

January 2018

Book Review: Gender and Conflict: Embodiments, Discourses and Symbolic Practices

H. Nanjala Nyabola

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nyabola, H. Nanjala (2018). Book Review: Gender and Conflict: Embodiments, Discourses and Symbolic Practices. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 19(2), 266-268.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol19/iss2/20>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. ©2018 Journal of International Women's Studies.

Gender and Conflict: Embodiments, Discourses and Symbolic Practices

Edited by George Frerks, Annelou Ypei, & Reinhilde Konig.

Ashgate Publishing, October 28, 2014. ISBN 9781409464853. 274 Pages

H. Nanjala Nyabola¹

What is conflict? It seems like it should be a simple question but the volumes of literature produced on the subject ever year attest to the fact that it is indeed a complex question. In policy work, there is a great deal of focus on violence as a manifestation of conflict because violence crosses a threshold of acceptable human interaction that must always be avoided. If violence is unacceptable human behaviour, then conflicts must be managed in such a way that they do not descent into violence. Thus, the notion of conflict is inextricably linked to the notion of violence, and while not every conflict may result in physical violence, Galtung (1990) proposes a definition of structural violence that asserts that even in the absence of physical violence, a conflict may still be underway.

This volume builds on Galtung's work and takes a step back from the higher-level discussions on violence to examine the dynamics of conflicts before they become violent. Specifically, it aims to unfurl the gender tropes that plague conventional discussions of violence to ask tough questions about the ways in which conflict both entrenches but also challenges presumptions on gender roles (3). It takes an expansive definition of conflict and using an admittedly constructivist methodology, works to pick at the nexus between these two broad and constantly evolving terms to propose new ways of thinking about our comprehension and management of contemporary conflicts. Essentially, the volume is asking us to rethink our presumptions on the dynamics of conflict, especially on the question of gender, in order to start new conversations on how to manage both conflict and any violence that may result from it.

Theoretically, this is an extremely necessary book because it moves beyond structuralist presumptions on conflict and works to introduce new and necessary tools for analysis. The editors from the outset commit to a feminist methodology, necessarily invoking highly localised, personalised levels of analysis and perspectives that like beyond the limits of formal institutions. The spectrum of loci of analysis thus varies, from the active conflicts in The Middle East and in the Democratic Republic of Congo, to the doors of a girl's toilet in Malta.

This is a key analytical move because restricting our analysis of conflict to institutions and "formal" spaces prevents comprehensive engagement with many human factors that drive people to conflict and ultimately violence. You cannot for instance, understand what motivates a young man in Mathare to engage in violent politics at the behest of a local politician if you don't understand the domestic dynamics that make the pursuit of violence an attractive (Van Stoeple, 116). Those who engage in conflict are not immune to the same domestic pressures that the rest of us face, and to understand what makes some people pursue violence and others not, you have to drill down to the highly local.

The other key advantage of constructivist, feminist methodology is that it permits a more critical engagement with the tropes that policy makers take for granted. Theo Hollander's chapter on the use of sexual violence in the DRC is an excellent example of how effective the challenge can be. The narrative of use of sexual violence as a weapon of war in the DRC is particularly well

¹ Writer, Political Analyst

established in national and international narratives in violence. And yet, moving beyond the horrific statistics, do the gender dynamics in the DRC fit as neatly into the typical narratives of victimhood that have emerged around the statistics? Hollander's historical research suggests not. In fact, his research suggests, the pervasive use of violence against women may actually be a misguided reaction to the increasing empowerment of women first with the arrival of Christianity, then with the ostensibly woman-friendly Mobutu regime, and finally with the abdication of traditional gender roles by men conscripted into the war effort.

Another key opportunity that arises from using this constructivist approach to gender is that it allows for a more holistic consideration of the subject than narrower structuralist frames allow. A structuralist approach, by focusing on the formal institutions of statehood and state making, would see the problem of gender as being the exclusion of women from the decision making process. As such, the focus on addressing any gender related concerns would be on bringing more women into the mix. The constructivist approach used in this text goes beyond such simplified narratives to examine the dynamics within and between male and female in society to ask: what is it about these dynamics that shapes the trajectory of conflicts and violence?

Compare the three chapters that deal with the Israel-Palestine conflict. Malmström's chapter on masculinities of Hamas fighters in Gaza is a self-contained study that focuses on the impact of conflict on the men of Hamas, without recourse to comparison on the situation of women. Only a constructivist approach permits this kind of examination because it focuses on how external politics shape internal discourses: how social and political dynamics in an active war zone shape individual masculinities in highly nuanced ways. The same can be said about Simonetti's study of the women of the Israel Defence Forces and their use of violence against Palestinian civilians. This latter chapter is one level of analysis removed—looking at the points at which conflict shapes gender identities at the moment of interaction with putative combatants—but still manages to ascribe a higher level of agency to the research subjects than a purely structuralist analysis would be able to accommodate.

Violi's chapter on a peace project involving women from Israel and the Occupied territories realises the full potential of this approach. By looking at the individual and group dynamics between the participants in the series of workshop. Violi is able to move beyond the presumption that women are somehow inherently more peaceful than men, to identify the core reason why it's imperative to involve women in peacebuilding processes. Quoting Cynthia Enloe (2007:15) she notes "women have special roles to play in exposing and challenging militarisation, not because women are somehow innately, biologically wired for peacefulness, but because women are so often outside the inner circles where militarising decisions are being made, and yet are likely to be called upon to support, and even work on behalf of militarising agenda" (Violi, 220).

Indeed Violi's chapter is an excellent closing to what it is overall an uneven and not entirely cohesive text. Without a doubt, the editors set out an ambitious agenda, to move beyond, not just the standard praxis of the dominant structuralist methodology but also beyond any lazy feminism or constructivism, to develop new ways of thinking about gender and conflict. However, the text fails on a very basic issue that overall undermines the laudable project. There are several chapters about gender, there are chapters about conflict, but only some of the chapters deal with the question of gender *and* conflict. Without a comprehensive chapeau definition in the introduction, the book flounders a little, and it becomes difficult to pick and sustain a narrative thread throughout the disparate chapters. Given that the editors go to great pains to distinguish violence from conflict, it is not enough to simply write about gender in the context of a conflict, or about gender in the

context of violent situations. It would have satisfied the editor's ambitions if more of the writers had written about how conflict shapes or impacts these gender identities.

Furthermore, perhaps given the truncated length of some of the chapters, in some of them, there's a sense that the reader is being invited to spectate alongside the writers on the lives of those who are enduring the conflicts. Chapters 9 and 10 on capoeira practice in Brazil and on the writing of girls in the bathroom stalls of a high school in Malta, while being interesting and illuminating in their own right, seem a little out of place in the whole volume and is cognitively jarring when sandwiched between a chapter on violent offenders in Nicaragua and women negotiating peace in Israel and the Occupied Territories.

This particular criticism takes on particular weight when you consider that the entire volume of 11 chapters doesn't feature a single writer from the global south. Even post-structuralist approaches to political analysis have their canons, and this book reads very much from the European canons of feminism and constructivism. If the goal of producing such a volume is to create somewhat universal analytical tools, then the entire book would have benefitted from giving space to post-colonial feminists to write back against the structures of violence that shape gender dynamics in their societies. Without that subtle contrast, the book become slightly self-indulgent or self-referential—is this a book about universal themes of conflict and gender, or is it about European perspectives on gender and conflict?

References:

- Enloe, C. 2007. *Globalisation and Militarism: Feminists Make The Link*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers
- Galtung, J. 1990. Cultural Violence, *Journal of Peace Research*, 27(3), 291-305.