



A Letter on Feminist Peace: Reflections on Working Methodology

To seek visions, to dream dreams, is essential, and it is also essential to try new ways of living, to make room for serious experimentation, to respect the effort even where it fails.¹

In September 2019, the Feminist International Law of Peace and Security project convened a workshop involving 19 legal academics and practitioners with the idea of drafting an alternative “Security Council” resolution to coincide with a number of anniversaries in 2020, including the *Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda* at 20, the *Beijing Declaration* at 25 and the half way point to the 2030 *Sustainable Development Goals*. The aim of the exercise was to reclaim the WPS agenda and to recast it as a transformative peace agenda, as originally envisaged by many women’s civil society groups at the time of its adoption in 2000. A year later, members of the team finalised the wording of a letter to the Member States of the General Assembly to be released on 21 September, International Peace Day, to coincide with the adoption by the Assembly of the Declaration on the Commemoration of the Seventh-Fifth Anniversary of the United Nations.²

This note is intended to provide a glimpse into the process that led to the release of a letter rather than a resolution and the intellectual struggles encountered along the way. We surface that journey to share with our readers the feminist labour that lies hidden from view, signified by a simple letter that stands as a material reminder of what went before. We felt this to be necessary if only to contest the dichotomised distinction made between process (or means) and ends and the oftentimes hierarchical privileging of the latter: both are inextricably inter-linked, co-dependent and co-productive.

The idea of an *alternative* resolution, a *shadow* report, has long been used by feminist activists as a political device for advocacy purposes. More recently, feminist law scholars have engaged in the re-writing of legal judgments as a new model of critical analysis. Feminist scholarship is, by definition, a critical enterprise; however, it is also a deeply political project that seeks to change the existing gendered social order by exposing the arbitrariness of exclusion based on sexual difference. Shared aspirations aside, the complexities inherent in the exercise of drafting an alternative resolution soon became apparent.

Was it even possible to pen a resolution in the knowledge that there is no singular feminist position, legacy or experience? Was it possible without reproducing the hierarchical order that we sought to destabilise, given it meant claiming the right to speak for, or on behalf of others? Such claims are an assertion of privilege (made even more troubling by the use of the

¹ Adrienne Rich, “Of woman born”, *History is a weapon*, 1977, <https://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/richofwomanborn.html>

² UN General Assembly, “Declaration for the Commemoration of the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the United Nations (Revised)”, June 18, 2020, <https://www.un.org/pga/74/2020/06/18/declaration-for-the-commemoration-of-the-seventy-fifth-anniversary-of-the-united-nations-revised/>

language of colonialism) that results in exclusions. Feminist critiques of the WPS agenda were ricocheting. To compound our difficulties the deeper we dug into the WPS resolutions the more we found ourselves being drawn into the confined normative space that had been created by states.³ There was seemingly no room for peace, let alone a feminist peace.

We needed an alternative entry point and it came in the form of an intervention by Dianne Otto who asked: why do we have a Security Council, and not Peace Council? While the decision to draft a Feminist Peace resolution provided a more liberating starting point since alternative constructions and possibilities could be embraced, it did not resolve some of the fundamental problems already identified and was to create its own set of cascading problems. Much like 'security', 'peace' too, has been wielded against many as a means of oppression and dispossession. In addition, we grappled with the sources and authorities of international law which we would rely upon as the backbone of the resolution. Feminist scholars have long struggled with the dilemma of choosing between "a language of neutrality, which provides credibility but disables you from saying those things you most need to say, and a feminist language, which allows you to say those things at the cost of being believed".⁴ What, we asked, are the costs, the benefits and the trade-off that we make in writing this resolution in the language of the law and, not least, in international law which was born of colonialism and blind to women?⁵

Whilst fully cognisant to its shortcomings, we chose to remain steadfast to the discipline of international law and to the doctrinal principles that provide it with traction and legitimacy.⁶ So we began with an excavation of the treaty and customary international law in search of the building blocks of feminist peace, however defined. We sifted through the WPS resolutions, the international bill of rights and relied heavily on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. We collated other international instruments that touched on women's lives as well as regional instruments and those that spoke to women's human rights. We extended our search to include supplementary material produced by states (even if *lex ferenda*); judgements and decisions of courts and tribunals and other bodies charged with interpreting the law; and to statements, declarations, manifestos issued by women's collectives and civil society movements that had been crafted to transform gender relations, to address law's silences and to centre peace.⁷

Against this backdrop we sought to enrich our conceptions of peace by reaching out to colleagues from other disciplines and professions each of whom generously provided valuable

³ On the boundaries and constraints presented by the institutions one finds themselves within, see: Carol Cohn, "Sex and death in the rational world of defense intellectuals" *Signs* 12, no. 4 (1987): 687-718.

⁴ Christina Whitman, "Law and sex: review of *Feminism Unmodified*" *Michigan Law Review* 86 (1988): 1389.

⁵ On the limits and possibilities of international law as a means to radical possibility see: Ratna Kapur, "The (im)possibility of queering international human rights law," in *Queering international law*, ed. Dianne Otto (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 131-47; Dianne Otto ed., *Queering international law* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

⁶ Statute of the International Court of Justice, Article 38, https://www.icj-cij.org/en/statute#CHAPTER_II

⁷ For example, see: Committee of Latin American and the Caribbean for the Defense of Women's Rights, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights from a Gender Perspective", <https://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/1349>. This declaration was proposed to the General Assembly in its 53rd session for consideration and, like the Maputo Protocol, the draft includes a substantive right to peace and a violence free life in both public and private life.

insights that found their way into the text of the draft resolution. Feminist scholarship prompted us to re-engage with alternative histories and re-evaluate feminist politics in an anthropocentric age; our collective work, discomfort, and reflections prompted us to confront our own blind spots and reassess our ontological and related epistemological positionings. Feminist writings on utopia invited us to play with alternatives and possibilities. The turn to science fiction and the works of feminist authors such as Ursula Le Guin led us to ask whether the resolution should be drafted on a visionary fiction basis. Should it address a planet where there was no Westphalian system of statehood? What if it were written in a manner which de-centralised anthropocentrism or in a planet such as Karahide where beings are ambisexual and ambisexed? We spoke to feminists outside the academy to learn how their conceptions of peace shape their work and to feminist activists, old and young, including many who were experiencing armed conflict first-hand.

Our collaborative exchanges took place against the global pandemic and global anti-racist protests which shaped our reflections around feminist peace. Each brought to the fore brutal structural inequalities that oppress through racism, colonialism, patriarchy and capitalism. The language of war and militarism adopted by political elites in their responses to the virus accentuated our discomfort and anxieties with the role of the state.⁸ These concerns were magnified and made palpable by the use of militarised force against recent BLM protesters. Our text grew. And as it expanded it was subject to countless collaborative revisions, amendments, restructuring, rethinking, rewriting. But the longer the text became, the more it seemed drained of its urgency for transformative peace and of a vision that could belong to all.

The decision of States to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the UN with the adoption on Peace Day of a declaration listing twelve pledges opened up the possibility of an alternative entry point: to pen a letter, setting out twelve counter-demands, albeit not necessarily in the same language as States. As with a resolution, a letter is also a device through which to set out an alternative view but, in taking a different format, the letter invites and beckons a response, an exchange, a dialogue between sender and addressee. Letter writing is part of a long legacy of feminist activism that has been used to unsettle and to bridge the divide between the public and private sphere. Thus, the letter does not sit in a historical void. Moreover, lest our intention be misconceived, the letter sits in the context of a broader programme of activities and outputs each of which seeks to explore the multiple facets of feminist peace and, in that process, to inspire, celebrate, challenge, stimulate and sometimes even provoke.

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⁸ See: Cynthia Enloe, "'Waging war' against a virus is not what we need to be doing", *WILPF International* March 23, 2020, <https://www.wilpf.org/covid-19-waging-war-against-a-virus-is-not-what-we-need-to-be-doing/>; and Cynthia Enloe, "Turning swords into ventilators? Or is it ventilators into swords?", *WILPF International*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.wilpf.org/covid-19-turning-swords-into-ventilators-or-is-it-ventilators-into-swords/>