



The impact of Covid-19 on the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

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KEY TAKE AWAYS

- Women appear to be disproportionately affected by Covid-19
- Pushback on global commitment to gender equality
- Gender equality and human development are correlated: focussing on gender equality will have a catalytic effect on the SDGs
- The increasing strain on peace operations is likely to have a negative effect on the WPS agenda

The year 2020 marks the 20th anniversary of the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution (SCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) (UNSC 2000).¹ Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, meetings to mark these anniversaries have been put on hold. Although all regions are affected by Covid-19, the consequences are unevenly felt. Emerging research and lessons from previous pandemics indicate that women are disproportionately affected by Covid-19. Generally speaking, times of crisis tend to reveal and reinforce socio-economic inequalities, reflecting the distribution of power in societies (Wilén 2020). Lack of resources generally impacts women more than men (Tryggestad 2020);² during the current lockdown, reports of sexual and gender-based violence, particularly domestic violence against women and girls, have spiked (UN 2020b:2). The UN has recently announced that the Covid-19 crisis threatens ‘to push back the limited gains on gender equality and exacerbate the feminizing of poverty, vulnerability to violence, and women’s equal participation in the labour force’ (UN 2020a:8; UN Women 2020b).

Gendered effect of Covid-19

In order to minimize the spread of Covid-19, most countries have imposed restrictions on movement, and measures of local isolation. It is estimated that around 81% of the world’s work force are currently impacted by lockdown measures (OECD 2020). For women living in countries with developing economies, Covid-19 prevention measures have particularly broad ramifications. Experience from the outbreak of the Ebola virus has shown this: ‘in Liberia, where approximately 85% of daily market traders are women, Ebola prevention measures severely impacted women’s livelihoods and economic security’ (UN Women 2014; UN 2020b:4). Travel restrictions were among the reasons.

Moreover, women make up a disproportionate percentage of those working in sectors that offer low social protection (Care International 2020a). In developing economies, 70% of women’s employment is in the informal sector, with few measures for protection against dismissal, or for paid leave (UN 2020b). In addition comes the uncertainties connected with unpaid care work at home (Ramo 2020). With schools and kindergartens closed across the globe, as has been the case with the Covid-19 crisis, women step in as main caretakers. In conflict-affected areas, especially in refugee camps, women and children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of Covid-19 (UNHCR 2020). Social distancing is often not an option, and much of the burden falls on women in the front line, caring for families.

Push-back to the global commitment to gender equality?

Border closures, and the lack of basic equipment for front-line health personnel, have revealed how poorly prepared countries have been for such a pandemic. As governments invest heavily in measures aimed at containing the virus and offer socio-economic stimulation packages to their own population, there is a risk that aid budgets, including budgets for funding the WPS agenda and the civil society actors promoting this, will shrink (OECD 2020). In addition comes the risk that this may give ammunition to nationalist politicians, who may seize the opportunity to continue with protectionist and nationalistic policies, even after the crisis is over, contributing to a pushback on value-oriented politics and multilateral cooperation, including global commitment to gender equality.

Already prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, a growing number of UN member states had started to question established standards of women's rights, with a roll-back on fundamental legislation for gender equality (Taylor and Baldwin 2019; OHCHR 2020). According to a recent report, 'despite decades of progress in advancing women's rights, bias against gender equality is increasing in some countries, with evidence of a backlash in attitudes among both men and women'; further, that younger men may be less committed to equality than their elders (Human Development Report Office 2020:9). Also noteworthy is the correlation between gender equality and human development: 'no country has reached low inequality in human development without reducing the loss coming from gender inequality' (ibid:2).

There are signs of backlash also within the UN Security Council, where the permanent members have struggled to find common ground on the WPS agenda lately, especially on language regarding sexual and reproductive health rights (Aoláin 2019). In September 2019, UN SCR 2467 on conflict-related sexual violence became the first WPS resolution not to be unanimously adopted (Taylor and Baldwin 2019).

The current pandemic may also constitute a risk to actual implementation of the WPS agenda. A March 2020 survey amongst peacekeepers in UN peace operations as well as practitioners and academics found that while respondents regarded SCR 1325 as important (91% answered on the positive end of the scale), it is not necessarily seen as a priority: 55% of the respondents said that the agenda is a priority in their mission, and a mere 14% gave it the highest score on a scale from 1 to 6 (Osland, Nortvedt and Røysamb 2020). On this point, respondents emphasised that the amount of attention paid to the WPS agenda varies considerably among missions and that contextual factors play an important role. Findings also show that gender equality is often regarded as a second-tier issue when set against other pressing issues.³ The Covid-19 pandemic may exacerbate the dilemma of prioritizing tasks and objectives within ongoing peace operations.

Concluding remarks

SCR 1325 was the first UN resolution to recognize the central role of women as change agents in contributing to peace and security (UN 2020b). Given the above-noted correlation between gender equality and human development, investments in gender equality will have a clear effect on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. Today, with signs of a pushback on global commitments to gender equality, defending the accomplishments of the past 20 years, with continued support to the work of the UN and member states towards achieving gender equality, has become more important than ever.

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Endnotes

1. 2020 also marks the 25th anniversary for the Fourth World Conference on Women and the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995).
2. Whereas 'regular' recessions tend to affect male employment more severely, Covid-19 seems to have the opposite effect, due to the inherent social distancing measures (Alon et al. 2020).
3. Findings from the Effectiveness of Peace Operations (EPON) network indicate similar tendencies in a case study of UN peace operations in Mali.

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