'Funmi Olonisakin

Awino Okech

COVID-19 In-depth Analysis

Twenty Years of UNSC Resolution 1325 call for a Frank Forward Look

Trust between Citizens & Institutions   October 28, 2020

Since the United Nations (UN) adopted UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in 2000 there have been significant shifts in discourse and practice on gender, peace and security. Twenty years later, conscious of the original limitations that shaped UNSCR 1325 in the first place, we must account for these shifts whilst striving to do much more than simply sustain the agenda.

Photo: Albert Gonzalez Farran/UNAMID

In 2015, 'Funmi Olonisakin, Cheryl Hendricks and Awino Okech argued that the divergence between three pillars of influence – feminist security studies, civil society activism and policy decision-making – achieved only limited results in the sphere of gender and security. We argued that the disconnect in the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in Africa despite enormous efforts – particularly by feminist activists – was illustrative of this. Of course, we recognise that the conversion of any political ideals geared towards structural transformation into a policy instrument, invariably results in losses in nuance, analysis and ideological grounding. This conversation builds on the 2015 article by accounting for three major dynamics that shaped the environment within which the Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda emerged but which weren't seen as integral to how it was conceptualised as a policy instrument and subsequently implemented.

> We might yet see a new convergence of the three pillars of influence that led to the adoption of 1325, one in which the policy space is responsive to citizens demands and activism and scholarship mutually reinforce each other @FunmiOlonisakin @OkechAwino
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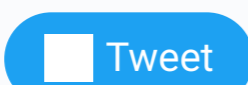
The first dynamic is the rise in intrastate conflicts in Africa with transnational ramifications. The prominence of organised violence and asymmetrical warfare, the role of non-state actors in the emergence and sustenance of proxy wars fought over the control of natural resources in sovereign territories has become a key source of conflict and insecurity. Notably, discourse and action on peace has retained a focus on the state and elite security, notwithstanding a rhetoric of human security. In the absence of transformation in the logic of thinking and action, feminist scholarship and the impact of these new forms of insecurity on women have remained marginal to security discourse and decision-making. This accounts for the large-scale focus on technical and process-based activities that have resulted in National Action Plans that offer some visibility, but with limited substance and real change in the structural inequalities that relegate women to the margins of peace and security decision-making, agenda setting and resource allocation. Unequivocally, the continuum of violence poses threats to women and this is seen in the differential impact of COVID-19 on women and girls across Africa.

Second, the national, regional and global security environment is no doubt changing. This change is of course undergirded by two major factors. The first is geo-politics, that places the building of stable states in areas away from the global centres of power. Construction of these new stable states in Africa is in competition with the sustenance of the global power axis that constructs a few powerful states as arbiters of the global political order. The second factor is the capture of the state by corporations and allied actors. The impact of state capture that has been observed across many African countries such as South Africa, Kenya, Burkina Faso to name a few resulting in greater encroachment of corporations into governance arrangements and in exercising greater control over public goods – land, mineral wealth, education, water – of various countries. The new authoritarian drift witnessed in Africa in the last few years even with increasing elections and changes in government, in part, sustains this state capture. The persistence of narrow state security objectives and authoritarian drift amid rhetoric of human security compels renewed effort toward transformation rather than the staccato of incremental change of the past two decades. Third, is the manifestation of the authoritarian drift in the narrowing of spaces to articulate dissent. These include but at not limited to foreign funding restrictions by different African, intensified surveillance of civil society organizations through legislation, restrictions to the right to protest and public assembly and a crackdown on internet access particularly around election periods.

WPS 2020 offers an opportunity to reflect on the impact of feminist activism through the challenge posed to the utility of the three pillars of UNSCR 1325 – participation, prevention, and protection, relief and recovery and the actors required to breathe life into these pillars given the shifting political landscape for women's rights activists. Most notable is the move by Women's Human Rights Defenders(WHRDs) away from state-based responses to thinking about protection, participation and prevention necessitated by the changing nature of global, regional and national conflict. There are conceptual and practical lessons to be drawn from activism emanating from the shifting nature of threats faced by WHRDs from states and corporations. WHRDs work within environments where their lives are considered disposable. In such a context, the UNSCR 3Ps cannot function in the same way. The rhetoric about women's inclusion occurs as gender considerations remain absent from how the provision of security is conceptualized yet gender is mobilized as a resource to engender insecurity and harm. The evolution of holistic protection as a set of strategies of resistance, survival and a route to imagining freedom by WHRDs requires us to revisit not only the conditions within which women are being asked to participate in policy environments but also demands that we confront the fact that prevention and protection cannot be anchored within a system that is rapidly generating harm for a category of its citizens.

A new horizon is emerging which might carry the promise of the transformation that has eluded the WPS agenda during the last two decades. This can be found in the conceptual contributions by WHRDs in the discourse on holistic protection and security. In addition, intergenerational and transnational feminist organising is changing the peace and security terrain in Africa. With the median age in Africa estimated at 19.5 years, a new generation of Africans is beginning to assert its agency, we are witnessing new contestation between the demand for protection of individuals from fear of violence and the persistence of state generated insecurity. We might yet see a new convergence of the three pillars of influence that led to the adoption of 1325, one in which the policy space is responsive to the citizens demands and activism and scholarship mutually reinforcing each other.

Funmi Olonisakin is Professor of Security, Leadership and Development at African Leadership Centre in the School of Global Affairs at King's College London.

Awino Okech, who teaches at the Centre for Gender Studies at SOAS, also serves as the co-chair of the JASS board. She anchors her broader political work through feminist movement support organisations in Africa and building the next generation of peace and security scholars with the African Leadership Centre.

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