MAKING VIOLENT WOMEN VISIBLE IN THE WPS AGENDA
Alexis Leanna Henshaw

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While the global agenda on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) has a stated focus on building women's agency as well as ensuring women's protection, implementation efforts have generally focused on a vision of women as victims. This narrative overlooks the reality that women are frequently agents of political violence, acting as supporters or combatants in the majority of contemporary armed groups. By seeing these women and making their voices heard in peace processes and post-conflict transitions, we can craft outcomes that are more inclusive. The inclusion of these women's voices may also create more effective long-term efforts at conflict prevention.

The international agenda on Women, Peace, and Security – as envisioned in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325; 2000) and subsequent resolutions – has been described as having three pillars: the protection of women, the prevention of conflict, and the increased participation of women.[1] Although on paper, each of these principles are treated as having equal importance, in practice, reviews of global implementation and specific national action plans (NAPs) developed by UN member states show that an emphasis on the protection of women has come to overshadow the other objectives.[2] Indeed, the UN itself has acknowledged at the institutional level that it has failed to meet benchmarks for the inclusion of women in peace talks as participants, signatories, and mediators.[3]

One consequence of the international community's focus on the protection of women is that it perpetuates the narrative that women's primary role in conflict is that of victim. Indeed, many country NAPs on Women, Peace, and Security, highlight the need to address issues of gender-based violence, sexual violence, and/or human trafficking, while the most frequently included gender clauses in peace agreements are provisions to safeguard human rights and eliminate discrimination.[4] Where the inclusion of women is discussed, NAPs and peace agreements often encourage consultation with or inclusion of women from civil society constituencies. UN Women's 2012 report *Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations: Connections Between Presence and Influence* called this "one of the most

sought-after forms of engagement," and included as first among its recommendations the development of "a standardized protocol that ensures engagement of women's civil society groups in formal peace negotiations."[5] However, this focus on the inclusion of civilian women overlooks the widespread nature of women's direct participation in contemporary armed conflict. By omitting the voices and experiences of such women, the outcome of many efforts at WPS implementation has been incomplete in ways that jeopardise the long-term wellbeing of women who are veterans of conflict. These exclusionary practices also have potentially serious consequences for the success of post-conflict programming and efforts to prevent conflict from recurring.

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1   Karen Barnes, "Turning Policies into Action? The European Union and the Implementation of UNSCR 1325", in *Women, Peace, and Security: Translating Policy into Practice*, ed. Karen Barnes and 'Funmi Olonisakin (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011): 211–22.

2   Paul Kirby and Laura J. Shepherd, "The Futures Past of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda", *International Affairs* 92 (2) (2016): 373–92.

3   UN Women, "Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations: Connections between Presence and Influence (Second Edition)", 2012, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/03AWomenPeaceNeg.pdf

4   Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees, Gender Equality Agency, "Action Plan for Implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Bosnia and Herzegovina for the Period 2014-2017", 2013, https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/BiH-NAP-ENG.pdf; UN Women, "Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations: Connections between Presence and Influence (Second Edition)".

5   UN Women, "Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations: Connections between Presence and Influence (Second Edition)", 9, 24.

6   Jakana Thomas and Kanisha Bond, "Women's Participation in Violent Political Organizations", *American Political Science Review* 109 (2) (2015): 488-506.

7   Ibid.

8   Dyan E. Mazurana, "Women, Girls, and Non-State Armed Opposition Groups", in *Women and Wars*, ed. Carol Cohn (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014): 146–68.

9   Alexis Leanna Henshaw, "Where Women Rebel: Patterns of Women's Participation in Armed Rebel Groups 1990-2008", *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 18 (1) (2016): 39-60; Alexis Leanna Henshaw, *Why Women Rebel: Understanding Women's Participation in Armed Rebel Groups* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

10 Henshaw, *Why Women Rebel*; Henshaw, "Where Women Rebel: Patterns of Women's Participation in Armed Rebel Groups 1990-2008"; Thomas and Bond, "Women's Participation in Violent Political Organizations".

11 Megan MacKenzie, *Beyond the Band of Brothers: The U.S. Military and the Myth That Women Can't Fight* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

WOMEN AS AGENTS OF VIOLENCE

Research on membership in non-state armed groups shows that women consistently participate in these organisations, and that it is also not unusual to find women in combatant and leadership roles. A dataset that examines women in armed insurgent groups across Africa finds that women participated in about 45 percent of active insurgencies since 1950.[6] It also suggests that the incorporation of women into these groups appears to increase over time, with just about half of African insurgencies during the 1980s and 1990s containing women.[7] Cross-nationally, similar patterns appear to hold.[8] Researchers have found women active in insurgencies across 60 countries and the majority of all such groups active since 1990.[9]

Given this body of research, why do we see comparatively little focus on insurgent women in the WPS agenda? One issue may be a lack of visibility among women in these groups. While women are active in the majority of insurgencies, they tend to be concentrated in roles away from combat, rendering them less visible and (at times) giving them less status in the organisation. It has been estimated that women act as combatants in only one-third of insurgencies, while they hold leadership positions in just about one-quarter of groups active since the end of the Cold War.[10] In national militaries as well as rebel groups, being a combatant confers a notion of elite status.[11] Those

who engage in (or are trained to engage in) armed combat command more respect and often find easier paths to leadership positions – like a seat at the table in peace accords.

The concentration of women in roles away from the actual fighting can create confusion over who is a participant or member in an armed group. Many women serve roles similar to that of historical "camp followers". Camp followers serve a number of crucially important roles for military organisations, including provisioning, cooking, laundering, and nursing.[12] In the past, such women were tolerated even in national militaries; though they were usually deprived of certain benefits reserved for male soldiers – eg, ranks, uniforms, or a salary. By depriving women of these signifiers, military commanders were able to purge them easily when they felt that the camp follower's presence was undermining group cohesion or efficiency.[13]

A similar pattern is evident in some rebel groups. In Angola, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports that many women – particularly wives, widows, and partners of male combatants – played a supporting role in the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola's (UNITA's) armed efforts. Several women interviewed by HRW in 2003 reported that they even were awarded official ranks within the organisation for administrative work, for acting as messengers, carrying supplies, or helping with organisational logistics. However, these women found themselves effectively excluded from disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) programming, which was only offered to personnel who were combatants – a distinction almost exclusively available to men in the UNITA ranks.[14] In the military wing of Angola's Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda (FLEC), women played roles substantially similar to those

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of women in the UNITA. Yet, while women reported preparing food for male combatants, organising schools in rebel-held areas, and recruiting other women to support the organisation, they do not appear to have received any formal recognition for these efforts.[15]

In some cases, there are documented instances of insurgent groups actively attempting to conceal the inclusion of women within their ranks. In the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), for example, women were consciously moved from combatant positions to less visible roles over the course of the conflict, in part because the organisation wanted them to reproduce rather than fight.[16] Some women in Sierra Leone's RUF likewise reported that commanders took guns away from them after the conflict, rendering them unable to participate in official DDR registries – which required demobilising combatants to surrender a firearm.[17] The prevalent use of girl soldiers in some conflicts further complicates matters. Where organisational leadership fears exposure, stigma, or possible prosecution due to the use of child soldiers, there is a strong incentive to make the use of both boy and girl soldiers less visible. As an example, while the use of male child soldiers was widespread within armed groups in Sierra Leone, girl soldiers commonly reported playing less visible roles away from open combat – such as cooking, sex work, and looting after a battle. As a result, these girls were often labeled as "unaccompanied children" and not "child soldiers" during the DDR phase – a misrepresentation that had both material and psychological effects for young women transitioning out of conflict.[18]

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DISARMING WOMEN, STRENGTHENING PEACE

By understanding the extent to which women contribute to political violence – as well as the roles that they play – we can potentially shape more inclusive as well as more effective peace agreements and post-conflict programming. It is worth considering that the participation of women (and girls) in DDR programmes has been historically low, even when we know that women formed a substantial part of the non-state armed groups involved in fighting.

12 Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

13 Ibid.

14 Human Rights Watch, "Struggling Through Peace: Return and Resettlement in Angola", 2003, https://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/angola0803/

15 Nana Rosine Ngangoue, "Angola-Women: Living with War in the Forests of Cabinda", *Inter Press Service Newswire*, 27 May 1996, http://www.ipsnews.net/1996/05/angola-women-living-with-war-in-the-forests-of-cabinda/

16 David Duriesmith, "Masculinity and New War: The Gendered Dynamics of Contemporary Armed Conflict" (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

17 Megan MacKenzie, "Securitization and Desecuritization: Female Soldiers and the Reconstruction of Women in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone", *Security Studies* 18 (2) (2009): 241–61.

18 Megan MacKenzie, *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, Security, and Post-Conflict Development* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

> Where disarmament is conceptualised as a pre-requisite for demobilisation and reintegration activities, women are placed at a disadvantage.

19   MacKenzie, "Securitization and Desecuritization: Female Soldiers and the Reconstruction of Women in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone"; Elisa Tarnaala, "Women in Armed Groups and Fighting Forces: Lessons Learned from Gender-Sensitive DDR Programmes", *ETH Zurich Center for Security Studies*, 2016, http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/62b42fcf-a5ff-46d5-9e6a-6bdb6d577289

20   Tarnaala, "Women in Armed Groups and Fighting Forces: Lessons Learned from Gender-Sensitive DDR Programmes"; Megan MacKenzie, *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, Security, and Post-Conflict Development*; Lesley Abdela, "Nepal and the Implementation of UNSCR 1325", in *Women, Peace, and Security: Translating Policy into Practice*, ed. Karen Barnes and 'Funmi Olonisakin (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011): 66–86.

21   Valerie M. Hudson and Patricia Leidl, *The Hillary Doctrine: Sex and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Jacqueline O'Neill, "Are Women the Key to Peace in Colombia?", *Foreign Policy*, 20 April 2015, https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/20/are-women-the-key-to-peace-in-colombia-farc-talks/; MacKenzie, *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, Security, and Post-Conflict Development*.

22   UN Women, "Joint Statement by Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka and Zainab Hawa Bangura on the Historic Commitment by the Government of Colombia and FARC-EP at the Havana Peace Talks Table", July 2016, http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2016/7/joint-statement-by-phumzile-mlambo-ngcuka-and-zainab-hawa-bangura

23   Natalio Cosoy, "6.900 Guerrilleros de Las FARC Ya Están Concentrados En 26 Zonas En Colombia", *BBC Mundo*, 22 February 2017, http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-38888897

24   O'Neill, "Are Women the Key to Peace in Colombia?".

Research based on discussions with female combatants has revealed a few common reasons why these women are often excluded from aid efforts after a conflict. First, where disarmament is conceptualised as a pre-requisite for demobilisation and reintegration activities, women are placed at a disadvantage. The notion of disarmament often presumes the existence and use of small arms, and reinforces a narrow idea of who is a combatant. Interviews with women in armed groups in Sierra Leone and Liberia indicate that many women either shared guns with other fighters, or were asked by commanders to surrender their arms to them before the war's end.[19] Their inability to participate in disarmament by extension precludes women from efforts at demobilisation and reintegration. Cases like these indicate the importance of moving beyond the combatant-noncombatant dichotomy that defines many DDR programmes. These traditional labels may not do justice to the complexities of armed groups that include large numbers of women and girl soldiers.

Another lesson to be learned from women in rebel groups is that shame and fear are barriers that DDR initiatives must work to overcome. Research has repeatedly shown that women and girls walk away from post-conflict programming because they are afraid of the social exclusion that comes with being identified publicly as a member of an insurgency.[20] At the same time, factors that make women's contributions less visible in wartime can also make it easier for them to fade into the background when a conflict is over. If women's fear of social rejection outweighs the perceived benefits of their participation in a DDR programme, they are likely to choose what appears to be the easier path. This choice is compounded by the fact that women often perceive little potential benefit from participating in post-conflict initiatives like job training. Such programmes, when aimed at women, are often focused on preparing them for low-wage, low-prestige jobs like hairdressing, seamstressing, soap-making, or beekeeping.[21] If the result of these programmes is to prepare women for jobs that won't meaningfully improve their standard of living (and which may not be in demand at all in their communities), why run the risks associated with enrolling? This is a question policymakers need to consider, although the solutions will likely vary from one conflict to the next. In particular, efforts aimed at overcoming social stigma will likely need to be highly contextualised and should consider the intersectional effects of gender when combined with age, race/ethnicity, religion, etc.

A final takeaway point is that programmes that want to be gender-inclusive will have greater impact when women are involved in the planning process. This hearkens back to one of the original – albeit often overlooked – aims of UNSCR 1325: inclusion of women as agents. While still ongoing, the peace process in Colombia has offered some intriguing outcomes that demonstrate the value of including female members of rebel groups in a negotiation. The Havana Peace Talks, which culminated in a peace agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2016, were noteworthy in that the negotiations included a Gender

Subcommission. This subcommission was charged with assessing the gendered impact of the final agreement, and its membership included women representing both the FARC and the national government, while also receiving the input and advice of thousands of experts and victims of the conflict. The Executive Director of UN Women and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict called the Gender Subcommission "a unique mechanism in the history of conflict resolution."[22]

There is initial evidence that the existence of this mechanism – and, by extension, the involvement of rebel women in the peace process – has produced a more inclusive outcome than past settlements. According to reports issued in spring of 2017, 32 percent of FARC cadres arriving at designated demobilisation zones are women.[23] That figure reflects a gender ratio that roughly corresponds to the overall FARC membership, which is generally believed to be 30-40 percent women.[24] If accurate, the reported participation rate is fairly remarkable because it represents a much higher level of female engagement than what has been observed in DDR processes following other conflicts. It is, additionally, a notably higher participation rate than what the government of Colombia achieved with its own defection and demobilisation programmes prior to Havana. Statistics from the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR) suggest that in 10 years of demobilisation programming from 2003-2012, only about 20 percent of participants from the FARC and 11 percent of participants overall were women.[25] Thus, there is a strong suggestion that female cadres are more willing to participate in a programme that they know their peers helped to design. Indeed, some DDR programming currently being implemented in Colombia is also being led or facilitated by FARC

members. In the spring of 2017, a small group of FARC affiliates participated in a "train the trainer" programme aimed at giving them the technical and logistical skills to participate in the campaign to de-mine conflict-affected areas of the country. The initial graduates of this workshop are currently recruiting other demobilising combatants to work for the campaign, thereby securing paid, skilled employment for those individuals for the duration of the de-mining process.[26] Two women participated in the pilot phase of the de-mining project, and they are currently training other ex-militant women to take part.[27] According to the FARC's social media channels, training in a variety of other job skills has been made available to both men and women in the

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25 Carlos Morales and Laura Linero, "Las Cifras de Los 10 Años de Desmovilizaciones", *El Tiempo*, n.d., http://www.eltiempo.com/Multimedia/especiales/desmovilizados/ARCHIVO/ARCHIVO-12224321-0.pdf

26 Government officials have indicated that the de-mining process is expected to last 3 to 4 years. Alta Consejería Presidencial para el Posconflicto, Derechos Humanos y Seguridad, "Gobierno y FARC-EP realizan primer taller de capacitación en acción integral contra minas antipersonal", 21 March 2017, http://www.posconflicto.gov.co/sala-prensa/noticias/2017/Paginas/20170321-Gobierno-y-Farc-Ep-realizan-primer-taller-de-capacitacion-en-accion-integral-contra-minas-antipersonal.aspx

27 Monica Sáez P, "'Creo que valió la pena el sacrificio': Guerrillera 'Yira Castro' Sobre la Paz en Colombia", *Zona Cero*, 7 March 2017, http://zonacero.com/?q=generales/creo-que-valio-la-pena-el-sacrificio-guerrillera-yira-castro-sobre-la-paz-en-colombia

28 Mujeres de las FARC. Twitter post. 1 June 2017, 4:26PM. https://twitter.com/MujerFariana/status/870375971639238656

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29 MacKenzie, *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, Security, and Post-Conflict Development.*

30 Henshaw, *Why Women Rebel*; Alexis Leanna Henshaw, "Why Women Rebel: Greed, Grievance, and Women in Armed Rebel Groups", *Journal of Global Security Studies* 1 (3) (2016): 204-19; Thomas and Bond, "Women's Participation in Violent Political Organizations".

demobilisation camps, including training in systems management and Microsoft Office programs.[28] Again, this represents a notable departure from previous DDR efforts such as the one in Sierra Leone, where training in computer/technical skills was only offered to men.[29]

FARC women involved in the Havana peace talks had an important voice in creating a gender-inclusive DDR effort. More broadly, though, these women also had the opportunity to provide input into matters of land rights, victim's rights, crime, and other matters that impact the female population of Colombia beyond the FARC's ranks. This focus on social issues fits with research that tells us that women who join armed insurgencies often do so in response to some form of collective deprivation, like widespread poverty, perceived abuses against their ethnic or religious group, or limitations on civil and political rights.[30] Again, it will take time to see the full impact of FARC women's engagement in the peace process, but initial signs suggest that this agreement could be a key case in illustrating the value of including not just women, but women from all sides of a conflict, in peace processes. Should the international community truly be concerned with implementing all three pillars of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda, they would do well to take note.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Keeping in mind the international community's commitment to promote the participation of women in peace processes, the architects of DDR programmes should be cognisant of the particular needs of women who are demobilising from armed groups. These key points should be considered.

1. "Disarmament" should be viewed through a gendered lens

While disarmament is an important goal in post-conflict processes, the assumption that all combatants will have small arms to surrender has been problematic. The experience of women in contemporary insurgent groups indicates that they are placed at a disadvantage in areas where the surrender of weapons is required for entry into demobilisation and reintegration programming.

2. Fear and shame are powerful barriers to women's inclusion in DDR programmes

Women and girls demobilising from rebel groups often face stigma or social exclusion. To understand and overcome these barriers, programmes need to be contextualised and mindful of the intersectional concerns of gender, ethnicity, religion, age, etc. At the same time, adding value to programming aimed at women can impact the cost-benefit calculus faced by potential participants. This can be accomplished by, for example, creating job-training programmes aimed at preparing women for skilled professions.

3. Give women from combatant groups a voice in designing post-conflict initiatives

By making women stakeholders in the DDR process, governments and international organisations send a powerful signal that they value the inclusion of women. In particular, by including female ex-combatants in "train the trainer" programmes like those implemented in Colombia, policymakers can create a beneficial cycle where women are positioned to bring other women into the process.

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