

Gender, UN Peacebuilding, and the Politics of Space: Locating Legitimacy

Laura Shepherd

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Review by Lizzy Ambler

Building on an extensive range of publications in the realm of gender politics and critical security studies, Shepherd's latest offering *Gender, UN Peacebuilding, and the Politics of Space: Locating Legitimacy* provides a stimulating analysis of UN peacebuilding commissions and the way they reproduce power relations in relation to gender, women and civil society. As noted by Shepherd, it is unusual for discourse-theoretical projects to include interview material, however, its inclusion provides insights across various UN staff, activists and analysts involved in peacebuilding activities. Such interview data is treated as a 'discursive artefact' of similar status to the policy documents elsewhere analysed within the discussions. Throughout the book, Shepherd provides a post-structural feminist analysis of the way in which power relations have a profound effect on peacebuilding initiatives. Shepherd draws on country-specific configurations within the current agenda of the UN Peacebuilding Commission, including references to discourse and practice in Burundi, Central African Republic, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone and Liberia. The discussion questions these initiatives' ability to make meaningful change when bound by the reproduction of such power relations. In doing so, the book provides key contributions to the scholarship on peacebuilding and the gendered logics and practices within it.

Shepherd's overarching argument emphasises that the ways in which the UN constructs peacebuilding within its discourse are significant. Specifically, particular realities are made possible and certain practices are prescribed within such peacebuilding imaginaries. These, Shepherd argues, are all reproductions of power and space. Yet, in the analysis of interview scripts and official documents spanning thousands of pages, there is only one statement by the UN that acknowledges gender as a power relation (p. 93). This displays the importance of Shepherd's work, and with the recent revelations within the peacebuilding and development sector, this is both a critical and timely area for sustained analysis and evaluation.

After addressing the project's scope—arguing that the concept of 'peacebuilding' within UN discourse can be regarded as 'state building', Shepherd focuses attention on three areas of analysis. Beginning with a focus on gender, Chapter 3 argues that 'gender' as a term is often conflated with 'women'. The result is a monolithic and thus problematic conception that is seen as something that 'needs to be incorporated' within UN discourse. However, there is little engagement with the evident gendered inequalities that lie in the foundations of this. The result, Shepherd argues, is a limited notion of agency for women and the positioning of them as subordinate to men in a hierarchy of gendered power. As such, the UN is creating in Foucault terms, 'conditions of impossibility' as opposed to 'possibility' in structuring gender-responsive peacebuilding that has resulted in limited programs for women, exclusion of them from formal and informal political spaces, and the perpetuation of discrimination and violence.

Alternatively, Shepherd suggests that the use of 'gendered' (rather than 'gender') as a focus within discourse would have increased utility in recognising power relations beyond an identity category (p. 71); a theme that reoccurs throughout the book. This is not to say that the UN's focus on gender is entirely unsuccessful, as there are suggestions of potential positive outcomes for both men and women, even when the gendered status quo is left undisturbed (p. 77). However, Shepherd shows there is often a disjuncture between country specific configurations and organisational committees with institutional spoken discourse (p. 82). Shepherd cites two reasons for this. First, resistance expressed within interviews in relation to UN Security Council Resolution 1325 that urges actors to increase participation of women and incorporate gender perspectives in all UN peace and security efforts. Interview data suggested that it was much easier to push for women's protection rather than participation within some country contexts. Second, interviews also revealed that the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda does not seem to instil a strategy of gender equality or 'mainstreaming' within peacebuilding discourse at a HQ level, given there is no reliance on the WPS agenda for its articulation. Therefore, there are different notions of this within policy frameworks supporting gendered interventions and with the descriptions of such interventions. This, Shepherd argues, has resulted in a divide between the gendered logic of country-specific configurations that emphasise integration, and transformation being the logic of the WPS agenda. A further problem highlighted by Shepherd within the association of 'gender' as 'women' is that it reproduces binary social relations of power that demands humans to identify as male or female, with the implications being a closure of space for participation of genderqueer individuals. Under such logic, particular performances of gender are rewarded (p. 92), while others are lost or excluded.

In the following chapter, Shepherd explores the way women are associated with and determined as subjects by peace and security practices. Expanding on the themes within the previous chapter, Shepherd asks, *if*

gender is synonymous with women in UN peacebuilding discourse, *how* are women constructed within the same discourse? By virtue of the fact of absence in the discourse, women can be assumed to be unimportant, or at best marginal, to peacebuilding activities, with women being absent from country configurations, and notably the Central African Republic. Building on the literature that emphasises the articulation of women as victims, Shepherd mirrors this analysis through the various logics within country configurations. For example, she shows how in Liberia and Burundi, the vulnerability of women is qualified by their representation as decision-makers. The language around vulnerability and association of women as girls means they are deemed to be required within the peacebuilding process (p. 112). In other reports, Shepherd also shows how women are seen as vectors of disease, notably HIV/Aids and poverty, whereby they have the potential to undermine the efficiency of the state (p. 113), and by extension, masculinity .

Shepherd's interviews showed a conscious effort to shift this discourse of vulnerability to articulate women as agents endorsing a logic of empowerment (p. 115). However, Shepherd identifies that inclusion is 'bought' through victimhood, which brings the mantle of vulnerability through which women become empowered and are 'allowed' to be agents of change. This relationship Shepherd describes is dysfunctional and colonial in nature, as the logic shows women must first be victims of violence (and therefore vulnerable) in order for them to be agents of change (and therefore empowered). Furthermore, Shepherd argues this logic of empowerment is tied heavily to neoliberal economic empowerment (p. 119), a realm deemed 'safer' for women to engage in rather than a focus on political participation.

Shepherd highlights that the discourse seems to compensate for failing to constitute women as political agents by over-determining their responsibilities within peacebuilding (p. 124), in areas such as violence-prevention. Shepherd acknowledges the plethora of roles women inhabit in society; however, she argues that often the articulation of this can result in the construction of a subject who can never achieve that which is expected of them, concluding "the woman in UN peacebuilding discourse would have to be truly (super) heroic" (p. 125). In the case of Burundi where women are recognised within the political realm of discourse, the complexities of national and international structures of political activity mean these are seen as separate from the 'local', whereby the 'local' is also aligned with the 'traditional' and thus inferior.

The final area of focus on 'civil society' highlights further this association of 'women' and the 'local' as spatial and conceptual domains within UN peacebuilding discourse. Shepherd identifies how the legitimacy given to women's social movements is often contingent on their performance of social roles considered appropriate to that context. This is shown by drawing on the example of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, where

femininity and a maternalism were used as political tools within the movement. Shepherd warns about the dangers of this, however, arguing it risks forging and further engraining an association that women conventionally disconnected with formal politics.

Within country specific configurations, Shepherd identifies the involvement of civil society organisations in peacebuilding measures as critical by the UN (p. 143). Regardless of this recognition, however, Shepherd emphasises the presumption that there are no barriers to this involvement of civil society (p. 144). Echoing earlier analysis around gender, the same is said for civil society as it is presented as a rigid concept within UN discourse. Given that capacity of civil society is related to the ability to confirm this uniform nature, civil society is constructed as an ineffective actor that lacks organisation, expertise and authority (p. 151).

Shepherd also highlights the tension in the construction of civil society, as either an active participant in 'sitting on the steering committee' or as a passive subject whereby UN staff 'hear their views' (p. 145). Ultimately, the position of civil society is seen as being subordinate to that of the UN, given that the agenda is not reliant on civil society partners (p. 151). Shepherd stresses again the oppositions at work here: the international versus the national; the midwife versus the labouring woman; and the detached versus the involved (p. 152). Ultimately, the 'international' as both a subject and space is consistently positioned in opposition to 'civil society' which in turn is associated with both 'the local' and women (p. 153). In summary, although civil society organisations may be invited during deliberations over peacebuilding plans, the influence they have is curtailed by their association of knowledge with the local (p. 155) and thus are gendered and engendering, as local knowledge is both valued and then subordinated.

In Shepherd's concluding remarks, legitimacy in peacebuilding discourse and practice are shown to be fundamentally gendered and spatialised, and the author calls for further research on productive and reproductive practices. The reader is left feeling the UN needs to pay significant attention to the ways in which the organisation plays a role in this, given the analysis shows it reproduces the very ideas it apparently tries to address.

One area that is striking, given the theme of the book, is the lack of focus on the bounds of masculinity within the analysis. If we are to talk about gender and critique the UN for adopting a monolithic definition of the term in relation to identity (and thus women), and with this then becoming the focus of the majority of discussions, perhaps a focus on masculinity (and thus men, using the same logic), would have given further weight to Shepherd's analysis. Given Shepherd shows a colonial power dynamic at work here, it would have also been insightful to explore more intersectional elements of analysis in displaying further the limitations of reproduction and binaries, exposing further those who are silenced or excluded from peacebuilding. The analysis

indicates that current discourse benefits (in limited ways) those who fit into the masculine and feminine typologies as this abides by wider gendered power dynamics, but it would have been useful to explore further who these people are. Who are actually empowered by such masculine conceptions of state building and a UN agenda that focuses exclusively on males when not otherwise addressing 'gender'? Although Shepherd does touch on this idea of masculine state building, a depth of analysis is focused on the limitations of femininity and masculinity *on women* with little suggestion of how this also may impact men. Such a focus would have given weight to the suggestion of adopting 'gendered' rather than 'gender' as a concept, as it would have displayed further the limits of power dynamics on both *men and women*, and thus the utility of adopting a non-binary, power-focused term within the peacebuilding discourse.

Shepherd's book is both thorough and articulate in engaging in complex discussions surrounding power-relations in peacebuilding. Shepherd initially focuses on addressing the concept of hope; a guiding principle of the organisation in a post-Cold War world (p. 2), and while the book could initially be perceived as deeply critical of UN Commissions, Shepherd remarks in the concluding section the apparent sincerity and commitment of the organisation to 'achieve good things' (p. 160). Having said that, recent developments have further demonstrated that while intentions may be 'good', this is certainly not enough to guarantee equality in practice whereby hierarchy and processes have resulted in the exploitation of women through gendered power dynamics. As such, this book would serve useful to both academics and practitioners, as it highlights some wider implications for the study of world politics, but also to the particular failures of the UN in serving as significant food for thought for more robust discussions by similar actors about how they engage with peacebuilding activities.

Lizzy Ambler is a PhD Candidate at the School of Government and International Relations, Griffith University.