

The Intrinsic Role of Women in Peace and Security: Genesis and Follow Up of UNSCR

1325

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Ambassador Chowdhury was under-secretary-general and high representative of the United Nations in New York from 2002 to 2007. He was ambassador of Bangladesh to the UN from 1996 to 2001 and represented his country in the Security Council during its membership in 2000-2001.



On the opening page of her remarkably forward-looking book *Sixty Years Sixty Voices —Israeli and Palestinian Women*, Patricia Smith Mellon writes poignantly, asserting women’s empowerment:

*She is rising to her full self,
to people’s astonishment
She has placed her future in her hands,
and is ready to drink from the cup of it.*

Though her book brings out wonderfully the inner quest and energy of Palestinian and Israeli women for sustainable peace in their countries and their region, Patricia underlines that “this book is for all women everywhere.”

The context of my contribution to this special issue of the **Palestine-Israel Journal** is also the same. Despite all the diversity generated by a variety of reasons, the quest for peace remains eternal and universal. The contribution and involvement of women in this is an inherent reality that transcends everything, and it prompted me to take a much-awaited step when the opportunity presented itself.

An Extraordinary Day

International Women’s Day in 2000 was an extraordinary day for me, and will remain so for the rest of my life. That day, I had the honor of issuing on behalf of the United Nations Security Council in my capacity as its president a statement that formally brought to global attention the

unrecognized, underutilized and undervalued contribution women have been making towards the prevention of wars, peace-building and engaging individuals and societies to live in harmony. The members of the Security Council recognized that peace is inextricably linked with equality between women and men, and affirmed the equal access and full participation of women in power structures and their full involvement in all efforts for peace and security.

If one looks into the relevance of the content, potential for change and expected impact of any global declaration for women, two stand out head and shoulders above all others. The Beijing Platform for Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, and UN Security Council Resolution 1325. They are unparalleled in terms of what they can do to empower women — not only to give 50% of the world’s population their due, but also to make the world a better place to live.

For a long time, the impression has been that women were helpless victims of wars and conflicts. The role of women in fostering peace in their communities and beyond has often been overlooked. Those inexplicable 55 long years of a lack of rational thinking by the UN Security Council was broken for the first time on March 8, 2000, when the seed for Resolution 1325 on women and peace and security was sown.

An Energizing Resolution

The formal resolution followed this conceptual and political breakthrough in October of the same year after nearly eight months of persistent efforts through the Council’s unanimous agreement to give this issue the attention and recognition that it deserved.

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To me and many others, the key element of 1325 has from the outset been participation in which women can contribute equally at all levels of decision-making and, ultimately, help shape societies where violence and inequality experienced by women would not be the norm. The Security Council should realize that women are not just a vulnerable group; they are empowering as well.

We need to remember that the main emphasis here, as peace and gender activist Cora Weiss often asserts, is not to make war safe for women, but to structure the peace in a way that there is no recurrence of war and

conflict. That is why women need to be at the peace tables; women need to be involved in decision-making and in peace-keeping teams, particularly as civilians, to make a real difference in transitioning from the cult of war to the culture of peace. Resolution 1325 marked the first time that such a proposition was recognized as an objective of the Security Council. As such, its implementation places a unique and all-embracing responsibility on the international community, particularly the United Nations.

It is amazing that in only 11 years, just four numbers — 1-3-2-5 — have generated a global enthusiasm that is unprecedented. The adoption of Resolution 1325 opened a much-awaited door of opportunity for women who have shown time and again that they bring a qualitative improvement in peace structuring and post-conflict planning. Women and many men all over the world have been energized by this resolution. Even the Security Council, which is known for being a closed club, demonstrated a forward-looking approach by adopting four follow-up resolutions relating to women and peace & security. When you take that into account, the potential of Resolution 1325, its implications and its impact in real terms are enormous.

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How Did It Begin?

I am often asked how the concept behind Resolution 1325 came to be placed on the Security Council's agenda for the first time during Bangladesh's presidency of the Council. My conviction and determination to steer that initiative grew out of my close and long-standing engagement with the international women's agenda. This agenda, effectively, came up in my interaction over the years with the NGO community, and I felt this needed a boost in the Security Council's work, in which the undeniable link between women's equality and peace would be asserted. The dynamics of global war and security strategy as it was evolving in a post-Cold War world prompting the UN General Assembly to adopt a Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace, which I also had the privilege of steering, prepared the ground for raising the issue.

At the beginning of March, when the Council's president submits the monthly work plan, I indicated my intention to proceed with this agenda. When I first brought up the issue of women and peace and security in the Security Council, some of my colleagues expressed wide-ranging disinterest

— even indifference — saying that the president was diluting the Council’s mandate by trying to bring in a “soft issue” to its agenda. Belying this preposterous presumption, I believe that the passage of Resolution 1325 is an impressive step forward in setting right the dimensions of contemporary security politics by accepting a women’s equality agenda.

The five permanent members of the Council resisted stubbornly through procedural and substantive maneuvers, expecting that this newcomer in the Council (Bangladesh joined in January 2000) would not be able to sustain its enthusiasm against this long-standing bastion of power. Conceptually, it seemed they decided not to connect women, peace and security. Also, I found that, in general, ambassadors to the UN do not feel that women’s issues are a top priority for them — and many of them do not get clear instructions in this regard from their respective governments. Though the NGOs were drumming up support for some years for the linkage between women and peace and security, no country or its ambassador in the Security Council — even with the yearly change in composition — was ready to take the leadership to initiate this issue in the Council. After I set the process in motion, it was, of course, a pleasure to get the collaborative support of some of my colleagues in the Council, in particular the ambassadors of Jamaica and Namibia.

I had originally hoped that the outcome would be a Security Council resolution, but it turned out not to be possible in the time available, due to objections by some high-profile member states. In that situation, we settled for a presidential statement which also remained elusive. Finally, I coaxed all 15 members to issue a unanimously agreed-upon press statement by the Security Council. Some members’ considerable resistance — even to the last moment — to such a move could not be sustained when those countries found that I was very determined to push this through, even threatening to issue a Council president’s own press statement without the other Council members. It is only this move that made them join in reconciling with the situation.

Disappointing Record of Implementation

However, the historic and operational value of the resolution as the first international policy mechanism that explicitly recognized the gendered nature of war and peace processes has been undercut by the disappointing record of its implementation. The complicity of the Security Council in international practices that make women insecure and deny their equality of participation, basically as a result of its support of the existing militarized inter-state security arrangements, is disappointing. Also, we should keep in

mind that the Security Council itself, despite all those follow-up resolutions, has yet to internalize gender considerations into the operational behavior of its actions.

I strongly believe that Resolution 1325 is not the end but the beginning of the processes that will gradually help reduce and eliminate the inequalities. A major concern emerging from various studies is that the themes most frequently referenced in resolutions by the Security Council tend to refer to women as victims rather than as active agents in the peace-building process, such as governance, peace negotiations and post-conflict nation-building.

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My own experience during the course of my different responsibilities — more so during the past 20 years — has shown that the participation of women in peacemaking, peacekeeping and peace-building assures that their experiences, priorities and solutions contribute to stability, including governance and sustainable peace. Such encouraging developments are to be seen in the work of — to name a few — the Mano River Women's Peace Network, a regional NGO headquartered in Sierra Leone in West Africa; FemLINK Pacific, another regional organization based in Fiji; in the courageous efforts for women's and girl's education in Afghanistan; and organizations like the Institute for Inclusive Security based in Washington, D.C., and the Global Network of Women

These bright examples however do not reflect the overall picture in terms of the implementation of 1325. The role of the UN Secretariat, the secretary-general in particular, leaves much to be desired, to say the least. Undoubtedly, there is a clear need for his genuinely active and dedicated engagement in using the moral authority of the United Nations and the high office he occupies for the effective implementation of 1325.

What Can Be Done?

What then can we do in the coming months and years to move forward in ensuring an effective, real and faithful implementation of 1325 in letter and spirit?

As a start, even after all the enthusiasm generated by the 10th anniversary of 1325 last October, the leadership of the secretary-general should be manifested in at least four areas:

First, the secretary-general should give top priority to energizing and supporting the UN member states to prepare their respective National Plan

of Action (NAP) for 1325 at the country level. Of 193 UN members, only 24 have prepared such plans so far — a meager one-third of which are developing countries. He should personally write to heads of states and governments — a civil society demand made to him a year ago — suggesting a timeframe to have their plans ready and get the UN resident coordinators to follow up on that. In real terms, NAP is the engine that would speed up the implementation of Resolution 1325.

Second, special attention should be given to the need for the promotion of awareness and sensitivity and training of the senior officials within the UN system as a whole with regard to Resolution 1325.

Third, urgent attention should be given to put an end to the sexual violence and abuses which take place in the name of peacekeeping and which have been ignored, tolerated and left unpunished for years by the UN. There should be no impunity whatsoever for the perpetrators of such acts.

Fourth, the secretary-general needs to take the lead in setting up a six-monthly inclusive consultative process with civil society organizations at all levels and involving all relevant UN entities for the implementation of Resolution 1325. He should also encourage similar consultative processes with non-governmental organizations at country level.

UN Women, the new UN entity established in July 2010 by the General Assembly, to promote gender equality and empowerment of women, should take these four areas up in earnest to make progress and to show early leadership.



Delegates at the UN Security Council meeting on October 21, 2010, reaffirmed their "commitment to the continuing and implementation of Resolution 1323".

A gender-responsive justice system is an integral element of effective peace processes and a necessary component of nation-building activities in post-conflict situations. When women are able to participate in peace processes, the development of such a system is one of the priority concerns they raise. Such a justice system helps to break the continuing cycle of violence against women, and ensures their meaningful participation not only in peace negotiations, but in rebuilding their communities and in transforming their societies.

Calling upon warring parties to adopt “a gender perspective” on peace negotiations and “gender mainstreaming” in all UN peacekeeping missions would sound hollow and meaningless unless we build women’s capacity and provide real opportunities and support to ensure women’s political, economic and social empowerment, a place at the peace negotiation table and equal representation at all levels of decision-making.

After the failure of the Security Council to adopt the indicators proposed by the secretary-general last October, it is high time to ensure that a doable, realistic and practical set of indicators to monitor and measure progress in the implementation of 1325 receive the whole-hearted approval of the Council. As we face the reality after the 10th anniversary, the international community’s commitment in 2011 is crucial.

1325 Belongs to Humanity

As my personal contribution to the effective implementation of Resolution 1325, at a meeting on 1325 at the United States Institute of Peace in Washington, DC in July 2010, I launched my own proposal entitled “Do-able First-Track Indicators for Realizing the 1325 Promise into Reality,” outlining measures that could be initiated without further delays and without prolonging our agony and frustration after 10 years of waiting in expectation.

Resolution 1325 belongs to humanity — it is owned by us all and it is for the benefit of all — it was intended as such since March 2000 when the conceptual breakthrough was made. Therefore, on the occasion of the 10th anniversary at the peace gathering of civil society in New York, on Oct.25, 2010, I declared “1325: a common heritage of humanity,” wherein the global objectives of peace, equality and development are reflected in a uniquely historic, universal document of the United Nations.

We should never forget that when women are marginalized, there is little chance for the world to get sustainable peace in the real sense.