

Review - Critical Feminist Justpeace

Written by Constanza Jorquera Mery

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CONSTANZA JORQUERA MERY, AUG 12 2025

Critical Feminist Justpeace: Grounding Theory in Grassroots Praxis

By Karie Cross Riddle

Oxford University Press, 2024

2025 marks the 25th anniversary of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, which launched the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda, a pioneering comprehensive gender perspective on international conflicts and a roadmap for countries in peacebuilding processes. In assessing the successes and failures of this agenda, "Critical Feminist Justpeace" by Karie Cross Riddle is a relevant contribution to the theoretical discussion of feminism in international relations and its explanatory capacity for global phenomena that face significant challenges in these uncertain times.

Riddle employs a critical feminist methodology to advance a normative theory of change, bearing the book's name, which overturns the traditional ways peacebuilding is understood and materialized. The book adopts a top-down approach, beginning with international organizations and states, and then transitioning to local-level peacebuilding.

The normative aspect of Riddle's proposal is based on the strand of feminism known as transnational feminism, which draws on contributions from development, decolonial, and postcolonial theories in the context of globalization and the erosion of national borders. It employs the lens of intersectionality to problematize social interactions in territorial spaces across borders, advocating for the establishment of global support networks that prioritize the Global South. Therefore, the author defines critical feminist justpeace based on its goals, which are to reduce structural power hierarchies and direct forms of violence that directly affect historically marginalized groups and promote equitable justice outcomes at the public and private levels.

The book's thesis argues that while the WPS agenda has integrated and institutionalized women's experiences and problems as agents in peace processes in the context of armed conflict, its implementation has been deficient. The author critiques the agenda for not fully addressing the substantive issues in remote territories, leading to ineffective peacebuilding. From this thesis emerges her effort to construct a grounded theory of 'Critical Feminist Justpeace,' identifying the central critical positions regarding the WPS agenda and peacebuilding processes in general. However, the work fails to illuminate how the author has constructed this theory in a clear and didactic manner while emphasizing its usefulness as an alternative path and a guide for thinking about the relationship between gender, armed conflict, and peace.

While acknowledging the value of research and the incorporation of feminism into an analysis of the implications of an armed conflict such as this one on the lives of women and girls, the emphasis on this case study does not allow for the reproduction of an analytical model with considerable degrees of generalization at the methodological and methodological levels, considering that the aim of any theory is universality. The book's most significant contribution, which deepens our understanding of this issue by providing proper dimensions and categories, is a point that deserves our appreciation and respect, rather than a comprehensive theory, as it attempts to demonstrate.

The author uses a theoretical framework that captures and makes visible the contributions of multiple key feminist authors to critical theory, including Uma Narayan, Judith Butler, and J. Ann Tickner, as well as other scholars from

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developing countries who emphasize the need to internationalize and decolonize the discipline of international relations. This is one of the book's highlights and main merits for future research and for students who wish to broaden their horizons beyond mainstream authors.

Historically, women have not been called upon to reinterpret international politics based on their valid experiences. They are often considered objects of research and victims of international problems, but not subjects or actors in their own right. Feminist approaches to international relations seek to make visible and incorporate into research agendas how the discipline has evolved from discourses that reinforce narrow and exclusionary notions regarding gender. This is especially important in discussions within the field of peace and security studies – which relates to UNSC resolution 1325 and the WPS agenda – where feminism has gained prominence, and its contributions are more widely used, compounded by the fact that specific issues central to the perspectives of the Global South are still absent or under-theorized in mainstream academic studies in the West, such as the relationship between the legacies of colonization, ethnic and religious conflicts, and institutional fragility, the effects of extractive practices by governments and multinational corporations on food insecurity and water access, and violence against indigenous women activists in Latin America.

The book's central theme is the author's experience conducting field research in Manipur and Assam, India, during her doctoral studies, which are case studies that highlight the difficulties in consolidating the logic of the Westphalian nation-state. This is one of the axes of feminist criticism in international relations theory, casting doubt on the concept of state formation, ideas of sovereignty, security, and development, and the need for an intersectional lens that sheds light on the connections that perpetuate armed conflicts and cycles of violence, which make it extremely difficult for peacebuilders to address the impacts of individual and collective trauma from protracted social dynamics that result in the continued violation of human rights.

Another of the book's substantive contributions is the description of "women's peacebuilding praxis," as she shares her findings in Manipur. Socially constructed gender identities also determine power distributions, impacting women's positions in both global and local politics, evident in the structural obstacles and hierarchies of gender, ethnicity/race, and class experienced by women peacebuilders not only in Manipur but around the world. This is reflected in the still low percentage of women negotiators in peace processes – 9.6% of negotiators by 2023, according to the UN –mostly relegated to participants and observers, as evidenced in chapters four and five.

The text details the entire process from methodological design to fieldwork practice, highlighting key elements such as research ethics, relationships with community interlocutors, the challenges of translation, and the difficulties faced by Riddle as a researcher during and after her stay in India. The narrative emphasizes the importance of self-care and support networks, humanizing the work of women researchers in complex environments.

A deep understanding of the research process is immensely beneficial for future studies involving fieldwork in conflict-affected communities in the Global South. The author attempts to establish a "critical feminist methodology as an example of reconstruction through praxis" (p. 183) in her concluding remarks. However, she leaves unaddressed one of the central conflicts between the rationalist and critical or reflectivist paradigms in International Relations (IR). This conflict arises from the criticism that rationalist approaches have towards critical paradigms for their lack of research programs supported by methods and techniques that ensure scientific validity. There is a call for these paradigms to move beyond mere criticism and to genuinely test the validity of their claims through some form of research process.

Conversely, critical theorists question the very foundations of how scientific knowledge is created, asserting that a formal disciplinary structure for studying international relations is unnecessary. From its inception, International Relations has lacked formal disciplinary elements, with a focus on deconstructing the dominant narratives surrounding international phenomena. Critical theory often emphasizes concerns for actors with limited power, while feminist studies contribute significantly by highlighting issues that have historically been overlooked, as well as by bringing more women into discussions. Although there is a strong emphasis on recognizing, making visible, and incorporating these marginalized voices—addressed through the "why"—there remains a lack of consensus and theoretical or methodological rigor in discussing the "how."

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Consequently, the book's weakest section is its conclusions, which consist of general recommendations for courses of action that do not result in a clear roadmap for realistically combatting the five structures that cause and perpetuate the conflict in Manipur. These structures are also present in other armed conflicts in the Global South. A roadmap proposal may establish levels of intervention at the international, domestic, and local levels and outline their interrelationships.

The same criticism applies to the concept of the "Global South." While it can serve as a functional, analytical category and a framework for contrast to the "North" or "Center," it can also create analytical confusion. This terminology risks generating an illusion of a homogeneous "non-Western" world or "the South," suggesting that these regions have similar interests. Such simplifications can obscure the epistemological tensions and the diverse realities of the actors involved, leading to criticisms related to "parochialism" in International Relations—referring to theories that only address a narrow reality.

Since the book focuses specifically on the case of Manipur, it highlights the complexity of applying the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda and theoretical concepts, such as Critical Feminist Justpeace, in other contexts, particularly where the specifics of conflict, gender-based violence, and peacebuilding efforts differ significantly.

Critical Feminist Justpeace aspires to be a conflict-transforming initiative based on "ethical reconstruction" (p. 186). In that case, it is not only necessary but also crucial to problematize further what this statement means, as well as the scope, depth, and limitations of ethics within the epistemological frameworks of the Western liberal order. This critical examination is not a passive exercise but an active engagement that demands our attention and involvement, not only in analytical terms but also in the political, socio-cultural, and economic impact on communities whose social fabric has been deeply damaged by long periods of conflict, since it could even generate the opposite effect on the risk groups it seeks to protect, considering this ethical reconstruction illegitimate and threatening to the survival of the parties in conflict.

Not only do women face unique challenges compared to men simply because they are women, but these specific challenges also require specific gender-sensitive responses. As the author emphasizes, feminist theories are distinguished by their ethical commitments to inclusion and self-reflection, as well as their attention to relationships and power in international relations.

This book presents an opportunity for further exploration of regions and case studies, such as: Are there different forms of feminist peace, or is there just one feminist peace? How can we enrich critical theory from the diverse feminisms to advance effective epistemic emancipation in international relations? Who defines national interests? If women were included in decision-making in the peacebuilding cycle, would the national interest be interpreted differently, and if so, how? , being an opportunity for other regions and case studies, such as in Latin America where, as in other developing regions, inequality, authoritarian legacy, armed violence, militarization, organized crime, and femicides urgently call on peacebuilders, civil society actors, and national and multilateral institutions to implement innovative and sustainable solutions over time, while for us academics, we move towards what the author refers to as, "critically reconstructing research norms for peace and conflict studies" (p. 195).

About the author:

Constanza Jorquera is an International Relations Specialist and Foreign Affairs Analyst with research interests in East Asian geopolitics, Chinese and Korean foreign policy, gender and international relations, and Feminist Foreign Policy. She holds a PhD in American Studies and both a BA and MA in International Studies from the University of Santiago, Chile. She is currently a professor of international relations at the University of Santiago, the University of Chile, Diego Portales University, and Alberto Hurtado University. In addition to her academic work, she serves as a Counsellor on the Council of Foreign Policy at the Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and as Vice-President of the Permanent Forum of Foreign Policy in Chile.

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