

Book review essay: Gender, UN Peacebuilding and Security

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GENDER, UN PEACEBUILDING AND SECURITY (book review essay)

Gender Politics and Security Discourse: Personal-political imaginations and feminism in ‘post-conflict’ Serbia, by Laura MacLeod. New York: Routledge, 2016. Pp. 151+appendix+references+index. £110. ISBN: 978-1-138-79566-2

Gender, UN Peacebuilding, and the Politics of Space: Locating legitimacy, by Laura J. Shepherd. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. 170+appendix+references+index. £41.67 (hcv). ISBN: 978-0-199-98272-1.

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Since its inception in the 1940s, the United Nations (UN) has been a prolific norm entrepreneur on women’s rights, gender equality and gender mainstreaming through its Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). Nevertheless, October 2000 constituted a revolution: the United Nations Security Council, one of the last bastions of masculine power in the UN, produced the first resolution – UNSCR 1325 – of its Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. The resolution contains a set of norms that seeks to address women’s concerns in post-conflict settings, by highlighting the need to increase female participation in security governance and in post-conflict processes, to prevent sexual and gender-based violence, and to protect women from conflict and post-conflict violence. The agenda is now formed by eight resolutions and has been adopted by 67 countries¹ through National Action Plans, as well as by different organs, programmes and funds of the United Nations, such as the UN Peacebuilding Commission. The conceptual apparatus of the agenda regulates the norms it seeks to promote, as well as the actors and institutions in charge of their promotion. Understanding how this conceptual apparatus is deployed and interpreted, how and under which circumstances it is resisted or reinforced, and what the implications of its reiteration and/or resistance might be, is therefore essential if we are to grasp the impact that international norms on gender, peace and security have on the daily lives of ordinary citizens.

The two books reviewed here advocate for a discursive approach to study international norm diffusion on gender, security and peacebuilding. They seek to answer questions such as what the priorities of the UN agenda on Women, Peace and Security are; how certain assumptions about women, power and space structure the agenda; how its activities function to reproduce the identities of certain kind of actors; and how social, political and economic contexts shape the understanding of the conceptual apparatus deployed. Both authors go beyond constructivist approaches on diffusion, and explain not only that discourses are performative, and that therefore norms should be understood as dynamic and unfixable processes of repetition and contestation, but also that identities - individual and collective – are the result of these processes of repetition and contestation of discourses that carve out subject positions. Therefore, discourses and actors are co-constituted. Both books also contribute to feminist security studies and to the wider scholarship on peacekeeping and peacebuilding by carefully unpacking the gender politics of security and peace. Laura Shepherd’s book, *Gender, UN Peacebuilding, and the Politics of Space*, develops a sharp critique of the way in which the UN Peacebuilding Commission’s textual practices reproduce ways of understanding

¹ As of October 2017.

gender, women and civil society that prevent the implementation of transformative strategies capable of altering gender relations and producing the sustainable peace the UN hoped to achieve. It is a policy-level intervention that looks at the horizontal diffusion of discourses on gender and security. By contrast, Laura McLeod's work, *Gender Politics and Security Discourse*, constitutes a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which Serbian feminist and women's movements have responded to the international discourses on gender security. In other words, it examines how the WPS principles and provisions travel vertically from the international to the national level through a diversity of activities carried out at community level. While McLeod's book provides an in-depth examination of how social and political contexts shape the discourse of gender security by using the example of post-conflict Serbia, Shepherd's work is a broader analysis of representational practices of gender, nation, women and civil society in peacebuilding operations, and how these organise the way we think about peacebuilding. As such, the authors share an interest in poststructuralist feminist approaches to peacebuilding and security. Ultimately, they both seek to analyse the ways that texts produce a specific understanding of a situation and how this understanding is also normative, allowing for the inclusion of certain policy options and foreclosing other possibilities for action.

McLeod's work tells the story of how different women's organisations in Serbia articulate and represent gender security in a particular way in order to achieve their political hopes. In chapter 4, she identifies three broad categories that summarize how gender security was described by activists: as the respect of human rights such as freedom of speech; as the response to structural female-specific security concerns, such as domestic violence; and as tackling insecurities affecting daily life, such as economic anxiety or health-related problems. McLeod demonstrates how these three broad categories are shared by all groups of activists. However, where the ideas of women organisations differ is on how insecurities might be corrected: for some, peace activism is highly connected to feminist claims, while for others, it is preferable to carry out their activities by rejecting a feminist label – which in Serbia is very much connected to war, nationalism and peace. In order to demonstrate this claim, McLeod heuristically divides women associations into two groups: those that define their activities as “political”, and those that define themselves as “non-political”. Women organisations that consider themselves “political”, such as Women in Black, are those who frequently also use the label feminist-pacifist, and connect gender (in) securities to war and the nationalist ideology and practices of the Serbian state. By contrast, “non-political” women's groups refrain from publicly stating their position in relation to war or to the past, and claim that they just work to provide emotional or physical support to women suffering abuse. In other words, McLeod claims that activists' identities are a product, and productive, of discursive practices. Who can and cannot speak about a certain subject in a certain way depends on the identity produced in and through any given discourse on gender security, and will vary depending on setting or context. The identity of an actor, her qualities and her interactions with other actors, particularly with the Serbian state, can only be apprehended as she (re)produces her particular discourse on gender security.

While McLeod explores the logics of gender security discourses through a concrete example, Shepherd offers a structural explanation for why UN peacebuilding discourse

reproduces a narrow construction of gender and peacebuilding. She argues that its very conservative logics of space leave undisturbed the hierarchical nature of the international system and prevent serious consideration of gender as a power dynamic, and of local understandings of peace. Shepherd proposes an extremely fine and nuanced analysis of textual and discursive practices of the UN Peacebuilding Commission, as well as the inconsistencies, absences and logical consequences of their articulations. In so doing, she analyses a vast amount of documentary sources as well as semi-structured interviews, both treated as “discursive artefacts in and of themselves” (Shepherd, 27). In short, the author makes the case that the UN peacebuilding discourse is organised by particular logics of space and gender that operate in three ways: “first, to create ‘conditions of impossibility’ in the implementation of peacebuilding activities that fail to take gender seriously as a power dynamic; second, to heavily circumscribe women’s meaningful participation in peacebuilding; and third, to produce spatial hierarchies that paradoxically undermine the contemporary emphasis on ‘bottom-up’ governance of peacebuilding activities” (Shepherd, 35). Behind the analysis lies an incredible intuition, always supported by verified and cross-referenced data.

The two books under review are hence different in research design and content, yet they seem to speak to each other as ghost twin projects. Taken together, the two works offer a fascinating analysis on the relationship between gender politics and the representation of gender in peacebuilding. In particular, they fill the lacuna of systematic, empirically rich discursive analysis on United Nations norms on gender and security, reaching complementary conclusions. Both authors look at how gender politics – the understanding of gender and feminism by actors – organize peacebuilding knowledge and influence security practices. They both demonstrate how gender security is thought about in different ways in response to various sites of political authority. Certainly, if you are looking for a definition of “gender security”, you should look elsewhere, as none of them defines the term in their books. McLeod explicitly refuses to ‘fix’ a definition of “gender security”, because this ‘fixing’ will do nothing but “reproduce the problems inherent in the concepts as they are currently configured” (McLeod, 141). Shepherd does not seek to decipher what gender security *is*, and rather demonstrates what a certain understanding of gender (security) *does* to UN peacebuilding discourses and practices. It is precisely this dynamic conceptualisation of discourses that connects the two books.

While McLeod concentrates on demonstrating the political function of the temporalities invoked in discourses on gender and security, Shepherd is more concerned by the logics of space and the resulting hierarchies of power and authority. McLeod’s work suggests that how actors understand and narrate “security” is very much linked to their perceptions of the “insecurities suffered in the past, noticed in the present and anticipated in the future” (McLeod, 12). One can relate those past insecurities to a war period, to structural factors, or to the politics of the post-conflict state, while another individual or organisation can perceive them as having nothing to do with the dynamics of conflict and post-conflict. In a sense, therefore, the construction and articulation of memories of the past constitute a politicised act that supports a particular configuration of gender security (McLeod, 24). The focus on the logics of space takes Shepherd to argue that UN Peacebuilding discourse reproduces peacebuilding as statebuilding. The

logics of space are reinforced by the reproduction of the concept of “national ownership” that, on the one hand, constructs the *nation* as being above its subjects – civil society, women, etc. – and, on the other hand, is located in a subordinate position to the *international* and its organisations. Chapter 5 shows how the same logics work to locate civil society in post-conflict societies as *bearers* of certain forms of local knowledge, and therefore as *partners* of the international community in its peacebuilding activities; but at the same time, as *beneficiaries* of external expertise, and therefore as located below the international community that does the “strategic planning” on policies intended to assist the “locals”. After demonstrating how gender is equated to women in UN Peacebuilding discourse, Chapter 4 powerfully unpacks again the workings of the politics of space that associate women with the “local”, the “communal”, and the “traditional”, and locate them in opposition to the much more *efficient* realm of politics. Shepherd goes on to demonstrate the complex interplay between the logics of gender that articulate gender as synonymous with women, and the logics of space that associate civil society with “local” politics and thereby with women, through a consistent articulation of civil society with women’s organisations. This is problematic, because civil society tends to be delegitimized through its articulation with women, and through a particular logics of space that constructs the state – and not its citizens - as the privileged interlocutor of the international community. Although McLeod does not specifically talk about the politics of space, her analyses complements Shepherd’s conclusions, as McLeod demonstrates how women organisations have the choice of adopting the hegemonic language coming from UN Security Council resolutions, or of adapting it so as to provide alternative understandings on and about gender security. She provides the example of the feminist-pacifist approach of Women in Black who, after a series of workshops and discussions, found strategies that enable them to use UNSCR 1325 to support a radical vision of gender security that challenges the primacy of state security.

These contrasting approaches are evident in how the books differently analyse the possibilities related to women’s organisations responding to hegemonic understandings of gender, women, security and peace. McLeod’s work is innovative here, as it pays attention to personal stories and the experiences of the individual through interesting material drawn from a unique case study. It introduces the concept of personal-political imaginations as a way to explain how individuals make meaning through their personal experiences and political ideas, which, together, shape a singular understanding of the world. The main (and possibly the only) weakness of the book is that the author could have better explained the connections between the individual personal-political imaginations of activists and the collective identities of NGOs or organisations that they join: do individuals join a group because of their political or apolitical convictions, or do they have to adapt their identity once they have joined a group? To be sure, several passages of the book point at the performance of identity and how activist subject-positions shape interpretations of dominant discourses, but a more explicit explanation of how this is so would have resulted in a stronger analysis. Similarly, the reader is left without knowing if and whether the international community that pushed for the implementation of the WPS agenda responds to the “conscious instrumentalism” from local organisations and, particularly, to the radical reconceptualization of the agenda by Women in Black. In a sense, the reader does not really know whether women

organisations can successfully challenge the hegemonic articulation of gender security contained in the agenda. Nonetheless, McLeod's work stimulates deeper reflection on questions such as whether there are ways to make seemingly abstract concepts and international discourses on gender security relevant to our everyday lives, and why certain articulations (of gender security) come to the front and others are excluded. It is therefore a very much recommended read for feminist and security scholars.

Similarly, one of the main virtues of Shepherd's book is her capacity to tease out complicated arguments on representations and articulations of women, gender and civil society. The author also builds a convincing case on how, although there is a consistent recognition in UN peacebuilding discourse that gender is a 'high priority concern', in reality this configuration is undermined by certain textual practices that effectively subvert the central place of gender in it. For example, gender is always placed at the end of texts or it is absent in key documents. Likewise, Shepherd uncovers other textual practices that restrict the logic of (women) empowerment in UN peacebuilding discourse to only economic empowerment, excluding the need to develop practices leading to political empowerment. The idea underpinning this is that if women are economically empowered, then they will automatically be able to gain a meaningful place in the political sphere. Shepherd claims that, in this way, the logic of empowerment functions to leave undisturbed the market logics of neoliberal economic development, opening a space for women's participation in it, but without challenging the functioning of a heavily discriminatory system. This also implies that economically empowering women is a technical, apolitical, exercise, while empowering them politically is not, making the whole UN peacebuilding business an apolitical practice. It is therefore a shame that all these ideas only come together and are hinted at the conclusion of the book, particularly because they point quite clearly at the material consequences of discourse (re)production. Instead, the book would have benefited from a more persistent engagement with scholars working on feminist political economy (True 2012; Elias 2015) and the political economy of post-conflict (Duncanson 2016), in order to explain more comprehensively how ideas about gender inform the (gendered and racialized) political economy of peacebuilding and its material consequences. Nevertheless, Shepherd's book represents an essential read not only to those studying feminist research agendas on peacebuilding, but also to a broader IR audience interested in understanding how discursive logics function to organize the way we think about power, authority and legitimacy in international relations.

The two books taken together could give the impression that the international is the place where knowledge is produced, and the local is where the knowledge is transformed, appropriated or contested. Shepherd skilfully explains how UN peacebuilding discourses construct the international as situated in a position of expertise and privilege, whereas through the case study of *Women in Black*, McLeod exemplifies how hegemonic knowledge and knowledge production structures are challenged. However, it seems as if only the local domain is formed by individuals with personal-political imaginations. As Shepherd very well explained, "the 'local' appears to be the only spatial domain where individuals are recognized as individuals" (Shepherd, 58). In other words, even though both authors conduct interviews with UN members of staff, they seem to forget that individuals from the international community also have

personal-political imaginations. How do those individuals articulate, challenge or reproduce concepts such as gender, security and civil society? How can we make these articulations visible in our research? Why is it easier to examine the *international* as a system or structure and the *local* as individuals having personal-political imaginations? Future research could investigate these questions and complete the puzzle exposed by Shepherd and McLeod. All in all, McLeod and Shepherd expose how doing “gender” in peacebuilding is an extremely political exercise that prescribes, not only the kind of practices and policies that are possible, desirable or unachievable in order to achieve gender equality or gender mainstreaming, but also who has the power, legitimacy and authority to carry them out. In so doing, the two books contribute to the development of an innovative poststructuralist feminist scholarship that cracks open for investigation fundamental dimensions of international politics that have hitherto been missed, misunderstood or trivialised by mainstream approaches to IR and security studies.

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