

Review – Governing the Feminist Peace

Written by Isabel Hernandez Pepe

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Review – Governing the Feminist Peace

<https://www.e-ir.info/2024/11/24/review-governing-the-feminist-peace/>

ISABEL HERNANDEZ PEPE, NOV 24 2024

Governing the Feminist Peace: The Vitality and Failure of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda
By Paul Kirby and Laura J. Shepherd
Columbia University Press, 2024

Governing the Feminist Peace introduces fresh, thought-provoking arguments that steer Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) research in new, exciting directions. The authors' extensive expertise, honed over years of study, is evident in the rich detail provided throughout their first co-authored monograph, offering a credible, well-grounded analysis of the WPS agenda.

Kirby and Shepherd argue that over the past two decades, WPS has often been wrongly reduced to a state discourse or technical apparatus, neglecting the agenda's relational and multifaceted nature. This reductionist tendency is common in International Relations (IR), particularly under positivist approaches. In contrast, drawing from critical IR, governance theories, politics of emotions, and feminist and post-colonial thought, the authors aim not to simplify but to embrace the complexity of WPS. They engage with the agenda by "seeking not to explain but to involve" (p.26), recognizing their positionality within the broader WPS community.

The book makes five significant contributions to the WPS scholarship. First, it reimagines WPS as a 'policy ecosystem' of interconnected actors, activities, and artefacts, highlighting the agenda's relational multiplicity. Second, it reframes vitality and failure not as binary categories but as inherent to WPS, an 'archipelago amid a constant tempest' (p.55). Third, it acknowledges the tensions, fractures, and contradictions intrinsic to any feminist peace project. Fourth, it argues for a more nuanced understanding of WPS, moving beyond a unidimensional view. Finally, to navigate this complexity, the authors employ an exciting technique called 'bricolage' (Särmä, 2015), assembling existing and new descriptions, insights, and practices, which they suggest should be used more in IR scholarship.

The book is structured into eight chapters. The first three chapters lay the groundwork for the more analytical sections that follow. The authors provide an overview of the WPS literature, introduce the concept of the policy ecosystem based on relational and co-existence dimensions and a holistic approach, and build the case for moving beyond the idea of WPS as a normative regime. The quantitative analysis in chapter three maps the WPS ecosystem through a massive review of 237 policy documents (33 documents from the UN system, 161 NAPs and 43 WPS documents published by international and regional organizations), setting the foundation for the subsequent analysis.

Chapter four delves into the historiography of the ten WPS resolutions using interviews with practitioners to explore how these resolutions have evolved and uncover their political significance. Using the metaphors of the series, the duel and the theatre, and while underlining the primary role the UN has and has had in the development of the WPS agenda, the authors highlight the dynamics, entanglements and relations established between an array of actors in different places during the formal process of structuring the agenda, which cannot be reduced to the work of networks concentrated only in the United Nations. Chapter five shifts the focus to states and their role in "domesticating the gender perspective," challenging the traditional view that the publication of a National Action Plan (NAP) is automatically a sign of success. The authors argue for a more contextual approach, paying particular attention to the intersection of Indigeneity, race, and the nation in NAPs of settler colonial states and critiquing the

Review – Governing the Feminist Peace

Written by Isabel Hernandez Pepe

essentialization of Indigenous perspectives.

Chapter six examines the role of civil society in the WPS ecosystem, highlighting the inherent fractures and tensions within the agenda. The authors compare institutions like NATO, which frames gender inclusivity as both ethical and pragmatic (as brilliantly investigated by Von Hlatky, 2022), with groups like the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), which must navigate their abolitionist roots in WPS discussions. This chapter reinforces the idea that the WPS agenda's contradictions are critical to its vitality, highlighting one more time the chimerical nature of the agenda. In the final analytical chapter, the authors explore the margins of the WPS ecosystem, where new alliances form across policy domains. They examine the overlap between WPS and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), as well as the intersection of WPS with arms control and disarmament, showing how cross-pollination at these borders can generate both 'new wellsprings as well as dead ends' (p.203) in the ecosystem.

Kirby and Shepherd summarize the book's main arguments in the final chapter and outline six critical tensions within the WPS ecosystem. These tensions—between gender as a concept, vulnerability and agency, hegemony and multiplicity, inclusion and abolition, issue hierarchies, and the ongoing contest between peace and security—are reflective of the broader challenges facing feminist peace projects, including feminist foreign policy projects which have been emerging in this past decade and which have been mentioned several times by the authors in the book.

Overall, *Governing the Feminist Peace* offers a nuanced and insightful exploration of the WPS agenda. Its critical approach, drawing from various disciplines, including International Relations, governance theories, politics of emotions, and feminist and post-colonial thought, makes it a pivotal resource for scholars and practitioners. It offers valuable new perspectives on the vitality and complexity of the WPS agenda and engages the reader in a stimulating intellectual journey through the innovative research methods in the IR discipline.

Nevertheless, there are areas where the book could have gone further. One notable limitation is the lack of accessibility for a broader audience, particularly for those less familiar with the technicalities of WPS scholarship or critical IR theory. The book assumes a high level of pre-existing knowledge, which could exclude scholars and practitioners new to the field or those without a deep grounding in feminist or post-colonial theory. For non-experts, certain sections may be challenging to follow, and the language sometimes leans towards being overly academic. This could limit the book's impact, particularly in making its insights more widely applicable beyond the academic sphere.

Moreover, while the book excels at highlighting the internal fractures and tensions within the WPS ecosystem, it offers fewer concrete strategies for practitioners or policymakers aiming to navigate these contradictions. Given the focus on policy ecosystems, the book could have included more practical insights or recommendations for those working on the ground to address the tensions between feminist ideals and institutional constraints. For example, a deeper exploration of how feminist actors could pragmatically balance the WPS agenda's competing demands might have added more actionable value for civil society and governmental organizations.

Finally, while the book engages very well with questions and intersections of Indigeneity, race, and colonial histories, drawing insights from post-colonial and critical theories, I would argue that it would have benefited from a more comprehensive engagement with non-Western perspectives on WPS and with additional analysis of case studies from the Global South. To provide a more comprehensive and diverse understanding of the WPS agenda, the book could have included more case studies and perspectives from the Global South in chapters other than the fifth one on domesticating the gender perspective. A broader inclusion of voices from these contexts would deepen the book's claims about the relational multiplicity of WPS and provide a more diverse understanding of the agenda's global challenges and opportunities.

References

Särmä, S. (2015), 'Collage: An Art-Inspired Methodology for Studying Laughter in World Politics', in *Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies*, ed. F. Caso & C. Hamilton, Bristol, UK: E-International

Review – Governing the Feminist Peace

Written by Isabel Hernandez Pepe

Relations

von Hlatky, S. (2022) *Deploying Feminism: The Role of Gender in NATO Military Operations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

About the author:

Isabel Hernandez Pepe is a PhD Candidate in Transnational Governance at Scuola Normale Superiore and Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna. Her research focuses on feminist foreign policies, feminist international relations, and feminist institutionalism, analyzing gendered norms in foreign policy institutions in Germany and Mexico. A member of the FIG (Feminism, Intersectionality and Gender) Research Cluster, she has also organized cultural events under the Third Mission framework.