Towards a Feminist Peace?

Oana Nițu

MSc. Political Science
Corresponding author. Email: oana.nitu@student.uva.nl

Abstract

This theoretical essay reviews the different strands of literature on positive peace, problematising its lack of engagement with feminist theory, despite discussing ideals such as inclusion and non-domination, which are very close to the feminist ethos. I show how different conceptualisations of positive peace – continuous, local, and relational – serve as a starting ground for envisioning feminist peace (or feminist *peaces*). The continuity of peace is synonymous with the resistance of feminist activists and scholars, as there is no end point to either peace or activism. Local peace permits the affectual interpretation of women's daily experiences, allowing for the valorisation of some of our strongest feelings. Relational peace introduces a space of non-domination and inclusion, which feminists have long strived for – a communion. My aim in this article is to show how we can normatively and empirically devise a version of positive peace whose focus is to better women's lives, and to question that idea that peace is only necessary after war.

Keywords

Positive peace, Affect, Communion, Non-domination, Utopia

Introduction

There is a growing scholarly consensus that peacebuilding should be defined in positive terms, moving away from the idea that the absence of war alone amounts to peace (De Coning, 2016; Paffenholz, 2021; Van Iterson Scholten, 2024; Soderstrom et al., 2020). *Building peace* implies that peace constitutes "a phenomenon in and of its own" and, hence building the absence of peace is "a priori absurd" (Van Iterson Scholten, 2024, p. 2). Departing from liberal, top-down, security-centric notions of peace, the positive peace literature on the one hand posits the necessity of a "local turn" to peacemaking by emphasising the importance of including local voices in the peace process (Autesserre, 2017; Van Iterson Scholten, 2024). Positive peace is thus given "local" meanings, which are context-dependent based on what peace signifies to people's "everyday lives" (Van Iterson Scholten, 2024, p. 5). On the other hand, as noted by Van Iterson Scholten (2024), some scholars critique the dominant ontology surrounding peace itself, by suggesting that peace is more than "a state of affairs" (p. 5), rather it is a continuous process, an emerging phenomenon, and a relationship between complex webs of actors.

Paradoxically, while discussing about peaceful "relationships [...] characterised by non-domination", "non-domination" as a "republican ideal", and notions of "inclusive social relationships", the literature on positive peace is largely gender blind (Van Iterson Scholten, 2024, p. 8; Paffenholz, 2021, p. 370; Soderstrom, 2020, p. 3). Despite huge potential, positive peace scholars often fail to recognise that peace has different implications for men and women beyond stressing the severity of gender-based violence during wartime and the

contested involvement of women in peace negotiations (Anderson and Golan, 2023; Bell, 2017; Christien and Mukhtarova, 2020; Krause et al., 2018; Thomas, 2024; True and Morales, 2018).

In this essay, I offer a literature review of the scholarly work on positive peace. I then suggest several ways in which the conceptualisation of positive peace and its associated elements – continuous, local, relational – are helpful for a critical understanding of peace, which is imperative to dismantle gender hierarchies, and which goes beyond the war–peace dichotomy. My aim in this article is to show how we can normatively and empirically devise a version of positive peace whose focus is to better women's lives, and to question the idea that peace is only necessary after war. Naturally, while my main focus revolves around women, I acknowledge that women's oppression is not only gendered but also classed and racialised. For this reason, my paper also explores these dynamics, albeit in less detail.

Three Kinds of Peace

Continuous Peace

Paffenholz (2021) suggests that peace must be seen as "perpetual", thus consisting of "continuous negotiations and re-negotiations" (p. 368). She indicates that there is "no end point" (p. 369) to peace, arguing that peace agreements are not "make or break" (p. 369) moments. Rather, peace involves malleable webs of actors in continuous movement, for whom peace has different meanings over time. In this sense, Paffenholz (2021) departs from the idea that peace needs to be achieved, but rather it must be *sustained*. Peace, therefore, cannot be situated within the success–failure binary; the absence of a "fixed destination" renders peace "utopian" and "subjective" (p. 378). Peace is "unending" and, as a result, we can only "strive towards peace" (p. 378).

Paffenholz's (2021) work has great potential as a starting point for envisioning a notion of feminist peace(s). First, recognising that peace eludes finality implies that it is a continuously evolving process which necessitates constant (re)imagining (Chao and Gusia, 2022). (Re)imagining peace provides leverage to feminist theorists and activists for whom the struggle is omnipresent, requiring continuous resistance: "oppression and patriarchy are constantly there, never-ending, and changing their form continuously" (Chao and Gusia, 2022). Striving towards peace in the way described by Paffenholz (2021) thus allows for a terrain of contestation in which *unfinished* feminist activism – "continuously questioning and contesting, continuously reacting, continuously organising" (Chao and Gusia, 2022) – is given the possibility to thrive. Thus, if we conceptualise peace as lacking finality, we are ontologically required to look at peace as a continuum in need of permanent transformation. This in turn creates gates for feminist resistance to re-assess, re-position, and re-imagine peace in relation to the ever-changing faces of oppression.

Continuous peace also has intriguing implications for societies "where war seems *unthinkable*" (Van Iterson Scholten, 2024, p. 7, emphasis mine), as peace needs to be maintained everywhere, regardless of the level of formal conflict. Based on Hawkesworth's (2020) analysis of the "*feminicidal* state" (p. 314, emphasis in original) – a concept denoting (un)purposeful state complicity in conserving "modes of male power by maximising women's vulnerability" (p. 314) – I posit that *women do not enjoy peace anywhere in the world*, not even in the

supposed tranquil waters of the Global North. States are architects of difference legitimating gender inequality, and as a consequence, "finding [...] a peace that speaks to us [women]" (Chao and Gusia, 2022, p. 56) is a continuous effort of resistance. Striving towards feminist peace cannot be reduced to the *a priori* absence of sexual and domestic violence emerging through the re-negotiation of gender roles during (armed) conflict, which is the focus of mainstream feminist foreign policy (Gerard and Pickering, 2013; Krause, 2015). For instance, even Denmark, rated the most gender-equal country in the world according to the most recent data in the UN Gender Inequality Index (2022), has a 15% pay gap between men and women and a highly gender-differentiated labour market between 'feminine' (the public sector and care work) and 'masculine' (the private sector and STEM) professions (Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). The continuity of peace thus allows us to depart from the colonial North-South binary, which assumes that states in the Global South lack the knowledge and expertise of states in the Global North, by emphasising that all governments must treat peace "as a positive project" (Autesserre, 2017; Van Iterson Scholten, 2024, p. 7). It is also worth pointing out that Western governments have historically legitimised their *civilising missions* in the Global South using a patriarchal logic according to which *weak brown* women must be protected from *harmful brown* men by the *protective white* colonists (Mani, 1987). This suggests that, instead of treating peace "as a positive project", peace was regarded as an export from the Global North to Global South (Autesserre 2017). Therefore, if we envision peace as continuous, we can understand how all states are, in practice, architects of difference, hindering feminist peace(s). We can thus depart from neocolonial assumptions regarding peace.

Lastly, striving towards peace as a utopian, subjective future implies that peace is an ideal and not an achievable reality, which prevents us from returning to a pre-conflict "normalcy" predicated on other's domination (Paffenholz, 2021). I argue that this utopian notion of peace presupposes that only "approximations" (p, 378) of peace exist, and as such there can be no return to peace because peace is a utopia. The impossibility of returning to peace in turn helps us avoid the conflation of peace with "normalcy" (Stravrevska et al., 2022). In this sense, pre-conflict normalcy is not in any way peaceful, as it is predicated upon somebody else's disempowerment and disenfranchisement", namely feminised and racialised subjects. Romantising the past as a peaceful state of affairs impedes us from acknowledging injustices that were constitutive of the pre-conflict order. This potentially explains why women who participated in armed conflicts as combatants and commanders in equal positions to men are often stigmatised upon their return from battle and adhere back to traditional gender roles (Alison, 2004). In this sense, normalcy cannot be peaceful as long as it is based on relations of domination, which are antithetical to positive peace (Soderstrom et al., 2020). I discuss the concept of domination in more detail in one of the following sections, as I believe that engaging with Soderstrom et al.'s (2020) ideas about relational peace is crucial to show how women's domination prevails everywhere in the world. Nonetheless, we can only devise feminist peace(s) by acknowledging that the idea "normalcy" is imbued in oppressive social relationships and, therefore, should be scrutinised.

Local Peace

The "local turn" to peacebuilding emerged in an effort to create bottom-up, "locally legitimate" (Van Iterson Scholten, 2024, p. 5) notions of peace which acknowledge that different meanings of peace exist for different communities and that these meanings can change over time. Some researchers studying local peace make the

explicit aim of their research to include marginalised voices whose notions of peace are unheard, such as women, creating indicators commonly agreed upon by the community in order to study and monitor peace.

Acknowledging the plurality and dynamism of local peace(s) is also an ontological shift useful for building an inclusive feminist notion of peace, which goes beyond classifying bodies as numbers and statistics. Importantly, peace is sensed "affectively and physically" in a "coming apart of the body [which] takes place" before and after conflict and cannot be captured using rigid indicators (Stavrevska et al., 2022, p. 46). Even when the war has formally ended, the result of affective and physical deterioration suffered during war necessitates a reconstitution of the body "in new ways" and with "often missing pieces" (Stavrevska et al., 2022, p. 45). The visceral description of a woman's vision of peace "as the moment when her toenails started to grow back" suggests that peace should be treated as plural to encapsulate different and maybe even conflicting interpretations of peace that emerge from our non-rational (emotional) knowledge (Stavrevska et al., 2022, p. 45). These interpretations can become conflictual as women are thought from a very young age that they should prioritise rationality at the detriment of emotions, which have been rendered "a sign of female inferiority" (Lorde, 2020, 53). Nonetheless, our affects constitute a crucial source of knowledge for understanding ourselves and our bodily sensations.

Looking at peace as affect allows us to destigmatise the use of the erotic, which Audre Lorde (2020) defines as a "resource vilified, abused, and devaluated within western society [...] misnamed by men and used against women" (p. 108). The diversity of local meanings of peace encourages women and marginalised groups to embrace "the chaos of our strongest feelings" (p. 109), demystifying affective sources of knowledge. As a consequence, the turn to local peace is useful to escape the assumption of the rational, calculated (read: neoliberal) subject in the liberal peace tradition, which is necessarily masculine (Marhia, 2013). By this, I do not mean to suggest that women cannot be rational and that men cannot be emotional. However, the so-called universal category of the human in security studies enshrines tacit masculinisation by assigning the human features traditionally associated with masculinity, such as rationality, whereas emotions, traditionally associated with femininity, are sidelined. Liberal peace is in the same way guided by a liberal internationalism "convinced of the superiority of its ideas" (Mac Ginty, 2020, p. 579), resulting in other non-liberal ideas being "cast as irrational, antiquated and exclusive" (p. 579). This includes, I posit, any affectual meaning that can be attributed to feminist peace. Nurturing one's self is tightly connected to the erotic, to "how acutely and fully we feel", and to "reclaiming [..] our [women's] loving" (Lorde, 2020, p. 109). Healing thus becomes incompatible with neoliberal peacebuilding. Again, as emphasised in the previous section, the continuity of peace is paramount to understanding that the healing of the self is a slow, affective process (Stavrevska et al., 2022). Hence, feminist peace must employ the radical utopian potential of love and vulnerability for healing the bodies and non-rational selves pillaged by war (hooks, 2001).

Relational Peace

Soderstrom et al. (2020) suggest that deliberation, non-domination, and mutual recognition and respect are constituents of relational peace. First, deliberation refers to the "exchange of views" (Soderstrom et al., 2020, p. 6-8) between the deliberating actors and presupposes that they recognise each other's legitimacy. Second, non-domination implies both the "lack of interference by another", and the freedom from "arbitrary power" (pp.

6-8). Lastly, mutual recognition symbolises the status awarded by the actors to one another, which can be thin – legal recognition – or thick – prestige and self-esteem. At least one of the three characteristics needs to be present in order for a relationship to be classified as peaceful.

While speaking at length about non-domination, Soderstrom et al. (2020) omit mentioning structures of domination and how they are perpetrated against vulnerable groups, in particular women. I argue that their conceptualisation of relational peace is useful not only when it comes to warring parties, but also within social groups, as war and peace can coexist. I suggest that, once again, women nowhere enjoy peace because none of the criteria set by Soderstrom (2020) are met. Firstly, women's access to forums of deliberation is severely limited. Only 27% of seats in national parliaments globally are held by women (World Bank Group, 2024). This renders the exchange of views between men and women severely unequal. Moreover, women's legitimate participation in deliberation processes is increasingly contested with the rise of far-right parties which vehemently preach that women should assume traditional gender roles, reinforcing the perception that women cannot be political (Politico, 2024). Relations of domination are ever more present, with women's reproductive rights under attack. Thus, women's entitlement to act as agents in control of their own lives is slowly fading away, with government interference enabling domination through abolishing gender equality departments and legislation safeguarding women's rights, such as the right to abortion. Thus, not only is the "institutional or legal solution" (Soderstrom et al., 2020, p. 9) to ensure women's non-domination missing, but the very same institutions are maximising men's control over women's bodies (Hawkesworth, 2020). Lastly, even the "thin" legal recognition present through legislation is being undermined in many parts of the world (Soderstrom et al., 2020, p. 10). In courts of law, the "ideal victim" of a rape case "is preferably sexually inexperienced or at least respectable", with evidence of using dating apps or wearing 'attractive' underwear working against her in the court (Angel, 2021, p. 13). It is also important to mention that although all sexual harassment and rape allegations are met with defiance, sexual violence against black women is more easily discounted, as they are perceived as more "adult-like" and "sexually knowing" than their white counterparts (Angel, 2021, p. 11).

However, Soderstrom et al.'s (2020) ideas can be useful to advance a notion of feminist peace. Post-colonial feminist theorists often discuss interdependence and community as the key to resisting and dismantling gender oppression, which involves a process of "nurturing the self, the community and the territory" (Akibayashi et al., 2022; hooks, 2001; Stavrevska et al., 2022, p. 45). Not only is interdependence a means to this utopic end, but also vital to finding serenity, which according to some theorists who strongly reject the "worship of individualism", takes place in a communal, interdependent setting – "thriving is about interdependence; it's about how we maximise the potential of the human race in its beauty" (Akibayashi et al., 2022, p. 102; hooks, 2001, p. 214). Akibayashi et al. (2022) describe this as "collective peace" (p. 102). hooks (2001) also depicts healing as "an act of communion" (p. 215). She says, "rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation" (hooks, 2001, p. 215). De Coning (2016) similarly suggests in his analysis of peace using complex system theory that the "holism" (p. 168) of such systems makes us interconnected parts of a system which creates new meanings and relationships, developing a "whole" that would not exist otherwise. I argue that collective peace is incompatible with the lack of deliberation, non-domination and recognition of women, in the way advanced by Soderstrom (2022). However, the departure from conceptualising peace as the absence of war to a positive relationship

emerging out of a complex web of relationships at least helps us strive for a non-dominating and inclusive peace. Looking at peace as relational and interdependent teaches us all, dominator and dominated, men and women, privileged and marginalised, to seek community with each other, as we are part of the same whole and only then can we truly find serenity. By this, I do not want to suggest that we should not question relations of domination, but that such relations of domination come to an end once we have emerged ourselves in community, and once we have recognised our interconnectedness. I also want to posit a question perhaps for another essay: if there is no peace and if, just for a moment, we pretend to agree with Waltz's (1954) definition of peace as the absence of war, what does the absence of peace imply for war? Is there then a war on women's bodies, women's agencies and women's thriving?

Conclusion

This essay constitutes both a critique and a commencement to the scholars of positive peace. It is a critique because it emphasises that the positive peace literature is gender-blind, despite addressing ideas very close to the feminist ethos, such as inclusion and domination. It is also a commencement because it recognises the potentiality of the very same strand of literature as a starting point to develop a notion of feminist peace. I try to at least highlight this potentiality in three ways. I first discuss Paffenholz's (2021) idea of perpetual peace, suggesting that *perpetually* attempting to strive towards peace is more or less synonymous with the feminist struggle to resist, even in states where formal peace has been apparently 'achieved', but are still marked by gender inequalities, such as Denmark. I also suggest that returning to a 'peaceful' normalcy preceding conflict is impossible, as normalcy is always predicated on someone's marginalisation. Second, I reflect upon the local turn in peacebuilding, discussing why it encourages a plurality of local peace(s), with a fluctuating meaning for each individual and community (Van Iterson Scholten, 2024). I use the idea of affect to show why local peace allows for affectual re-imaginings of what peace means in women's everyday lives, whose use of the erotic and non-rational knowledge should be encouraged to nurture one's self and community and to create affectual healing. Lastly, I look at Soderstrom et al.'s (2020) notion of relational peace and explain that when peace is described as an interdependent phenomenon, women do not enjoy peace anywhere in the world. However, I emphasise how this conceptualisation hints at feminist ideas about collective peace and communal healing, and how communal care of one another can bring about a utopian version of feminist peace.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declares no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgements

I wrote this paper as an assignment for the course State of the Art Political Science, under the guidance of Gijsberg Van Iterson Scholten. He recognised that the literature on positive peace is largely gender-blind and suggested that I can explore it from a feminist lens. I would like to thank him for his support with this paper and for his willingness to listen to and integrate feminist insights within the realm of positive peace.

Bibliography

Akibayashi, K., Fabros, C., Kirk, G., Natividad, L., and Okazawa-Rey, M. (2022). Feminists Visioning Genuine Security and a Culture of Peace: International Women's Network Against Militarism. In Smith, S. and

Yoshida, K. (Eds.), *Feminist Conversations on Peace* (pp. 91-104). Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529222074.

Alison, M. (2004). Women as Agents of Political Violence: Gendering Security. *Sage Publications*, 35(4), 447-463. https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010604049522

Anderson, M.J. and Golan, G. (2023). Women and Peace Negotiations: Looking Forward, Looking Back. *International Negotiation,* 23(1), 157-175. https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-bja10085

Angel, K. (2021). *Tomorrow sex will be good again. Women and Desire in the Age of Consent*. Verso.

Autesserre, S. (2017). International Peacebuilding and Local Success: Assumptions and Effectiveness. *International Studies Review*, 19(1), 114-132. https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viw054

Bell, C. (2017). Women, Peace Negotiations, and Peace Agreements: Opportunities and Challenges. In Aolain, N. (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Conflict* (pp. 417-429). Oxford University Press.

Chao, I. and Gusia, L. (2022). Unfinished Activism: Genealogies of Women's Movements and the Re-imagining of Feminist Peace and Resistance. In Smith, S. and Yoshida, K. (Eds.), *Feminist Conversations on Peace* (pp. 47-60). Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529222074

Christien, A. and Mukhtarova, T. (2020). *Explaining trends in the frequency of gender provisions in peace agreements, 1990-2019*. Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security. https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Gender-Provisions-Peace-Agreements.pdf

Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024). *Gender Equality - An Incomplete Success.* https://denmark.dk/society-and-business/gender-equality.

De Coning, C. (2016). From Peacebuilding to Sustaining Peace: Implications of Complexity for Resilience and Sustainability. *Resilience*, 4(3), 166-181. https://doi.org/10.1080/21693293.2016.1153773

Gerard A. and Pickering, S. (2014). Gender, Securitization and Transit: Refugee Women and the Journey to the EU. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 27(3), 338-359. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fet019

Hawkesworth, M. (2020). Visibility politics: Theorizing racialized gendering, homosociality, and the feminicidal state. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 45(2), 311-319. https://doi.org/10.1086/704986

hooks, b. (2001). *All About Love*. *New Visions*. HarperCollins Publishers.

Krause, J., Krause, W. and Bränfors, P. (2018). Women's Participation in Peace Negotiations and the Durability of Peace. *International Interactions*, 44(6), 985-1016. https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2018.1492386

Krause, U. (2015). A Continuum of Violence? Linking Sexual and Gender-based Violence During Conflict, Flight and Encampment. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 34(4), 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdv014

Lorde, A. (2020). *When I Dare Be Powerful. Women So Empowered Are Dangerous*. Penguin Books.

Mac Ginty, R. (2010). Warlords and the Liberal Peace: Statebuilding in Afghanistan. *Conflict, Security & Development*, 10(4), 577-598. https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2010.500548

Mani, L. (1987). Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India, *Cultural Critique*, 7(1), 119-156. http://ereserve.library.utah.edu/Annual/HIST/4865/Theiss/contentious.pdf

Marhia, N. (2013). Some humans are more Human than Others: Troubling the 'human' in human security from a critical feminist perspective. *Security Dialogue*, 44(1), 19-35. https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010612470293

Paffenholz, T. (2021). Perpetual peacebuilding: a new paradigm to move beyond the linearity of liberal peacebuilding. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 15(3), 367-385. https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2021.1925423

Politico (2024). *If Far Right Surges in EU Election, Women's Rights Could Be Imperiled*. https://www.politico.eu/article/women-rights-peril-if-far-right-eu-election-surge-activists-say/.

Soderstrom, J., Akebo, M., and Jarstad, A. (2020). Friends, Fellows, and Foes: A New Framework for Studying Relational Peace. International Studies Review, 0(1), 1-25. https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viaa033

Stavrevska, E., Carvajal, S., and Luci, N. (2022). 'Peace' across Spaces: Discussing Feminist (and) Decolonial Visions of Peace. In Smith, S. and Yoshida, K. (Eds.), *Feminist Conversations on Peace* (pp. 34-46). Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529222074

Thomas, J. L. (2024). Sisters Are Doing It for Themselves: How Female Combatants Help Generate Gender-Inclusive Peace Agreements in Civil Wars. *American Political Science Review*, 118(2), 831–847. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000461

True, J. and Morales, Y. (2018). Towards inclusive peace: Analysing gender-sensitive peace agreements 2000–2016. *International Political Science Review*, 40(1), 23-40. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512118808608

UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) (2022). *Gender Inequality Index (GII)*. https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/thematic-composite-indices/gender-inequality-index#/indicies/GII.

Van Iterson Scholten, G. (2024). Peace Beyond the Absence of War: Three Trends in the Study of Positive Peace. *New Perspectives on Global Peace*, *Intech Open*. http://dx.doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.1004656.

Waltz, K. N. (1954). *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. Columbia University Press.

World Bank Group (2024). *Proportion of Seats Held by Women in National Parliaments (%)*. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS?end=2022&start=2006&view=chart&year=2022.