

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sustaining gender: Natural resource management, conflict prevention, and the UN Sustaining Peace agenda in times of climate catastrophe

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Abstract

Climate change and its potentially violent consequences for international peace and security have transformed the United Nations (UN) approach to Sustaining Peace. One of the emblematic initiatives of this new approach is the UN Joint Programme for Women, Natural Resources, Climate, and Peace. We use feminist peace scholarship to consider what the recent debates about who builds peace and where peace is built in Peace Studies and Environmental Peacebuilding miss when they treat concepts of 'scale' and local natural resource management as gender-neutral and what this might tell us about the wider UN Peacebuilding agenda in which it is situated. We make three claims. First, we claim that gendered relations of power that leverage women for win-win opportunities of peace and gender equality (re)produce an idea of a feminised, self-contained local. Second, we demonstrate that this makes it possible to reproduce the dominant political order that privileges intervention, and the dominant economic order that is occupied with forcing 'local' economies to adapt their natural resource management strategies. Third, we argue that assuming that 'the who' and 'the where' of building peace is local makes it much harder to ask about *how the conditions of possibility for violence* transcend scales.

Keywords: conflict prevention; gender; local; natural resources; Sustaining Peace

Introduction

Since the 2015 high-level review of the United Nations (UN) peace and security architecture, the UN agenda known as Sustaining Peace has reconfigured international intervention away from state-centric and militarised perspectives. Sustaining Peace moves towards bottom-up and inclusive policies directed at preventing conflict, ensuring that local populations become resilient to human-made and natural disasters and guaranteeing equal access to social, health, political, and economic opportunities.¹ In turn, approaches to conflict prevention are often concerned with long-term interventions that address all dimensions and root causes of *local* conflicts.² Crucially, the agenda makes frequent reference to the context of these initiatives in terms of increased pressure

¹UNSG, 'Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace report of the Secretary-General' (New York: UN General Assembly, 2020), p. 5.

²UNSG, 'Challenge of Sustaining Peace Report of the Advisory Group of Experts on the Review of the Peacebuilding Architecture' (2015); 'The future of United Nations peace operations: Implementation of the recommendations of the high-level independent panel on peace operations' (2015).

on natural resources and climate security.³ It does so through a whole UN system approach to peacebuilding that brings together a diverse set of UN bodies and programmes and often references women as being key to the success of this approach.⁴

One of the emblematic initiatives of this new approach is the UN Joint Programme for Women, Natural Resources, Climate, and Peace. The final narrative report of the programme's pilot project in Sudan credits the pilot with achieving 'very positive outcomes with respect to women's participation and influence in natural resource conflict prevention and peacebuilding in North Kordofan [state].'⁵ The report describes how the pilot engendered women's participation in community-based conflict mediation and dispute resolution related to natural resources, representing a dramatic shift from how 'prior to the project, women's opinions would only be sought on social issues, particularly domestic disputes.'⁶ The report goes on to suggest the success of the pilot 'as one of the first to successfully link gender, climate change, and security in a single theory of change' and that it 'has generated considerable interest among peace and development actors.'⁷

Reading the material presented in this Final Narrative Report, as well as the public-facing documents created for the Joint Programme, one gets the idea that the Joint Programme for Women, Natural Resources, Climate, and Peace (hereafter JP) represents exactly what feminist scholars have advocated for in terms of needing to treat women as more than mere victims of conflict and expanding programmes to issues beyond Sexual and Gender-Based Violence.⁸ The JP,⁹ of which the pilot in Sudan is a part, is framed around two core assumptions: (1) that natural resource management (NRM) provides a good opportunity to increase women's participation in fragile and conflict-affected settings, particularly in light of climate shocks and (2) that women's participation in NRM is necessary to prevent conflict in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.¹⁰

Therefore, at face value, the JP treats women as agents of change and thus addresses issues that feminist scholars identify as being crucial for and often missing from peacebuilding. Namely, it engages questions of women's economic empowerment in post-conflict settings and the under-valuation of prevention.¹¹ Surely, UN-funded interventions that focus on a complex interrelated combination of conflict resolution, economic livelihoods, and women's participation, such as

³Cedric de Coning, 'Sustaining Peace: Can a new approach change the UN?' (Bonn: Development and Peace Foundation, 2018); Florian Krampe, Farah Hegazi, and Stacy D. VanDeveer, 'Sustaining peace through better resource governance: Three potential mechanisms for environmental peacebuilding', *World Development*, 144 (2021), p. 105508.

⁴UNSC, 'Women and peace and security: Report of the Secretary General' (2020).

⁵UNEP, UN Women, UNDP, PBSO, and UN SDG Group, '2020 final annual narrative report on the Joint Programme on Women, Natural Resources, and Peace' (2020), p. 7.

⁶UNEP et al., '2020 final annual narrative report', p. 7.

⁷UNEP et al., '2020 final annual narrative report', p. 7.

⁸Sherri Gibbins, 'No angry women at the United Nations', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 13:4 (2011), pp. 522–38; Laura J. Shepherd, 'Sex, security and superhero(in)es: From 1325 to 1820 and beyond', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 13:4 (2011), pp. 504–21; Laura J. Shepherd, 'Knowing Women, Peace and Security: New issues and new modes of encounter', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 22:5 (2020), pp. 625–8.

⁹We want to briefly point to the fact that the Joint Programme refers to 'women' in the title, while the Knowledge Platform refers to 'gender'. In this project proposal we use 'gender' to refer to the category that informs our analysis and use the same terms as the UN when discussing specific UN documents. This in and of itself is interesting in terms of discursive analysis (see also Laura Shepherd, *Gender Violence and Security* [London: Zed Books, 2008]).

¹⁰UNEP, 'Women, natural resources, & peace: A Joint Program of UN Environment, UN Women, UN Development Programme and UN Peacebuilding Support Office' (Geneva: United Nations Environment Programme, 2018), available at: https://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/Women_NR_Peace_2pager_2018.pdf.

¹¹Soumita Basu and Catia C. Confortini, 'Weakest "p" in the 1325 pod? Realizing conflict prevention through Security Council Resolution 1325', *International Studies Perspectives*, 18:1 (2017), pp. 43–63; Suzanne Bergeron, Carol Cohn, and Claire Duncanson, 'Rebuilding bridges: Toward a feminist research agenda for postwar reconstruction', *Politics and Gender*, 13:4 (2017), pp. 715–21; Claire Duncanson, 'Beyond liberal vs liberating: Women's economic empowerment in the United Nations' Women, Peace and Security agenda', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 21:1 (2019), pp. 1–20; María Martín de Almagro and Caitlin Ryan, 'Subverting economic empowerment: Towards a postcolonial-feminist framework on gender (in)security in post-war settings', *European Journal of International Relations*, 25:4 (2019), pp. 1059–79; María Martín de Almagro and

through the inclusion of more women in NRM, should be a cause for celebration? Indeed, celebration, or at least relief, was our own initial reaction on learning about the JP. However, as we continued to consider how gender is represented within the logics of the JP, and in turn, how the gendered representations make possible gendered material practices, we became increasingly less celebratory. Additionally, even if women were engaged in community-based resolution for natural resource disputes in North Kordofan when the pilot ended in 2020, it is now, even more so, very hard to be celebratory about peace in Sudan. These two senses of decreased celebration – about the JP and about peace in Sudan – are interrelated and are precisely why we think it is so critical to take a gendered approach to analysing not just gender programmes for peace such as the JP, but the wider UN agenda of Sustaining Peace.

Based on the existing debates in the Peacebuilding literature, and in Environmental Peacebuilding, which have taken a ‘turn’ to consider the value of preventing conflict and building peace at the local/community scale,¹² we have two interrelated questions that guide this paper: what does a gendered reading of the JP reveal about who builds peace and where peace is built? What might this tell us about the wider UN Peacebuilding agenda in which it is situated? As we show in our analysis, gendered logics are foundational to the JP insofar as it assumes the potential in ‘leveraging women’s unique experiences’ as a way of opening up ‘win–win opportunities’ for both women’s empowerment and local peace on the basis of good NRM.¹³ We propose a deeper critical interrogation that takes us to the heart of how the JP leverages women in NRM initiatives for win–win outcomes in a contained local space and question why this might matter for the kind of peace offered by the broader UN Peacebuilding agenda known as Sustaining Peace.

By making our analysis of the JP in relation to the wider UN Sustaining Peace agenda, we argue that these same JP gendered logics of leveraging the local for (localised, self-contained, interpersonal) peace are fundamental to the wider UN Peacebuilding agenda. Overall, we hope to show how within opportunities to leverage women, gender is understood as merely a matter of interpersonal relations. This obfuscates structural relations of power within and between different scales of local, national, and international. It is easier to see the evidence of this in the JP because of the centrality of gender as a target of intervention. However, our analysis should raise questions for the wider Sustaining Peace agenda and its reliance on gendered logics of conflict prevention and local participation, which feminise local economies and forms of governance, treating them as situated, particular, self-contained, and in need of adaptation.

To proceed, we first outline the academic debates we build on, namely the current debates within Peacebuilding literature relative to the new UN Peacebuilding agenda and the scales of peace, as well as emerging debates within Environmental Peacebuilding, which consider questions of local NRM and conflict prevention. In both of these debates, we find scalar concepts of ‘local participation’ and ‘local knowledge’. Therefore, in our analysis of them, we refer to what feminist scholars say about taking a gendered approach to questions of scale, participation, and knowledge production. This approach highlights the relations between discourse, materiality, and subjectivity to understand how much of the international agenda on gender refers to local women in gendered ways, and how these reproduce dominant relations of political and economic power and privilege the international order. From there, we outline the methodological approach we took to select and analyse empirical material from the JP. In the following empirical subsections, we answer the question of what a gendered reading of the JP reveals. First, we consider the work gender does to leverage women to create win–win situations where women are empowered and peace is secured. This is a question of how gender is understood in relation to ideas about governance of natural

Caitlin Ryan, ‘Introduction: (Re)integrating feminist security studies and global political economy: Continuing the conversation through empirical perspectives’, *Politics & Gender*, 16:3 (2020), pp. 1–6; Laura J. Shepherd, ‘The paradox of prevention in the Women, Peace and Security agenda’, *European Journal of International Security*, 5:3 (2020), pp. 315–31.

¹²Tobias Ide, Lisa R. Palmer, and Jon Barnett, ‘Environmental peacebuilding from below: Customary approaches in Timor-Leste’, *International Affairs*, 97:1 (2021), pp. 103–17; Gearoid Millar, ‘Toward a trans-scalar peace system: Challenging complex global conflict systems’, *Peacebuilding*, 8:3 (2020), pp. 261–78.

¹³UNEP, ‘Women, natural resources, & peace.’

resources, conflict prevention, and climate adaptation, and how it is deployed to solve certain kinds of problems. Secondly, we show how leveraging women for these win-win opportunities (re)produces gendered ideas of a self-contained local space where women can build peace, relative to wider scales of national and international peacebuilding. Finally, we conclude by considering what this might mean for the kind of peace on offer within the wider Sustaining Peace agenda.

Theorising gender, natural resource management and peace

We draw on three interrelated yet distinct bodies of literature, all of which have tackled in some way questions of ‘who builds peace?’ and ‘where is peace built?’. Within Peace and Conflict Studies debates, we focus on recent debates about how ‘scale’ figures in the new UN Peacebuilding agenda. Relatedly, we consider how the separate sub-field of Environmental Peacebuilding has recently shifted to consider ‘local’ NRM. Finally, we use feminist peace scholarship to consider what these two debates miss when they treat concepts of scale and local NRM as gender-neutral.

Scale points to hierarchised social, political, and economic territorial spaces, each designating ‘the arena and moment, both discursively and materially, where socio-spatial power relations are contested and compromises are negotiated and regulated’.¹⁴ Recent debates about scale in peacebuilding have emerged relative to the shift in UN Peacebuilding towards the Sustaining Peace agenda and support a conceptualisation of ‘where’ peace is imagined to be built within the JP and the wider agenda. Scale matters in peacebuilding because international interveners try to reallocate power and resources into a centralised national state,¹⁵ or to subnational, state-based, or ‘traditional’ institutions and actors.¹⁶ But scales are not fixed, immutable, and separate spaces. Instead, they are *constructed* rather than natural and are therefore *sites of contestation*.¹⁷ A ‘politics of scale’ approach to peacebuilding thus allows for a consideration of how contestation over and alignment of interests from actors across and within scales can influence outcomes of peacebuilding. For us, what is useful in this is its treatment of scales as value-laden.

We see this as contrasting with some of the more recent debates about ‘trans-scalar’ peacebuilding.¹⁸ These debates take a more normative approach to scales and see opportunities to derive positive peace outcomes from the unique knowledge and interests of those scales most pertinent to the policy intervention. Whereas these debates do acknowledge interaction between scales as having an effect on outcomes, we find it troubling that there is less attention to the constructed nature of scales, and that extreme differences in material power underlie the influence over decisions between scales. We agree with Millar’s evaluation that within primary models of peacebuilding, problems and solutions are either offered from the global scale and imposed on the local or are imagined to be contained at a national or local level in a way that limits ‘the sphere of intervention to the subnational level and ignores the global and international structures’.¹⁹ However, absent an analysis of the discursive and material relations of power that have structured these scales in the first place, we do not see how there can be any kind of transformative action for peace. Rather, we point to how feminist scholars have clear theorisations of scale that offer a more complex account of power. For instance, Massey theorises scale and the gendered implications of scalar ordering to

¹⁴Erik Swyngedouw, ‘Glocalization’ and the politics of scale’, in Kevin R. Cox (ed.), *Spaces of Globalization: Reasserting the Power of the Local* (New York: Guilford, 1997), pp. 137–166 (p. 140).

¹⁵Shahar Hameiri, *Regulating Statehood: State Building and the Transformation of the Global Order* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

¹⁶Andreas T. Hirblinger and Claudia Simons, ‘The good, the bad, and the powerful: Representations of the “local” in peacebuilding’, *Security Dialogue*, 46:5 (2015), pp. 422–39.

¹⁷Shahar Hameiri and Lee Jones, ‘Beyond hybridity to the politics of scale: International intervention and “local” politics’, *Development and Change*, 48:1 (2017), pp. 54–77.

¹⁸Sara Hellmüller, ‘A trans-scalar approach to peacebuilding and transitional justice: Insights from the Democratic Republic of Congo’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 57:4 (2022), pp. 415–32; Millar, ‘Toward a trans-scalar peace system’; Gearoid Millar, ‘Ambition and ambivalence: Reconsidering positive peace as a trans-scalar peace system’, *Journal of Peace Research*, 58:4 (2021), pp. 640–54.

¹⁹Millar, ‘Ambition and ambivalence’, p. 648.

demonstrate how the local is feminised and devalued in relation to a more masculinised global.²⁰ In our empirical sections, we evidence how we see gendered scales in peacebuilding programmes, and why we think this matters.

Debates in Environmental Peacebuilding focus on how NRM is essential to the establishment of sustainable peace and development. This has led scholars to establish a link between 'bad' NRM and conflict.²¹ We engage with Environmental Peacebuilding debates because of the ways in which these studies variously lend support to or challenge the kinds of assumptions in the JP that link NRM and (local) conflict management. The most recent literature has moved to examine whether improved NRM may contribute to security and the improvement of local economy and livelihoods and explores the causal mechanisms through which environmental projects contribute to peace.²²

In terms of how projects specifically target local conflict prevention in the context of natural resources, Castro analyses a capacity-building programme for conflict-management training in Darfur.²³ His findings suggest that programme participants do use their training to resolve local conflicts, such as farmer/pastoralist conflicts. However, his findings also illustrate a wider limitation of these kinds of approaches to NRM and peace, insofar as the project treats the local as a self-contained site of conflict (or peace). Namely, Castro points out that all benefits of the project are limited/contained to local communities and do not affect the wider national and global context because 'elite priorities are elsewhere, while international donors often end up enablers of conflict and chaos instead of servants of peace.'²⁴ We find this useful relative to how an exclusive focus on 'the local' misses the ways in which local dynamics and economic activities are always connected to dynamics and economies at different scales, usually in unequal ways. As we show in our subsequent analysis, treating the local as a self-contained site of peace/conflict reproduces gendered logics of responsabilisation.

While 'gender' appears as a variable or an issue for further attention within some of the recent Environmental Peacebuilding debates, these debates have only limited engagement with feminist insights on peace.²⁵ Feminist Peace and Security scholars have consistently pointed to the importance of how discourse and practice in global security and peacekeeping are gendered.²⁶ At the same time, they have criticised the fact that in these discourses, the deeper structural causes of inequality rooted in capitalism and neocolonialism are often sidelined.²⁷ Feminist Peace scholarship clearly shows the limitations to achieving peace that is gender-just and sustainable when

²⁰Doreen B. Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 5–11.

²¹Siri Aas Rustad, Päivi Lujala, and Philippe Le Billion, 'Building or spoiling peace? Lessons from the management of high-value natural resources', in Päivi Lujala and Siri Aas Rustad (eds), *High-Value Natural Resources and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding* (London: Earthscan, 2012), pp. 573–623.

²²Tobias Ide, 'The impact of environmental cooperation on peacemaking: Definitions, mechanisms, and empirical evidence', *International Studies Review*, 21:3 (2019), pp. 327–46; McKenzie F. Johnson, Luz A. Rodríguez, and Manuela Quijano Hoyos, 'Intrastate environmental peacebuilding: A review of the literature', *World Development*, 137 (2021), p. 105150; Krampe, Hegazi, and VanDeveer, 'Sustaining peace through better resource governance'.

²³A. Peter Castro, 'Promoting natural resource conflict management in an illiberal setting: Experiences from Central Darfur, Sudan', *World Development*, 109 (2018), pp. 163–71.

²⁴Castro, 'Promoting natural resource conflict management in an illiberal setting', p. 170.

²⁵Carol Cohn and Claire Duncanson, 'Women, Peace and Security in a changing climate', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 22:5 (2020), pp. 742–62; Annica Kronsell, 'WPS and climate change', in Sara E. Davies and Jacqui True (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Women, Peace, and Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 726–37; Henri Myrtilinen, Jana Naujoks, and Janpeter Schilling, 'Gender, natural resources, and peacebuilding in Kenya and Nepal', *Peace Review*, 27:2 (2015), pp. 181–7; Keina Yoshida and Lina M. Céspedes-Báez, 'The nature of Women, Peace and Security: A Colombian perspective', *International Affairs*, 97:1 (2021), pp. 17–34.

²⁶Gülay Çağlar, Elisabeth Prügl, and Susanne Zwingel (eds), *Feminist Strategies in International Governance* (London: Routledge, 2013).

²⁷Cohn and Duncanson 'Women, Peace and Security in a changing climate'; Maria Martin de Almagro, 'Producing participants: Gender, race, class, and Women, Peace and Security', *Global Society*, 32:4 (2018), pp. 395–414.

post-war reconstruction strategies privilege an expansion of extractive industries and other capitalist markets.²⁸ However, despite the clear contributions that feminist insights have made to analysing climate change and gender, feminist contributions are marginalised within much of Environmental Peacebuilding, and instead, ‘gender’ is added as a variable in a fairly shallow way.²⁹

Outside of Feminist Peace Studies, debates on gender and the environment are hugely informative of how environmental projects often bring in gender through essentialist accounts of women’s relationship with nature, which reify rather than challenge gendered relations of power.³⁰ It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage with the richness of these debates, but we want to acknowledge two ways we drew on existing work in order to develop our own analysis.

First, these debates make clear the risks of treating women as a self-contained unit, and in treating women as a homogeneous social category that can be leveraged for good environmental management and (neoliberal) livelihoods activity. One illustration of this comes from analyses of forest management projects in India³¹ and Nepal,³² which treated women’s activities in the forest as homogeneous to all women, thus ignoring the role of caste and class. Furthermore, the projects treated women’s forest activities solely within an economic logic of livelihoods and environmental management. This leaves out the social role that forest work plays. It also fails to recognise that, beyond being merely economic activities that can impact ‘the environment’, the social and ecological space of the forest shapes and is shaped by gendered social relations.

Secondly, these debates point to the relations between the local and international in terms of what is counted as good knowledge for resource management and, in particular, how the knowledge of women is treated as local and situated knowledge in contrast to the scientific and universal knowledge of international experts. This is reflected, for instance, in how international intervention programmes rely on (differentiated and hierarchical) notions of scale that position women as managers of their local environments. Ahlborg and Nightingale suggest that this misses ‘that although actors at various levels may have scale-dependent interests, the knowledge held by all actors is inherently multi-scalar’.³³ Treating women’s knowledge of natural resources as contained within both a closed-loop of gender and a closed loop of local is also a way through which women’s knowledge is marginalised and feminised in relation to the knowledges that are rendered as global or technical.

It also relates to how programmes for economic livelihood are designed, wherein women’s micro-economic activity is divorced from broader political action and from other economic scales. Not only does this rely on homogenisation of women and a false assumption that women’s economic activity will necessarily alleviate household poverty, but it simultaneously de-politicises

²⁸ Carol Cohn, ‘Mainstreaming gender in UN security policy: A path to political transformation?’, in Shirin Rai and Georgina Waylen (eds), *Global Governance: Feminist Perspectives* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 185–206; Jenny Hedström and Elisabeth Olivius, ‘Insecurity, dispossession, depletion: Women’s experiences of post-war development in Myanmar’, *The European Journal of Development Research*, 32:2 (2020), pp. 379–403; María Martín de Almagro, ‘Building feminist peace: Gender, legal reforms and social reproduction after the United Nations mission in Liberia’, *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 5:1 (2022), pp. 45–62; Martín de Almagro and Ryan, ‘Subverting economic empowerment’; Sylvia Tamale, *Decolonization and Afro-Feminism* (Ottawa: Daraja Press, 2020).

²⁹ Cohn and Duncanson, ‘Women, Peace and Security in a changing climate’; Nicole Detraz, *Gender and the Environment* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017); Christiane Fröhlich and Giovanna Gioli, ‘Gender, conflict, and global environmental change’, *Peace Review*, 27:2 (2015), pp. 137–46; Anna Kaijser and Annica Kronsell, ‘Climate change through the lens of intersectionality’, *Environmental Politics*, 23:3 (2014), pp. 417–33; Yoshida and Céspedes-Báez, ‘The nature of Women, Peace and Security’.

³⁰ Bina Agarwal, ‘The gender and environment debate’, in David Bell, Leesa Fawcett, Roger Keil, and Peter Penz (eds), *Political Ecology* (London: Routledge, 1998).

³¹ Shubhra Gururani, ‘Forests of pleasure and pain: Gendered practices of labor and livelihood in the forests of the Kumaon Himalayas, India’, *Gender, Place & Culture*, 9:3 (2002), pp. 229–43; ‘Geographies that make resistance: Remapping the politics of gender and place in Uttarakhand, India’, *Himalaya*, 34:1 (2014), pp. 68–79.

³² Andrea Nightingale, ‘The nature of gender: Work, gender, and environment’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 24:2 (2006), pp. 165–85.

³³ Helene Ahlborg and Andrea Nightingale ‘Mismatch between scales of knowledge in Nepalese forestry: Epistemology, power, and policy implications’, *Ecology and Society*, 17:4 (2012), p. 8.

women's agency through 'nurturing a form of depoliticised collective action that is completely non-threatening to the power structure and political order'.³⁴ We take seriously the insights from these scholars of the need to interrogate the interrelations between how the environment is treated as a site for economic activity and an object of management, how women are treated as a group tasked with environmental management, and how environmental management programmes treat political agency in relation to economic activity.

A note on our methodological approach

We draw on analytical insights from feminist post-structural theory to approach our analysis of how gender is deployed for peacebuilding in the JP, and in turn, what this is doing to offer a particular vision of peace. In the analysis of policies and governance, feminist post-structural theorists draw attention to the ways in which governance functions through complexes of power and knowledge, material and symbolic technologies, and the co-constitution of the state and forms of subjectivity.³⁵ While governance by the state was an early focus of such analyses, similar analytical frameworks derived from an inductive analysis of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda have been used to understand the nature, scope, and limitations of the agenda and its potential as a tool for sustainable peace and conflict prevention.³⁶

Conventional approaches to policy analysis focus primarily on explaining the gap between policy intentions and its outcomes, and how policy can be better implemented. We draw on insights from post-structural feminist policy analysis to examine how the policy itself and associated practices create and reproduce meaning and what, therefore, can be implemented.³⁷ Feminist policy analysis serves as a tool for shedding light on the conceptual frameworks that shape knowledge within a given policy. It delves into not only our perceptions of what we believe we know, but also the implications of these perceptions of knowledge for policymaking in the global context. This approach has a rich history within the field of IR, illustrating its effectiveness in understanding how discourse constructs a sense of stable meaning, enabling us to navigate and comprehend our surroundings. The aim is to deconstruct the discursive formations that constitute the UN Sustaining Peace framework and to understand how particular policy initiatives that link gender equality and good NRM become possible, how women are given certain subject positions such as 'agents of change' or 'helpless victims', and how this matters for the future of peacebuilding.³⁸

In our theory building, we focus on what the linking of the gender equality agenda and the NRM agenda can tell us about the broader shift towards conflict prevention to tackle 'complex multidimensional challenges'.³⁹ To do so, we study the production of rationalities that justify particular modes of linking gender and NRM. Here, we consider, for instance, how certain discursive representations make connections between different actors and problems, and what kinds of language are used to make these connections. Additionally, we interrogate the material techniques and mechanisms through which the UN ensures that these rationalities are translated into policies,

³⁴Srilatha Batliwala and Deepa Dhanraj, 'Gender myths that instrumentalise women: A view from the Indian frontline', *IDS Bulletin*, 34:4 (2004), pp. 11–18 (p. 17).

³⁵Carol Lee Bacchi and Susan Goodwin, *Poststructural Policy Analysis: A Guide to Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Michel Foucault, 'Governmentality', in Graham Burchell, Collin Gordin, and Peter Miller (eds), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 87–104.

³⁶Pol Bargaúes-Pedreny and Maria Martin de Almagro, 'Prevention from afar: Gendering resilience and sustaining hope in post-UNMIL Liberia', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 14:3 (2020), pp. 327–48; Paul Kirby and Laura J. Shepherd, 'Women, Peace, and Security: Mapping the (re)production of a policy ecosystem', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 6:3 (2021), p. ogaa045; Shepherd 'Knowing Women, Peace and Security'.

³⁷Dvora Yanow, *Conducting Interpretive Policy Analysis* (London: Sage, 2000); Marysia Zalewski, 'Well, what is the feminist perspective on Bosnia?', *International Affairs*, 71:2 (1995), pp. 339–56.

³⁸Lene Hansen, 'Discourse analysis, post-structuralism, and foreign policy', in Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield, and Tim Dunne (eds), *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 95–110; Laura J. Shepherd, *Gender, UN Peacebuilding, and the Politics of Space: Locating Legitimacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³⁹UNEP, 'Women, natural resources, & peace.'

objectives, and activities. Finally, we consider the subject positions embedded in relations of power that can be used to divide, silence, and marginalise individuals, communities, and even states based on class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality.

We used inductive coding to analyse a total of 30 documents covering a total of more than 500 pages to examine how the JP agenda was made possible, and what it articulates. We first identified three initial ‘foundational’ documents to develop a coding system. These are the 2013 United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) ‘flagship’ report on women, natural resources, and peacebuilding,⁴⁰ one of the two principal documents of the ‘Sustaining Peace’ agenda,⁴¹ and the 2020 narrative evaluation of the UN JP.⁴² We chose two of these documents based on their foundational role in establishing ‘new’ institutional agendas (the flagship report and the United Nations Secretary General report). We chose the narrative report on the JP because it represents a thorough explanation of the goals of the programme and because it frames the future of the programme relative to the wider UN peace and security architecture.

Based on our inductive coding of these documents, we continued our analysis with documents for the three projects directly affiliated to the JP. One of these, located in Blue Nile state in Sudan, is a direct follow-on from the pilot in North Kordofan state. Beyond Sudan, we traced the expansion of the JP agenda to a further two projects in West Africa. We identified these two projects – one in Côte d’Ivoire, and one transboundary project in Mali/Niger – because the final evaluation of the JP mentioned them as evidence of the programme’s expansion. Using information on the Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MPTF) Database, we identified five further projects in Sudan where the logics of the ‘gender, NRM, and peace’ are visible.⁴³ We developed criteria for the inclusion or exclusion of projects based on whether the project targeted a combination of NRM, peace/conflict, and women, and then searched the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) projects in Sudan. Finally, we also analysed the ‘public-facing’ Joint Programme website and its Knowledge Platform on Gender, Natural Resources, Climate, and Peace.⁴⁴ Including the initial three documents that we used to develop a coding system, we used Atlas.ti to analyse and code a total of 30 documents, including project concept documents and semi-annual and annual reports. Here, we explored: (i) the type of conflict-affected context in which the project is being designed; (ii) the nature of the conflict the project is trying to prevent (communal, national, international, on access to resources, on ethnic grounds, etc.); (iii) the proposed activities; (iv) the implications of these activities for different stakeholders.

From a feminist post-structural perspective, these documents are discursive artefacts, and therefore we can deconstruct the discursive formations that create local communities, in this case, rural women, as governable objects.⁴⁵ This approach enables us to gain insight into what is to be learnt about and governed, when and how, and to what ends. We delve into the mechanisms and rationales that develop in the (re)production of the JP and its governable objects, and we investigate the consequences and the silences brought about by these mechanisms. We used discourse analysis for a close reading and inductive coding of the documents. As we proceeded, we developed and refined our argument relative to other available scholarship.⁴⁶

⁴⁰UNEP, UN Women, PBSO, and UNDP, ‘Women and natural resources: Unlocking the peacebuilding potential’ (2013).

⁴¹UNSG, ‘The challenge of sustaining peace: Report of the advisory group of experts for the 2015 review of the United Nations peacebuilding architecture’ (2015).

⁴²UNEP et al., ‘2020 final annual narrative report’.

⁴³We thank Nina Valentini, an undergraduate research assistant at the University of Groningen, for her invaluable help with this.

⁴⁴UNEP, ‘Women, natural resources, & peace’.

⁴⁵Angelyn Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women’s Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

⁴⁶María Martín de Almagro, ‘Indicators and success stories: The UN Sustaining Peace agenda, bureaucratic power, and knowledge production in post-war settings’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 65:3 (2021), pp. 699–711; Steve Stemler, ‘An overview of content analysis’, *Practical Assessment, Research and Evaluation*, 7:17 (2001), pp. 1–6.

Who builds peace? Leveraging women for win-win opportunities

In this section, we aim to demonstrate how the JP agenda enables an understanding of women as resources who can be leveraged for win-win opportunities in peace and gender equality. In our analysis of the logics of the JP agenda, we identify two discursive narratives that dominate the ways in which women's participation is conceptualised: first, that women are leveraged for their 'unique' roles and experiences, and second, that women's inclusion improves the quality of peace by decreasing conflict in the community through 'better' NRM. We also show how the JP agenda logics, which frame women as a resource to be leveraged, are based on an understanding of gender as interpersonal relations contained *within* and limited to particular socio-cultural contexts, and an understanding of women as self-contained category. A critical feminist reading of these discursive framings helps us to demonstrate the gendered limitations of what these projects make (im)possible relative to wider structural and institutional relations of power.

Within the evaluative report, the original JP Sudan pilot programme in North Kordofan state, is lauded as a model for how women can be made central to peacebuilding and NRM, and how in turn this improves not only the peace outcome of the intervention, but also the socio-economic position of women in the community. This pilot was developed as an extension from a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) programme in Sudan called the Community Security and Stabilization Programme (C2SP). The C2SP programme included women as beneficiaries of the project and used logics of gender equality to allocate a percentage share of resources and a quotas for women's participation in community dispute resolution. The JP reporting on the pilot frequently references the C2SP, and lessons learned from it, as laying the groundwork for the JP pilot. Principally, in addition to referencing the lessons of what worked in the C2SP (namely the local conflict resolution mechanisms), JP reporting on the pilot points to how C2SP made it clear that women could be leveraged for better outcomes.

In the pilot project and the second affiliated project that expands the JP to Blue Nile state, women clearly appear as more than just beneficiaries. Their inclusion is consistently framed in terms of leveraging their unique roles as peacemakers to facilitate peace, or their unique roles as resource users to manage resources sustainably and peacefully, or both, 'capitalizing on their important roles as natural resource managers and the increased economic and care burdens women face in the post-conflict context'.⁴⁷ Women are therefore leveraged for their unique roles and experiences, and we see an argument that women's inclusion improves the quality of peace by decreasing conflict in the community through better NRM. Indeed, within the evaluative reports, the JP pilot programme is lauded as a model for how women can be made central to peacebuilding and NRM in other peacebuilding projects, and how in turn this improves not only the peace outcome of the intervention, but also the socio-economic position of women in the community.

Women as a social category can only be leveraged for peace and NRM if they are treated as having something that makes them unique. Within the JP agenda, this is done primarily through emphasising the dependence of women on natural resources. 'Women and girls play important roles in the management of natural resources worldwide. In fragile and conflict-affected settings, women are particularly likely to be dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods, and to be the primary providers of water, food and energy for their families and communities'.⁴⁸ Across the UNEP flagship report that formed the basis of the JP, in internal reporting on the JP, and in public-facing resources such as the Knowledge Platform, gender is framed in a binary and interpersonal way. This is evident in how women and men are attributed different social roles and status according to the 'cultural, economic and political dynamics' and therefore, different life opportunities and access to 'natural resources and decision-making'.⁴⁹

In turn, the idea of leveraging women appears through prescriptions that women can and should take up tasks because of their unique relationship to natural resources and/or their unique positions

⁴⁷United Nations, 'PBF 00128019 project report semi-annual 2021' (United Nations Peacebuilding, 2021), p. 3.

⁴⁸UNEP, 'Women, natural resources, & peace'.

⁴⁹UNEP et al., 'Women and natural resources', p. 10.

as conflict mediators. Women, who do not appear in the reports as anything other than heterosexual and essentially reproductive, are considered as best suited to prevent conflict and to manage natural resources well *if* they are liberated from their always-inferior position in local societies that constitutes a stumbling block to accessing education, opportunities, and resources.⁵⁰ The related assumption is that women are both ready and willing to seize this opportunity to engage in new work opportunities. The success stories in the final report of the JP show how women in Sudan who took part in the project reported increased income from farming, while they were also able to participate and influence in natural resource conflict prevention in North Kordofan.⁵¹ Women and their knowledge are treated as resources/tools to be used to achieve a broader objective. Their inclusion is justified in terms of their usefulness to peace/NRM. This can be seen, for instance, in frequent references to ‘harnessing women’s economic potential’.⁵²

Turning to the materiality of their inclusion, the leveraging of women seemingly necessitates skills and capacity-building, as evidenced by all the training organised as the main activities of the programme and conceived as necessary for its success. While some elements of the reports do seem to acknowledge that structures of power limit women’s meaningful inclusion in NRM and peace-building, there is an insufficient degree of theorisation for how capacity-building and skills training can change these power structures. Namely, there is insufficient engagement with two constraints: the economics of women’s exclusion and the enduring basis of legitimacy for patriarchal authority. Research suggests that the latter does not dissipate based on changes to policy and/or capacity-building training, and in fact, some research suggests that women’s increased economic activity can contribute to patriarchal backlash.⁵³ Moreover, through the treatment of gender as contained to interpersonal relations and as something that can in turn be leveraged, the JP obscures the ways in which other categories of social power construct ideas of citizenship and participation in public life.

Through the UN JP documents, including the 2013 UNEP flagship report, so-called threat multipliers such as climate change and (bad) NRM offer an excellent opportunity for a win-win situation. Crucially, ‘major shocks, such as conflict and climatic disasters, can pose particular challenges to women’s natural resource-based roles and livelihoods, with trickle-down impacts on community welfare. At the same time, these shocks often change prevailing social dynamics in ways that can lead to new opportunities for women’s economic and political activity, and engagement in mediation and conflict resolution.’⁵⁴ These shocks are treated as an opportunity to help achieve gender equality because they offer a strong entry point for women’s empowerment and economic and political participation *and* for the shifting of community attitudes about the capacity of women to engage in leadership and decision-making.⁵⁵ The first part of the ‘win-win’ is reflected the idea that ‘women’s knowledge and roles related to natural resource management offer a unique entry point to empower women economically and to strengthen women’s leadership in governance, dispute resolution, and peacebuilding’.⁵⁶ The second ‘win’ is that as women are trained in natural resource conflict mediation, conflict will be prevented and resolved at local levels.⁵⁷

In terms of how the programme understands the win-win opportunities arising from upheaval/change/conflict, there is an interesting conundrum evident in the framing of what outcomes are desirable for women’s inclusion in livelihoods activities and conflict resolution via their inclusion in NRM. The JP conceptualises women as uniquely positioned to manage natural resources because of gendered divisions of labour, and uniquely positioned to capitalise on the

⁵⁰UNEP et al., ‘Women and natural resources’, p. 32.

⁵¹UNEP et al., ‘2020 final annual narrative report’, p. 7.

⁵²UNEP et al., ‘Women and natural resources’, p. 48.

⁵³Marie E. Berry, *War, Women, and Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁵⁴UNEP ‘Women, natural resources, & peace’.

⁵⁵UNEP et al., ‘2020 final annual narrative report’, p. 12.

⁵⁶UNEP et al., ‘2020 final annual narrative report’, p. 12.

⁵⁷UNEP et al. ‘2020 final annual narrative report’, p. 13.

opportunity to become more involved in resource decision-making and conflict resolution when men leave. Consequently, there is simultaneously a recognition that a gendered division of labour exists, and a failure to think about the material and time-cost implications of women having *more* tasks. Simply put, if women *do* take up the roles and tasks previously undertaken by men to manage community resources, who will cover the work of women while they take up those tasks?

This critique is not dissimilar to critiques of how gendered participation in capacity-building and training programmes needs to go beyond thinking merely about ‘what time of day should workshops be so women can attend’ to questions of who is doing the work that they would be doing if they were not sitting in a workshop. This relates to important questions about *which women* participate in capacity-building and/or increased decision-making over resources and, crucially, whose interests they represent when doing so. What emerges as a seemingly simple programmatic question over time, labour, and gender, we think, actually points to a deeper problem with the kind of peace on offer, one where *because* the extra labour of decision-making and capacity-building is not considered, some women will face a further double burden of labour, and some women may not participate at all because they cannot afford that burden. Those with the most capacity to participate and to absorb the extra burden, such as by getting others to perform their other labour, are in no way guaranteed to represent the interests of all women as a group.

The affiliated project in Blue Nile state, Sudan, replicates the pilot project and has an evident strategy of leveraging women and treating intervention into communities as a win–win opportunity where (1) community-based conflict management and NRM will be more robust and sustainable by having women and (2) women’s economic livelihood activities through the programme will further their political and economic empowerment. The leveraging of women to create a win–win in the context of the opportunities of conflict are all evident in the main project goal of the project in Blue Nile state to ‘promote the empowerment of women change agents, capitalizing on their important roles as natural resource managers and the increased economic and care burdens women face in the post-conflict context.’⁵⁸ In focusing on the specific outcomes of the project, the logic that women can be leveraged for better peace is evident in Outcome 1: ‘Local-level governance and conflict resolution mechanisms are strengthened through enhanced participation of women and gender-responsive, inclusive, and participatory processes in selected conflict-affected communities.’⁵⁹

However, there is a slight difference between the original JP pilot and the second follow-on project in Blue Nile state in terms of how the Theory of Change imagines the link between peace and livelihoods. In the Blue Nile state project, economic empowerment is seen to precede women taking up political roles in NRM, and the project’s first activities are for livelihood support. The Theory of Change proposes that on the basis of women’s increased livelihoods, that their ability and capacity to take part in local NRM will improve, and that in turn, women will improve the quality of peace in their communities.⁶⁰

Our analysis of the projects in Côte d’Ivoire and Mali/Niger shows that the same logics of leveraging women are replicated, as well as the win–win and self-contained local logics. For example, the project in Côte d’Ivoire clearly mentions that it is basing its logic on the pilot project carried out in Sudan, although it admits that some research will need to be conducted in Côte d’Ivoire ‘in order to best target the women’s associations and groups who are in a better position to benefit from the project, to better understand the power dynamics in access, usage and control of natural resources in the area, and to identify specific opportunities to reinforce women’s economic and political empowerment as well as their leadership as agents of peace.’⁶¹ The activities that have already been proposed are again very similar to the ones considered successful by the final report of the JP pilot: training in the management of new techniques of exploitation and management of natural

⁵⁸United Nations, ‘PBF 00128019 project report semi-annual 2021’, p. 3.

⁵⁹United Nations, ‘PBF 00128019 project report semi-annual 2022’ (United Nations Peacebuilding, 2022), p. 12.

⁶⁰United Nations, ‘PBF 00128019 project report semi-annual 2021’, p. 17.

⁶¹United Nations, ‘PBF 00124534 project document’ (United Nations Peacebuilding, 2021).

resources and the set-up of Community Councils for the management of local natural resources in which women and young people have seats. That these activities are recurrent is also telling regarding the spaces where women are being leveraged: in local/communal peace/conflict-management processes, but not in national/international ones.

Where is peace built? The self-contained gendered local

This section reveals that there are clear spatial and scalar dynamics in the JP. Crucially, the JP builds on and sustains a gendered understanding of the local and treats women's management of NRM as hyper-localised. In doing so, it *feminises* women's participation as *contained* to the local⁶² and *depoliticises* feminist activism at the local level, because the model of mediation and participation being promoted is one of *efficiency* through feminised values of cooperation and collaboration, instead of one that requires systemic transformation. In sum, the JP therefore relies on and reproduces gendered understandings of women as 'peacemakers' and 'good managers' of natural resources.

Throughout all the projects we coded, the local is almost exclusively defined as 'the site' of conflict and peace, while the global still generally absent. Women are to be included in 'local-level governance and conflict resolution mechanisms' because these 'are strengthened through enhanced participation of women and gender-responsive, inclusive, and participatory processes in selected conflict-affected communities.'⁶³ In all the projects for Sudan that we analysed, including those not directly affiliated to the JP, the position of women and girls in the community is framed as being a problem of the patriarchal system and social norms. Therefore, in order to leverage women in the community, 'the intervention will target changing social norms and challenge the patriarchy system and other harmful traditional practices.'⁶⁴ The project treats these as norms at the local level and targets these norms for change through project activities that 'build trust between natural resource users.'⁶⁵ This is important because the implicit assumption is that these are situated/contained social norms at a scale small enough to be changed through localised intervention.

Although there is some evidence of linking processes of peace across local and national scale through 'conflict tracking at the local level and harmonized capacity building with state level actors',⁶⁶ the 'national' in all these projects is treated as laying the ground for local peacebuilding to take place on. Women's voices 'are heard in the process' in order to ensure that community voices are included and 'that the peace process addresses key issues linked to natural resource access use, and control' at the local level.⁶⁷ This replicates the idea that national spaces constitute local spaces, but not vice versa, and that the local is a space that has relevance for itself but not for the wider context. When the global appears in one project, the conflict brought by the global (represented by an investment company) is treated in terms of the Sudanese state's weakness and inability to exert governance over international investment.⁶⁸

The crucial role of Sudanese women in the 2018 revolution at all levels, from the national to the local, is also unexamined.⁶⁹ This clearly relates to how the JP constitutes the local as a

⁶²Several feminist scholars had already pointed out the fact that the UN Peacebuilding architecture gender logics treated women and women's organisations as essential partners to build peace at the local level: Martín de Almagro, 'Indicators and success stories'; Shepherd, *Gender, UN Peacebuilding, and the Politics of Space*.

⁶³United Nations, 'PBF 00128019 project report semi-annual 2021', p. 4.

⁶⁴United Nations, 'PBF 00128019 project report semi-annual 2022', p. 4.

⁶⁵United Nations, 'PBF 00128019 project document' (United Nations Peacebuilding, 2021), p. 16.

⁶⁶United Nations, 'PBF 00119468 project document' (United Nations Peacebuilding, 2021); 'PBF 00119467 project document' (2021).

⁶⁷United Nations, 'PBF 00128019 project document', p. 21.

⁶⁸United Nations, 'PBF 00128019 project report semi-annual 2021', p. 8.

⁶⁹Yusra Elmobashir Abdalla, Hajir Hamad Bashir, Isalam Adam Omer Mohammed, *et al.*, 'A regional insight into Sudanese women's participation in the December Revolution' (Chr. Michelson Institute, 2023), available at: {<https://www.cmi.no/publications/file/8733-a-regional-insight-into-sudanese-womens-participation-in-the-december-revolution.pdf>}.

self-contained unit. This is first evident in where the problem is situated, for instance, through situating ‘competition over natural resources as well as economic and livelihood opportunities, land ownership, movement of people and lack of sense of community’ as driving intercommunal conflict.⁷⁰ It is also evident in how women’s inclusion in peace processes is framed as being largely contained to the local level. Even though the five ‘non-JP’ Sudan projects focus less on what women’s inclusion in peacebuilding will do for the quality of peace, there is still the clear idea that the *local table* is where ‘women’s networks are relevant as both protective localized environments for some of the most vulnerable groups in communities affected by forced displacement, as well as local peacebuilding and conflict resolution fora.’⁷¹ When women are instrumentalised as being essential for peace in the JP, it is contained to their essential role *within* a particular scale that is self-contained. Ultimately, this also makes possible a peace where the local is perpetually situated in conditions of epistemic marginality, where the knowledge of women is treated as local and situated, good for making peace where they grow crops/graze cattle/trade in local (or cross-border) markets, in contrast to the universal knowledge of national and international experts.

In sum, the local is depoliticised through a gendered logic of feminised spaces of peace in which women are being leveraged for collaboration and cooperation at community level, or as ‘hold outs’ of uncontrolled, but self-contained, masculine violence that needs to be brought to heel. Not only are women only being leveraged on a particular scale – the local – based on their own interpersonal gendered relations, skills, and knowledge, but this misses the role of international dynamics and global markets/global militarisation in causing violence and conflict across scales.

Concluding remarks: Using the Joint Programme to read Sustaining Peace

In the previous two sections, we demonstrated how a feminist reading of the UN Joint Programme on Women, Natural Resources, and Peace reveals that even when women are included as more than ‘mere’ beneficiaries, gender takes meaning only relative to interpersonal relations. This means that as the JP leverages women for a win–win of peace and gender equality, it misses the wider role gender plays in constituting and upholding gendered scales of ‘who builds peace’ and ‘where peace is built’. This is striking particularly in the context of Sudan, where the JP pilot and first follow-on projects were run. Namely, while Sudanese women and civil society groups were critical of the Juba Peace Agreement,⁷² the JP and other PBF-funded projects from this time treat it as the national foundation/framework for building a sustainable peace and then offer to include women and Civil Society Organisations at the *local table* to manage conflict drivers (natural resources, displacement, violence against women).

A gendered reading of the JP helps to raise questions for the wider UN Sustaining Peace agenda, which has been described ‘as the most serious attempt to prioritize prevention in the way the UN manages conflict since Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s 1992 An Agenda for Peace.’⁷³ To start, we can return to the problem of leveraging. In terms of what the language of *leveraging* does in the JP, we suggest that this can be used to interrogate the broader trend of responsabilising the local for positive peacebuilding outcomes in Sustaining Peace and how this reflects a logic of maximising efficiency more so than a language of radical inclusion. We also showed how leveraging women *individualises* gender relations as solely a matter of interpersonal relations between men and women. These same JP gendered logics of leveraging the local for (localised, self-contained, interpersonal) peace are fundamental to the wider UN Peacebuilding agenda. The centrality of interpersonal gender relations as a target of intervention in the JP makes it easier to notice the obfuscation of gendered structural relations of power within and between different scales of local, national, and international.

⁷⁰United Nations, ‘PBF 00119471 project document’ (United Nations Peacebuilding, 2021), p. 7; p. 9; p. 6.

⁷¹United Nations, ‘PBF 00119467 project document’, p. 12.

⁷²Hala al-Karib, ‘How years of impunity gave Sudan’s generals licence to destroy my country’, *The New Humanitarian* (2023), available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/first-person/2023/05/03/impunity-sudan-licence-to-destroy-my-country>}.

⁷³De Coning ‘Sustaining Peace: Can a new approach change the UN?’.

However, this is also relevant for the wider Sustaining Peace agenda and its reliance on gendered logics of conflict prevention and local participation, which feminise local economies and forms of governance, treating them as situated, particular, self-contained, and in need of adaptation.

Feminist scholars have spent decades demonstrating that gendered relations of power are effective in interpersonal relations precisely because they structure institutional relations from the state to the international.⁷⁴ The deployment of gender in the JP obscures these gendered institutional relations, making it seem as though gendered relations of power are entirely situated within socio-cultural practices. This is reified through similar understandings of gender in Sustaining Peace, such as where ‘discriminatory relations’ and violence against women are discussed in terms of socio-cultural norms:

Given social norms in many conflict-affected societies, sexual violence against women and girls inflicts trauma well beyond the act of violence. Public spaces, such as markets, or activities, such as fetching water and firewood, become dangerous for women – but so too can their homes be dangerous.⁷⁵

Without ignoring the reality that women do face these forms of violence, we want to push back on how such an interpersonal and socio-cultural understanding of gendered relations makes impossible a more radical and transformative peace. Namely, an interpersonal understanding of gender relations forgets about the gendered structural relations of power in two ways.

First, an interpersonal understanding of gender and the self-contained local is doing work to make it seem as though international interveners, states, and business interests stand outside gendered relations of power, rather than being intrinsic to interveners’ production of knowledge and identification of problems and proposed solutions. Relegation of gender to the local interpersonal sphere will offer a limited and gendered peace insofar as it leaves out myriad relations of power that are always already at work in keeping the margins marginal.⁷⁶ The self-contained local approach to thinking about peace thus sustains the possibility that power relations can be understood simply as interpersonal relations between men and women and leaves the gendered relations between scales out of view – and off the hook.

Perhaps even more critically, assuming that ‘the who’ and ‘the where’ of building peace is local makes it much harder to ask about *how the conditions of possibility for violence* transcend scales. There is a great wealth of feminist scholarship that can point us to how the conditions of possibility for violence move between spaces such as (including, but of course, not limited to) arms trade fairs, international boardrooms of extractive industries, national defence strategy offices, and cafés where non-state armed actors meet. None of these are contained to a single scale, and they enable violence that is direct and indirect, which destroys whole ecosystems, cities, and households. If a ‘trans-scalar’ approach to peace is to have any effect, it must also seek to understand the interests that enable trans-scalar violence.

In thinking about the consequences of a focus on building the ‘latent capacity’ of local women to manage conflict over natural resources and to manage natural resources in the context of climate collapse, we are left with critical questions of how any kind of success for the Sustaining Peace agenda relies on offsetting responsibility to women and the feminised local. This is not ‘merely’ the result of generalisable silences around the real drivers of violence and climate collapse (hint: not management of grazing areas or women’s cookstoves), but also a reflection of the gendered logics that structure the UN Peacebuilding Agenda. In other words, it is a consequence of deeply

⁷⁴ Cohn, ‘Mainstreaming gender in UN security policy’; Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Laura Shepherd, *Gender Violence and Security* (London: Zed Books, 2008).

⁷⁵ UNSG, ‘The challenge of Sustaining Peace: Report of the advisory group of experts for the 2015 review of the United Nations Peacebuilding architecture’, p. 20.

⁷⁶ Cynthia Enloe, ‘Margins, silences and bottom rungs’, in Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski (eds), *International Relations Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 186–202.

structural gendered logics that make it possible to treat women's cooking fuel and cattle herding as a reasonable target for peace and security intervention while the 'masculine' security realm of resource extraction and militarisation goes unchecked.

Video Abstract. To view the online video abstract, please visit: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210524000081>.

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