Women's Rights and Peace Don't Always Go Hand in Hand

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There was long a truism in political science that democratic states don't go to war with one another, based on a century of statistical data. This prompted decades of U.S. foreign policy aimed at democracy promotion, culminating in the failed wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The problem was that the prevalence of the term "democratic peace" led policymakers to overlook three key facts.

First, while stable democracies do tend to enjoy pacific relations with one another, emergent democracies often face great risk of civil or interstate war. Second, stable democracies are actually more likely to go to war against nondemocracies, meaning that the drive to promote democracy could itself be considered a global security risk. Third, democracy grants power to the people—but not all people want liberal democratic institutions or peace. The result of all this, as political scientists Sadaf Nausheen, Varya Srivastava and Shubra Seth have argued, is that Western democracies have often engaged in futile, self-defeating conquests, undermining peace without building actual democracy.

A similar paradox exists with respect to promoting women's human rights abroad—a paradox that participants at this week's United Nations Security Council meetings on "women, peace and security" would be wise to bear in mind. Although evidence is incontrovertible that women's actual empowerment is good for peace and security, there is also a link between advocacy for women's rights and violent conflict.

In nearly all wars, men have justified armed violence by claiming they must "protect their women." More recently, rescuing the oppressed women of other nations has also become a rallying cry for military action. Those calls for intervention, though, seem only to galvanize men in repressive nations to double down on their cultural norms as they resist the foreign invaders. Moreover, the association between "women's rights" and meddling foreigners can leave local feminist movements with less room to maneuver in their own right and on their own terms. In some cases, advocates may set aside the fight for gender equality in favor of first repelling the invaders—a process that can harden gender norms and increase violence against women.

This is particularly evident in the U.S. approach to Afghanistan. When the U.S. entered the country in 2001, it was not to save women. Rather, as political scientist Laura J. Shepherd has shown,

women's rights became a handy narrative for demonizing the Taliban. To be sure, the resulting 20 years saw important gains for urban, educated women. But U.S. militarism in the region also harmed many women, especially in rural areas, creating a backlash to gender equality that ultimately helped the Taliban regain power. In this sense, both "counterinsurgency" and "peace" between the U.S. and the Taliban came at the expense of some women's security.

Even when armed violence is genuinely motivated by humanitarianism, it still puts women in harm's way and often leads to setbacks for their rights. While war weighs particularly heavily on men, who either tend to take up arms or are assumed to, it hits civilian women and whole families hard, as well. There is often less food to go around; families lose breadwinners or loved ones; and men, women, boys and girls alike face sexual assault or displacement. Even when women are lucky enough to escape all these harms, they are at heightened risk inside their own homes both during and after a conflict. The war in Bosnia-Herzegovina was the first to document how domestic violence rates skyrocket when countries experience armed conflict, but the World Bank has found a similar trend in other places, such as Nigeria.

On the other hand, it is also simplistic to say that "peace" is always good for women. As political scientist Cynthia Enloe has long argued, so-called peace or "post-conflict contexts" can be periods of extraordinary insecurity for women and girls, who may be shut out of institutions and economic opportunities, expected to bear children to replenish the nation's dead or brutalized by traumatized husbands, fathers and brothers returned from the frontlines.

This is why the road to achieving both women's empowerment and peace sometimes leads through renewed violence. And sometimes, it is initiated by women themselves. Although women's empowerment may go statistically hand-in-hand with peace, for many women, empowerment means joining armed groups with gender-egalitarian ideologies. For them, peace and demobilization can mean a significant setback in stature, autonomy and security.

For other women, empowerment may mean advocating for a military intervention to overthrow a dictatorship. Some would argue that the problem with the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was not that it overthrew the Taliban, but that it waited for terrorism to provide the excuse, rather than launching a humanitarian intervention five years earlier, when gender apartheid was first instituted.

The point is that "women's rights," "peace," and "security" do not always go hand in hand. Indeed, women's empowerment and even their security can easily become a casualty of "peace." If war is fought for various reasons including women's rights, then making peace often means sacrificing some goals for others. And, of course, different women and men will experience these consequences differently.

Even in the best-case scenario, where a durable peace also includes gains in political and economic freedom for women, women can be expected to use that freedom to pursue very different goals. Equality means different things to different women—the feminist pro-life movement in the U.S. illustrates this truth—and for some, gender equality is not even their priority. Indeed, some actively work against it.

The women who join the Islamic State, al-Qaida and Boko Haram—as well as right-wing extremist

or simply counterfeminist movements in the West, both now and historically—are not merely pawns or victims of these groups, as they are sometimes portrayed. And as political scientists Nakissa Jahanbani and Charmaine Willis show, their tendency to support or engage in violence in service of these aims actually increases as democratic freedoms, education and employment opportunities widen for women.

And though women are certainly at the forefront of peacemaking, they can also be a source of insecurity for other women. Mothers participate in circumcising and forcibly marrying their daughters, trapped—like their husbands—in terrible protection dilemmas where they must choose which rights of which family members to sacrifice to ensure their collective physical and economic security. Older women and men alike police gender norms in families and communities, denying both young women and young men complete freedom and regulating their children's behavior through family violence. Political scientist Meredith Loken has documented how women have themselves committed sexual violence in conflict zones against both other women and men.

The point is, empowering women does not necessarily equate to promoting a liberal, gender-egalitarian agenda or to the protection of women and children. To do that, it might be more important to support women's rights activists—men or women—than to support women per se. But if the goal is to support women's empowerment no matter the political agendas they might set, there is a tension in presupposing what kind of support they will want or need.

In short, women's empowerment is a lot like democracy: Once established, it supports both peace and security in a mutually reinforcing triad. But this tells policymakers precious little about how to get there, because the goals of empowering women and supporting peace and security can be in conflict with one another, particularly in fragile, post-conflict contexts. Achieving all three when starting from a situation of gender totalitarianism, in a world where conflicts are often pursued and perpetuated through competing narratives of women's empowerment, is a fraught and dangerous process.

In Afghanistan, for example, it may be that the very best way to help women is not for the "imperialist" U.S. to espouse Afghan women's rights at all, but rather to provide a way for them to feed their children and pursue their own goals. At the same time, the best way to support women's rights in Afghanistan may be for the U.S. to get off its soapbox and allow local voices—including those of both female human rights defenders and local men supporting education and political freedoms for their sisters and daughters—to carry the day.

This does not mean that powerful governments should not pay attention to and vocally advocate for women and girls, as well as for the men and boys who support them, in other parts of the world. Nor does it mean that the U.N. Security Council should abandon its emphasis on Women, Peace and Security, for which gender specialists fought and under whose banner many transformative policies have been developed.

But it does mean that simplistic tropes like "women, peace and security" can lead policymakers astray and are worth unpacking. Does the U.S. government have an equal interest in supporting, empowering and listening to the voices of Afghan women aligned with the Taliban as they do to secular, Western-aligned female activists? Does the U.N. Security Council care equally about gender-based violence against men and boys?

A better way to think about equality in conflict zones may be to think about gender—not just women, who after all are not a homogeneous group. Another may be to promote both a less violent and more gender-egalitarian world—without assuming these go hand in hand, and without being afraid to trade one off against the other in different contexts. Yet another may be to heed the ways global gender stereotyping can unintentionally undermine human rights for all genders, as well as inclusive security and durable peace.

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