



Gender and blue helmets

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BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Gender and blue helmets

The Women in Blue Helmets: Gender, policing, and the UN's first all-female peacekeeping unit, by Lesley J. Pruitt, Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 2016, 121+appendix+notes+references+index pp., £27.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-520-29061-7

Gender and peacebuilding, by Claire Duncanson, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2016, 158 +notes+references+index pp., £15.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-7456-8252-5

During the last two decades, feminist scholarship has both strongly contributed to the rise of the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda in the field of international security and benefited from the much-needed attention this rise has given to topics on women, gender, war and peace. Yet it is not a coherent and cohesive feminist discipline that has emerged, but rather a complex and fragmented field that is characterized by various understandings, approaches, and methods to the objective that ultimately unites them all: gender equality. The legal policy framework in the form of United Nations (UN) Security Council resolutions – which has developed because of, and alongside, burgeoning feminist scholarship – is the focus of much of the debate. Yet the relationship between the policy framework and the academic scholarship is complex and uneasy, where feminist scholars on the one hand welcome the attention that the WPS agenda brings and, on the other hand, criticize the way in which the constitutive topics are approached, understood and (not) dealt with. The conflation of women and gender, the focus on women as victims rather than agents, and the ‘instrumentalist’ versus ‘rights’ debate stand at the forefront of these discussions. On a more foundational level comes the question of whether feminist scholars should engage at all with the topics of war and security, at the risk of being co-opted and ultimately reinforcing a patriarchal and militarized system.

The two books under consideration in this review both advocate for women’s participation in peace and security issues, but also for transformative change that allows them to participate on equal premises. They both contribute to the aforementioned feminist scholarship and to wider scholarship on peacekeeping and peacebuilding, as well as the political economies of – and international responses to – conflict, with original analyses of gender, women, peacebuilding and peacekeeping. Claire Duncanson’s book, *Gender and Peacebuilding*, develops a trenchant critique of neoliberalism’s negative effects on gender equity in peacebuilding efforts, while Lesley Pruitt’s work, *The Women in Blue Helmets*, constitutes a comprehensive analysis of the first all-female formed police unit (FFPU) deployed by India to the UN. While Pruitt’s book provides an in-depth examination of how the deployment of FFPU can work as temporary measures to transform and challenge existing gender stereotypes and increase female participation, particularly – but not limited to – the security sector, Duncanson’s book is a broader analysis of existing gender gaps and gender dilemmas in the policy community and academia, with a focus on women’s socio-economic empowerment. As such, the authors share an interest in gendered political economies in general, and women’s socio-economic empowerment in peacebuilding in particular – topics which, until relatively recently, have garnered comparatively little attention in both policy and academic circles (see, for example, True 2012; Jennings 2014).

Pruitt's work tells the story of the first FFPU deployed by India to the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), with male support staff required to cook and clean for the female unit. The originality of the case makes it interesting in many ways, and Pruitt delivers an exhaustive account of the creation, work and implications of the unit on both individual and structural levels, as well as local and global ones. The book adopts a normative, critical constructivist feminist approach and explores how the FFPU came about, the expectations surrounding it, the lessons drawn from its deployment, and its broader implications for gender and equity, and peace and security. The key argument is that the FFPU is a timely, temporary special measure – a policy innovation – that 'pragmatically pursues long-term goals while working with short-term options' (Pruitt, 2). The book spans six chapters that combine detailed findings related to the FFPU as a case study, with more abstract discussions about women's access to peace and security work at the UN. This latter process is described as slow, staggered and controversial, an understanding which is shared by Duncanson.

Duncanson's work pursues two broader aims: firstly, to map feminist positions on the WPS agenda and, secondly, to set the agenda for future feminist scholarship, with a clear focus on identifying solutions to the problem of neoliberal policies in post-conflict contexts. As such, it differs in style and aim from the work of Pruitt. Duncanson positions herself somewhere in between the critical feminists who want to work as 'insiders' in transforming this order and those 'critical-critical' feminists who assume 'outsider' positions. As such, she opens up for synergies and collaboration between the two camps, but appears to lean quite heavily towards the 'outsider' position as the book develops. The volume is divided into five densely referenced chapters, ranging from an overview of the literature relating to the WPS agenda and explanations of what exactly is meant by a feminist peace to explicit criticism of, and ideas of alternatives to, neoliberal peacebuilding. This is pursuant to the main argument of the book, which is to challenge neoliberal approaches in order to engender peacebuilding – an argument that is so thoroughly explained, defended and repeated that even a World Bank employee must start having doubts about neoliberalism's benefits. The author structures the book by adopting and developing Munro's (2000) three ways of examining gender in relation to peacebuilding: gender equality as a goal, gender as an analytical tool, and gender as an approach.

The two books under review are hence different in research design, content and style, yet reading the books together there appear to be some points of connectivity. The two works offer a captivating gender analysis of contemporary peacebuilding and peacekeeping efforts, where detailed case studies are put into a complex context of interwoven global and local aspects. The dynamic interaction between the global and local dimensions connects the two books, as does their interest in political economy and women's participation. However, while Pruitt's book engenders a sense of hope for positive change in terms of gendering peace operations, Duncanson's work serves to provoke boiling anger against the sole culprit identified in the book for the failure of feminist peace in post-conflict states: neoliberalism. As such, one may conclude that the authors have attained their aims of 'uncovering potential for positive change' (Pruitt, 3) and 'naming neoliberal policies as part of the problem in post-conflict contexts' (Duncanson, 3).

These contrasting approaches are evident in how the books differently analyse the possibilities related to women's socio-economic empowerment and the post-conflict political economy. In Pruitt's work, this is mainly articulated around the argument that the deployment of the FFPU has had far-reaching effects, both on an individual and structural level. She claims that, just through their everyday lives and interactions, the FFPU has effected significant change by challenging gender dichotomies and breaking down stereotypes (Pruitt, 45). Indeed, not only does the creation of the FFPU give the female peacekeepers a relatively

well-paid and well-respected job, but the female contingent also encourages local women to engage with the security sector – as evidenced by the greater numbers of women who joined the Liberian national police force after the deployment of the unit (Pruitt, 54). Pruitt concludes that the FFPU has both met and exceeded expectations – although exactly what those expectations are is unclear.

While Pruitt explores women's socio-economic empowerment through a concrete example, focusing both on the agents and the broader structure, Duncanson offers a structural explanation for women's absence in the political economy, explicitly targeting neoliberalism as the cause. The criticism raised against neoliberalism is the main focus for the third, and arguably strongest, chapter of the book, which also features three 'mini case studies' of peacebuilding interventions to illustrate the gendered harms caused by the imposition of neoliberal policies. It starts by arguing that post-conflict states are particularly ill-suited to neoliberal approaches, as the policies of privatization and liberalization feed into war economies and further weaken fragile institutions. Indeed, Duncanson claims that those in key positions in the war economy (mostly men) are best placed to benefit, while cuts in social spending disproportionately affect women and girls because of their position as carers and, often, refugees. In addition, women and girls' health needs and education opportunities are jeopardized if subsidies are cut. No liberal economic initiative imposed from the outside is spared from critique, as even the often hailed 'microfinance' schemes for women are criticized for their small-scale ambitions, preventing women from actually getting out of the coping economy – a point that is explicitly demonstrated in the mini case study of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In short, the author makes the case that neoliberal policies 'aggravate the gendered inequalities and devastation caused by the combat and criminal economies and intensify the desperation of the women who dominate in the coping economy' (Duncanson, 74).

The effects of neoliberal macroeconomic approaches are then demonstrated by short, but surprisingly dense, empirical snapshots glimpses of three mini case studies: Mozambique, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Afghanistan. These are followed up by a post-colonial-inspired criticism of peacebuilding narratives. This section unpacks 'critical-critical' feminists' criticism against peacebuilding and exposes the racial, colonial and neo-imperial undertones of contemporary peace operations, revolving around the distinction between the 'civilized' West and the 'backwards' South, and the absence of a global perspective in tracing the roots of conflicts. While Duncanson joins the 'critical-critical' feminists in their analysis of the liberal peacebuilding narrative, she also opens up for possibilities of change, arguing that the determinism found in this criticism hinders actual progress and efforts to transform peacebuilding and challenge neoliberalism. This is a welcome contribution by Duncanson, making the book more action- and change-oriented, rather than another 'critical' work that just exposes difficulties and dilemmas without any forward vision. However, a more thorough analysis of patriarchal cultures' effects on the peacebuilding efforts of post-conflict societies is lacking. Neoliberalism is surely part of the problem – but so too are patriarchal cultures, which existed long before neoliberalism.

Women's participation in peace and security work is another topic shared by the authors. Indeed, participation – as one of the three original pillars in the WPS agenda – is embraced by both authors as the main strategy for achieving a gendered transformation of institutions like the UN, and more broadly for achieving a feminist peace that is inclusive, expansive and transformative. Yet the premises for women's participation are debated, and undoubtedly constitute what Duncanson calls a 'gender dilemma', which refers to what happens when gender-related topics receive much-wanted attention and initiatives, yet generate new types of challenges for feminists. This is most clearly visible in Pruitt's analysis of female peacekeepers' work and the 'second shift' in chapters 3 and 4, which expose an inherent tension

in the book between the appraisal of women's performances and the rejection of instrumentalist discourses.

In the introduction, Pruitt explicitly disavows any attempt to evaluate the FFPU's performance against male colleagues and, more particularly, seeks to dismantle instrumentalist discourses that 'explain' the actions of the FFPU in terms of 'natural' qualities inherent to women and the concept of femininity. Such instrumentalist understandings are used to both link women's presumed qualities with specific outcomes ('operational effectiveness') and, more generally, as a justification of women's presence in these sites. Pruitt argues instead that women should be included because they are political subjects with rights, not because of their 'operational effectiveness' or other justifications. Attempting to 'opt out' of operational effectiveness is, however, a tricky needle to thread, as any analysis of the FFPU's efforts in the militarized space of a peacekeeping operation will almost necessarily hinge on some notion of operational effectiveness to demonstrate the difference (positive or negative) made by the unit. Similarly, drawing comparisons to male colleagues is done implicitly throughout the book, and particularly in chapters 3 and 4.

In chapter 3, which examines how the FFPU works and functions in practice, it is explained not only that the deployment of the FFPU led greater numbers of Liberian women to join the national police force (Pruitt, 54), but also that it has reduced the rate of sexual harassment and rape in Liberia, thanks to the FFPU's enhanced responsiveness to crimes of sexual and gender-based violence. FFPUs are also reported as avoiding armed engagements more than their mixed and all-male counterparts, and have reportedly even requested more non-lethal weapons. This latter point is interesting, yet no explanation is given as to why the female peacekeepers tend to avoid armed interactions. Nevertheless, the main understanding drawn from the chapter is that female peacekeepers make a positive difference, and one that does indeed increase the operational effectiveness of the mission. The overall results and impact of the deployment of the FFPU, as described here, show that – as Pruitt argues in the introduction – 'the FFPU can create secure environments as effectively as men, and perhaps even more effectively' (Pruitt, 12).

That said, Pruitt goes to great lengths to avoid falling into an instrumentalist discourse, and indeed is largely successful in making her counterargument that typical 'feminine capacities' such as empathy and caring are not natural, but learned. She convincingly argues that the FFPU's extraordinary results are due to a broader vision of their mandate, a strong motivation to serve as role models, and their extensive training in sexual and gender-based violence, which itself is a function of social expectations relating to the perceived comparative advantages of female police officers. This latter point is key to her argument: Pruitt repeatedly demonstrates how, as a response to social expectations on women to add 'feminine qualities' to the mission, female peacekeepers get more training in specific areas and thereby excel in these domains. But this training is the result of the women's own initiative, rather than any deliberate effort on the part of the UN mission:

because it is often erroneously assumed that women somehow, as if by instinct, know how to deal with things like sexual and gender-based violence, policewomen in the FFPU have often been left to fend for themselves in learning how to respond to such crimes. ... the FFPU's responsiveness to dealing with such cases was based not on 'natural' abilities but on knowledge obtained by the first commander's initiative to ensure that officers would receive special training on this issue. (Pruitt, 60, 62)

Female officers thus requested more training on these issues in order to be able to respond to them effectively. In relation to this, Pruitt rightly points out that it is necessary to also ensure that male officers receive appropriate training and have the chance to develop more empathetic attitudes, rather than expecting women to assume full responsibility for a 'double shift'.

This ‘double shift’ – or as Pruitt calls it, the ‘second shift’ – is nonetheless precisely what the female peacekeepers in the FFPU took on in their effort to be good role models and respond to social expectations. Indeed, while the presence and practice of the FFPU seems to have facilitated economic empowerment for women – by upholding their rights to both access and participate in security institutions, supporting women’s and girls’ access to education, and providing decent, comparatively well-paid employment – it seems as if these gains are made partly through the female peacekeepers’ willingness to take on this second shift. The second shift entails extensive volunteer work by the female peacekeepers in the community where they are deployed, including working with schools and orphanages, providing food and clean water in areas near schools, and offering free health care services for certain groups of the population (Pruitt, 72). The explanation proffered for this extra work is the fact that female peacekeepers, unlike their male counterparts, see themselves as more broadly involved in the community. This extra work leads Pruitt to ask the question of whether or not more is expected from women than from men, to which the answer is an angry ‘yes’. She extends this analysis to a discussion about female peacekeepers providing role models for local women, suggesting that – as long as this is expected by female peacekeepers – male peacekeepers should also face such expectations, with the possibility of finding much-needed alternative expressions of masculinity following armed conflict. This is a valid point, although it could be argued that male peacekeepers (possibly displaying various types of military hyper-masculinity) may not be the most appropriate role models for men in post-conflict societies.

The premises for, and an evaluation of, women’s opportunities to participate in peace and security processes and institutions is also explored in Duncanson’s book, together with the other two pillars drawn from the WPS agenda: protection and prevention. Chapter 4 features evidence from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Syria, Burundi and Liberia, and the overall picture shows mixed results for the first two pillars, while prevention is described as the neglected pillar. Using analysis from the DRC, Duncanson paints a grim picture of efforts made on the protection component, which in policy terms has heavily focused on sexual violence. On the one hand, the prosecution of perpetrators, the training of security personnel, access to justice and, in particular, access to gender-sensitive reparations are depicted as starting to achieve results – yet larger transformation efforts, including the socio-economic empowerment of women and altering toxic masculinities, are still scarce. Similarly, some progress is reported in the participation of women in parliaments and governance, where Liberia stands as a progressive example for gender integration in the security sector – much due to the FFPU’s deployment and involvement in society, as Pruitt’s book demonstrates. Yet participation remains sparse in peace negotiations, which is exemplified by the exclusion of women from the Syrian peace talks.

The discouraging results notwithstanding, participation is still identified by Duncanson as part of the main strategy to challenge and transform neoliberal approaches to peacebuilding – a topic addressed in the final chapter, which explores gendered alternatives to neoliberal peacebuilding. Inspired by feminist works by True (2012) and Ní Aoláin, Haynes, and Cahn (2011), the approaches needed to challenge neoliberalism are identified as the socio-economic empowerment of women and a feminist political economy. Two more concrete measures are suggested – gender impact assessments (GIAs) and gender budget initiatives (GBIs) – as being an essential part of a fiscal democracy. While these measures can surely be expected to generate change if implemented as intended, their actual functioning and impact depends on the participation of an educated and gender-balanced civil society, something that is arguably hard to find in a post-conflict society. This leads back to square one: women’s participation. Here again, a broader analysis of the causes for women’s exclusion is wanted. While

neoliberalism undoubtedly contributes to women being sidelined in the economic sphere, this is also due to social expectations and patriarchal views of women's traditional roles and functions in society – yet such a reflection is missing from the analysis.

The Women in Blue Helmets is timely and innovative, with interesting material drawn from a unique case study. It introduces pragmatic alternatives to how gender mainstreaming can be achieved, and therefore also lives up to its stated aim of uncovering the potential for positive change. Indeed, 'instead of expecting individual women to adapt themselves to the existing male-dominated system, FPPUs provide the option of all-female spaces and pursue structural and procedural changes that give serious attention to women's needs and motivations' (Pruitt, 2). FPPUs thus represent a new type and, according to some, 'not the right kind' of gender mainstreaming (Pruitt, 89) because of its gender segregation; yet as Pruitt rightly points out, concerns about gender segregation have remained absent when it comes to all-male units, and FPPUs should be seen as a *temporary* special measure and an opportunity for women who are not ready to face the burdens associated with being integrated in mixed-gender units, but who still want to pursue a peacekeeping career. The main (and arguably only) weakness of the book is that, by underlining the success of the FPPUs and the many 'extra' benefits accrued through their deployment and their 'second shift', the author implicitly and unintentionally adds support to an instrumentalist and operational effectiveness discourse – notwithstanding her argument that these benefits occur because the women of the FPPU have responded to social expectations rather than a natural predisposition towards acting in specific ways. Nonetheless, Pruitt's work prompts deeper reflection on questions such as whether there is a 'right kind' of gender mainstreaming, what the premises actually are for female participation, and how small changes can contribute to larger transformations. It is therefore a highly recommended read for any feminist or peace scholar.

Similarly, *Gender and Peacebuilding* is a well-written and well-argued work which contributes to a better understanding of contemporary gender dilemmas in the field of gender, peace and security. One of its main virtues is Duncanson's capacity to iron out arguments and dilemmas to the point where they become comprehensible to anyone, from undergraduate students to professors. The author also builds a convincing case against neoliberal macroeconomic approaches in peacebuilding, which is a clear theme throughout the book. However, the one-sided focus on an economic, structural explanation for the failure to build feminist peace undermines the main argument – specifically, the lack of reflection on different agents' roles and implications in the failure to achieve gendered peacebuilding is a hindrance to the argument. For example, references to local elites' corruption are made occasionally, but even this is written off as being induced by, and a consequence of, the neoliberal system – thus attributing very little (if any) agency to individual actors. Only at one point in the book is there a reference to 'fundamentalist Islam and the legacies of Cold War interventions' (Duncanson, 85) as being partly responsible for women being impoverished and vulnerable in Afghanistan. Yet religious fundamentalism and patriarchal cultures are not only present in Afghanistan, but play similar roles in other conflict-affected (and peaceful) countries. In line with this one-sided focus on neoliberalism, explanations that rely on cultural factors as to why women are oppressed or discriminated against are written off as neocolonial. Yet it is hard to argue that culture does not play a role in women's status and position, whether socio-economically, politically, or in terms of physical security. Culture certainly influences norms about which occupations women should have, for example, or if they should work at all – which makes culture and patriarchal systems complicit with neoliberal approaches in creating peace by and for men. Having said that, Duncanson's book represents a clear contribution to feminist research agendas on peacebuilding and the political economy of (post-)conflict, with its detailed arguments and focus on a way forward.

The two books under review thus contribute to the development of an innovative and action-oriented movement in feminist scholarship. This is a welcome addition to the feminist studies on women, gender, peace and security, which opens up new possibilities for both research and policy agendas to move forward. Yet the works by Duncanson and Pruitt also showcase how numerous and pervasive gender dilemmas remain, perhaps most clearly visible in instrumentalist discourses related to women's participation. All the same, participation is identified in both works as the main strategy for achieving gender equity, with a particular focus on participation in the economy in order to attain women's socio-economic empowerment. The way forward must therefore start by truly implementing one of the three 'p's of the WPS agenda.

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