning home, apparently aimed at preventing Australians, including women and children, affiliated with ISIS from return.... If the legislation remains as proposed it constitutes a blanket measure that does not distinguish between individuals who may pose security threats and those who do not." Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, "Legislative Responses to ISIS Returnees Take a New Twist in Australia," *Just Security*, July 26, 2019.

41 Louis Kriesberg and Joyce Neu, "Conflict Analysis and Resolution as a Field: Core Concepts and Issues," *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, November 2018; Teresa Whitfield, *Friends Indeed?: The United Nations, Groups of Friends, and the Resolution of Conflict* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2007).

available data shows that, over time, women's participation in these talks is stuck at under 10 percent.⁴² Changes in and the undermining of the multilateral system, which at least nominally emphasizes the WPS agenda, have the potential to degrade even this level of inclusion, as reflected in recent negotiations in Yemen, the Central African Republic, and Syria.

Under the special envoy model of mediation often used by the multilateral system over the last thirty to forty years, women's voices and rights have been regularly excluded, even when there is support from institutional WPS champions. The case of Yemen, where the UN has had a significant role in the current peace process through a special envoy, is illustrative. Even with the peace talks convened in Sweden—a state with a feminist foreign policy—and with a gender adviser supporting the UN special envoy, there was only one woman included in the talks in Stockholm in late 2018. According to experts familiar with efforts to increase women's role in these talks, the negotiating parties were resistant to women's engagement to the extent that some feared the talks would be at risk if there was an insistence on more participation by women.⁴³

Similarly, women were almost completely absent from the negotiations in the Central African Republic that started in 2017. The panel deployed by the African Union to consult with armed groups included no women, and there is no indication of women participating in the parallel talks facilitated by Russia, a state that has consistently pushed back on the relevance of the WPS agenda.⁴⁴ This is despite the fact that the conflict in the Central African Republic has been notable for the way in which armed actors have deployed gender-based violence. It also ignores the role women have played mobilizing for peace, from the community

level to the highest political level—most notably, the former president, Catherine Samba-Panza, who now co-chairs FemWise, the African Union's network of women mediators.

Women have also been active mobilizing for peace and delivering life-saving humanitarian aid since the beginning of the conflict in Syria. They organized a women's political platform within the opposition, and—with the support of the UN special envoy and a dedicated gender adviser—created a platform for dialogue for women across parties.⁴⁵ Yet these initiatives have been undermined by Russia and China, permanent members of the UN Security Council that have repeatedly thwarted the council's efforts to mitigate the conflict and undermined the office of the special envoy.⁴⁶

The WPS agenda has been largely built on the agreement that women's meaningful inclusion at all levels of decision making is necessary for international peace and security. The potential for erosion of this multilateral support for women's participation in peace processes, which would compound the lack of progress in this area, is an additional indicator of the tenuous nature of adherence to the WPS agenda.

DEFENDING WPS IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL NEGOTIATIONS

Since the adoption of Resolution 1325, there has been robust discussion among academics, policy-makers, and activists about the ability of the UN Security Council as a hierarchical security institution to implement a transformative, feminist agenda.⁴⁷ But there has been less interrogation of what the undermining of the multilateral system writ large would mean for work on WPS in the Security Council. Much of the international architecture built to promote accountability for the

42 Council on Foreign Relations, "Women's Roles in Peace Processes," accessed September 19, 2019, available at www.cfr.org/interactive/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/explore-the-data.

43 Communication with UN diplomats, New York, May and June 2019.

44 The eleven members of the African Union panel were all men. UN Women's executive director raised the issue of this all-male panel in her statement to the Security Council during the 2018 debate on WPS. Edith M. Lederer, "UN Chief Decries Failure to Bring Women into Peacemaking," Associated Press, October 25, 2018.

45 UN Department of Political Affairs, "Because It's 2018, ... and Other Reasons Why Women Must Be Included in Peace Processes: Interview with Christina Shaheen, Gender Advisor in the Office of the Special Envoy for Syria," 2018, available at <https://dppa-ps.atavist.com/because-its-2018-and-other-reasons-why-women-must-be-included-in-peace-processes>.

46 United Nations, "Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution on Syria as Russian Federation, China Veto Text Supporting Arab League's Proposed Peace Plan," February 4, 2012, available at www.un.org/press/en/2012/sc10536.doc.htm.

47 See, for example, Dianne Otto, "Power And Danger: Feminist Engagement With International Law through the UN Security Council," *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 32, No. 1 (2010).

WPS agenda is predicated on a robust multilateral system. The UN Security Council's recent debate on ending sexual violence in conflict illuminates the challenge posed by efforts to roll back existing normative frameworks.

In April 2019, a month after difficult negotiations at the Commission on the Status of Women, the Security Council prepared for its regular review of the UN's annual report on conflict-related sexual violence, with negotiations underway on a new resolution on the topic.⁴⁸ As the deadline for the negotiations neared, it became clear that the mention of sexual and reproductive health rights might prevent the resolution from being adopted. Language on sexual and reproductive health that includes reference to the termination of pregnancy or abortion has always been a sensitive matter in the council, but previous resolutions have nonetheless included compromise language on “non-discriminatory and comprehensive health services, including sexual and reproductive health.”⁴⁹ This time, however, the United States, a permanent member of the council and the initial champion of ending sexual violence in conflict, threatened to veto even this previously agreed language that could implicitly include abortion.⁵⁰ Ultimately, all sexual and reproductive health language was stripped from what became Resolution 2467, with no reference to prior agreed language—an important omission in the precedent-heavy world of the Security Council.⁵¹

Apart from being a contentious negotiation, this debate over women's rights exposed worrying fissures in the Security Council. When it came to the vote, there were thirteen in favor and two abstentions (China and Russia)—the first time a WPS resolution has not been adopted unanimously. The debate also exposed a lack of agreement among champions of WPS, as evident in statements by council members, particularly South Africa's explanation of its vote (this resolution is

“telling survivors that consensus is more important than their needs”), as well as those of Belgium, the Dominican Republic, France, and others.⁵² Concerns about this successful challenge to previously agreed language are not limited to the WPS agenda; some worry that allowing such regression on a contested operative paragraph of a resolution sets a dangerous precedent for other contentious issues as well.⁵³

Conclusion: Lessons Learned for the Future of WPS

As the twentieth anniversary of Resolution 1325 approaches in 2020, peace and security efforts require new analyses, new strategies, and new resources to adapt to changing realities. Since its inception, the WPS agenda has provided a framework for challenging and improving upon old systems. However, in order for the agenda to be an effective tool, it must move beyond rhetoric and be woven into actionable policy. It must become a driving force behind the development and implementation of peace and security policy and programming rather than being buffeted by political considerations that elide the status and rights of women.

Achieving this change depends on two crucial deliverables: a sustainable increase in resources—from advocacy to political capital to funding—and improved accountability within the multilateral system—from “peer pressure” to formal accountability measures. Toward this end, nascent and forthcoming feminist foreign policies have the potential to increase political will and resourcing for WPS, though only if they are politically empowered and driven by the constituencies that have the most at stake, including women human rights defenders, communities affected by conflict,

48 See, for example, Colum Lynch and Robbie Gramer, “At the U.N., America Turns Back the Clock on Women's Rights,” *Foreign Policy*, March 14, 2019; and Julian Borger and Liz Ford, “Revealed: The Fringe Rightwing Group Changing the UN Agenda on Abortion Rights,” *The Guardian*, May 16, 2019.

49 UN Security Council Resolution 2106 (June 24, 2013), UN Doc. S/RES/2106, para. 19.

50 Robbie Gramer and Colum Lynch, “How a U.N. Bid to Prevent Sexual Violence Turned Into a Spat Over Abortion,” *Foreign Policy*, April 23, 2019.

51 For some initial analysis of why this matters, see the excellent analysis of Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, the current UN special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism. “Gutting the Substance of a Security Council Resolution on Sexual Violence,” *Just Security*, April 24, 2019.

52 United Nations, “Security Council Adopts Resolution Calling Upon Belligerents Worldwide to Adopt Concrete Commitments on Ending Sexual Violence in Conflict,” April 23, 2019, available at www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13790.doc.htm; “France Blasts US for Weakened UN Resolution on Sexual Violence in Conflicts,” *France 24*, April 24, 2019, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=07116nj48YU.

53 Conversations with UN diplomats, New York, April 2019.

and local peacebuilders. These deliverables also depend on a commitment to implementing the WPS agenda in its entirety rather than picking and choosing convenient or “easy” components to nominally engage on. International actors must be willing to try, fail, and try again. Using the WPS agenda to creatively rethink and reform existing systems will be far more effective in the long term than attempting to squeeze it into these systems without transforming them.

As governments, the UN, and civil society continue to discuss the future of the WPS agenda and how its twentieth anniversary can catalyze its implementation, the current geopolitical moment can provide valuable lessons. Peace and security issues are not gender-neutral. Efforts to counter terrorism, for example, show that all peace and security strategies require a gender analysis: they need to assess gender-based differences, nuance responses to conflict in a way that reflects those differences, and repeat.

By not addressing the misogyny embedded in existing political structures and national security architectures, we risk the continuation of exclusionary norms. With multilateral institutions made up of individual states, the current pushback on gender equality from those states means national-level values are playing out in the multilateral system. The WPS agenda has the potential to combat this, as it ultimately aims to transform the power dynamics that underpin and drive violent conflict and preclude peace. As Jessica Zimmerman points out, “Using the gender analytical frameworks proposed by the WPS agenda is intellectually strenuous, time consuming, and, to many, it is more threatening than an ‘add women and stir’ approach. Gender, peace and security... requires long-term commitment, leadership, and predictable funding—a policy trifecta that is intimidating to government actors.”⁵⁴ While the transformative potential of the WPS agenda is immense, mustering the will and capacity required to implement it remains a major challenge.

54 Jessica Zimmerman, “The Power and Limitations of Rhetoric: Lessons from the Women, Peace and Security Agenda,” *EastWest.ngo*, November 1, 2017.

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