Gender and Peacekeeping: An Evolving Field of Practice

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Context

In October 2000 when the Security Council adopted its resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, many international observers, including women's rights groups the world over, hailed it as a landmark resolution. For the first time ever, the Security Council mandated international actors working in conflict and post-conflict situations to address the specific impacts of conflict on women and to draw on women's capacities in all efforts to build and sustain peace.

In the decade leading up to the adoption of SCR 1325, the significant increase in armed conflicts the world over and the increasingly civilian character of these wars – evidenced through large-scale civilian casualties as well as civilian participation in actual combat efforts – propelled women to the centre stage of this landscape. They were targeted for specific abuses, including rape and other forms of gender-based violence; they were killed as part of their communities or ethnic groupings; they engaged in active combat in many cases or worked (oftentimes forcibly) to service the combatants as cooks, spies, sex slaves, porters, etc.; and they assumed new roles within their communities, as heads of households and sole breadwinners in the absence of their menfolk who, in most cases, had been either killed, conscripted into the fighting forces or were in hiding.

Notwithstanding the fact that women played diverse and complex roles during conflict, very little investment was made in analyzing this reality. The tendency on the part of the international community prior to the adoption of SCR 1325, was to depict women solely as victims and not as actors engaged in multiple roles during

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conflict. This translated into very little consultation and involvement of women in the processes to build peace. In the post-conflict period, it contributed to an exclusion of women from accessing support and services in critical areas such as disarmament, demobilization and reintegration and in security sector reform processes.

The much-needed change in the conception of women’s role in conflict came about as a result of sustained advocacy and calls by women’s rights groups the world over, for greater international attention and understanding of women’s role in conflict and peace processes. Networks of women’s groups in conflict-affected countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas mobilized to advocate for a stronger voice in efforts to build peace in their countries. They called for greater attention to addressing the adverse impact of conflicts on women’s lives and for their inclusion in all efforts to build peace, from the negotiating table right through to the longer-term peace-building and development agenda.

Through a set of strategic alliances that developed between women’s groups in conflict-affected countries, international NGOs, a number of UN agencies and a few committed Member States, including a number on the Security Council, the subject of women, peace and security was introduced in an Open Debate of the Security Council and culminated in the adoption of SCR 1325 in October 2000.

The Changing Face of Peacekeeping

In the context of UN peacekeeping, the mandate of Security Council Resolution 1325 (SCR 1325) called for a change in the nature of the business of peacekeeping by requiring that a gender perspective be applied to the different components of peacekeeping activities as a means of ensuring the successful implementation of peacekeeping mandates and promoting equal rights of women and men in post-conflict situations.

The increasingly multi-dimensional nature of most recent peacekeeping operations has endowed these missions with broader mandates, whose scope extends beyond the more traditional approaches to peacekeeping, which is characterized by ceasefire monitoring undertaken by military personnel with very limited or no responsibilities for engaging in civilian activities to support post-conflict peace-building efforts. Multi-dimensional peacekeeping operations however, have at their centre, the goal of restoring and stabilizing security and supporting institution-building to prepare the ground for long-term development. In this context, peacekeeping operations have important scope and opportunity to address gender disparities in a broad range of sectors that are integral to the transitional process, including disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), police reform, mine action, legal and constitutional reform, elections and the promotion of human rights.