

Teaching Feminist Peace through Encounters with Female Violence

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How do we teach peace through a feminist lens? This chapter reflects on this question through a conversation between Gina Heathcote, Elisabeth (Lisa) Koduthore and Sheri Labenski. Each of us holds different positions in relation to teaching feminist praxis – early career scholar, established scholar and student – and as an intergenerational dialogue we discussed different flows of knowledge and the capacity to recognize the ways we learn from one another. Each of us has engaged with the topic of female violence in the classroom, as well as in our research. While the student–teacher relationship is often thought of as hierarchical, we employ feminist methods to break down this binary. In our discussion, the topic of female violence becomes a way for us to unsettle assumed knowledge, within ourselves and in scholarship, and to develop each of our understandings of feminist peace.

Due to our engagement in various classroom conversations, our understanding of feminist peace necessitates that both the student and teacher confront the biases held within feminist legal scholarship. We argue that within a dialogue on peace and female violence, students are afforded the opportunity to explore the stereotypical assumptions that position women as assumed peacemakers, while challenging biases when engaging with women who commit harm. Rather than questioning acts of violence themselves, our dialogue thinks through the constructions of female violence found both in society, law and legal scholarship, and how this relates to teaching feminist peace. We consider how acts of violence undertaken by women must be acknowledged to exist, rather than dismissed or ignored, as often happens in scholarship focused on women as victims during armed conflict. Thus, using female violence as a site of inquiry provides the linchpin to consider the linkages between peace, education, feminist methodologies and international law. We conclude our conversation by pondering the way peace is

traditionally conceptualized, and we are left wondering if centring discussions on peace as 'everyday peace' offers a useful change of perspective.

As part of the conversation, we use Lisa's artistic interpretation and analysis of British citizen Shamima Begum to discuss teaching feminist peace. Lisa's project was submitted as part of her coursework for the module Gender, Sexuality and Law, at SOAS University of London, convened by Gina. The module encourages students to use a range of methods to engage with academic material and adopts varied feminist teaching praxis. Our conversation discusses art, as a medium for speaking to the unspeakable, in both teaching and research. We argue that feminist peace can only be achieved by addressing challenging topics.

(SL: Sheri Labenski; GH: Gina Heathcote; EK: Elisabeth Koduthore)

- SL: Thank you so much Gina and Lisa for agreeing to join me for this conversation. It is so wonderful to have the opportunity to talk to you both about feminist peace, specifically the link between feminist peace, education and female violence. As you know, Gina, my PhD was on female perpetrators, but lately I have been focusing on the relationship between gender, peace and education. When the opportunity to contribute to this book came up, I called you, Gina, and on this call it was you who said something to the effect of: 'Why don't we discuss how we can teach feminist peace through female violence?' Which I thought was perfect, look, the power of conversations is already apparent! Gina, you then reminded me of the SOAS module I taught during my PhD, which utilized scholarship on female perpetrators to prompt really challenging conversations on gender, stereotypes, international law, conflict and also peace.
- GH: Thanks, Sheri. I am honoured to have this opportunity to talk about some of my teaching, including that I have done with you in the past, in particular, the Gender, Armed Conflict and International Law module, which both of us have taught. Actually, I undertook this little experiment where I set up a second module titled Gender, Peace and International Law (as opposed to armed conflict) and that second course is not as popular as the armed conflict module, which I think is really interesting. Why is armed conflict so desirable as a field of study, but peace is overlooked or less desirable? In fact, I find the things that most students want to study – conflict-related sexual violence, women's participation, transitional justice – are all topics on the peace course. Interrogating what we are talking about when we talk about peace is a really important feminist project and taps into my ideas about methodologies.

Both of those courses have always taught me so much about how I think about feminist peace, partly because students can use art projects, or they can use alternative sources to expand feminist methodologies on peace. We also undertake additional activities, including craft activism,¹ and coming together we make quilts. I think the year you studied the peace module, Lisa, we had lots of multimedia and all kinds of alternative conversations. I learned so much about diverse experiences of gender and feminist methods from my students. I feel like I cannot have this conversation without including my students and former students in the room (which is both of you). Feminist peace education is as much about breaking down a hierarchy of actually who gets to speak and how we speak. That is why I suggested that we invite Lisa into this space.

EK: Thank you, yes, I did the MA in Gender Studies and Law at SOAS from 2019 to 2020. Initially, I had enrolled on the gender studies programme, but then switched to the gender studies and law programme after taking a module with Gina about gender, peace and international law. During my time on that course, I was really interested in how we can understand and explain violence as not only physical, visible harm. I was struck by the concept of structural violence and the violence within law.

SL: Considering all of our different relationships to the module and feminist peace praxis, I want to first discuss the methodology you, Gina, employ when teaching female violence and feminist peace, simultaneously.

When I consider my feminist methodology for teaching feminist peace, I have always assumed that there can't necessarily be areas that are 'off limits' as topics of conversation. I have tried to push against any kind of thought that says, 'Oh we can't talk about female violence because we are talking about peace.' For me, that just adds to an unhelpful and ultimately harmful binary between peace and violence, where conversations on peace only involve the things that women do that we 'like', such as women as peacemakers and women as rebuilders of society. While these are important roles women inhabit, women also inhabit other roles, roles that are maybe less understood and less researched. My methodology for teaching peace is to acknowledge the range of roles women themselves engage in, and through gendered analysis of these different roles we are able to move closer to feminist peace. How have you approached this issue, Gina?

GH: I think for me, it also is important to recognize and see histories of resistance, particularly against colonial violence, which often had strong military leaders that were female.² Those histories are never told in the kinds of stories dominating the field of gender and conflict. Resistance and decolonization processes have not been significant elements of the study of gender and peace.³ The way peace and violence are held in that moment opens up those discussions as well, and that disrupts our own expectations about how gender operates. I think female violence and representations of female violence can be a good vehicle, I guess, in a way to speak about what is not spoken there.

SL: Gina, your module encourages students to use alternative methods for completing the final project, but do you involve alternative methods in your teaching as well?

GH: Yes, the course includes a peace walk. One year, we also undertook some craft activism: we did some knitting. It was really an open space for different people to join, not necessarily only those on the course. We did some crocheting. Students are encouraged to join the vigil which Women in Black run every Wednesday, in London at the Edith Cavell statue,⁴ and we talk a lot about protests as a means of engaging the law. In some years, part of the assignment has been to engage with feminist protest through participation and then to write about it. Thinking about protest as a feminist methodology has always been part of the peace course, and thinking about gendered peace and feminist peace.

For the peace walk, we start at the Edith Cavell statue. Cavell was a nurse in the World War I, who was shot in Occupied Belgium. We go down to the women of World War II monument, and to the Iraq and Afghanistan monument near the Ministry of Defence, all in London. It's really fascinating – there is something about the process of walking and talking; we all get different memories of that experience as well. We live-Zoomed this year because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was an interesting adaption because for me it's also about thinking about learners. In the peace walk, I learn more about my students: we talk in a slightly different way. It's not set up as a classroom, obviously, we walk together, we encounter things on the walk.

There are other things I practise in the classroom that are probably more subtle about thinking, who's speaking and how I engage different people, and ensure different types of

knowledge are valued. That's been really hard during teaching online due to COVID-19. But I think we've been quite successful in some ways of creating a collaborative learning space. It's not just about the alternative methods outside the classroom, it's about thinking about the classroom space itself. I don't see how you can teach about feminist peace without paying attention to the dynamics of the classroom and who supposedly has got knowledge. I mean, how on Earth could I be the expert in the room? So many of my students arrive with diverse experiences and so expertise on gender and conflict/peace are already in the room. For me, the process of creating feminist peace or an education space is as much about what kinds of knowledge we encounter.

EK: I really appreciated that about your courses. You were really good at facilitating that kind of collective learning, where everybody has experiences, knowledge and perspectives to bring to the table. I really benefited from that learning space you created.

GH: Thanks Lisa: I do try to always ground the class with recognizing that all of us have some relationship with armed conflict. There can be a denial of this in Global North university spaces. This can result in a sense of, we are here looking at and into the conflict space and not acknowledging all of us have some relationship to conflict. Peace is always about stories of war as well. I think that hopefully the classroom becomes more accessible once you identify that and, I hope, it avoids fetishizing the experiences of those that are coming from conflict spaces as the people that have to bring the anecdotes for the rest of us to analyze. It's such an important thing that we need to think about when we are doing any kind of feminist peace education.

SL: Absolutely, and this leads us on perfectly to a discussion of your work, Lisa. When Gina and I had our initial phone conversation, your name immediately came up because of your amazing artwork and essay.⁵ Could you tell us a bit about the artwork, and what inspired you to create it?

EK: During the second year of my MA, I wrote several essays about Shamima Begum. I was interested in the way that she was constructed as a violent perpetrator and 'Other' by the State, reinforced through the removal of her British citizenship. Her hypervisibility in the media and public discourse – as a 'violent' woman and an 'ungrateful migrant', both of which are roles deemed unacceptable by the State because of the lack of gender conformity and submission to the State's power – allowed the State to hide its own structural violence, which it enacts on

gendered and racialized bodies through the purportedly fair justice system. The first piece I made was a small clay sculpture of a woman (see Figure 13.1).

GH: There were two versions of it weren't there? There was an early version that was just the one. It's like a Russian doll. Then the second one had three formations (see Figure 13.2), layering, thinking about the intersections of gender – your work was a standout contribution to the module.

EK: The first one was a single clay sculpture which I then expanded while writing my dissertation, where I painted three Russian dolls to think about the different aspects I was writing about. The process for both allowed me to reflect on other forms of knowledge production and thinking outside of, or beyond, the sheet of paper and writing things down.

I'd read an article by Tiffany Page, about vulnerable research and her emotions as she was writing about the Arab Spring in Tunisia.⁶ For me, it was physically making something

Figure 13.1: Small clay sculpture of woman



Source: Sculpture and image by Elisabeth Koduthore

Figure 13.2: Russian dolls painted by Elisabeth Koduthore

Source: Image by Elisabeth Koduthore

to represent some of my research in a different form and creating a conversation from that piece, but also trying to reflect and engage in my role as the researcher and as the writer. For instance, the way that I was picking pieces of Shamima's story and weaving an argument that made sense to me paralleled the violence or roughness that I needed to work with the clay. There was a violence, I think, to it, as I'm taking her life as a sort of case study for the argument that I want to make. I'm not really helping or undoing any violence, but taking somebody's story and writing about it for my purposes. At the same time, clay is a fragile material and, as I'm writing my essay, I am also assembling little pieces in a story that's quite fragile. Those were some of my reflections while I was doing it, while I was also thinking about how I could represent some of my ideas of structural violence. I carved these lines into the sculpture to think of structural violence and how that's experienced by different bodies in invisible ways.

SL: Do you have a background in art?

EK: Not any sort of formal background. I've always had a creative streak and channelled that into pottery as a way to meditate and let my mind wander a little bit.

SL: Thinking about our earlier discussion on teaching methodology, I am interested how your engagement in the module inspired you to work through and analyse the course material in this

way. What prompted you to create an artwork over ‘just an essay’? I use quotes here, because I am acknowledging that the written word is also a part of artistic expression.

EK: I think it was a lot of what we had been talking about in Gina’s courses – unpacking methodology and how we can approach thinking and knowledge production a little bit differently, as well as from different angles and perspectives.

SL: It is as if art allows people to communicate in a way they might not have been able to through other mediums – in this instance, creating an artwork brought something more to your final project than an essay alone would have done. Yet art also, as Gina mentioned, allows the creator to speak to the unspeakable. It also gives the audience a different way of experiencing your thoughts and ideas. Is there something more vulnerable about creating a piece of art versus writing an essay, for instance?

GH: I think it is important that Lisa, you started by talking about the process of making and the visceral experience of that, what that gave access to and connected it to. Tiffany Page’s piece on vulnerable writing as method contributes to thinking about how we both produce ourselves in writing and research through vulnerabilities that come to the surface, but also, how we write about vulnerable subjects and the potential violence that’s enacted on those subjects. I do think there’s something about the visceral experience of violence that can be reproduced or explored through the art form that maybe is quite difficult to communicate sometimes with words.

EK: Absolutely: it was through creating the sculpture that I reflected more on my role as the researcher/writer and the potential violence of my project towards a vulnerable subject. It also allowed me to reflect more consciously on why I felt drawn to Shamima and how writing about her helped me make sense of my legal and social place as a Brown woman in the UK.

SL: I would like to shift things slightly to talk about some of the gendered stereotypes we often find when discussing peace. The article that I assign when teaching on female violence and peace, and I know you do as well, Gina, is the article by Hilary Charlesworth, ‘Are women peaceful? Reflections on the role of women in peace-building’.⁷ When the students come to class that week, I begin our discussion with a story about my own experience, of when I first was introduced to the topic of gendered peace stereotypes. I was doing my

masters in Egypt and my professor showed us a picture of a woman crying in a courtroom. She said something like, 'Tell me what's happening in this picture.' People began speculating things like, she is a victim and the perpetrator was just sentenced, or she's a victim who just testified, or she's a mother of a victim, and so on. Then the professor said, and I am paraphrasing, 'No, this is a picture of a woman crying for the man who was just found guilty of war crimes.' There was such a silence in the room. I think the silence was people trying to process the idea that, one, a woman would/could support violence (or the person who committed violence) and, two, questioning why didn't I think of that as a possibility? Why didn't I consider that a woman could support violence in conflict? The professor was using an image to underscore the need to confront the biases that each of us have around who does what in armed conflict.

GH: I think there are a series of questions that unfold from that question from Charlesworth's article 'Are women peaceful?'. However, it is not about answering the question, but rather identifying internalized bias or assumptions that we make and associate with women and with peace. If we have assumptions about women as peaceful, what's the other side of those binaries: masculinity and war? What gets unspoken and unmentioned? If we are thinking about peace processes, then we are thinking about women being included, because they are supposedly bringing peace, but nobody ever expects a military leader to come to the peace process demanding peace, they don't have to have a specifically peaceful agenda, right? They have any number of political or legal agendas, but women are coming to bring peace. The question 'Are women peaceful?' should get us to ask, well, where are women violent and when are women supporting violence? Is that the same? What assumptions do we have about that? When is women's violence rendered invisible and when is it hypervisible? How is it justified and excused? Let's not forget that ideas on just war centre using violence to bring peace, so we need to ask can violent women deliver peace?

SL: Lisa, I am curious what your experience was, as a student, either with the Charlesworth piece or in general with interrogating the connection between female violence and feminist peace?

EK: The Charlesworth piece helped me unpack and articulate some of my own biases about women, violence and peace, and to also reflect on the racialized aspects of this. For instance, if we

are thinking of women said to be aligned with ISIL or alleged to be perpetrators, there is a significant difference in how they are presented, based on their race. I explored this a bit more in my dissertation, where I compared the media presentation of Samantha Lewthwaite⁸ to Shamima Begum.

GH: I think it depends probably where you are. If you are in a peace process, then there's a reductive question from that – oh, what you mean is that we should bring in the violent women? No. Rather, why are we working via a dichotomy? What holds them together as a binary? For feminists, this is also a question about methodologies. What assumptions have you already made about feminist peace before you walk into the room? For me, a feminist methodology is about continually questioning our concepts and asking who is left out. How are we listening? This is linked to what Lisa was saying about vulnerability. If you ask those questions, of feminist peace, I think it is inevitable that you are going to have to think about female violence, because it's about asking about one's own assumptions.

SL: Yes, it is a sort of excavation of personal biases as well as what is allowed to be seen as serious academic scholarship, and for me, the example of female violence puts both of these into focus. When I have presented on female perpetrators, there is often a bit of push back. Female perpetrators are often seen as anecdotal, and the common counterarguments are to say this is not prevalent enough to be of relevance to international criminal law (my area of research). I wonder if the push back is coming, in certain cases, because looking at female violence would mean we would have to question the entire system of international and domestic law, as well as the way societies are structured, and that is too much for some. Looking at female violence necessitates looking at biases in law, society and scholarship.

EK: I do think a lot of the time, in these conversations, female violence is seen, as you were saying, as anecdotal or as sensational.

GH: I think your work, Lisa, also spoke to the racialized dimensions of this issue, acknowledging that you cannot talk about this just through the lens of gender as there is a need to examine who gets produced as a potentially violent actor in either peacetime or war. Drawing back to Shamima Begum, who is always represented as a racialized British citizen, she is always constructed as not British or shouldn't be British or shouldn't be allowed home. For me, it's a question about feminist methodologies – always – and to ask what assumptions lead us, as a society, not to ask questions about the discursive and the

structural violences that are being produced in this moment and it's what I always liked about Lisa's project too. I think that lots of feminist spaces probably don't want to do that work because it is incredibly difficult.

- SL: Right. It forces very uncomfortable conversations and once you address personal biases and your positionality and begin to really analyze female violence, it illuminates so many power dynamics and hierarchies that you cannot unsee. Like you said, Gina, when we stop gender condemnation that has been so evident in the reporting of Shamima Begum, and we start to look at conceptions of Britishness and belonging, things become much more complicated. It seems easier to make Shamima the exception and the object where we place our fears, rather than recognize that her situation is indicative of deep structural issues. Do either of you have any thoughts on this idea of female violence being seen as an exception?⁹
- EK: I think part of it is that we think of violence as exceptional, whereas I noticed a shift in my thinking, especially with structural violence theory, to thinking of violence as something that is really everyday and the fundamental way in which societies work.¹⁰ There are so many sanctioned forms of daily violence that we live alongside – so it isn't surprising that women are violent. To me, there's almost something quite self-evident about it; because we live in a violent world, everybody has the potential for violence – we're all perpetrators and victims in different scenarios, times and spaces.
- GH: If we accept women as human, then we have to accept the full spectrum of human experiences that are inside all of us. This is an undoing of the gender binary. I also think about the reverse: as there is a huge attraction in the classroom for students to study male victims. Every year, I have people that come and say, 'I really want to look at male victims, particularly of conflict-related sexual violence because there's no work on it.' However, there is quite a lot of work on it, more than you would expect.¹¹ These strange kinds of gender assumptions that infiltrate the field too.
- EK: I wonder whether part of the interest in violence is that it is something that is so visual a lot of the time and that we are surrounded by images of violence, so it is easy to visualize or grasp. Perhaps this is where art could be used to create more visual presentations of peace so that we become more articulate in describing and discussing peace.
- GH: That is such an important point, because so much of the discourse around gendered violence is how invisible and

everyday gendered violence is, going back to the point you made before. When I speak about gendered violence, I am interested in how discourses on gender construct our understandings of when violence is justified, so a deeper, structural account of violence than a specific study of, say, gender-based violence, as important as that is. Art projects help bring to the fore those kinds of connections between direct violence and structural violence and symbolic violence: the violence of every day. While our cultures are saturated with images of violence, gendered violence is much harder to visualize and capture, because it does not always happen in the public domain, because it is often connected to other forms of inequalities and because it is structural and there is a deep symbolic mode of that as well.

SL: This is a perfect segue to bring our conversation to a close by returning to the concept of feminist peace. A discussion that my colleagues and I have had many times over is that, when we attempt to define peace or feminist peace, we focus on conflict and violence. We know what peace is not, but don't agree on what peace is. Maybe it is because it can mean something different to everyone. Having a good night's sleep can be seen to be someone's definition of peace.

GH: We can be involved in feminist spaces talking about gender and conflict or gender and peace, and speaking about everyday violence, but we don't talk about everyday peace.¹² I haven't seen much that says, well, how do you do that in reverse? Or how do you undo everyday violence and create everyday peace?

SL: Absolutely. Peace beyond peace agreements, but peace in each of our everyday lives. This doesn't preclude global discussions on peace, of course, as we know the local and international are deeply connected. Do you think the idea of everyday peace may offer an alternative way into conversations on a feminist peace?

GH: That's why you have to have conversation, because it was this space that created that thought. That's what conversation does, too.

SL: Thank you so much, Gina and Lisa, for your insights and your time. It was an absolute privilege to hear both of your perspectives.

Notes

¹ Pentney, B.A. (2008) 'Feminism, activism, and knitting: are the fibre arts a viable mode for feminist political action?', *Thirdspace: A Journal of Feminist Theory and Action*, 8(1),

- Available from: <https://journals.sfu.ca/thirdspace/index.php/%20journal/article/view/pentney/210>
- ² See Waller, M. and Rycenga, J. (eds) (2001) *Frontline Feminisms: Women, War and Resistance*, London: Routledge.
 - ³ See Whaley Eager, P. (2008) *From Freedom Fighters to Terrorists: Women and Political Violence*, London: Routledge, Chapter 4.
 - ⁴ Edith Cavell Memorial, Available from: <https://edithcavell.org.uk/>
 - ⁵ Lisa's artwork and essay 'Belonging while Brown: Shamima Begum and the precarity of citizenship' won the prize for Best Paper at the Leicester Law School Postgraduate Conference 2020.
 - ⁶ Page, T. (2017) 'Vulnerable writing as a feminist methodological practice', *Feminist Review*, 115(1): 13–29.
 - ⁷ Charlesworth, H. (2008) 'Are women peaceful? Reflections on the role of women in peace-building', *Feminist Legal Studies*, 16(3): 347–61.
 - ⁸ Auer, M., Sutcliffe, J. and Lee, M. (2019) 'Framing the "white widow": using intersectionality to uncover complex representations of female terrorism in news media', *Media, War and Conflict*, 12(3): 281–98; Szpunar, P.M. (2021) 'The preemptive voice of enemy images: the before-and-after motif in news coverage of women homegrown terrorists', *Journalism*, 22(12): 3066–82, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919894125>.
 - ⁹ Sjöberg, L. and Gentry, C.E. (2007) *Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics*, London: Zed Books.
 - ¹⁰ See Kidd, A. (2016) 'Networks of violence in the production of young women's trajectories and subjectivities', *Feminist Review*, 112(1): 46; Scheper-Hughes, N. and Bourgois, P. (2004) 'Introduction: making sense of violence', in Scheper-Hughes, N. and Bourgois, P. (eds) *Violence in War and Peace: An Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp 19–20.
 - ¹¹ See Lewis, C. (2014) 'Systemic silencing: addressing sexual violence against men and boys in armed conflict and its aftermath', in Heathcote, G. and Otto, D. (eds) *Rethinking Peacekeeping, Gender Equality and Collective Security*, London: Palgrave, pp 203–23.
 - ¹² See Otto, D. (2020) 'Rethinking "peace" in international law and politics from a queer feminist perspective', *Feminist Review*, 126(1): 19–38.

Further reading

- Bertotti, S., Heathcote, G., Jones, E. and Labenski, S.A. (2021) *The Law of War and Peace: A Gender Analysis Vol 1*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Dolan, C. (2018) 'Victims who are men', in Aoláin, F.N., Cahn, N., Haynes, D.F. and Valji, N. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Conflict*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Madhok, S. (2018) 'Coloniality, political subjectivation and the gendered politics of protest in a "state of exception"', *Feminist Review*, 119(1): 56–71.
- Parashar, S. (2014) *Women and Militant Wars: The Politics of Injury*, London: Routledge.
- Park, H. (2017) 'Racialized women, the law and the violence of white settler colonialism', *Feminist Legal Studies*, 25: 267–90.