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Reconceptualizing Peace: Feminist Perspectives

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Abstract

Although peace is widely regarded as humanity's most desired objective, the world continues to experience wars, armed conflicts, and various forms of structural and social violence. The realization of peace depends on inclusive definitions and frameworks that adequately reflect the experiences, needs, and aspirations of all members of society. Yet dominant peace discourses continue to exclude or marginalize women and their perspectives. This exclusion produces inaccurate, incomplete, and partial conceptualizations of peace. The omission of women from peace frameworks not only overlooks their lived experiences of conflict and violence but also impedes the realization of substantive, inclusive, and sustainable peace. The present paper is an attempt to examine how feminist scholars theorize peace and how they criticize the dominant state-centric perspectives that have historically marginalized women's experiences and contributions to peacebuilding. While discussing the feminist ideas of peace, the study also highlights the significance of women's agency, participation, and everyday experiences in rethinking conventional understandings of peace. It further suggests that gender-inclusive frameworks are foundational for effective, equitable, and sustainable peacebuilding and for addressing the broader social structures that perpetuate violence and inequality.

Keywords

Peace, Feminist, Gender, Liberal, Marxist, Patriarchy, Violence against women, Westphalian.

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1. Introduction

Peace is understood as a universal principle that operates across cultures, boundaries or nations. In an era marked by increasing conflicts, inequalities, terrorism, environmental degradation, the pursuit of peace has become a critical global imperative. Despite peace being humanity's most cherished dream, the world is often plagued by conflict and war. The end of cold war didn't bring lasting peace. Instead it lead to smaller, yet brutal conflicts in places like the Balcones, Africa and the former Soviet Union. Ethnic and religious hatreds have fuelled violence in Rwanda, Bosnia, Liberia, and elsewhere. Despite the ideals, war and conflict are more visible than peace.¹ The philosophical and theoretical traditions have shaped understandings of human nature. It is true that establishing peace and stability is a necessary foundation for preserving International ties. In order to ensure this, many theoretical perspectives have been developed and many institutions have been established. The pursuit of peace in intractable conflicts has indeed become a pressing concern in context of reevaluating the Westphalian international system. The territorial sovereignty that emphasizes rigid boundaries and absolute state control, often lead to competition and conflict over territory and sovereignty. In response, there is a shift towards a post-Westphalian International society that is more interconnected world where diverse actors including non- state actors interact and cooperate.

Peace is closely tied to the absence of violence, where conflicts are resolved through peaceful means rather than violent ones. While a world without conflicts is Elysium, peace can be achieved by addressing conflicts through non-violent, conciliatory approaches. The state of peace comes when conflicts are resolved by peaceful mechanisms.² Here, the definition advanced by Galton and reproduced by Johanson is worth mentioning: "Peace.... is having the capacity and skills to act with creativity, empathy and non violence in conflict situations."³ This definition suggests that peace is a proactive and dynamic process that requires effort, skill building, and commitment to navigating conflicts in a positive way. This perspective highlights the importance of non-violent conflict resolution in achieving peace. By using peaceful mechanisms, such as dialogue, negotiation and mediation. An environment can be created that is conducive to understanding, reconciliation and ultimately, lasting peace.

Giraudoux describes it as 'intervals between wars'.⁴ This viewpoint seems to emphasize the fleeting nature of peace and its connection to the absence of war focusing on formal agreements like peace treaties and their impact on former

conflicting parties and the international community. Peace is also seen as a psychological and emotional condition characterized by inner calmness. Anderson describes, “Peace is a state of mind”.⁵ It is characterized by a profound sense of serenity and tranquillity, extending beyond the mere absence of conflict or violence to compass a deeper state of inner calmness and harmony. The foundation of negative peace sets the stage for more sustainable and lasting peace, ultimately leading to positive peace. In a war like situation, the logical step should be the elimination of war and securing borders. By establishing effective Institutions of good governance can bring positive peace.⁶ A holistic approach to peace encompasses both the absence of violence and the presence of harmonious relationships. Effective peace building efforts must therefore focus on two key dimensions: reducing violence and fostering positive, mutually respectful relationships.

2. Objective of the Study

The study aims to critically examine the feminist reconceptualization of peace by analyzing how feminist scholars challenge dominant state-centric and militaristic understandings of peace and emphasize women’s experiences, agency, participation, and everyday forms of violence. It further seeks to highlight the significance of gender-inclusive approaches for achieving substantive, sustainable, and inclusive peace.

3. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive and analytical research design based entirely on secondary sources. Relevant scholarly literature, including books, research articles, reports, and academic writings on feminist peace studies, gender, conflict, violence, and peacebuilding, is reviewed systematically. The study employs thematic analysis to identify major feminist arguments and critically compare them with conventional state-centric approaches to peace.

4. Reconceptualizing Peace through Feminist Perspectives

Liberal perspective on peace is mainly driven by the western understanding of democracy as democracies are less likely to go to war with each other due to the accountability of leaders to their citizens.⁷ liberals view free market as an important factor in promoting peace. Economic ties develop mutual interests and reasons for cooperation. This idea is further developed by the proponents of Democratic Peace Theory. They are of the view that democratic States tend to resolve conflict peacefully.⁸ In order to preserve social order and advance peace, the neo-Durkheimian perspective on peace places a strong emphasis on the value of social solidarity, shared values and collective identity. According to this perspective, peace results from solid social ties, common moral principles and cooperative organizations that promote mutual respect, trust and understanding between people and groups.⁹ The liberal and pluralist traditions view positive peace as an outcome of the institutionalization of universal liberal principles, law and order, human

rights, global governance structures and interstate cooperation. From the perspective of both classical and structural realism, States operate in an anarchic International system where they prioritize self interest, resulting at best in precarious balance of power. In this context, the idealist conception of peace is regarded as impractical and of limited utility for comprehending international dynamics. Realists are of the view that in order to achieve peace, Nations must attain a condition that balances the distribution of power. They realize that it is extremely challenging to accomplish because nations prioritize their relative gains.¹⁰ The Realist's conceptions that limit peace to the absence of armed conflict, while labelling it idealistic and passive; construct peace as a feminized category and this marginalize it within security studies.¹¹ Marxist theories reconceptualized peace as synonymous with economic justice and social emancipation which is attainable only through revolutionary transformation. True peace occurs only when fighting over money, land oil and power ends. When some have control over resources and others do not, war and conflict happen. It requires changing the whole society so that no one exploits others.¹²

The fundamental tenants of both liberal and illiberal peace building models are contested by feminists. These models include the false dichotomy of peace and war, the prioritization of state security over human security and colonial legacies embedded in these frameworks.¹³ Liberal feminists contend that gender inclusion into current institutions can bring about peace, while Marxist feminists contend that eradicating capitalism and class exploitation is necessary. Feminist scholarship contends that peace extends beyond the absence of interstate and civil war. The issue is not mere of definition. Peace is usually measured by the extreme of inter-state wars while overlooking structural and gender based violence. J.N Tickner is of the view that realists ignore the insecurity facing at home, workplace or community because it is not a security issue. This type of state centrism is gendered. In mainstream International Relations and Security Studies, women are seen as objects of research. Only male scholars define and decide what counts as "real" security knowledge. Women's own accounts of war, insecurity or peace building are dismissed as anecdotal or "too subjective". Tickner argues that women are data and expertise. Further Cockburn extends this perspective with the view that instead of using statistics and treaties, feminists use oral histories, interviews, and participatory research with women in conflict zones.¹⁴

Recognizing women as knower's allows their lived experiences to be treated as data in security research. It is not just state documents, troop counts, or GDP, the narratives women tell about war, safety, and peace are empirical material for studying security. This method questions the state's story that "the country is safe" by using women's stories to show that many women still feel unsafe. So, Wibben tells scholars to treat women's stories as legitimate, analyzable evidence of how security and peace really work.¹⁵ Framing women as subjects, not objects, requires that IR listen to women as producers of knowledge, because their perspectives

expose both the threats they navigate and the peace work they perform. These dimensions are absent from State Centric Perspective. Feminist Scholars content that gendered power relations lie in the social construction of war and violence. The conceptual framing of violence and war in binary opposition to non violence and peace constitutes a gendered move that replicates male/female hierarchical structures in the social order. This practice, consequently, sustaining the normative superiority of violence relative to non-violence.¹⁶ Feminist critique dismantle the war/peace binary which prioritizes spectacular violence against men while rendering women's everyday threats invisible, including domestic and community violence during "peace time". Burn illustrates this perspective with examples of post conflict areas where formal peace did not end militarized masculinity, domestic violence or inequalities.¹⁷

Conflicts often worsen existing gender inequalities. Women and girls are disproportionately affected, facing higher risks of sexual violence, displacement, and loss of livelihood. In war torn areas, especially women are vulnerable to sexual assault and exploitation. Women usually bear the main responsibility for caring for families and communities in the midst of conflict and destruction. Traditional peace building processes are typically dominated by men, and women's contributions are often marginalized or overlooked. This exclusion not only reduces the effectiveness of peace efforts but also ignores the valuable insights and experiences that women offer. A clear example is the absence of women in the formal peace negotiations and decision making bodies. Since 2000, the United Nations' Women, Peace and Security Agenda, starting with Security Council Resolution 1325, has stated that women must help in the peace processes, peace keeping, and post-conflict re-building. There are ten resolutions dealing with sexual violence, women's participation, and gender-aware peace building. A causal relationship between women's political participation and global peace is proposed by liberal feminist studies. According to a study, between 1960 and 2000, no interstate conflict was initiated by democracies with more than 25% female legislators. According to an another study, gender-balanced UN peacekeeping forces increase civilian trust and reduce complaints of abuse.¹⁸

Therefore, peace building must confront entrenched inequalities and routine oppression contesting state centric paradigms that reduce peace to the mere absence of war. Jaisi Bernard contents that patriarchal systems generate to unequal social realms. One is the hegemonic, "male world", centred on competition and power, the other is deprivative female ethos that is centred on love and duty.¹⁹ In this regard two contrasting models of social organization can be discussed here. The Dominator model is based on the hierarchical ranking of one half of humanity over the other. From a conceptual standpoint, this model may take either matriarchal or patriarchal form. The partnership model is founded on the equal participation of both halves of humanity. It ensures equal participation establishing equality among men and between women and men.²⁰ The project of constructing a post-colonial

feminist future requires critically questioning and redefining conventional understanding of peace. This vision prioritizes demilitarization and the elimination of armed conflict, while remaining acutely aware of the gendered risks posed by militarization and weaponization. According to Global South Feminists, Peace is the simultaneous destruction of capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. They oppose “colonial feminism”, which justifies occupation and “rescue” narratives by citing women’s rights. Rather, women’s political agency rooted in resistance histories and territory-body-land connections are the foundations of peace. Decolonial viewpoints contend that gender equality programmes operating within capitalist structures reinforce knowledge hierarchies and harm women’s well being rather than creating peace.²¹

5. Conclusion

Structural violence and ongoing military conflict continue to be the defining characteristic of global politics. This highlights a basic problem: if peace is defined without taking into account all the individuals, it cannot be attained on a global scale. Despite comprising half of the population, women are often ignored in these frameworks. Alternative frameworks for understanding peace are provided by feminist studies. It shows how militarism legitimized through masculinity and how structural violence borne mainly by women, stems from gendered hierarchy. Peace education requires distinguishing between educating about peace and educating for peace. The former entails teaching the substantive issues central to peace research.²² For conflicts to be resolved peacefully one must identify pathways to transform harmful gender norms and incorporate gender based violence into definitions of war and organized crime. Gender equality has significant and far reaching implications for peace.²³ Gender analysis should be integrated throughout the curriculum to expose hidden inequalities. Research indicates that societies organized on partnership model characterized by gender equality experience lower number of internal and external conflicts compared to those organized on the dominator model of patriarchy

Feminists have argued that peace should not be understood as a passive idea. It seeks to challenge and transform existing power structures and the status quo. Peace is not a static endpoint but rather an ongoing, gendered process that fundamentally concerns men, women, and the nature of their relational dynamics. Conceptualizing peace as a gendered process reveals two pervasive assumptions: first, that men and women are essentially different, and second, that women are inherently peacemakers while men are inherently aggressors. This essentialist perspective has been challenged by empirical evidence demonstrating that men can also be victims of violence, and women can be perpetrators of violence and abuse. Furthermore, studies indicate that power-sharing arrangements in negotiated settlements have a positive impact on the durability of peace. Specifically, women’s participation in peace negotiations significantly enhances both the quality and sustainability of peace agreements. Feminist Scholars and peace

researchers contend that peace should not be understood as a passive condition; rather, it constitutes a transformative concept that challenges and seeks to destabilize established power structures.²⁴ Feminist Scholars argue that the definition of peace will be incomplete and peace building will not work if the voices of women are not heard and women are not treated as political leaders. Contemporary practice and policies have increasingly formalized and extended these initiatives. Gender sensitive approaches foreground women's lived realities and decision making, interrogating whose security matters and recognizing women as active agents of peace rather than passive victims.

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