

Postcolonialism, Feminism and the United Nations

Written by Stephen McGlinchey, Rosie Walters and Dana Gold

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Whereas most media and general coverage of the United Nations paints it as a well-intentioned international organisation, critical theories (as their description would suggest) offer a more nuanced take. Postcolonial scholarship allows us to focus on the UN Security Council – the most powerful organ of the United Nations where five permanent (P5) members sit, each of which has a permanent veto over anything tabled there. These five states are China, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States and France – the nations that were (in their 1940s configurations) allied against Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan and the other Axis powers in the Second World War. Because these nations were victorious in the world's last major war, they were able to give themselves permanent seats in the post-war order that still endures today, of which the United Nations Security Council is a central element. Postcolonial scholarship points out that each of the P5 states were former colonial powers (though to very different extents) and through the design of their veto can continue to wield disproportionate power in the modern era. To further underline the structural problems at the heart of the United Nations, there are no states from Africa or Latin America permanently on the Security Council. This serves to implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, restrict Global South initiatives.

If we dig a bit deeper using feminism, we can see more critiques of the United Nations – but also acknowledge certain successes. A central issue with the United Nations is that, by itself, it has very little power or money. Both of those resources come from the goodwill and participation of the member states. As explored in the previous chapter, the United Nations is governed around the principle of sovereign equality where the ultimate decision-making rests with states – especially the P5. Essentially, nothing transformative can occur at the UN level without the approval of historically powerful states. And, this is the issue for many feminists who believe that international organisations like the United Nations should do more to raise awareness and push for change, especially in areas of gender inequality. But, sovereignty raises barriers to progress.

For example, the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report of 2020 noted that worldwide gender parity was a century away, despite meaningful progress in landmark issues such as extreme poverty and maternal mortality. One of the most known nation-state offenders in the gender inequality category is Saudi Arabia, which despite progress in recent years continues to treat women within its society in ways that are deeply unequal. It was ranked 146th out of 153 states measured in the aforementioned report – amongst the worst. In Saudi Arabia women do not have equal voting or civil rights, undergo various forms of social segregation (including dress codes) and were only given the right to drive in 2017 after a lengthy campaign (pictured). Yet, Saudi Arabia does not receive sanctions for this behaviour. Instead, in 2017 and 2018 Saudi Arabia was elected to positions on three principal women's rights bodies within the United Nations – including the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The irony of this is not lost to feminists and points to the deep structural gender inequities visible within international organisations such as the United Nations, and the thinly veiled patriarchal nature of their day-to-day operations.

The United Nations is not deaf to examples such as those above and has worked towards improving life for women across the world – and this is the point where the mixed picture becomes clearer. Feminists often harness the

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platforms available through the United Nations and secure progress that would not be possible without the playing field made available by international organisations. Perhaps the best example of this came in October 2000, when the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 – a landmark in emphasising the value of equal participation of women, as well as their increasing involvement in the promotion and maintenance of peace and security. Furthermore, it recognised the disproportionate impact of conflict on women. The United Nations subsequently created several specialised groups, such as the Task Force on Women Peace and Security, as well as the Task Force on Violence Against Women, to uphold its commitment to the protection of women's rights. Additionally, the United Nations has also provided women in impoverished countries with more access to resources and opportunities they would otherwise not have, for example through initiatives such as the UN Girls' Education Initiative. Further, a large number of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (explored further in chapters 17 and 18) target issues pivotal to women in ways that are designed to be more nuanced in order to overcome some of the ineffective applications of prior efforts which tended to help some women more than others.

As with many things at the international level, progress in one area is often simultaneous with a perceived lack of progress in others. Despite efforts of the United Nations to push for more global gender equality, feminist scholars such as Tickner (2005) have argued that women suffer from discrimination that means they are still not being taken seriously at both an institutional and grassroots level. And, it is hard to read the case of Saudi Arabia *vis-à-vis* the United Nations as evidence of this changing. Discrimination and inequality for women remains, particularly in states that may be suffering from poverty, war or deprivation. And, when António Guterres became UN Secretary General in 2017 he continued an unbroken run of male leadership going back to the founding of the organization in 1945. As a result, and despite progress, feminists remain watchful over the United Nations and critical of its ability to achieve the results needed. A continued negative gendered perspective within the functioning of the organisation serves to slow or hinder structural change for women around the world. The critique seems to have caught on and Guterres (2020) has made commitments towards using his leadership to make this 'the century of women's equality'.

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