

Why Should We Understand Multiple Meanings of ‘Gender Security’?

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Abstract: Research concerned with language and meanings is often thought to be less useful and less policy-relevant than research utilising instrumental approaches. This article explores how a deeper understanding of the variety of meanings about ‘gender security’ in relation to Security Council Resolution 1325 can be useful to practitioners. An analysis of three initiatives related to SCR 1325 in Serbia demonstrates that different post-conflict personal-political imaginations lead to very different interpretations of ‘gender security’, shaping the subsequent policy designed to implement SCR 1325. Investigating how (potentially conflicting) ‘gender security’ policy is made is useful to practitioners as it enables us to go some way towards creating a policy that would be meaningful and significant to all stakeholders.

Keywords: Serbia, policy, gender security, post-conflict, SCR 1325

Introduction

What does ‘gender security’ mean? The concept is trickier than it might seem. For instance, to ‘gender’ something is not *necessarily* about including women, although many argue that it is. ‘Security’ is also messy: it could refer to a sense of safety in daily life, or to the protection of state borders. It is not my intention in this article to discuss or define ‘gender security’. Rather, my intention is to highlight how a deeper understanding of the variety of meanings about ‘gender security’ can be useful to practitioners. Scholarly work which has been heavily inspired by post-structuralism and a concern with language and meanings (that is, discourse) is often thought to be less useful to policy-makers, think-tanks, NGOs and other practitioners – less useful than more instrumental social science approaches. I argue that analysing some of the *ways* in which ‘gender security’ is thought about, and understanding *how* these meanings have come about, can go some way towards creating a policy that would be meaningful and significant to all stakeholders.

To make these arguments, this article will analyse debates about implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (SCR 1325) in Serbia. SCR 1325 urges for more effective gender perspectives within peacekeeping and post-conflict processes. I analyse Serbian debates about SCR 1325 via a theoretical framework concerned with personal-political imaginations, a term I use to give a sense of temporal and spatial contingency to

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the feminist insight that the personal is political. Imaginations encapsulate the complexity – and boundaries – of life, experiences, knowledge and hope, highlighting how we conceptualise our world. A critical element of imagination is hope, particularly important when exploring political practice concerned with a hope for a change. Additionally, suggesting that an imagination is personal-political recognises the ways in which power is infused within a particular imagination, a ‘disturbing’ insight for the realisation ‘that relationships we once imagined were private or merely social are in fact infused with power.’¹ Accepting that ‘private’ and ‘personal’ elements shape ‘public’ and ‘political’ outcomes (and vice versa) challenges the perception that the production of policy is devoid of personal experiences and knowledge. These personal-political imaginations shape the subsequent actions that we make, including policy decisions.

Acknowledging and understanding the role of personal-political imaginations potentially opens way for a more meaningful policy for all stakeholders. I use the word *meaningful* carefully here. I do not suggest that it is possible to make a policy which we all agree with. Rather, I suggest that it is possible to make a policy that has value and significance for all stakeholders, who understand divergent (and even opposing) approaches to gender security, and respect the validity of alternative approaches. I use this framework of personal-political imaginations to explore three initiatives in Serbia responding to SCR 1325. Analysing these initiatives demonstrates that the way in which ‘gender security’ and SCR 1325 is conceptualised is product and productive of a particular post-conflict personal-political imagination. The article will conclude with a discussion of why it is useful for policy-makers to understand how (potentially) contrasting gender security policy objectives can develop.

Configurations of Post-conflict and SCR 1325

In Serbia, *one* particular personal-political imagination relates to the boundaries and complexity of how Serbia’s relationship to conflict and post-conflict is understood. Serbia has a complex relationship to conflict, primarily relating to competing narratives about Serb responsibility, guilt and participation in the wars and in committing war crimes.² These tensions about responsibility shape the political debates of an apparently post-conflict era: for instance, in early 2010, there was much discussion over the wording of the ‘Srebrenica Declaration’: was Srebrenica a war crime, genocide or atrocity?³ The relationship that Serbia has to conflict and post-conflict becomes messier when we consider how Serbia suffered many of the consequences associated with war during the 1990s: severe economic difficulties and hyperinflation, growth of corruption, international economic sanctions, the NATO bombing and refugees. The complex relationship that

1 Enloe 2000, 195.

2 Subotić 2010; Obradović–Wochnik 2009.

3 See for instance B92 ‘Serbia should unequivocally condemn Srebrenica’ (22.02.2010.); ‘Serbian Parliament on Srebrenica Resolution’ (30.03.2010.) for discussion of the debates.

Serbia has to conflict and post-conflict (partly) shape personal-political imaginations affecting 'gender security' discourse.

Noticing the post-conflict personal-political imagination in understanding *how* a meaning of 'gender security' comes about can be useful to practitioners. But first, I should state that my refusal to 'fix' a definition, concept, or notion of 'gender security' is because any temporary fixing or reconceptualisation of a concept reproduces the problems inherent in the concepts as they are currently configured.⁴ This recognises that the performance of gender security discourse relates to; functions within; and is constituted by; the broader social and political world, highlighting an important principle: that the specific performance of security is *political*.⁵ It is the political (and personal) discourse of 'gender security' that I aim to reveal in this article, by focussing on how practitioners in Serbia have interpreted discourses of gender security in relation to SCR 1325.

SCR 1325 was passed by the Security Council on 31 October 2000, urging for a gender perspective within UN peacekeeping and post-conflict processes. SCR 1325 also encourages training about, and consideration of, gender impacts in relation to conflict and post-conflict management, and encourages UN missions to consult with local and international women's groups. Additionally, the resolution highlights the need to eliminate gender-based violence. Initially, the resolution was designed to affect the organisational arrangement of the UN system, but the impact of this particular resolution has been far-reaching: with feminist organisations conducting advocacy work related to SCR 1325, countries adopting national action plans (NAPs) to implement SCR 1325, as well as the stirrings of organisational changes within regional and international institutions.⁶

Examining the discursive positioning and representation of SCR 1325 within a policy initiative reveals ways that gender security discourses are performed. Furthermore, SCR 1325 is a resolution that has to be translated: not only literally into other languages, but also metaphorically.⁷ It is this process of 'translation' that I am most interested in. How have different practitioners 'translated' the resolution to (re)produce their policy objectives related to 'gender security'? And, how have these interpretations come about? I have argued in detail elsewhere that the way in which 'conflict' and 'post-conflict' is configured affects how SCR 1325 is interpreted, and the subsequent policy which is produced.⁸ In making these arguments, I focussed closely on three initiatives related to SCR 1325 in Serbia, highlighting the connections between post-conflict personal-political imaginations and how 'gender security' is translated.

4 Shepherd 2008, 172.

5 Dillion 1996.

6 Olonisakin et. al 2011; Cohn 2008; Gumru and Fritz 2009.

7 Shepherd 2010, 157.

8 McLeod 2011.

The analysis will now be briefly summarised: a more detailed explanation can be found elsewhere.⁹

SEESAC and Domestic Violence

In 2007–08, an agency partially supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), SEESAC (South-Eastern European Small Arms Clearinghouse) produced a report titled *Firearms Possession and Domestic Violence in the Western Balkans*.¹⁰ The report investigated the extent to which small arms and light weapons (SALW) plays a part in domestic violence in the Western Balkans. The impetus behind this report can be seen as a trickle-down consequence of the increased international emphasis on the gender and security frameworks articulated in SCR 1325. In response to SCR 1325, the UNDP developed an action plan (called the Eight Point Agenda), issued to all UNDP agencies in early 2007 along with the recommendation that 10–15% of the budget of UNDP agencies was devoted to gender concerns.

A discursive reading of this report suggests that Serbia continues to be affected by the consequences of war and conflict. Post-conflict is represented as a period of continued violence and insecurity as a result of conflict: the proliferation and (ab)use of SALW in domestic violence is attributed to the instability of a post-conflict era. These problems can be resolved through provision of support for capacity-building and development. This particular post-conflict imagination shapes the configuration of ‘gender security’. The notion that Serbia has a post-conflict problem that is *resolvable* through the provision of appropriate *international support* is echoed through the policy prescriptions made in the report. That is, SALW (ab)use in domestic violence can be resolved (and thus ‘gender security’ achieved) through appropriate international support.

Women in Black and Political Responsibility

Like feminist activists worldwide, Women in Black activists in Serbia have been deeply engaged with the process of making SCR 1325 relevant to their local context. One way that Women in Black have localised SCR 1325 has been to produce and disseminate a Draft Resolution listing specific recommendations that would implement SCR 1325. These recommendations echo their pre-existing values. A core value held by Women in Black activists relates to political responsibility: activists insist that in the post-war, post-Milošević era, Serbian institutions and society needs to resist the denial of war crimes committed in the name of Serbia during the 1990s and deal with militarised violence that remains embedded in society.¹¹

9 See McLeod 2011.

10 Dokmanović 2008.

11 Zajović 2007, 31–38.

The post-conflict problem identified by Women in Black activists relates to principles of political responsibility, which is connected to the group's critique of militarism. The evasion of the post-conflict political responsibility agenda in Serbia is viewed as a manifestation of militarism, and there are 'security risks [in] not confronting the criminal past'.¹² Addressing the political responsibility agenda is critical for Women in Black activists, who understand conflict as a consequence of deeper problems in society. So, where the post-conflict personal-political imagination critiques processes of militarism and reinforces the importance of political responsibility, the achievement of 'gender security' is also linked to political responsibility. For Women in Black, 'gender security' is achieved through altering dominant social values in Serbian society and taking steps towards political responsibility.

Ministry of Defence and the Draft NAP

A NAP to implement SCR 1325 in Serbia was accepted by the Serbian Parliament in December 2010. Prior to this, a series of consultations took place. These public consultations included a wide range of state and non-state actors, and more research is needed to ascertain the reactions of those involved, not involved, and delegitimized during the consultation process. A successful consultation process would produce a NAP meaningful to all stakeholders, even if they disagreed with some parts of the NAP. The analysis in this article is based upon a report produced by working groups coordinated by the BFPE and the Ministry of Defence in Serbia to formulate recommendations for a draft NAP.¹³ Investigating the early stages of negotiations towards a NAP reveals the aspirations that actors have, and critically, how they imagine Serbia's relationship to post-conflict.

The recommendations incorporate multiple visions of post-conflict, but the dominant representation of Serbia's relationship to conflict and post-conflict emphasises Serbia's future participation in external peacekeeping forces. Indeed, 'Serbia, as a UN member country, wants to contribute actively to the processes of peacebuilding, stability and security'.¹⁴ Within the recommendations, the need for international legitimacy is inscribed, suggesting a desire to escape connotations with a post-conflict past. That is, the formulation of a NAP is a progressive move designed to enhance international legitimacy. Connected with these progressive assumptions is the notion that instrumental equality is a way of achieving gender security. The gender security logic presented in the recommendations for a draft NAP places emphases on measurable, quota-based indicators of the participation and involvement of women in the Serbian security sector. This liberal vision of gender security as instrumental equality echoes the desire to represent Serbia as a modernised, liberal-democratic state which has moved on from the problems arising from the conflicts of the 1990s.

12 Women in Black 2010, 3.

13 BFPE 2010.

14 BFPE 2010, 6.

What can be seen from the brief summary of the three initiatives is that conceptualisations of post-conflict matter in making meanings of gender security. Focussing on the liberal equality ambitions of Serbia's NAP highlights why those conceptualisations of post-conflict and gender security matter. The focus on instrumental equality downplays Serbia's relationship to the conflicts of the 1990s. This lack of critical engagement is not unusual: the UK 2010 NAP does not offer any specific recommendations in relation to Northern Ireland.¹⁵ Why is understanding how we (by 'we,' I mean practitioners) think about post-conflict important in relation to SCR 1325? When SCR 1325 was first passed in 2000, the very radical potential of the resolution was in the opening of possibilities for how 'gender security,' and indeed, 'security' was conceptualised. The danger in not attempting to understand each other's meanings is that we reproduce potentially oppressive policies, even while opening up opportunities for others. The Serbian NAP reinforces a liberal vision of 'gender security,' limiting possibilities for how SCR 1325 can be interpreted, and diluting the radical shift in security thinking that SCR 1325 offers.

What is missing from the current debate is the acknowledgement that SCR 1325 opens up a complex picture of 'gender security' – more complex than the either/or dichotomy that all the initiatives discussed here suggest. This relates to my earlier point that my refusal to 'fix' a notion of 'gender security' arises out of my desire to avoid the reproduction of the problems inherent in the concepts as they are currently configured, or any limitations that would arise should the concepts be reconfigured. Understanding the connections between our post-conflict personal-political imaginations and our vision of 'gender security' is important for developing a starting point for knowledge and understanding that could lead to a more meaningful policy for all stakeholders. As a side point, these post-conflict personal-political imaginations are not just reflective of local hopes, but also of international concerns, as highlighted by SEESAC's gun abuse and domestic violence initiative. Thus, we should understand multiple meanings of 'gender security' to avoid the reproduction of potentially oppressive notions, allowing us to prise open the complex picture of 'gender security' offered by SCR 1325.

Conclusions: Knowing Meanings

I do not believe that any of the policies discussed above are 'wrong' or inappropriate: this is a critique, not criticism. Rather, I wish to seek a better understanding of how these ideas are organised to find ways of allowing multiple visions to operate. A comparison of the three initiatives reveals a connection between the personal-political imaginations of conflict and post-conflict as it relates to Serbia, and the subsequent policy which is developed. William Walters points out that 'comparison is a powerful tool for highlighting political and other types of social imaginations, for exposing tacit assumptions that are otherwise not questioned.'¹⁶ It is the exposure of tacit assumptions that is the critical

15 GAPS 2010.

16 Walters 2002, 381.

thought to hold here. A tacit assumption refers to the assumptions underpinning courses of actions, and yet, those assumptions are rarely explicitly voiced or even understood by the decision-maker. These assumptions are often based upon life (both personal and collective) experiences, which is knowledge that can be difficult to transfer to another person. In this article, comparisons of post-conflict personal-political imaginations have revealed the tacit assumptions that underpin interpretations of 'gender security'. These tacit assumptions can sometimes be the source of misunderstandings. Put simply: not everyone thinks in the same way and nor should we assume that they do. And our forgetting of these tacit assumptions (that we are often not aware of) can lead us to talking – and producing policy – at cross-purposes.

Knowledge about tacit assumptions is useful, as making sense of (some) tacit assumptions that shape policy relies upon a comparison of meaning and language. Like Laura Shepherd, I wish to make the argument that 'poststructural theories of language have much to offer policy makers and practitioners,...we need to engage critically with how that understanding is mediated through and facilitated by our ideas about the world we live in.'¹⁷ Shepherd suggests that thinking critically about our ideas, meanings and language enables us to avoid unconsciously reproducing different forms of oppression and exclusion that potentially arise from policy.¹⁸ As she points out, this critical engagement is not in pursuit of a somehow perfect or better policy (given that perfection is an impossible task and 'better' is subjective), but rather, about awareness of how political ideas are organised and how these ideas are reproduced in the making of a policy.¹⁹

Awareness of how political ideas are organised is relevant to the process of making gender security policy. The way that tacit assumptions shape gender security policy in Serbia was explored by mapping and contrasting personal-political imaginations of conflict and post-conflict. Developing awareness of the effects that personal-political imaginations of conflict and post-conflict have upon how we conceptualise 'gender security' could open way for dialogue between conflicting groups. This effective dialogue potentially opens space for a process of making meaningful policy. This is not to say that it would be 'better' policy, but rather, a policy that would be significant to all stakeholders: and surely, that is 'useful'.

17 Shepherd 2010, 144–5.

18 Shepherd 2010, 145.

19 Shepherd 2010, 157.

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