Gender as a Post-Conflict Condition: Revisiting the Three Waves

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The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda has been an ambivalent platform for celebrating achievement and lamenting results. Women peacebuilders around the world have become increasingly more vocal since the adoption of UNSCR 1325 and have found allies throughout UN structures to amplify their voices. Much as they have made their presence known in peace processes in Syria, Libya, South Sudan, Cyprus, the Philippines, Colombia, and elsewhere though, they have also seen acknowledgment come with a reluctance to adopt their claims in substance. Fifteen resolutions on from UNSCR 1325, we are now celebrating the thwarting of resolutions that seek to co-opt the WPS agenda to backtrack on feminist gains, such as recently tabled by Russia.

Indeed, the relation between the softer language in which WPS is often couched and the more radical feminist claims linking gender to conflict has often been fraught. One of the founding assertions of WPS is that the inclusion of women results in longer-lasting peace. This is not only an empirical claim but a political one whereby this inclusion is linked to inclusivity more generally, transparency, democracy, and social justice. This link also provides the direction for broader intervention agendas that use gender perspectives to advocate for wide-ranging institutional changes post-conflict to address equality and social justice questions. New constitutions are opportunities for policy changes that under normal conditions might have taken much longer to adopt. But if conflict – and its end – can occasion feminism, might we perhaps also see feminism as inherently a post-conflict condition? And if so, can this relation also illuminate aspects of the frustrated progress in WPS? In this short article I want to explore what happens if instead of starting from the premise that conflict affects women and men differently, we start from the premise that conflict is productive of new developments in feminist agendas. Gender is not used to tell us something about conflict, but conflict is instead employed to tell us things about feminism.

Conventional histories of western feminism locate the movement's progress along the three waves of the 20th century: the struggle for women's suffrage and its victories in the 1920s, the struggle for emancipation and the politicisation of the private sphere in the 1960s, and the struggle for the recognition of multiplicities of genders, feminisms, and discriminations at the close of the century. Transpose that onto conventional western history and those dates follow closely three world wars and their consequences: the devastation of WWI (1914–1918), the totalitarian spectre of WWII (1939–1945), and the collapse of the dichotomic world order of the Cold War (1940s–1989). The links between these two trajectories are more or less well-established.

Suffragette movement historians have traced connections between the active roles that women took in the war efforts in Britain, France, and the US and the strengthening of arguments supporting their vote. On the level of political discourse, women had proven their contribution to the public sphere and that made their exclusion untenable (van Wingerden, 1999). They also highlighted the paradox of democratic deficits when the war was staked primarily on democracy (Karlan, 2003). And in practical terms, their votes were now necessary to boost the conservative vote in France (Hause and Kenney, 1981) and the liberal government in the UK. In the latter, the disenfranchisement of groups such as soldiers and sailors on residency grounds provided room for the arguments suffragists had been making for decades and made them compelling. In this light, the war provided the context that amplified claims and made their heeding expedient. Political scientists have read this in the language of "opportunity" (McCammon et al, 2001), very closely echoed in calls for increased participation of women in post-conflict polities under the WPS

agenda.

The opposite approach is taken by Nancy Fraser, who sees in the developments in gender equality after World War II a co-optation of at least part of the agenda to capitalist demands and its "valorization of waged labour" (2009: 111). Rather than women making the most of political opportunities, she argues that capitalism absorbed their gains. Studies of the second wave noted the parallel trajectory that followed the war of expanding production and wealth on the one hand and claims to equality on the other. Women's contribution to the war effort contributed to rendering women's presence in the expanded labour force indispensable, while at the same time, for those women that returned to domestic duties, it provided the context for critiquing their relegation there. The claims to recognition of domestic work as unpaid labour and thus to expanded welfare protections was also coupled with claims about the pay gap and to gender protections around reproduction and sexual violence within and outside the home. The personal-political sphere constituted in the second wave was at once a sphere of rights and of work. From a cautionary perspective such as Fraser's the opportunity of aligning interests in this post-war phase was also a liability. In either case however, the struggle for equality and its gains were embedded in western societies in the process of recovering and prospering after war.

But if the recovery from devastation occasioned gains in gender equality after the two world wars, the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s provided ground for amplifying the calls for attention to the multiple forms that such equality should take. The collapse of the dual order and the framing of globalisation as at once a multiple and connected system, offered a context to reconstitute second wave fractures in approaches to feminism, sexuality, discrimination, and positionality as connected struggles along a spectrum – it attempted "unity with a dynamic and welcoming politics of coalition" (Snyder, 2008: 176). Most importantly, the collapse of the bipolar order rendered the dynamics between the global North and South a major point of reference in the intersectional dynamics that the third wave considered. It is at this point that international politics gained prominence in feminist politics and vice versa, even if connections pre-existed it (Tickner and True, 2018).

Yet curiously, at this precise point, the post-Cold War condition and the third wave became parts of two separate discussions, the first honing in on women and peace, the second on more cultural questions of identity. It is almost as if the coalition approach forged two paths out of the feminist politics of the personal: a capitalised Feminist Politics of international relations captured largely by the WPS agenda and a lowercase feminist politics of the cultural sphere. Their reconvergence in the global protests spurred by the #metoo movement and the campaigns in response to femicides in India and Boko Haram abductions suggest that the discursive fine-tuning developed along the way may have enhanced rather than weakened their coalition-building potential.

My point in revisiting this history is to suggest that one way to look at feminism is as being integrally connected to the post-conflict condition. Issues under WPS are thus not merely a subset of feminist questions, nor a subset of post-conflict politics. Feminism agendas are developed in post-conflict contexts which are productive of feminist shifts. (Post-)conflict and feminism are integrally connected and indispensable to one another. Why is this change of perspective significant? Because it connects feminist multiplicities and because it refocuses gender equality as a project perpetually under construction and always in the making in post-conflict societies. And from this perspective we can now begin to rethink "post-conflict" not as a condition of separation within global hierarchies, but as a condition that is common. Locating feminism within the western-centric three waves and the western-centric world wars is about remembering that both feminism and conflict connect as much as they divide the world's regions.

Granted, that the discourse of the three waves of feminism is a discourse that valorises "progress" in the flattening terms of Western privilege, applying particularly to the US and the UK, and particularly to sections of women in these societies. The links between industrialisation and wealth production that provided the impetus for changing approaches to women's suffrage and work do not apply universally after conflict. Far from a grand entry to the workforce, today, a recent study shows (Quek, 2019), women in conflict situations face added challenges in employment. Yet they also adapt to and use the opportunities that post-conflict environments enable (Yadav, 2020). The story is not singular, and progress is not linear. A reading of global dynamics does not only allow for critique, but through this critique decentres both "feminism" and "post-conflict." But the story does not end there. Because in so doing, it enables their connections to open up new spaces for thought and action. The reconfiguration of "feminism"

and “post-conflict” as inherently connected terms is a suggestion that is embedded in the political structure of the WPS agenda but which, I want to argue, furnish this agenda with a far more wide-ranging and radical potential if read through an all-encompassing feminist lens. For while WPS is founded on the promise of an expanded view of security (Tryggestad, 2009), its conception of conflict and its effects in “post-conflict” as primarily a situation contained within warring spaces, keeps it locked into a necessarily neo-colonial frame.

One way this promise can be kept is by revising the terms under which National Action Plans for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 are produced. Scores of feminist scholars have drawn attention to the problematic neo-colonial relations that undergird these plans, placing women in the North, and indeed the UN, in a position of “bringing” WPS to women in the South. This, I know from experience partly analysed elsewhere (2016, 2018, 2020), may entail hearing their voices and enabling their use of UNSCR 1325 as a tool, but it ultimately bounds the North to exporting gendered peace and gendered security to the South. It cannot be otherwise, because WPS by its very structure is based on a definition of “conflict” as a war or war-like situation in a local context, and the link of “security” to that local conflict environment. Northern NAPs as a result, proclaim actions regarding peacekeepers deployed in those conflict areas and peace interveners relating to women in those conflict areas. Is conflict really so localised today? When refugee women fleeing conflict locations come to the North, are not those hosting societies also a “post-conflict” space? Yet how many NAPs really address post-conflict conditions at home?

If we rethink conflict and post-conflict in more expansive terms while keeping in mind its integral links to feminist struggles, far from engaging in a tautological exercise, we re-emphasize the expansive scope of the human security agenda that underpins WPS in the first place – an agenda that implicates societies and not just military structures in the provision of “security” and in doing so reconfigures those societies in global terms and not as localised points in the export of norms and values. This could mean reframing citizenship in Cyprus, rethinking intervention in Afghanistan, refocusing “indicators” of progress, redirecting resources, addressing refugee conditions in western camps, dealing with racism and anti-migrant violence and hate speech, recommitting to the protection of the displaced as gendered subjects and as a priority over border policing, rebalancing approaches to climate refugees and climate displacement. The list is endless, but the point is to integrate a concern for accountability for conflict as a global concern rather than a directional one from Northern “peace” to Southern “conflict.”

Not least now, when the COVID-19 pandemic has made of all countries a disaster zone and has highlighted how its effects are unevenly felt by women suffering violence at home, precariously employed, carrying the larger burden of frontline work in retail and care, and the larger burden of home schooling. It is telling that laudable as the attention to these connections has been, almost instantaneously, at the UN and internationally, a WPS-framed analysis as exemplified in the examination of specifically Arab NAPs (Swaine, 2020), remains locked in these regionalising dynamics. But equally, in the global perspective of health security, it seems that the WHO has not adequately mainstreamed gender into its pandemic responses (Asthana et al, 2020; Wenham and Davies, 2021). Equally stark is the contrast between a 2020 Georgetown report that applies a WPS perspective to security within the US (Klugman et al, 2020), and the 2016 US NAP and 2019 WPS Strategy that are outward-facing and engage only with the US’ wars abroad, failing to account for women’s security at home.

A more integral connection between WPS and human security, arising from a global understanding of feminism as a post-conflict condition, might provide a more holistic and more responsive understanding of the challenges these failures expose. Feminism as a post-conflict condition does not simply entail organising feminist security as a subset of human security but making feminism a condition of (global) post-conflict politics.

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