

BOOK REVIEW

## Building Peace: Feminist Perspectives

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*Building Peace: Feminist Perspectives*, edited by Laura J. Shepherd, is a rigorous, wide-ranging exploration of women's representation in, and involvement with, contemporary peacebuilding efforts around the world. The arrangement of the chapters nicely invites the reader to first consider women's formal, constructed roles as both "victims of violence" and "agents of change" in global political institutions, such as the UN, before problematizing the notion of what it means to be and operate as a victim and/or a change agent, both in general and within more-or-less rigid institutional structures. The volume then goes on to investigate other representations of women, and of gender, in a variety of post-conflict and peacebuilding processes, as well as using feminist lenses to interrogate the concept of peacebuilding itself and related ideas such as war and conflict, reconciliation, security, and political settlement. The volume, taken as a whole, draws out the point that women and peacebuilding are both conceptually and actually linked in a variety of ways, and considers the values and the pitfalls of such connections for creating a more just and more peaceful world. Moreover, the collection utilizes an intriguing mix of qualitative and quantitative data in support of its conclusions, and presents different methodologies as having equal scholarly weight and validity. As such, it is a representation of how we, as feminists, might continue to conduct gendered analyses of conflict and peacebuilding in a way that both respects intersectionality and does not reinscribe traditional patriarchal privilegings of particular quantitative and analytical approaches to political research on war and peace.

The book pays careful attention to the diversity of women's lives, and in particular the diversity of women's experiences surrounding war and conflict, post-conflict, and peacebuilding processes. As Fionnuala Ní Aoláin notes in their contribution, "it is precisely the complex marbling of women's lives that requires meaningful representation," and this volume ably fulfills that goal (38).<sup>1</sup> Heidi Hudson continues this theme when she demands that scholars treat "human, lived experiences as legitimate and not as culturally deviant or exceptional" (86). This imperative is exemplified throughout the book via the reflective interviews referenced in a number of chapters, which demonstrate that women's needs, interests, challenges, and demands reflect both complex local realities and also a larger web of regional and global realities. The recurrent mixing of the local and the global operates as a leitmotif for the book, and bolsters Nicole George's point, in her chapter, that the "so-called 'local turn' in peacebuilding . . . may be particularly restrictive for women" when it is not actively paired with structural critiques of,

and a subsequent determination to avoid, “gender discrimination and women’s marginalisation” (46–47). Similarly, Donna Pankhurst notes in her piece on sexual violence against women in war and peacebuilding that the “tendency to generalise is countered by the emergent picture of enormous variety in women’s experiences” during and after war; nevertheless, she contends, it is crucial to understand the “patterned” nature of violence against women in order to develop policy approaches that successfully take account of women’s concerns (63). The volume thus acknowledges and delves into, rather than attempting to ignore, the tension between oppression understood as a structural, institutional problem and the felt experiences of oppression by women with diverse backgrounds, contexts, and life experiences.

In addition, a number of authors nicely note the many different roles that women play in conflicts and subsequent peaces; as George puts it, the celebrated stories of women as peacemakers have “obscured the roles women played in resistance . . . confrontational protests . . . industrial sabotage . . . and massacres” (51). This is an important point, and is echoed by other authors throughout the collection. Taken together, this amplification goes some way toward fighting the common assumption that men make war, and women make peace. Also highlighting the many different agential and representational roles of women, Kara Ellerby argues that it is not enough for female bodies to be physically at the table during the peace process. As she notes, women were present at the El Salvadorian peace negotiations but did not advocate for women’s interests during those negotiations; as per their reflections, the female commanders did not consider the women’s movement “part of their overall movement” (17). But of course, this raises the question of what constitutes women’s—considered as a group—particular interests and concerns, and so what women’s substantive representation in the peace process might look like (Ellerby takes up this second question in the latter half of her chapter). Similarly, Elisabeth Porter, for her part, draws on “the gender-specific ways that women and men experience insecurity and security” in order to demonstrate that reconciliation cannot be viewed as something that need occur only between previously warring political actors, but rather must be understood as something that occurs also in the context of women’s everyday lives and relationships, and that is essential to building a culture of peace (89–90). These moves between the experiential and the theoretical throughout the volume help elucidate the classic feminist point that there are many different ways of being a woman. Although it must be said that this movement can make the book feel disjointed in places, the careful ordering of the contributions, as well as the strong thematic connections throughout, ensure that the volume is more cohesive than anthologies sometimes tend to be.

However, as I alluded to in the previous paragraph, the volume could perhaps benefit from some discussion of what it means to be a woman, personally, socially, and politically, and, more important, of who “counts” as a woman and who does not. These are of course deep and difficult questions, and were the volume to take them up wholesale, it would be a different book. So, this note is not meant to be critical in that way; rather, it is meant to point out that gendered analyses such as those contained in this book rest at least implicitly—and in places explicitly—on particular understandings of “woman” and “womanhood,” and it might enrich the dialogue in certain ways if these understandings were drawn out and critically considered to some degree. Many of the authors acknowledge the many and varied constructions of “woman” as a social category, but then go on to talk about women, their diverse experiences, and their needs and interests, without significant discussion of who they mean to be including, and who they mean to be excluding, when they engage in such discourse. More broadly, there is

the possibility of tension between the provision of a “gendered” analysis, as opposed to the provision of a “woman-centric” analysis, and the volume might benefit from a more explicit acknowledgment of this possibility. (Again, I am not saying that such a tension necessarily exists, only that it is possible, depending on the hermeneutics of the discourse.) An exception to this is Shepherd’s contribution; one of her guiding questions focuses on the “different constructions of women, and representations of gender, that emerge in UN peacebuilding discourse” and how these different representations lead UN peacebuilding efforts in a variety of directions that are sometimes more, and sometimes less, helpful to particular women existing in the world (2; see also 9–13).

The volume represents a significant contribution to feminist philosophy in that many of the chapters take as their starting point suggested courses of study, and attempt to follow through on those suggestions. This is essential work, as all too often traditional political theory gestures at the importance of developing rigorous feminist analyses of particular issues, problems, and arenas, without putting in the time or the work to actually do these analyses. As Pankhurst states, she is writing “in response to Richmond and MacGinty’s suggestion” that the policy arena take account of “‘second wave’ feminist, and other, research on violence against women” (60). So, in her piece, she demonstrates that such research can usefully contribute to developing workable approaches to peacebuilding, and shows how policymakers might take account of it in their formal and informal decision-making processes. Similarly, Aoláin points out that any interrogation of actual political settlements, and of the concept of political settlement itself, from a feminist point of view “requires not only a broad engagement with key macro politics, but must remain attuned to the specific experiences and exclusion women experience in micro political settings” (45). Aoláin’s chapter does just that, and so is a strong jumping-off point for those theorists and activists interested in the descriptive and normative relations among gender, feminism, and political settlements.

Hudson, by contrast, rejects what she calls the “conventional gender and peacebuilding consensus,” and instead works to show “how a decolonial-feminist lens can change the way we look at gendered peacebuilding spaces, identities, infrastructures and the everyday, respectively” (74–75). Hudson’s careful attention to materiality, and her push-back against Eurocentric modes of theorizing about war and conflict, peacebuilding, gender, and Africa as a cultural imaginary, situate her piece at the forefront of feminist theorizing today. Rounding out the volume, Porter recognizes the need for, and so provides, an explicitly feminist analysis of the concept and practice of reconciliation in the post-conflict space (as “fuzzy” as that concept inevitably is) (90). Throughout, she takes care to demonstrate how peace and reconciliation scholars might engage in transformative reconciliation theorizing and practices by taking up feminist understandings of empathy, compassion, and truth-telling. So, at the end, Porter proffers another instance of what this volume does so well: it carefully engages with contemporary feminist scholarship, while also pushing the boundaries of possibility at both the theoretical and practical levels. The result is an important contribution to the critical question of how we might actually go about creating a more just and more peaceful world.

## Note

1 I use the gender-neutral pronoun “their” here because the author’s preferred pronouns are not made clear from the information available in the volume. In places where the author’s preferred pronouns are made clear by the volume (either via the “Notes on Contributors” or via autobiographical sections of their texts), I use the appropriate pronoun.

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