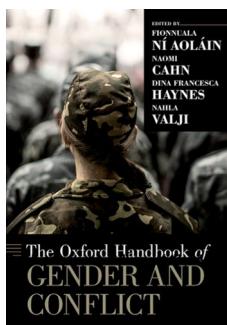


BOOK REVIEW



The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Conflict

Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, Naomi Cahn, Dina Francesca Haynes and Nahla Valji (eds)*

Book review by Gillian Wylie, Assistant Professor of International Peace Studies at Trinity College Dublin.

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In times when the very concept of gender and the field of gender studies are coming under political attack from populist governments, this comprehensive, multifaceted handbook is a timely reminder of how crucial gender analyses are to understanding the causes and consequences of war and the conditions of peace. The four editors, working with a host of expert contributors, trace an arc from pre- to post-conflict contexts, illuminating along the way how gender shapes war and can deepen peace. That arc begins with gendered discourses about masculine protectors and female victims, which make war thinkable. It then extends into a range of gendered practices and harms that go into making warfare and ends with upended gender relations in post-conflict societies, and even possibilities for gender-sensitive peace and post-conflict justice. The chapters of this book, organized in five sections on background and context, the United Nations (UN) Women, Peace and Security agenda, legal and political elements, conflict and post-conflict space, and case studies, illuminate all this – and much more – in

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ways that stimulate nuanced understandings of gendered war and creative imagining about gendered peace.

This sizeable volume teems with theories, policy analyses and case studies, to capture a rich research field that is in rapid evolution. While the study of gender, war and peace began only a couple of decades ago from a feminist urge to “add women and stir” – breaking the silence about women’s presence and activism in relation to conflict and peace – most current thinking, as reflected here, complicates and goes beyond the idea that gender equals women. The opening section, incorporating several helpful “background and context” chapters, encapsulates this trajectory. Dubravka Zarkov, for instance, charts how waves of feminist thinking have impacted on the study of conflict. In line with the main tenets of third-wave feminism and contemporary gender studies, current scholarship tends towards complicating homogeneous understandings of women’s experiences, focusing on relations between complex women and men, and acknowledging diversity across a range of masculinities and femininities. Intersectionality and post-colonial theory, which both draw attention to the ways in which people’s identities are also shaped by race, class and context, are key to underpinning these developments, and these perspectives influence many of the chapters here (for example, those by Eilish Rooney, Amina Mama and Pascha Bueno-Hansen).

The value of intersectional and heterogeneous approaches to gender and conflict is to break down simple gender binaries – those sharp conceptual divisions which see the world as composed of homogenous groups called “men” and “women” – that inscribe women as war’s passive outsiders and victims, and men as purely patriarchal perpetrators of armed conflict and gender-based violence. This openness to the complexity of gendered identities and their varied impacts on experiences of war are recognized in most of the chapters of the book. Thus, male victims of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence are present, and women’s engagement as citizen supporters or active combatants in armed struggles is here too. Easy assumptions about direct links between militarized masculinity and sexual abuse of women civilians are questioned, as are equally easy assumptions that just bringing more women into politics will make for gender-sensitive post-conflict peace. The sense of a field in rapid evolution is also captured by the inclusion of chapters on current forms of violence beyond conventional wars as fought and experienced between or within States. Contemporary concerns about violent extremism are the subject of a chapter by Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Alison Davidian – they analyze how gendered ideologies can provoke engagement with radicalization for women and men, and raise the prospect of how women’s empowerment might help prevent such violence. Looking into the future, Christof Heyns and Tess Borden consider what the mounting use of autonomous weaponry will imply for militarized masculinities, women as soldiers, and gendered harms experienced by those targeted by drones.

As the book comprehensively captures, theorizing gender and conflict has evolved to encompass the complexities of diverse gendered lives. However, another

key theme uniting much of the book is the way in which gender binaries still predominate in the shaping of political and legal responses to gendered war and peace. Several chapters in the book's second section on the UN's Women, Peace and Security resolutions, for example, pinpoint the narrow focus by governments and civil society actors on women as war's innocent victims.¹

Several contributors to this book suggest that there is an overemphasis on the "protection" pillar of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on "Women, Peace and Security" and its subsequent resolutions, with advocacy and policy efforts focused on ending women's vulnerability to conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence. Chapters by a number of contributors (such as Dianne Otto, Karen Engle, Kimberly Theidon and Chris Dolan) argue that an overemphasis on the "protection" of women not only once again positions members of this sex as the perpetual victims of war, but also stresses the awfulness of sexual violence to the neglect of other forms of gendered harm that are distressingly prevalent in warfare, such as forced conscription or massacres of civilians of fighting age – both of which befall men rather than women. Other contributors, such as Martina Vendenberg on "Peacekeepers, Human Trafficking and Sexual Abuse", seem less convinced of this broader approach to gendered harm, stressing the importance of maintaining a focus on approaches that prioritize responding to violence against women as a "weapon of war" and advocating an end to legal impunity for perpetrators. By containing these differing views, the book encompasses differences within feminism over whether violence against women or broader understandings of gendered harm should be the basis of activism and policy. Yet, there is general consensus across many chapters that political support is needed across all the pillars of Resolution 1325, especially increasing attention to women's empowerment and participation as central to preventing conflicts or bringing conflicts to peaceful ends.

Although the book overall holds a remit for a broad, non-dichotomous understanding of gender as it shapes and is shaped by conflict, the ability to maintain this perspective seems to fade somewhat as the chapters progress. A focus on women alone begins to emerge, particularly as the issues of conflict give way to the theme of peace in the middle of the book's fourth section on "Conflict and Post-Conflict Space". Here, there are many excellent chapters, including an account of the causes and consequences of women's exclusion from peace processes (Christine Bell), a discussion on the role of women in building bridges between conflicted communities (Aili Mari Tripp), and a study of the ongoing gender inequality experienced by women as UN peacekeepers (Sabrina Karim and Marsha Henry).

Helpfully, many of the themes expressed in the fourth section of the book are reiterated and exemplified in the fifth and final "Case Studies" section. Here we

1 UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on "Women, Peace and Security" was passed in 2000. It has four main pillars – participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery. It has been followed up by a family of related resolutions in subsequent years. For details, see: www.peacewomen.org/why-WPS/solutions/resolutions.

find (among others) the transversal, cross-community politics of women in Northern Ireland discussed by Monica McWilliams and Avila Kilmurray; the defiant agency of birthing mothers in Palestine taking risks to ensure their children are born as citizens in Jerusalem, captured by Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian; and the complex history of women's political role in post-genocide Rwanda, as analyzed by Doris Buss and Jerusa Ali.

Notably, Buss and Ali's chapter, "Rwanda: Women's Political Participation in Post-Conflict State-Building", offers a subtle debunking of the simplistic equation which states that adding more women politicians will make for gender-sensitive peace. While women compose an unprecedented number of Rwandan parliamentarians, their record regarding gender equality legislation remains mixed, given the competing pressures exerted on these politicians in regard to their gender identity, their party affiliation and the influence of the government's authoritarian tendencies.

While these case study chapters are revealing in bringing to life women's complex experiences as soldiers, victims and activists, effectively complementing the background discussions of the earlier chapters, some of the commitment to maintaining insight into the complexity of gender is lost in these accounts. Only Maria Baaz and Maria Stern's case study addresses masculinities, offering a carefully layered analysis of what causes militarized men to perpetrate sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Concurrently, some chapters fall back into treating women as a homogenous group with unified, discernible interests. Importantly too, these parts of the book do not revisit an intriguing idea floated in an early chapter by Diane Otto – that to establish peace there is a need to go beyond adding women into existing peace efforts. Instead, peace should be imagined as a "multi-gendered project" which involves "engaging men and other genders, as well as women", so as to avoid, as Karen Engle notes, narrowing the scope for possibilities of peace. This idea of how men and other genders might connect to peace-building, or be reshaped by peace efforts, is to date an under-researched theme in the wider study of gender and peace, and there is not much in this book to further this train of thought. A new area for research suggests itself as a consequence.

If there is something else missing from this wide-ranging volume, it is the question of LGBTQI experiences of war and peace. Admittedly, the editors themselves note this gap in their introduction to the book. Yet, this seems to be a glaring omission, especially in a book that works so consciously with an awareness of the complexity of gendered lives. It is a little odd that a book which does so much to critique gender dichotomies seems to shy away from including the spectrum of gender identities – even more so at a time when transgender soldiers are facing dismissal from the US military for not conforming to the gender binary required by the Trump administration,² and LGBTQI people are

2 "White House Announces Ban on Transgender People Serving in Military", *The Guardian*, 23 March 2018, available at: www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/mar/23/donald-trump-transgender-military-ban-white-house-memo.

facing distinct forms of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence in ongoing wars in Syria and elsewhere.³

At 600 pages and forty-five chapters, this is a hefty book. But it needs to be so, in order to do the justice it undoubtedly does to the richness of contemporary theorizing, policy analysis and empirical research on the multiple ways in which gender shapes conflict situations and peace processes. Despite its size, the book is made readily navigable by its organization into five main sections that will guide readers with particular interests; each chapter is relatively short but exquisitely concise, capturing key ideas, debates or cases and providing a helpful bibliography. As such, this book will be invaluable for researchers, teachers, students, policy-makers, advocates and activists in the field of gender, conflict and peace. It is one I will definitely use as a central text when teaching students and supervising PhD researchers. When all its parts are drawn together, this book provides a wealth of insights into the myriad ways in which the arc from pre- to post-conflict is gendered, provides important guidance for those crafting responses, and is also a source of inspiration for those wishing to imagine sustainable peace as a “multi-gendered project”.

3 See, for example, the writings of Danny Ahmad Ramadan, available at: <http://dannynamadan.com/>.

