

# Women, peace and security: new conceptual challenges and opportunities

**By Nicola Pratt and  
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## ■ Executive summary

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions have attempted to redefine the relationships among women, peace and security. For many activists and practitioners, making gender central to peacebuilding and conflict resolution should transform the international peace and security agenda. However, there are indications that women are being integrated into the existing peace and security agenda without any transformation occurring.

This policy brief focuses on the conceptual basis of the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda in terms of three links: between gender and conflict, between gender and peacebuilding, and between the WPS agenda and feminist visions of peace.

It recommends the following:

1. Rather than merely adding women into existing structures and processes, the WPS agenda should strive to transform the international peace and security system.
2. Interventions in conflict/post-conflict situations should not only be informed by a liberal feminist agenda, but also by intersectional and post-colonial feminist analysis.
3. Peacebuilding interventions should also include those women who do not necessarily support liberal agendas.
4. Efforts to strengthen women's participation in conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction should identify different non-violent forms of female political agency.

## Introduction

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions have attempted to redefine the relationships among women, peace and security. For many activists and practitioners, making gender central to peacebuilding and conflict resolution should transform the international peace and security agenda. However, there are indications that women are being integrated into the existing peace and security agenda without any transformation occurring. In particular, there is a danger that the

international community is actually undermining women's local peacebuilding efforts.

This policy brief focuses on the conceptual basis of the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda and examines both its opportunities and challenges. The opportunities are linked to the expansion of the international peace and security agenda to incorporate the experiences and peacebuilding practices of ordinary women in conflict and post-conflict contexts. The challenges are linked to how the

international community responds to and incorporates these experiences and strengthens these forms of agency in order to transform the peace and security agenda.

The conceptual challenges and opportunities are discussed in terms of three links: between gender and conflict, between gender and peacebuilding, and between the WPS agenda and feminist visions of peace.

### **The link between gender and conflict**

The WPS agenda is unique in its linking of gender to processes of conflict, conflict prevention and conflict resolution – in other words, its linking of social and political dynamics. The view that politics is not merely confined to processes in and the formal institutions of the public sphere (such as voting, high-level diplomacy, political party membership and non-governmental organisations), but also includes everyday actions and dynamics in the sphere of social and gender relations has been a key insight of feminism (“the personal is political”). The way in which this link between social and political dynamics is conceptualised is crucial for how we think about the international peace and security agenda.

On the one hand, there is an increasingly influential view among WPS agenda advocates that places gender at the centre of conflict analysis by arguing that gender inequality is a *cause* of conflict and a threat to international security. This is largely based on research that reveals statistical correlations between gender inequality and state militarism, and gender inequality and civil war (Caprioli, 2000; 2005). While such a conceptualisation of the links between gender and conflict may appear to transform the international peace and security agenda, in reality it may be an obstacle to such a transformation.

On the other hand, a more transformational analysis would examine how gender identities are socially constructed and politicised in relation to (and also as a result of) war and violence. For example, qualitative research has demonstrated that the mobilisation of populations for war depends on the construction of gender differences (men as warrior-protectors and women as in need of protection) by political and military leaders. Policies aimed at the transformation of conflict need to address the often-multidimensional causes of violent conflict, in which gender is implicated (Cockburn, 2004), but not necessarily causal.

Interpreting the WPS agenda to focus on addressing gender inequalities without addressing the ways in which gender intersects with the structural and cultural causes of war may undermine local women’s agency. For example, a focus on gender inequality as a cause of war may easily feed into Western discourses that represent women in the Global South as universally victimised and in need of external intervention. It may even justify foreign military intervention, as in Iraq and Afghanistan, in the name of “liberating women”. By glossing over complex interrelationships between war and gender, discourses about the need to “save

women” in the Global South risk provoking a local backlash against women’s activism in conflict/post-conflict situations, which become associated with “foreign” interventions and even “foreign” military agendas (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009).

### **The link between gender and peacebuilding**

The WPS agenda highlights women’s agency as peacemakers. Indeed, WPS agenda advocates often describe women as “natural” peacemakers because of their concern for their families and communities. This notion is used to advocate for their inclusion in peacemaking and conflict resolution processes. However, this essentialisation of women as peaceful may be counterproductive because it upholds rather than challenges dominant stereotypes of women as peaceful versus men as violent that are implicated in war dynamics (see above) (Cohn, 2008).

By essentialising women as peacemakers the WPS agenda risks homogenising all women, assuming that women’s needs, interests and agency are the same because of their shared gender. The focus of the WPS agenda on women as a universal category marginalises consideration of other factors that are significant in shaping women’s needs, interests and agency – including class, religious, ethnic, or racial background, political orientation or geographical place of residence.

By promoting an essentialist definition of women as peacebuilders, the WPS agenda overlooks or even denies the multiple forms of political agency in which women engage during conflict. Women’s everyday survival and coping mechanisms at the community level, for example, might seem apolitical at first sight, but they play an important role in maintaining the social, political and economic fabric of their communities. In addition, a wider understanding of women’s agency enables us to ask why some women (and men) opt out of violence and how they strategise for livelihoods and normal lives, negotiating and/or defying relations of power. Such local coping strategies, forms of resistance and agency can offer important insights for conflict transformation and peacebuilding (Richter-Devroe, forthcoming, 2014). The challenge is to identify, recognise and strengthen different non-violent forms of female political agency and include voices that are representative of different groups of women.

### **The link between the WPS agenda and feminist visions of peace**

The WPS agenda draws on important observations by feminist scholars and activists about the link between gender dynamics and war. It also makes gender equality, women’s empowerment, and women’s representation central to post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding. However, its conceptual underpinnings remain wedded to a narrow liberal feminist paradigm, thus marginalising other feminist approaches to and understandings of conflict and peace (Pratt & Richter-Devroe, 2011). It is these other feminist approaches that present the greatest opportunity for transforming the international peace and security agenda.

The intersectional analyses pioneered by feminists of colour, feminists in the Global South and post-colonial feminists highlight the multiple inequalities and injustices at the local, national and international levels that shape women's experiences of insecurity. In order to construct peaceful and just societies it is necessary to address sources of inequality that include, but are not limited to, women's access to decision-making institutions and processes of peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Moreover, by reducing women's participation to those activities that correspond with the liberal peacebuilding model, the WPS agenda marginalises feminist critiques of the existing international peace and security architecture, including, for example, opposition to militarisation and military solutions. Indeed, the WPS agenda may lead to pitting gender equality against anti-militarism, thereby potentially dividing feminists from feminists.

Through its focus on women's access to decision-making and support for gender equality, the WPS agenda endorses a particular liberal vision of peace that may not be inclusive of all interests and experiences. It does not easily accommodate women's agency that does not seek individual emancipation/empowerment or work within secular-liberal frameworks. Pious women or women belonging to political Islamist groups may not subscribe to the liberal objectives of the WPS agenda. Such women may value gender complementarity rather than gender equality. Another example would be those women whose agency is informed by a rationale of resistance (also non-violent) against unequal power structures rather than by the liberal dialogue-for-peace model, which is more easily applied to contexts where conflicting parties are equal in power. In the Palestinian context, for example, the WPS agenda is adopted by more professional, largely secular, urban-based women leaders, while non-professional and/or non-liberal constituencies, such as members/supporters of the Islamist movement or rural and camp women, are unaware of or reject the WPS agenda. This not only leads to their experiences and voices being silenced by the international community, but also exacerbates fragmentation and rivalries between different constituencies of woman activists on the ground. The exclusionary nature of the WPS agenda (which stems from its liberal underpinnings and lack of intersectional analysis) thus raises questions about the role of the international community in delivering pre-approved solutions to what are often complex local realities.

## Recommendations

1. The international community should respond to and take seriously women's responses to and understandings of conflict and peacebuilding in order to truly transform the international peace and security agenda, rather than merely adding women into existing structures and processes.
2. Interventions in conflict/post-conflict situations should be broadened from a narrow liberal feminist agenda, which prioritises women's equality and participation in

decision-making institutions, to also include insights from intersectional and post-colonial feminist analysis. By widening its theoretical foundation, the WPS agenda would be better prepared to identify the context-specific structural and sociocultural causes of conflict, thus being able to formulate more effective policies. A one-size-fits-all approach may even exacerbate tensions and/or inequalities

3. Support for women in conflict/post-conflict situations should not be limited to women's groups and activists who support the WPS agenda, but should recognise those women who do not necessarily support liberal agendas. Support for/facilitating dialogue among women (who ostensibly are on the same side) about future visions of peace is often necessary in conflict/post-conflict situations.
4. Efforts to strengthen women's participation in conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction should identify, recognise and strengthen the different non-violent forms of political agency in which women on the ground engage. This would necessitate careful context-specific research into women's formal and informal non-violent political activities before and during conflict in order to include their practices, experiences, and voices in any conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction efforts.

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