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Why the United Nations security council must let women speak freely

Women's civil society advocates were long excluded from the security council. This is changing, but they must be allowed to speak freely.

By Louise Allen

Women civil society advocates from war-torn countries now have greater access to the United Nations' security council. This means that, at last, women with lived experiences of dealing with conflict can inform the most powerful global body addressing peace and security issues.

Resolution 1325, passed in 2000, requires the security council to engage women in conflict resolution. Once or twice a year, an opportunity was created for one woman representing all of civil society to speak during open debates on women, peace and security. This year, these are being held on 25 October.

However, outside of these annual debates, from its inception in 1946 until just three years ago, civil society representatives were not permitted to brief the security council during country-specific meetings. This has changed.

In the first nine months of 2018, more than a dozen representatives from women's organisations spoke to the 15 council members. Among them was Razia Sultana, the first Rohingya person to ever address the security council.

Why does this matter? These briefings convey intel and perspectives that council members would not otherwise hear.

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Hajer Sharief from Libya, one of several women civil society advocates who have recently briefed the UN security council. Photo: LNU Photo. CC BY 2.0. Some rights reserved.
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Hajer Sharief from Libya gave a briefing in January, facilitated by the NGO working group on women, peace and security (of which I was executive director, until the end of August). Afterwards, a diplomat told us her account had persuaded some council members to follow up with the head of the country's UN mission to ensure that her policy recommendations were taken up.

A growing number of UN member states have publicly stated that they welcome such statements by representatives of women's organisations.

But the UN – an organisation that defends national sovereignty – has long been reluctant to accept civil society testimony, particularly when it challenges government narratives. Expecting civil society to fit within such narrow parameters undermines the inclusion of women's testimony and analysis.

A diplomat once relayed a request from their ambassador to identify a civil society speaker who had either been raped or was born of rape, lived through the stigma of their ordeal and had then had risen to become a leader in their community. The aim was to have someone who could 'move' the security council with her story.

This type of request reduces civil society participation to entertainment – a potentially exploitative or voyeuristic kind – not a partnership. Civil society's role is not to 'move' the council. The council and civil society alike must take great care when working with survivors of sexual violence, in order not to sensationalise an individual's experiences or cause further harm by re-traumatising them.

This request was dismissed, and a robust conversation with the diplomats ensued to explain why. However, since then, many other council members have similarly asked civil society speakers to focus primarily on their personal experiences, suggesting a preference for personal narrative over local analysis and recommendations.

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On several occasions, member states have asked for recommendations of women civil society representatives who are compelling speakers, who speak English well, but are not 'too political', contentious or divisive.

There are also frequent appeals, once invitations are accepted, for civil society speakers to focus remarks narrowly on specific areas, or not to discuss politically sensitive issues. New York-based civil society has countered this and advised that invited speakers should be enabled to give independent statements which best reflect the needs of their communities and the assessments of their organisations.

It takes political will in the first place for a member state to extend such invitations, as these briefings still do not enjoy universal support from all security council members.

In 2017, an activist from Burundi made headlines when Russia and other members blocked her from speaking. To expect women civil society speakers to limit themselves to communicating a moving personal story is to assume that they are not political analysts and actors with urgent messages to deliver.

The various powerful statements made by women civil society advocates over the past year have required real political courage, both from the women themselves and from the member states that invited them.

Sultana opened her statement in April by stating that the security council had failed the Rohingya people. She outlined essential recommendations related to the humanitarian situation in Bangladesh, accountability for the Burmese military and legal reforms required for an inclusive and equal Myanmar.

Afterwards, council members mentioned their surprise at her strongly-worded statement, but recognised that it had been vital for her to denounce inaction.

Such opportunities should be protected and promoted to further institutionalise women's participation in this formal setting. Attempts to craft their statements into politically palatable messages contradict the very reason these briefings are so essential – and question whether the role of civil society is genuinely appreciated and understood.