

**Zeitschrift:** Fem\*Fém : das feministische Magazin mit wissenschaftlichem Blick = la revue féministe avec une perspective scientifique

**Herausgeber:** Verein Feministische Wissenschaft Schweiz

**Band:** - (2025)

**Heft:** 68

  

**Artikel:** Women, peace and security : our on-off love affair with the agenda

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1098655>

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# Women, Peace and Security

Our on-off love  
affair with  
the agenda

While there have been multiple revolutions made by feminists in international law and peace and security, the advances promised by the Women, Peace and Security agenda have been absorbed in the existing structures to suit the status quo. Yet, there still has been enormous progress. I will discuss how we have tried to encapsulate our understanding of gender in law and practice, in our approaches and institutions, and will identify some of our achievements and where we have been rebuffed.

In the early 1980s, I went to Nicaragua. The amazing women of the Nicaraguan Revolution were fighting a second revolution: to end the violence against them, which had risen enormously after the victory against the Somoza dictatorship that women had made happen. These women had a vision: a world in which international law could be used to unite women across borders to address violence against women and prevent conflict. They envisaged the creation of a cadre of international feminist lawyers to effect that revolution. I was inspired and went off to become one of those lawyers. It is from that perspective that I reflect on what has happened in the years since.

#### Disrupting the binary gender narrative

Although we have made a revolution in international law, revolutions are never finite. Yet, we should be proud of what we have done! Not just in law but also in the gradual reclaiming of our—women's—history, revolutionising science, social and cultural norms, and international relations, where we have entered spaces previously owned by men. Until now, our world has been written

and explained by binary narratives of race, class and origin, all encased in gender. Our revolution is that we have initiated the disruption of that narrative: by understanding what gender really means, its creation and consequence, and by applying this understanding in our approach to conflict.

There would be millions of women everywhere who would think that this assertion is absolutely ridiculous, and on a bad day, I am in that camp. Changes take time to percolate and there is no guarantee that the constant push back will not prevent a full realization of our goals. Yet, if we can understand how the revolution has evolved, what we have crafted and built to reinforce it—for example in the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda—we can be smarter in navigating its success.

To do that we have to understand the importance of gender. Judith Butler posits that gender is the performance of culture and of materialism.<sup>1</sup> Understanding gender means contesting existing norms which determine how women and men should live; norms which create and perpetuate stereotypical roles and responsibilities. Without the division of gender into two categories, the existing structures of power which embody and create patriarchy would lose their foundation; what would happen next would indeed be revolutionary.

But to achieve that, we have to embrace complexity, as this vision means interrogating more than just one form of discrimination. It means understanding intersectionality and how to ensure its inclusion in analysis. It means applying the intersectional lens to existing political economies from micro to macro and it means understanding gender relations as causal in violence; from the individual to armed conflict. Evidently, whilst seeking to ensure gender analysis, we have to remember that it is women who are more adversely affected in every category. The challenge is how to interact with existing structures so as to effect the transformation required by our new knowledge.

## From the Beijing Platform of Action to UNSCR 1325

Our WPS agenda was built on our own history. The UN World Conferences on Women, starting in Mexico in 1975, with the fourth and latest taking place in Beijing in 1995, were intended to bring the lived experiences of women into the foreground. Progress was messy—but that is also fine. The Beijing Platform of Action was considered a blueprint for gender equality and endorsed by 189 states. Huge! But it was ignored almost as soon as the ink was dry in the approach to ending wars in Rwanda and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was ignored because when it comes to compulsion, UN outcome documents like the Platform for Action are the softest of the soft, deemed aspirational rather than an obligation; they are part of the “we will get to this when the important stuff is done.”

Revolutions need a vision, a strategy and tactical thinking. Therefore, feminists went for the UN Security Council (UNSC) to install our rights as a legal obligation and, as the UNSC ostensibly represents the ultimate decision maker of the agreed system of the UN, why not go for a Resolution? In the early negotiations, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) was a major advocate, demanding that there be reference to weapons, to arms trading and inequalities in the Resolution. How

1 Butler, Judith: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York, London: Routledge, 1990.

could we possibly achieve security if war itself, its causes and the means to affect armed conflict were left unquestioned? Yet, such language was omitted as it was too progressive for the narrative of the UNSC, which grounds security in geopolitical power play, underscored by militarism and by rules which institutionalise the power of the P5—the five permanent member states of the UN Security Council, namely China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States.

### **Co-optation of the language of participation**

The imprecision of the language misrepresented the ultimate objective of nailing women's rights to legal obligation. Nevertheless, we celebrated the adoption of the UNSC Resolution 1325 in 2000 and its initiation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda; of course we did! Such moments need time to percolate. None of us really could anticipate how 1325 would be used. It referenced the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) of 1979 and the Beijing Declaration and Platform, so we had sources. It told us that women must be participants in all areas of security, from prevention to reconstruction, but the means to do so were not registered anywhere. The Kosovo conflict was the first to reach an ending after the adoption of Resolution 1325—and nothing happened. Valiant attempts by Kosovan women to be part of the negotiations were unsupported. The language of participation was also utilised to incorporate more women in state militaries, also so that they can become peacekeepers (no irony seen, whatsoever!). Battalions of women peacekeepers have deployed to Liberia, to Haiti—and done well. Of course they did, but at considerable cost; and it had little to do with structural change.

That strand of the militarization of inclusion continues to be pushed. In the short term it *might* mitigate some of the harms of male militarised peacekeeping, but it is still based on the promise that militarism is the solution to ending war and bringing peace, suggesting that we just need more women in uniform! And we forget that before even getting into peacekeeping, women in the military are subsumed into a structure which embodies hierarchy, where orders have to be obeyed no matter their perversity. How will this help to realise the vision of the WPS agenda? What if instead, the focus was on the community, on how to do a proper gender analysis of the political economy at local level: support the changes needed in all ways that are required without abstraction or projectisation and giving women most affected by conflict the resources to have real agency.

### **Sexual violence: The Tribunals for former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda**

If the birth of 1325 left us looking for a map to find a different direction, UNSCRs 1820 and 1889 (2008/2009) took us down a rabbit hole by exclusively focusing on conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), which we have been struggling to get out of ever since. No one will dispute the impact of sexual violence in armed conflict on lives and communities, but Nobel Peace Prize winner Leymah Gbowee was right when she claimed that the only way to stop sexual violence in armed conflict is to stop conflict itself. Whether we

call it a weapon of war or not, it is used because it works. And it works because of the narratives that have been created around sexual violence over history embedded concepts of women as the property of men, her body not her own, and the crime as related to his honour, hers already compromised. This was the fight that feminists took up in the legal structures as they applied to the prosecution of CRSV in the ad hoc tribunals of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and for Rwanda (ICTR). It is a history of “one step forward and one back” as the reality of what had happened to women hit the brick wall of law, which had been written by and for men, and was mostly adjudicated by men. Progress in one case backslid or qualified in the next. Trying to explain women’s experience in that male-dominated legal context was a microcosm of the needed revolution. By the end of it, the effort of brilliant lawyers and incredible women from Bosnia and Rwanda, who were prepared to stand up and tell their stories, resulted in change: Rape was designated as torture, a crime against humanity and, in particular circumstances, a component part of genocide.

Testifying could be brutal for those who chose to participate. In 1996, I met women being supported by the women’s aid NGO Medica in Bosnia who had suffered and survived atrocities. The question was why so many women would tell their histories but very few would take it to the ICTY for justice. The answer was screamingly obvious: Women who do not know where their family members might be, how to feed their children, where they can live, how they will rebuild their lives, simply do not have the time to demand accountability for sexual violence. It is wanted, of course, but other justice is needed first—in particular with regard to social and economic rights—and in post-conflict these quite simply have never been prioritised or even noticed as the international community come rushing in to train police and security forces, rebuild legal structures, pursue neoliberal economic models and focus on dealing with the political structures that more often than not are linked to the conflict.

## Missing words

WPS was in part an attempt to redress all of this. But as Cynthia Enloe, one of the great feminist writers on militarism and conflict, insists, language matters: If words are not specifically included in mandates their import withers. The implementation of the WPS agenda is a perfect example. In 2020, WILPF and the London School of Economics and Political Science combined to examine why it had not had the impact we had hoped for. The resulting publication, *Where are the Words?*,<sup>2</sup> shows how the Resolutions were imperfectly translated and implemented in conflict and conflict-related situations. It is a detailed analysis of how the Resolutions were not understood at an individual level, did not accurately reflect the actions needed and how the system failed to make the bridges between the various elements so as to make it real. Predictable and predicted.

In the discipline of law, language is the core of everything. Part of the feminist revolution in this space has been about reinterpreting that language. Building on what happened in the ad hoc tribunals, a body of law is now developing that reflects better understandings of how gender impacts experiences of conflict. One of the most brilliant analyses of CRSV is from

2 Werner, Sarah Kenny; Stavrevska, Elena B.: *Where are the Words? The Disappearance of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the Language of Country-Specific UN Security Council Resolutions*. Geneva, London: Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security, 2020, [www.wilpf.org/publications/where-are-the-words](http://www.wilpf.org/publications/where-are-the-words); see also the accompanying Guide for Civil Society Organisations: [www.wilpf.org/publications/where-are-the-words-a-guide-for-civil-society-organisations](http://www.wilpf.org/publications/where-are-the-words-a-guide-for-civil-society-organisations).

3 Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic: “I lost my dignity.” Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic. Geneva: United Nations, 2018, [digitallibrary.un.org/record/1480420](https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1480420). See also Chinkin, Christine; Rees, Madeleine: A Commentary on the Commission of Inquiry Report: “I lost my dignity,” May 19, 2018, [www.wilpf.org/a-commentary-on-the-commission-of-inquiry-report-i-lost-my-dignity](http://www.wilpf.org/a-commentary-on-the-commission-of-inquiry-report-i-lost-my-dignity).

the Commission of Inquiry for Syria, “*I lost my dignity*”<sup>3</sup>: A horrible title, but it explains the ways in which CRSV happens, to whom, by whom, where and to what purpose. It explains how CRSV changes as the conflict itself takes new forms. It shows how men and women are differently targeted based on their perceived roles; and it shows, too, how gender impacts the aftermath, where it is women who are at risk of honour killings. Honour and patriarchy. This analysis is the type of work we need to build on.

### Where are we at right now?

In the International Criminal Court (ICC), the special advisors to the prosecutor have brought massive changes in how we understand gender, by building on cultural changes and perspectives, which is essentially the application of the teleological approach. In particular, the advisor on gender persecution has brought comprehensive gender analysis into the elements of this crime and rooted it in human rights violation so that we can see how gender persecution is built incrementally and gives us opportunities—if we can but take them—to prevent it from happening. Brilliant women from Afghanistan and Iran have built on this to identify their experience as that of gender apartheid, a new legal term which describes the institutionalization of gender persecution through decrees, law and policy.

Right now, we can be forgiven for pessimism but let us not go there. There are things we can and must be doing, building on how we organised around the WPS agenda. We have networks, many of them created under the banner of 1325. The process of transforming activism into project-based, donor-funded work may have inhibited organic growth but the networks do exist. From the local grass roots to the INGOs who support them in the larger spaces, the champions in government and other institutions, we have become linked. Imperfect as yet but there, and too strong now to be taken down by those who cling to the “old way.” We need to be more intelligent as to how we go forward, moving away from donor dependency, finding ways of ensuring value is given to social reproduction and really understanding how gender is created and constructed. We need to make better use of some of our institutions so that we can make sure that our agenda has impact, which means not doing the same things we have done before but using what we have learnt to create a narrative. The elements are all there: brilliant work on alternative economies, environment, valuing social reproduction and care, broader understandings of justice, and more is out there. We need to consolidate and build connections between the various networks and the creation of “hubs.” I like to think it is inexorable even if the process is tough. The more we do, the closer we are to ending patriarchy. When that happens, we will look to WPS, despite its faults, as a huge dynamic in effecting that change.

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