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Race, Justice and New Possibilities: 20 Years of the Women, Peace and Security agenda

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As the international community celebrates the 20th anniversary of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, [New Directions](#) reflects on its past (and future) and the assumptions inherent within the global normative framework. We argue that the WPS agenda is illustrative of a practice of global politics that can be rooted in exploitative patterns of interaction between the Global North and so-called Global South. The dynamic of this relationship ultimately inhibits the emancipatory potential of the WPS agenda advocated for by activists. We argue that the current limits of the WPS agenda is because of the [embeddedness of racism within International Relations](#).

In the wake of the brutal [racist murder of Mr George Floyd](#), and the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) and its responses, it is even more urgent to unpack the embeddedness of racial hierarchies within the practices of the WPS agenda. [Crises tend to reinforce the status quo or engender regression](#), and yet, it is imperative that we do not return to 'normal'. In our commitment to a progressive WPS agenda, we interrogate how global racial hierarchies operate through an in-depth focus on

National Action Plans (NAPs). [NAPs](#) are a means through which states articulate their priorities within and commitments to the WPS agenda. NAPs, we show, are more than just documents – they are political and policy artefacts that show relative power, state intent and are used as tools for action.

For us, NAPs also present a fascinating puzzle since we see a division wherein the focus of Global North NAPs is on the Global South, while Global South NAPs tend to be more inward looking. Examining NAPs then helps us to understand who the WPS agenda is about, and who it is for. It also highlights how WPS is, and can be, localised (or not).

NAPs, Race and What Matters

In targeting Global South countries, most Global North NAPs that we examine seek to localise the WPS agenda externally. In our analysis, we see that continued assumptions about [‘the Other’](#) are baked into the WPS as articulated by NAPs, which invariably confirm historical and continued racial hierarchies within international relations. Yet, much of what justifies North-South interactions are the calls for [localisation](#) of the WPS agenda. The [emancipatory, transformative potential of the WPS agenda](#) is limited by such a binary understanding of global engagements for achieving peace and security.

Amid the calls for WPS localisation, we explore the agendas of NAPs along with their limitations as they constitute and are constituted by a framework that continues to reproduce racial hierarchies across Global South and Global North partnerships. Our chapter identifies three sites in which racial hierarchies are reinforced by the NAPs of Global North countries: who gets funded; who is the subject of foreign policy; and what imageries define country priorities and perception of ‘the Other’.

At a time when official development assistance may be repurposed for domestic use due to economic contractions and other budgetary constraints at the expense of already vulnerable populations, who gets funded is an important question in the context of Global North support for the WPS agenda. The programmes of WPS are still generally underfunded. Yet, even among those states who have developed new NAPs since the 2015 [Global Study](#), which identified underfunding as a concern, funding remains skewed towards protection with emphasis on tackling sexual violence, than on any other aspect of WPS policy. This type of funding emphasises support to specific countries. For example, Afghanistan and South Sudan feature significantly as targets for WPS intervention across many countries’ commitments.

In this way, wealthier Global North countries can dominate or dictate the practice of WPS in poorer ones while reinforcing otherness through focus on specific countries as 'problematic'.



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But not all countries are specific in their NAPs about which countries they want to focus their attention on. Rather, it is the implicit framing of who the subject of foreign policy is that we infer focus on the Global South. Typically, foreign policy signals a country's general orientation to the world at large, even when accounting for differentiated engagement based on a host of factors including history, culture and interests.

NAPs constitute a part of foreign policy for the countries of the Global North. Yet, despite an overarching commitment to WPS as fundamental to a more general orientation of foreign policy, NAPs specifically orient interventions towards women in the Global South. To use one example, Canada is committed to the WPS agenda and shares this commitment with the UK. Yet [Canada's NAP](#), as foreign policy, does not focus on the plight of women in the UK but rather only certain types of women are deemed to be in need of WPS intervention and invariably these women reside in the contexts of the Global South.

We were puzzled, yet unsurprised, that there is no accounting for how the historical and contemporary conditions of colonialism and its attendant racism manifest themselves in the current structure of the international system. It is this condition

that renders the fragile 'Other' vulnerable enough to need the interventions being offered within Global North NAPs. Moreover, these conditions often tend to ignore the local agency of WPS advocates underscoring the foreign policy lens within which WPS interventions are being applied. There were however exceptions to this, for example [Ireland](#).



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Images & Imagery in gendered international politics

We draw our third insight from the idea that representations matter in global politics. Inanimate symbols in the form of photographs, paintings and as we've seen recently, statues, matter for the messages they send. The toppling of [the statue of slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol](#) and the [removal of the Theodore Roosevelt statue](#) in front of the American Museum of Natural History in the United States are just two instances of the fall of statues in the US, the UK and Europe amid protests calling for the removal of memorials that celebrate and honour white men in a whitewashed history.

The list of [statues removed](#) continues to grow. Black and decolonial scholarship helps us understand that the same systems of oppression that protestors are resisting by calling for the removal of these statues also operates in peace and security spaces. Despite histories of violent occupation, slavery and racism, states can too often co-opt WPS initiatives into [white saviour](#) narratives. A focus on saving black and brown women in the Global South serves as a way to distance Global North countries from both the violence within their own borders and that which they enact abroad.

In most cases, NAPs pass up the opportunity to engage how multiple oppressions and struggles intersect with gender, and thus fail to respond intersectionally to concerns of peace and security. Rather, to justify WPS intervention, the agenda as evidenced by NAPs further minoritizes women vis-a-vis the Global North. Yet, it is worth remembering that, globally, these women are not minorities. Minoritizing women of colour in global politics is an active practice linked to histories of violent oppression and one which WPS risks reproducing. The strategic mobilisation of WPS for foreign policy gains means that once again queer lives are ignored in the agenda, racial hierarchies are reproduced, and the transformative potential is lost.



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Our engagement with symbols in the NAPs takes a slightly different angle as we consider images as important artefacts of states' WPS practices. In our visual analysis we show how racialised communities within Global North states continue to be outside of WPS imaginations of safety. We draw on the work of Roland Bleiker in exploring how visual politics, and specifically racial dimensions of these visual politics, operate within WPS NAPs.

[Bleiker argues](#) that photographs are taken as an “authentic representation of the world”. He continues, “the illusion of authenticity also masks the political values

that such photographic representations embody. The assumption that photographs are neutral, value free and evidential, is reinforced because photography captures faces and events in memorable ways.” But photographs are not neutral, and the intersectional feminist analysis of the cover images used by NAPs exposes how these images reify racial hierarchies in WPS. The images used to represent WPS work are a [powerful form of visual communication](#) that also serve to shape public perceptions about the military and global relations between states.

In our chapter we considered nine cover photos where ‘Global South’ women of colour are featured. For example, the [UK 2018-2022 NAP](#) includes an image of women marching in Darfur against gender-based violence. Why focus the attention of the WPS NAP on these women rather than the women within the UK, perhaps those who are doing the work of implementing a gender perspective in domestic policies? While it is certainly a significant component of the WPS agenda to address gender-based violence, [this violence also occurs within the UK](#). As evidenced by the 22 NAPs reviewed, there is much work to be done to connect domestic and foreign policy through an intersectional feminist approach in responding to gendered violence.



Image credit: Bristol University Press

Title pages of 8 Global North NAPs. Top, L-R: UK NAP; Austrian NAP; Ireland NAP; Middle, L-R: Canada NAP; Switzerland NAP; Bottom, L-R: Australian NAP; New Zealand NAP; Iceland NAP

Conclusion

In the year that WPS turns twenty social and political organising for racial justice, including among [proponents of the WPS agenda](#), is forcing people around the world to confront the pervasiveness of racialised hierarchies domestically and internationally. We thus situate our own reflections at this critical juncture that asks us to take gender and race seriously, but also calls on us to interrogate how gendered and racialised hierarchies persist even through well-meaning initiatives.

Yet in some ways this anniversary moment is also an opportunity for a reckoning about the future of WPS. In the wake of a pandemic, ripples of a reckoning with the way anti-blackness impacts all institutions require those invested in WPS work and peacebuilding more generally to reflect on what it means to do explicitly anti-racist WPS work (see here the work of [Women of Color Advancing Peace and Security \(WCAPS\)](#) working to address the lack of representation and support for women of colour in what continues to be a predominantly white community of peace and security practitioners). Furthermore, it is a moment where WPS must confront what room there is for abolitionist aims within this agenda.

In 2012 the [Women's International League for Peace and Freedom \(WILPF\)](#) was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize for the work calling for universal disarmament however this vision remains largely absent from much WPS work. Rather than a vision informed by calls for more women in police forces, future visions of peace might be motivated by the [#8toAbolition](#) campaign. This campaign focuses on peace and security issues within Global North countries including the need to remove police from schools, the need to provide safe housing for everyone and calls to free people from

prison. We write this blog post shortly after Pride month, just days after an [NYC Queer Liberation March was brutally disbanded](#) by the NY Police Department. The police violence in this instance was further magnified given that the march was drawing attention the recent murder of [trans black women](#) and men including [Tony McDade](#) who was shot dead by Tallahassee police in May.

From our standpoint, while representation matters, agency in that representation is also important. In 2013 Patrice Khan-Cullers, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi came together with a mission to create [Black Lives Matter](#) "to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes. By combating and countering acts of violence, creating space for Black imagination and innovation, and centring Black joy, we are winning immediate improvements in our lives". We can certainly take the mission of the

founders of the #BlackLivesMatter movement to heart. It remains to be seen now whether this critical juncture will impact how North-South relations are structured and how the WPS agenda is deployed so that it is reflective and oriented really towards eradicating gendered inequalities taking account of intersecting struggles.

Global Racial Hierarchies and the Limits of Localization via National Action Plans.

New Directions in Women, Peace and Security, (pp 133 – 151).

About the author



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