

# THE PRACTICAL IS THE POLITICAL: THE UN'S GLOBAL STUDY ON WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY



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Weighing in at just under five pounds, the 417-page *Global Study on the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325*, released last month, is nothing if not ambitious. Its expansive subtitle – “Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing Peace” – correctly hints at the study’s broad thematic scope. Just recapitulating, classifying, and mapping the dozens of recommendations spread throughout the report’s thirteen main chapters required a 20-page annex, which despite the best of intentions is anything but reader-friendly.

This presentational confusion is symptomatic of deeper structural shortcomings in how the *Global Study* was conceived. The report’s outline lacks a clear organizing principle. The rationale for the definition of chapter topics, and their sequencing, is not obvious. There is considerable repetition. Some sections – Chapter 8 on conflict-prevention, for instance – are substantively thin. Others are overstuffed: Chapter 10 (on ‘Actors’) is three times the length of most others. As a result, clarity suffers.

But architectural elegance, conceptual consistency, and economy of expression are the wrong yardsticks by which to measure a report such as this. Far more consequential is whether its recommendations are sufficiently concrete, and bought into widely enough, to stand a decent chance of real-world adoption. In this respect, the *Global Study* is already a resounding success: some of its key recommendations were incorporated into a Security Council resolution ([UNSCR 2242](#)) the day before the report itself was launched. Other proposals emerging from the study will be the subject of high-level internal UN deliberations in the weeks and months ahead. To cite these practical implications is not to damn the report's analytical quality with faint praise. Both the issues and reform proposals in, for example, Chapter 6 (on peacekeeping) are closely argued, and the study's ability to combine internal UN information with the findings of social-science research is impressive.

The institutional and policy reforms proposed in the *Global Study* are directed at the usual range of stakeholders – UN departments and agencies, aid donors, member states in general, the Security Council, civil society organizations, the media – and cover everything from increasing women's political participation in post-conflict countries to addressing gender-discrimination within traditional justice mechanisms. The broad canvas is altogether fitting given that the report was tasked with reviewing a decade and a half of progress on advancing the objectives of [Resolution 1325](#) since its passage in 2000, including efforts to implement the many “women, peace and security” (WPS) resolutions adopted in the intervening years. Broad-spectrum coverage is also strategic: addressing a wider range of subjects and conceptual framings provides opportunities for a more diverse array of WPS advocates within and outside the UN to advance their specific agendas, whether these involve the rights of women refugees (Chapter 12) or reforms to how humanitarian services are delivered (Chapter 4).

## STAYING IN STEP

The *Global Study's* thinking and recommendations align fairly closely with the gender-related elements of the two other major UN peace and security reviews released this year: *Uniting our Strengths for Peace*, the [Report of the Secretary-General's High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations \(HIPPO\)](#), and *The Challenge of Sustaining Peace*, the Report of the Advisory Group of Experts for the 2015 Review of the UN's Peacebuilding Architecture. The consistency across these three reports is no coincidence. All three were subjected to similar inter-agency consultations within the UN system. Because this largely involved the same UN staff members from one report to the next – the *Global Study's* lead author was also a member of HIPPO – a concerted effort

at “coordinated messaging” was a prominent feature of the process by which the three documents were produced. In fact, it would have been surprising if the reports, all released within a 90-day period, had come to blatantly contradictory conclusions. These are, for the most part, consensus documents, and the balance of power among the key peace and security stakeholders – within the UN system as well as among member states – varies little from one month to the next.

Still, because it focuses on gender issues, the *Global Study*, which was requested by the Security Council in Resolution 2122 (2013), goes well beyond what could reasonably be covered in the two earlier reports. The willingness to outline a more far-reaching agenda was also a reflection of the *Global Study*’s organizational locus: while *Uniting for Peace* was coordinated by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), and the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) oversaw the drafting of *Sustaining Peace*, the *Global Study* was conducted under the auspices of UN Women. The study’s lead author, Radhika Coomaraswamy, formerly the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, not only knows the UN system well, but was well known within the system as someone willing to confront powerful actors that sought to obstruct her office’s ability to fulfill its mandate. This independent streak may help to account for the report’s willingness to stake out new ground.

Much of the analysis underlying the *Global Study* will be familiar to people who have followed the evolution of the WPS agenda. It reports, with updated statistics, on the still pitifully low proportion of women among negotiating delegations to peace talks; the continued lack of funding dedicated to advancing gender equality and meeting women’s needs in post-conflict situations; and the difficulties that women’s organizations in conflict-affected countries face when seeking access to international forums. These points are supported by a nicely curated selection of academic research, as well as the findings from a series of regional consultations organized to inform the *Global Study*.

One of the key messages that emerged from these consultations was the urgent need among local women peacebuilders in civil society for rapidly disbursing financial assistance to help them play the kind of active and sustained role envisioned for them in [Resolution 1325](#). As a result, the *Global Study* recommended that a specialized financing instrument be created for this purpose. The UN system and some donor governments have already begun taking action on this proposal. Even if the idea of establishing a dedicated funding window for

women's peace organizations has been circulating for years, there is nothing like a high-profile public manifesto to galvanize action.

## PULLING PUNCHES

For all its merits, the *Global Study's* drafting team had to operate within institutional limits. Pressures from within the UN bureaucracy, particularly from the lead departments responsible for peace and security, effectively constrained the nature and the depth of self-examination the report could undertake. For instance, the report seeks to balance the bad news about women's continued underrepresentation in the mediation field by celebrating, in a standalone box (p. 275), the appointment of Mary Robinson (a former president of Ireland and one-time UN High Commissioner for Human Rights) as the Secretary-General's representative to the Great Lakes Region – ostensibly the first woman to be appointed a lead peace envoy by the UN. What the report avoids mentioning is that this post does not involve mediating an ongoing conflict, but rather facilitating the adoption of new guidelines and protocols in support of an existing conflict-prevention framework. This is not unimportant work, and Robinson has achievements to point to, but a more honest accounting of her appointment would have acknowledged that the UN has still, to date, never appointed a woman as a chief mediator.

One also gets the impression that the data behind some of the study's charts and graphs has been carefully massaged to cast the UN – or parts of it, anyway – in a more flattering light. For instance, rather than reporting straightforwardly on the share of women among senior managers in UN peace operations, which would mean looking at the “director” level and above, a graph on page 271 depicts something slightly different: the proportion of women in a managerial bracket specifically devised to include more junior positions and exclude some that are higher up. This appears to show steady, if excruciatingly slow, progress in recent years. But inquiring minds might suspect that the trend would reflect less well on the UN had a less artful system of classification been used.

The *Global Study* also ignores uncomfortable questions that might generate a productive conversation about the reasons why the WPS agenda has progressed more quickly in some places than in others. For instance, the report might have asked why certain peace processes conducted outside the Security Council's purview – those that do not constitute a standing item on the Council's agenda – have arguably performed better than most UN-run

mediation efforts when it comes to implementing at least some of [Resolution 1325's](#) four pillars of prevention, protection, participation, and relief and recovery.

Take the example of the long-running civil war in Colombia, which was not subjected to continuous Security Council monitoring and was not the site of a UN diplomatic or security mission. Yet, the amount of activity undertaken to advance women's leadership in conflict-resolution processes in Colombia is striking. In 2014, a "subcommission on gender," consisting of representatives from both parties to the conflict, was established to inform the ongoing talks between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Colombian government. This built on earlier efforts to ensure women's engagement (and the representation of gender issues) in peace negotiations.

By contrast, UN-administered processes typically do not achieve anything like Colombian levels of gender-responsive peacebuilding with respect to quotas for women in public institutions or other elements of the participation pillar. This may partly reflect Colombia's middle-income status, the strength of its women's movement, and even the support provided by UN Women (which gets a self-congratulatory shout out on page 46). Yet, it's fair to say that if the *Global Study* had not been drafted by the UN, it might have taken greater pains to address the crucial unanswered question in this study, and on which *Uniting for Peace* and *Sustaining Peace* were equally silent: why has the UN been so stunningly incapable of taking even the procedural steps it prescribes for itself, to say nothing of achieving its desired outcomes? Examples of non-implementation are (sometimes) identified in the *Global Study*, but the reasons behind such lapses are rarely if ever confronted honestly. In particular, the political struggles underlying non-implementation – within the UN system and among member states – are left almost completely unexplored.

The "Financing of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda" (the subject of Chapter 13) is a good example. The reader learns, through a wealth of data, that no standardized system for measuring gender-equality-focused spending in conflict-affected countries is in use across the UN system, nor is there a consistently rigorous channel through which UN entities report the gender-disaggregated spending data that they do generate. But no serious effort is then made to get to the bottom of why these problems have persisted. The report does not, for instance, examine the incentive for entities to reduce exposure to criticism about their under-spending on women's post-conflict priorities. Nor does the *Global Study* adequately explain the UN system's failure to reach even the modest spending target specified in the Secretary-General's 2010 Seven-Point Action Plan on Gender-

Responsive Peacebuilding: that 15% of post-conflict project funding be geared toward addressing gender-equality. (The Secretary-General's Policy Committee agreed in late 2010 that this target would be reached by 2014.) Instead, the *Global Study* calls for applying the same (as yet unmet) 15% target more broadly – that is, to all peace and security spending “across the board”, including in UN missions and by member-states. In light of past experience, it is unclear why anyone should take these new pledges more seriously.

## STRUCTURAL REFORMS

The *Global Study* rightly notes that fully implementing [Resolution 1325](#) has been, and will remain, a matter for all actors – national and international, state and non-state. At the same time, it is perhaps inevitable that the most significant recommendations of a UN report will be targeted at the UN itself. Indeed, the *Global Study* proposes a number of structural changes to the UN's WPS architecture. Three are particularly noteworthy.

**The first structural change** is a call to establish a Security Council working group to focus attention on the gender dimensions of the Council's thematic agenda items (on the rule of law, the protection of civilians, etc.) and its country-specific work. The purpose is, among other things, to ensure that when the Council drafts mandates for the peace operations it authorizes, members have access to detailed information on country-specific gender issues across a range of functional domains such as transitional justice and security sector reform. To support its recommendation for a working group, the *Global Study* cites research conducted by several civil-society organizations, including the NGO Working Group on Women Peace and Security. These studies have documented the Security Council's uneven performance when it comes to providing detailed instructions to mission leadership on how to advance women's ‘participation,’ whether in peace talks, post-conflict planning or constitutional reform processes. This is in contrast to the often very detailed provisions the Council uses on ‘protection’ issues, particularly those related to conflict-related sexual violence, in its country-specific resolutions.

In Operational Paragraph 5 of [Security Council Resolution 2242](#), passed on 13 October, the Council announced its intention to set up an “informal experts group,” more or less along the lines suggested in the *Global Study*. This is an idea that some Council members had resisted for years, and for which the Russian delegation continued to express a decided lack of enthusiasm even as it voted in favor of the resolution. (Resolution 2242 was passed

on the day of the Council's annual Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security, which in this 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of [Resolution 1325](#) featured a record number of countries making statements in a marathon session that attracted significant media interest.)

Whether this informal expert group will become a lively part of the Security Council's regular calendar – as is the case with the protection of civilians working group, for instance – is hard to say. The commitment of key member-states will be a major determinant, as will the skill with which the group's working methods are designed. The recommendation that the group be co-chaired by one permanent member and one elected (i.e., fixed-term) member is a good start. An important constraint is the lack of a robust system for delivering policy-relevant information on country-specific gender issues to the Council in a timely and actionable form. This could be remedied by seriously strengthening UN Women's field offices, which currently lack analytical capacity. The odds of securing new donor funding for such a purpose appear low at present.

**The second structural reform** concerns the architecture of UN field missions. The *Global Study* proposed that a senior gender advisor at the director level be assigned to advise each mission's SRSG on everything from electoral systems and administration to the role of women in post-conflict economic recovery. Gender advisors of various kinds have been deployed to UN missions and country teams in conflict-affected countries for more than a decade, but they are often relegated to marginal activities. Even those with sector-specific expertise have been generally unable to ensure that mission leadership is continuously apprised of the gender dimensions of key issues, let alone influence decision-making.

The appointment of gender advisers is another proposal the Security Council adopted without delay. Operational Paragraph 7 of [Resolution 2242](#) endorses the idea of the Secretary-General deploying senior gender advisers, which is as good an interim outcome as the *Global Study's* authors could have hoped for. On the other hand, the ability of these advisers to shape policy or the design of decision-making bodies may well depend on what kinds of skills are prioritized in recruitment, which part of the UN assigns them to missions, and (most importantly) the entity to which they report. As of now, it seems that the gender advisers – which the UN system could well take years to deploy widely – will lack the quasi-independence enjoyed by human rights components within UN field missions. This will affect the quality of the advice rendered as well as the receptivity of mission leaders to its content.

**The *Global Study*'s third major proposal** is for the creation of a new high-level position in UN Women: an Assistant Secretary-General (ASG) for Women, Peace and Security. The new ASG would be charged with championing the WPS agenda, and representing UN Women at interagency forums and before intergovernmental bodies, including but not limited to the Security Council. The idea of a high-level official who could exert pressure on other parts of the UN system to live up to their commitments has a certain appeal. The case for a new leadership figure would be more convincing, however, if a truly independent office – outside the normal bureaucratic chain of command – were to be established. This was not to be. The report argues, cogently if not persuasively, that the nature of the issues do not lend themselves to the creation of a post along the lines of the SRSG on Sexual Violence in Conflict. That office has considerable latitude to speak out and exert pressure, including through its work with Security Council sanctions committees. Whether member-states, not to mention the UN's senior management, will ultimately back the idea of a new ASG is hard to predict. (This is not a decision that can be made through a Security Council resolution.) But there does not seem to be a groundswell of support.

Even if this recommendation is not adopted, the *Global Study* will have achieved a great deal. In addition to the structural reform proposals mentioned here (and there are many others), the report establishes principles to inform what appear likely to be growth areas in the peace and security field. Perhaps most notably, the report (in Chapter 9) argues forcefully against incorporating the work of local women peacebuilders into the kind of soft, but still militarily driven, counter-terrorism strategies found in the emerging international agenda on “countering violent extremism.” This emphasis on strategic detachment – which aims to avoid “instrumentalizing” the women's empowerment agenda and tarnishing the reputation of WPS advocates through association with military actors – could, in theory, risk distancing gender equality advocates from high-level security-planning forums. That would be an ironic outcome, given the years invested in securing women's participation in precisely such bodies.

A similar risk arises from another of the report's notable preoccupations: its insistence (in Chapter 12) on identifying the links between WPS objectives and the legal and institutional foundations of international human rights. Could not these arguments also be used to support the claim – a favorite among WPS skeptics – that issues of women's participation are a matter for the UN's human rights bodies, and not a fit subject for the



Security Council's continued attention? The willingness of the *Global Study's* architects to hazard such risks reflects a sense that securing practical, political gains need not come at the expense of principles.

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