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‘Localising the Global’ – Resolution 1325 as a tool for promoting women's rights and gender equality in Rwanda[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Much work on Resolution 1325 and the agenda of ‘women, peace and security’ has its focus on how Res 1325 has ‘trickled down’ from the global to the local level in a specific context. This article will reverse the gaze highlighting women's local perspectives asking what the ‘women, peace and security agenda’ have done for respectively the national women's organisations and local women's groups in a specific African post-conflict setting - Rwanda. The article sheds light on the local/global dynamics in the processes of translating Res 1325 with a focus on the gender language and practices. Thus, it explores how the global gender language and the global norms laid out in Resolution 1325 has been used by national women's organisations working as ‘localising agents’ in transformative processes where the gender norms laid out have become part of the gender vocabulary of the women's organisations and been appropriated. The article also explores to which extent Resolution 1325 has worked as promoting women's rights and gender equality at the level of local women's groups and identifies some tension with local understandings of gender and local practices indicating that further localising is needed.

Introduction

During the genocide in Rwanda it is estimated that 800.000 men and women died in 100 days leaving a high number of female headed households and 250.000–300.000 women were raped followed by a high rate of HIV/AIDS infections (Longman, 2006; Powley, 2003). Mainly, Tutsi women were victims of rape as they were portrayed as seductresses towards Hutu men as a part of the propaganda in the Hutu ten commandments,¹ but also Hutu women who were in ethnically mixed marriages or who sympathised with the Tutsi were victims of violence. Many women were left to fend on their own as their husbands were either killed, in exile or imprisoned. These women faced severe economic hardship, as their property had in many cases been taken over, and also isolation in their dispersed communities combined with a deep feeling of mistrust and suspicion towards neighbours and sometimes even family members as a consequence of the genocide (Baines, 2005; Burnet, 2012; Newbury & Baldwin, 2001). As described in the report “Strengthening Governance: The Role of Women in Rwanda's Transition” the genocide also led to changes forced by the circumstances at the micro level where women and girls made up 70% of the

population: “They were the ones who picked up the pieces of a literally decimated society and began to rebuild. They buried the dead, found homes for nearly 500.000 orphans and built shelters”, (Powley, 2003; 13).

The horror of the genocide in Rwanda (1994) was an eye opener for the international community – including the UN – on the gendered aspects of conflicts and the use of rape as a systematic weapon. The adoption of Resolution 1325 (Res 1325) was based on the experiences from Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. Res 1325 formally put ‘women, peace and security’ on the agenda in the UN Security Council and was adopted in year 2000. With its promises of including women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building and mainstreaming of the traditionally male dominated security sector it represented an important milestone. Already, before Res 1325 was adopted, an active women's constituency was in place lobbying for it and bringing forward information on the gendered aspects of conflict and peace-making from women's groups in war torn societies to the (predominantly) male Security Council members, who rarely left New York and most often not to speak with representatives of local women's groups (Cohn, 2008). Thus, with the help of Security Council members

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¹ The ‘Hutu Ten Commandments’ were Hutu extremist propaganda publicly circulated. Three of the commandments addressed women's role. One of the commandments declared that a man was a traitor if he had a relation to a Tutsi woman as a wife, concubine, secretary or protégé. Another commandment stresses that Hutu women are more dignified and more conscientious in their roles as women, wives and mothers. A third commandment encourages Hutu women to be on guard and bring their husbands, brothers and sons to reasons.

from Canada, Jamaica and Namibia the 'women's lobby'² was successful in bringing forward their messages. Even after the adoption of Res 1325 global women's networks like the NGO Working Group on Peace and Security (NGOWP) (<http://www.womenpeacesecurity.org/>), Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) (<http://peacewomen.org/>) and the Global Network of Women Peace Builders (GNWP) (<http://www.gnwp.org/>) have strategically worked to ensure that the promises of Res 1325 on more female involvement in peace processes are put into practice. Recently, WILPF brought forward inputs from women's organisations to the high level review of Res 1325 taking place in October 2015 and GNWP has been running a project called "Women Count – Security Council Resolution 1325" with the publishing of Civil Society Monitoring Reports on Res 1325 in selected countries including Rwanda. Thus, Res 1325 was already, from the beginning, an important battlefield for women's organisations to ensure that the gendered effects of conflicts were addressed and women's perspectives on peace and security were acknowledged as they had long been overlooked.

Despite the vital role of the women's organisations, only two provisions of Res 1325 are mentioning women's groups respectively the need to include "Measures that support local women's peace initiatives and indigenous processes for conflict resolution, and that involve women in all of the implementation mechanisms of the peace agreements" (UN Security Council, 2000; 3, 8b) and for ensuring that "Security Council missions take into account gender considerations and the rights of women, including through consultation with local and international women's groups" to ensure a gender perspective (UN Security Council, 2000; 3, 15). As such Res 1325 was not designed for promoting women's activism, but this has not stopped the women's organisations from using it as a weapon.

The article brings forward Rwandese women's local responses to the global gender talk about Res 1325 and the agenda on 'women, peace and security' as their voices and "how the local talks back" (Levitt & Merry, 2009; 442) to the global are often overlooked. The expectation that global gender talk just 'trickles down' to the local level remains a vision and has very little to do with the realities on the ground and the on-going local gender battles. Thus, the article takes its point of departure in the strategies, visions and hopes of the national women's organisations and local women's groups in post-conflict Rwanda to explore if or how the global gender talk and the promises laid out in Res 1325 has been translated into practice? Or in other words if the global gender talk and its promises have been useful for the national women's organisations and local women's groups and have made any difference for women's lives?

The main argument of the article is that the global gender talk laid out in Res 1325 has been useful for the national women's organisations but has created some tension at the level of local women's groups. The findings of the article demonstrate that the national women's organisations in Rwanda have adopted the gender language linked to the 'women, peace and security' agenda with all its costs and serve as 'localising agents' for the 'women, peace and security' package. However, they also work as 'accommodating agents' using the 'women, peace and security' package to legitimise their own activities, attract more resources and give some clout to their activities. At the level of the local women's groups in Rwanda, the findings of the article demonstrate that tension exists between local gender understandings and practises and the global gender norms as gender is understood differently and is seen as a foreign concept. The findings also point out the importance of addressing questions of men and masculinities as they seem to be the losers and women the winners of the on-going gender battles.

The article is based on data collected during my fieldwork in

² This refers to the six organisations in the NGO working group: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), Amnesty International, International Alert, Hague Appeal for Peace, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children and Women's Caucus for Gender Justice (Cohn, 2008).

Rwanda in February 2015,³ mainly semi-structured qualitative interviews with the leaders of three major national women's organisations (one of which is an umbrella organisation) and one men's organisation – all with their headquarters in Kigali but some of them with local branches. These organisations can be characterised as national and regional networks and the umbrella organisation a national policy advocate organisation.⁴ The interviews were conducted in English at the headquarters and lasted one and a half hour and in one case also included a meeting with the local women who benefitted from the activities and a visit to the facilities offered. In addition four local focus group were carried out interviewed with all together 20 participants from women's groups in respectively the western (Murambi/Gashali) and eastern (Mukama/Rukomo) part of Rwanda⁵ with community based women's groups⁶ engaged in income generating activities like basket weaving, pineapple-growing, poultry-rearing and vegetable growing. The interviews were carried out in the local setting where the work of the groups took place in the local language Kinyarwanda with a local translator and lasted around three hours. Interviews were also conducted with representatives from the state level (Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion/Gender Monitoring Office) and the UN (UN Women/UNHCR), but these interviews have been the focus of another article (author forthcoming) and will only be used as background information. All the interviews were taped and combined with my written notes on the impressions from the interviews. Despite of the critique against the gender language in Res 1325 (see the section on researching local norm translation) this document is the focus of the article as this is the document the actors relate to and which is the point of departure for the national action plans. The interviews are combined with readings of the Rwanda National Action Plan on Resolution 1325 for the years 2009–2012, Civil Society Monitoring Reports on Resolution 1325 from 2010 and 2012 and the Evaluation Report of the Rwanda National Action Plan from 2015.

It has been a methodological challenge to detect the influence of Res 1325 at the level of the local women's groups – perhaps not surprisingly. The national women's groups with their base in Kigali and their links to regional and transnational networks are familiar with the global gender language and Res 1325 and use it actively. However, the further one moves away from the centre the less known and traceable are the global gender norms. At the level of the local women's groups no one was aware of Res 1325 and the interviews rather focused on the themes related to Res 1325 like for example women's participation in local decision-making fora/conflict mechanisms and violence against women in a post-conflict setting. But some attention was also given to broader gender issues like women's economic empowerment, as this is an important aspect in the Rwanda National Action Plan on Res 1325. However, the women in the local women's groups did not differentiate between the gender norms laid out at the national/international level leaving it to the researcher to try and (re)establish those indirect links.

³ The fieldwork was made possible through the economic support from the Carlsberg Foundation.

⁴ In her work Hassim defines national and regional networks as "identifiable constituencies" (2005; 6) which are often based in the cities and funded by foreign donors. These networks are "characterised by attention to issues that would in the 1980s have been regarded as feminist (and therefore problematic)" (ibid.) – issues such as violence against women. Thus, the networks are oriented towards women's strategic interests. She (ibid) defines national policy advocates as "advocacy agents who are tied into the state processes" (Hassim 2005: 4). These are described as resourceful organisations in terms of expertise and funding and as being part of consultations. Apart from this, they are also usually based in the cities. Often these organisations would make alliances with other actors outside and within the civil society. However, it is important to bear in mind that in the context of Rwanda all the women's organisations both work on women's practical and strategic needs and interests which is different than in the definitions by Hassim.

⁵ I would like to thank ADRA-Rwanda for the support during my fieldwork in Rwanda.

⁶ Hassim states about community based organisations that they are "women organisations at this level have been the most distant from the state, and even from women's NGOs and networks that engage the state. A major part of their work addresses women's practical needs" (Hassim 2005: 6).

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