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Book Review: Gendering War and Peace Reporting: Some Insights—Some Missing Links

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***Gendering War and Peace Reporting: Some Insights –Some Missing Links.* eds. Bertit von der Lippe and Rune Ottosen, 2016. Nordicom, University of Gothenburg, Goteborg, Sweden. 278 pages. ISBN: 978-91-87957-42-0. SEK 280, \$31, €28, paperback.**

Reviewed by William A. Tringali¹

Gendering War and Peace Reporting: Some Insights –Some Missing Links is a collection of fifteen articles edited by Bertit von der Lippe and Rune Ottosen. The book is divided into four sections: “Gendering Professional Agencies”, “Women and Lack of Agency”, “Postcolonial Perspectives Forever?”, and “Masculinities, Heroes and Victims?” Each section contain between three to four chapters, all dedicated to the aspects of gender and war and peace reporting that fall beneath the subject of their respective chapters.

In regard to the book’s introduction, I have nothing short of praise. Bertit von der Lippe and Rune Ottosen do an excellent job giving a concise but rich background on the interplay of so many factors that engage with and therefore shape war reporting and gender. As they comment “Power is not produced alone, and neither is gender” (18). Gender is an ongoing process; it is always shifting and changing, and by that measure so must our understandings of it.

My comments begin with the structure of the work itself. The book’s first chapter “Bodies at War” prepares even the most unformed newcomer to war and peace reporting. Presented as a history of women in war and peace reporting, Linda Steiner’s chapter gives a concise and incredibly informative background that sets the stage for every coming chapter of this book.

The flow between chapters in this book is truly magnificent. The organization of articles is done in a way that every early chapter adds to the reader’s knowledge of gender and war and peace reporting, starting with a history and moving swiftly into social science research accounts. This text, though remarkably informative, doesn’t feel dense because of the building blocks of information given in early chapters.

While this book is almost perfectly structured, there are moments where it feels like portions could have been shifted or altered to avoid repetition. The most striking example occurs in chapter ten. Titled “Philanthropic War”, this chapter discusses how Norwegian media used politician Anne-Grete Strøm-Erichsen’s visit to female prisoners in a small town in the north of Afghanistan, and her subsequent tears over their treatment, to justify war under the liberal feminist ideals of “protecting” women and children. Here we see war reporting being used to victimize Afghan women for the purpose of portraying Norway and Norwegian soldiers in a heroic light. Immediately following this, chapter eleven, titled “Key Factors and Challenges to Understanding Women’s Roles in the Peace Process”, opens with a paragraph titled “Victimization of Afghan Women by the Media” (194). But in a book so otherwise well-structured, moments like this only stand out because of how otherwise smooth this books feels to read.

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In reporting the violence, sexual assault, and sexual abuse *Gendering War and Peace Reporting* combines statistical data with personal accounts and interviews in a way that is neither too cold nor too sensational. The men and women that are the survivors of these crimes are given a voice, rather than just being reduced to a number. The horror they experienced is presented both realistically and academically, without forcing survivors into victimhood. As a sexual assault survivor, I was very impressed.

Gendering War and Peace Reporting is unflinching in its tackling of remarkably difficult and uncomfortable subjects. The most taxing portion of this book for me was one portion of Marta Kollarova's chapter "Good or Bad Agents?" which raises the topic of how Western women that join ISIS. Titled "Romantic Love and ISIS Propaganda", this portion of Kollarova's chapter focuses on how in news media "jihadi brides are presented as crazy and unnatural" when "many jihadi brides are educated women" (151). Presenting them as either innocent girls tricked into falling in love with terrorists, or evil "ghouls" obsessed with violence and carnage Rather than "trying to find an acceptable explanation" for the actions of these women, "Good or Bad Agents?" asks readers to recognize the agency of these women. In doing so, Kollarova calls upon societies to better understand why these women made the choices they did, allowing for solutions to emerge from there. This book is dedicated to acknowledging every aspect of women's agency, just as the reporting it critiques must.

The studies within each chapter range from discussions of machismo to orientalism to liberal feminism, and its *Gendering War and Peace Reporting's* critique of the latter that I found most interesting, and one of the many praises I have for the book. Dedicated not to expressing the "shortcomings of lip service equality", *Gendering War and Peace Reporting* discusses that while the presence of more women in news media is imperative to improving how war and peace are reported, it is not the end of the fight. One chapter goes into detail about a reporter who was told by her boss, a woman, that women couldn't cover war stories, as they had different needs to consider than men. Some women that rise through the ranks end up embracing and furthering hegemonic masculinity.

Connected to this was the idea of using women in reporting as tools in the "legitimation of wars" (92). Whatever side that is being opposed by the Western world is usually the side that's presented as being anti-women, and Eva Boller's chapter "There are No Women" goes into a fascinating example of the lives of women under Libyan's Gaddafi, who "clashed with more traditional sectors of Libyan society and with conservative Islam clerics" (99). Liberal feminism, in this way, becomes a tool of war, in which the West must rescue and protect the women of the East.

Gendering War and Peace Reporting forces its readers to question what they believe even in between chapters. In Eva Boller's chapter "There are No Women" she raises the ever-present critique that not enough women are assigned war and peace reporters. Beyond this, she also comments that not enough women are being reported on. "It is not possible to film reality" Boller comments. She strongly critiques those reporters, and in doing so also critiques other authors in this book who comment that "It is like that is [Country]!" (104). Reporters and anthropologists must do all they can to pursue stories, even if doing so is not easy. Of the many reporters she interviewed, most commented that women existed "in the background" or a "secondary topic" were often not the subject they intended to look into. Boller's response to both of these appears a challenge to both the reporting and academic world alike: if men are not easily able to write stories that included women's voices, they need to try harder. And if they cannot find a way to report on women, then more women need to be included in war reporting.

It is thought-provoking work like the examples listed that make me wish *Gendering War and Peace Reporting* had a conclusion. Bertit von der Lippe and Rune Ottosen's introduction was so well put together, and each chapter flowed with such structural grace that I found myself almost out in the cold when I turned the last page of the last chapter and found only a list of contributors. Presenting such challenging and thought-provoking work, I was left wanting some final words on gender and reporting. This lack of conclusion makes *Gendering War and Peace Reporting* feel less like a book and more like a collection of essays, though that isn't necessarily a bad thing.

I would recommend this book for anyone interested anthropology, gender studies, or journalism. The writing of the first chapters, especially the introduction and first chapter, would work well in an undergraduate class centered on either quantitative or qualitative data collection.