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## Subverting economic empowerment

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# Subverting economic empowerment: Towards a postcolonial-feminist framework on gender (in) securities in post-war settings

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## Abstract

This article demonstrates that the inability of the United Nations Women, Peace and Security agenda to realize greater peace and security for women in post-war states stems to a great extent from its failure to engage deeply with the materiality of women's lives under economic empowerment projects. We argue that the Women, Peace and Security agenda reproduces a neoliberal understanding of economic empowerment that inadequately captures the reality of women's lives in post-war settings for two reasons: first, it views formal and informal economic activities as dichotomous and separate, rather than as intertwined and constitutive of each other; and, second, it conceptualizes agency as individual, disembodied, abstract, universalizing and conforming to the requirements of the competitive pressures of the market. The article then offers a three-pronged postcolonial-feminist framework to analyse international interventions in which representation, materiality and agency are interconnected. We argue that such a framework helps understand better who is empowered in post-war economies and how they are empowered. This, in turn, makes visible how post-war economies produce gendered and racialized (in)securities that need to be addressed by the Women, Peace and Security agenda. With this, we also hope to reflect on broader international political economy concerns about the problems of making conceptual distinctions between

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politics and economics, and to challenge the constructed borders between materiality and discourse that have pervaded peace and conflict studies.

### **Keywords**

Discourse, feminist political economy, feminist security studies, gender, materiality, postcolonialism

## **Introduction**

Over the past two decades, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has become the overarching site through which the international community conceptualizes and promotes women's political participation in peacebuilding and women's economic empowerment in post-war states. References to relief and recovery are widespread in the agenda, constituting an attempt to respond to 'the special needs of women and girls during repatriation and resettlement and for rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction' (UNSCR 1325, 2000: para. 8). Subsequent resolutions, such as UNSCR 1820 (2008), UNSCR 1888 (2009) and UNSCR 1889 (2009), also call on member states to promote women's (economic) empowerment. As the UN Peacebuilding Commission recognized, 'the economic empowerment of women greatly contributes to the effectiveness of post-conflict economic activities and economic growth and leads to improving the quality and social outcomes of economic recovery measures and policies as well as to sustainable development' (UNGA, 2013: 4). We argue, however, that these hopeful statements are simply paying lip service to women's economic empowerment. These good intentions cannot materialize in practice because, first, women's economic concerns are largely absent from post-war economic reforms (Bergeron et al., 2017; Duncanson, 2016), and, second, the WPS agenda, as the primary international framework for addressing gender in post-war states, only engages with economics in a shallow way. In other words, the WPS agenda reproduces the wider failure of dominant models of 'empowerment' to seriously engage with the material conditions of women's realities and the diverse forms of agency present in contexts of peacebuilding and international intervention. Overall, we argue, the WPS agenda has a piecemeal and partial approach to economic empowerment, characterized by a lack of engagement with (in)formal economies and a blindness to the complex relationship between the postcolonial state, violence and gendered processes of reconstruction.

We contend that the failure to advance women's economic empowerment through the WPS agenda, and the wider post-war agenda in which the WPS agenda is situated, comes from two assumptions made about women and economic empowerment: first, current post-war projects are characterized by a problematic understanding of economic empowerment that views formal and informal economic activities as dichotomous and separate, rather than as intertwined and constitutive of each other; and, second, they reflect an understanding of agency as individual, disembodied, abstract, universalizing and conforming to the requirements of the competitive pressures of the market (Chisholm and Stachowitsch, 2017). As with assumptions of 'subject' in models of empowerment more

broadly, the subject of WPS interventions must become an entrepreneur in order to be 'empowered'.

Starting from the contention that actual economic conditions in post-war states are the crucial factor preventing women from increasing their security (True, 2012), this article makes a theoretical contribution by presenting an alternative postcolonial-feminist framework that invigorates gender and peacebuilding theorizing, and engages more deeply with both the discursive representations and the materiality of women's lives (re) produced in and through economic empowerment projects. This, in turn, will help us unveil the conflation of neoliberal peacebuilding and Eurocentric logics structuring social orders in post-war states with economic empowerment in the WPS agenda. Examining only the socio-economic conditions or the representative discourses cannot get at essential questions of who is empowered in the post-conflict recovery and economic development, how they are empowered, and what structural relations of power determine the answers to these two questions. It is these questions that must be answered in relation to economic empowerment in post-war states, including within the WPS agenda and its implementation. Furthermore, the analysis of these questions addresses the increasing convergence of security and market discourses in neoliberal peacebuilding and international interventions, as well as its (unintended) effects on local populations. This relates to wider debates in the literature on post-war economies and reconstruction, such as the increasing attention being paid to the materiality of intervention and post-war recovery, especially insofar as material objects 'are nested within wider power structures' (Mac Ginty, 2017: 874). Further, it reflects some of the concerns in wider international political economy (IPE) debates on the problems of making distinctions between 'politics and economics, and prioritizes one over the other, rather than seeing them as mutually constitutive' (Chacko and Jayasuriya, 2018: 83).

Our theoretical framework draws inspiration from Hudson's 'conversations' piece in the 2015 *Politics and Gender* forum, where she argues that reframing the relationship between the two main feminist International Relations (IR) streams — Feminist Security Studies (FSS) and Feminist Political Economy (FPE) — would be most productive through considering the relations between representation, materiality and agency altogether without separating them in the analysis (Hudson, 2015: 417). She briefly outlines her argument and argues that 'beyond the safe world of critique there is potential for FSS and Feminist IPE to engage more meaningfully around issues of spatial politics' (Hudson, 2015: 417). She further argues that thinking 'spatially' about the material conditions that women encounter in post-war states allows us to think through how women are represented in post-war recovery programmes, but, crucially, to consider this in relation to how 'bodies interact with posthuman materialities in differential ways' (Hudson, 2015: 416), or, in this particular case, to consider the actual materiality of post-war projects (such as for infrastructure) and their effects on women's lives. We find Hudson's proposed framework to analyse women's economic empowerment in post-conflict countries extremely useful insofar as it considers the interactions between matter, discourse and agency. However, we also consider it crucial to problematize Hudson's framework's use of economy, insofar as it does not explicitly engage with considerations of how formal/informal economies are interdependent (Nordstrom, 2010). Understanding the complexities of women's economic empowerment in post-war states requires considering the 'full spectrum' of formal/infor-

mal economies (Nordstrom, 2010: 161), and thinking seriously about how economies actually function, rather than what is said about how they should function.

We take Hudson's analysis one step further and theorize the questions of who is empowered in the post-conflict recovery and economic development and how they are empowered by drawing from the key principles of decades of postcolonial-feminist theorizing. First, we take subjectivities seriously by paying attention to how intersectionality, representation and power work as 'multiple axes of differentiation' (Brah and Phoenix, 2013; Chowdhry, 2007), that is, how the categories of difference are constructed, by whom and for what purposes (Agathangelou, 2004; Crenshaw, 1989; Puar, 2004). These categories must always be examined in a relational manner in order to better understand how the encounter between the 'international' and the 'local' produces power relations between 'tradition' and 'modernity', the 'foreign' and the 'native' (Chowdhry and Ling, 2010). At the same time, subjectivities are multiple, rather than universal, and cross-cutting allegiances of contemporary international relations go beyond these simple binaries (Ling, 2007).

Second, we pay attention to the material conditions of women in post-war states from a perspective attuned to the gendered and racialized logics structuring the political economies and social realities. Materiality and material conditions are the cornerstone of postcolonial-feminist studies (Alexander and Mohanty, 1997). Yet, these material conditions are experienced in an intersubjective manner and offer liberations as well as pose a diversity of constraints depending on one's lived reality (Anzaldúa and Keating, 2002). This is why bringing subaltern and exiled voices and alternative forms of agency (Chowdhry, 2007) into our analysis through contrapuntality (Said, 2003) is the third requirement. Contrapuntal analysis enables us to collect as many narratives as possible on the same event and recuperate a 'non-coercive and non-dominating knowledge' (Said, cited in Chowdhry, 2007: 15).

The article is organized as follows. In the first section, we provide a theoretical critique of economic empowerment in the WPS agenda, and point out some of its consequences. Here, we engage with other WPS scholars to argue that an essential and under-analysed facet of the WPS agenda's failure relates to economic empowerment (Bergeron et al., 2017; Duncanson, 2018). In the second section, we provide an integrated postcolonial-feminist frame that renders visible the complexity of women's actual material conditions in post-war recovery and their capacity to act in those conditions, as it is attuned to how formal/informal economies are linked to local and global violence. We structure this argument around the politics of representations of women and economies, materialities, and the subject's agency in WPS policies. The aim is to show how the approach might change the way we look at post-war economic empowerment agendas, and the spaces, identities and infrastructures that they create. This section also illustrates the theoretical underpinnings and practical implications of our argument through illustrative examples from post-conflict contexts in Western Africa. Finally, we offer some concluding remarks.

## **Economic empowerment in the WPS agenda**

In an in-depth analysis of the Peacebuilding Commission's work on women and gender, Shepherd (2017: 117) points to the tension between a logic of vulnerability and a logic of empowerment in UN peacebuilding discourse: women must first be vulnerable, they

have to be victims of violence, and then they can be empowered as agents of change. The assumption here is that women victims are agency-less and it is through a set of measures dedicated to empower women, such as those contained in the WPS agenda, that the UN is giving women the individualized and universal agency needed to become entrepreneurs of their own future. As pointed out by Eyben and Napier-Moore (2009: 291), ‘the Achilles heel of empowerment is that it implies that you don’t have power. Subordination is built in’.

The WPS agenda assumes that through opening access for women to certain political and economic spaces, gender equality will prevail and women will use their agency to transform post-conflict settings into spaces where sustainable peace flourishes. However, access to political spaces alone is not transformative. As Irvine (2013) points out, laws to protect women against sexual violence and efforts to include them in peace processes and parliaments cannot do much to improve women’s security because structural factors, including structural adjustment policies and neoliberalism, are responsible for many of the insecurities affecting informal women workers (Konadu-Agyemang, 2000; Moseley et al., 2010). While there is some evidence that post-war economic reforms can increase income-generating activities undertaken in the urban informal economy, there is not much literature analysing the gendered effects of post-war economic policies for women working in the informal economy (Nagar et al., 2002). We problematize both the representation of economic empowerment as the solution for women lacking individual, entrepreneurial agency, and the invisibility of the informal economic sector in the WPS agenda. Women and their concerns are largely absent from post-war economic reforms (Bergeron et al., 2017; Duncanson, 2016). At the same time, the WPS agenda, as the primary international framework for addressing gender in post-war states, only engages with economics in a shallow way. In particular, we can observe three main problems within the WPS agenda’s engagement with ‘economic empowerment’.

The first problem is the treatment of the formal and informal economy as binary concepts rather than as intertwined. Informal economic activity dominates the economies of most post-war states but is not tallied in formal accounts of economic activity. These informal activities matter insofar as they represent the reality of most women’s (re)productive labour, and they also serve as the foundation upon which any formal economic recovery and development is built. Formal/informal economic activity is mutually constituted because through informal economic activity, formal economic activity becomes possible, and vice versa. Nordstrom (2010) points out that women engage in informal economic activity because it provides a means of survival — this must be understood both from a position of materiality and from a structural analysis of racialized and gendered capital. Nordstrom also points out that women’s participation in informal economic activity cannot and should not be seen only in terms of negativity insofar as this informal economic activity can serve as a basis of power through the networks that women foster, a source of agency within households and communities, and a potential entry point into more profitable formal economies. Further, the collective value of all the informal economic activity of women can outweigh the formal state accounts of economic activity (Budlender, 2011). The decision to exclude women’s informal economic activity from formal accounting should be seen as a political decision that serves to render these women invisible and illegitimate, and one that devalues

the overall representations of women and their work in post-conflict economic recovery and development. This, in turn, structures broader international intervention responses in post-conflict states, and reinforces ideas of women primarily as victims who need international support to be empowered.

The formal–informal binary has clearly been destabilized by feminist IPE (Peterson, 2010, 2012). The formal economy relies on the unwaged labour of the informal sector, and formal/informal economic activities around war, violence, exploitation and militarism bleed together and cannot be differentiated. Despite the interlinkage of formal and informal economies and how they are gendered, we did not find any reference to this in the WPS resolutions, and just a passing mention in the 2015 Global Study on WPS. Informal economies are not explicitly recognized or mentioned in any of the eight UNSC WPS resolutions. We used Atlas.ti to code the resolutions for ‘economic’ and ‘entrepreneurship’ — there are 12 references to ‘economic’ or ‘socio-economic’ across the resolutions. Broadly speaking, these references equate ‘economic’ with formal economic policy, economic decision-making and (formal) economic recovery and reintegration. The first time that economic aspects appear explicitly in the agenda is in resolution UNSCR 1889 (2010: para. 1), where the UNSC ‘Urges Members States, international and regional organisations to take further measures to improve women’s participation ... including by enhancing their engagement in political and economic decision-making at the early stages of recovery processes’. In order for member states to do so, women’s organizations should be consulted in order to ‘specify in detail women and girls’ needs and priorities and design concrete strategies, in accordance with their legal systems’. Women, therefore, rightly need to participate in formal post-conflict economic planning, but there is no recognition of women’s engagement in the post-war (in)formal economy. The only time when non-formal economic activity implicitly appears is in relation to calling on member states to prevent women from engaging in the illicit trade of weapons (UNSC, 2015). Across the WPS agenda, we argue that the silence around the ‘informal’ is problematic — not because women’s formal economic activity is unimportant, but because it provides only a partial and limited view of what women’s economic activity entails. The 2015 Global Study on 1325<sup>1</sup> mentions formal/informal economies only briefly in a checklist for states reporting on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The questions about economics are as follows:

How do post-conflict economic recovery strategies promote women’s participation and equality? Do these policies address women’s roles and needs within both the formal and informal sectors? Do they recognize the particular situation of rural and other disadvantaged groups of women, as disproportionately affected by the lack of adequate health and social services and inequitable access to land and natural resources? (UNWomen, 2015)

While women’s needs in the informal sector are recognized in the WPS agenda, this recognition is not in-depth enough to allow for an adequately contextualized and thorough examination of the relationships between the formal/informal economies, their mutual constitution and their material conditions. Instead, they are treated as separate sectors, whose common intersection is women’s roles and needs. As Nordstrom (2010: 165) argues, the informal and extra-legal are often obscured from view. For example, in

Sierra Leone, international financial institutions have encouraged foreign agribusiness investment as a means to bring economic resources to impoverished rural areas (Millar, 2015; Ryan, 2018; Yengoh et al., 2016). As part of a national strategy to attract oil palm investment projects, large plots of land have been leased for 50- to 80-year terms. Despite the promises of economic development, these deals undercut women's livelihoods because the informal growing and selling of oil from native palms on communal lands has traditionally been an income source for women. Women lose most or all of this income when mono-crop plantations clear native oil palms. At the same time, non-monetized activities such as gathering firewood become significantly more difficult in areas with oil palm plantations (Ryan, 2018; Yengoh et al., 2015). Similar agribusiness investment deals are proliferating throughout numerous post-war economies, and they can help clearly demonstrate how formal and informal economies are not neatly divided, as well as the need to think about representation, matter and agency in an integrated manner when analysing whether WPS-related projects and programmes are to successfully empower women in such post-conflict economies.

Bringing informal economies into view requires more than mere recognition of their existence and, instead, a systematic evaluation of just how they came to be obscured in the first place. Nordstrom points to the ways in which threats of gendered violence serve to keep Sri Lankan women producing coir that will be sold on the international market outside of the formal sector. Through obscuring informal markets and production, their economic productivity is excluded from formal measures of gross domestic product (GDP), and, furthermore, the actual violence used to keep them in the informal sector is rendered invisible (Nordstrom, 2010: 169). A critical approach to women's economic empowerment needs a more realistic view of formal and informal economies as intertwined, as well as how their relationships are gendered and embedded in the global system of racialized capital.

The second problem in the WPS agenda is the gendered view of agency and employment. One way that this is evident is in the representation of household economics, where there is an underlying assumption that women are contributing to household income. This is reflected within the Global Study and within other programmes for the implementation of the WPS agenda, such as Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration programmes directed at female ex-combatants (Basini, 2013; MacKenzie, 2009). For example, jobs programmes and microcredit for women in the Sierra Leone National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration were framed as 'family stabilization measures' to 'reduce pressure on male ex-combatants in ex-combatant families' (MacKenzie, 2012: 73). The assumption that women's participation in economic activity should serve to support a primary wage earner is highly gendered insofar as it is blind to households where women are the primary or sole economic providers. It is also demonstrably false as women in conflict and post-conflict states are disproportionately the primary breadwinners (Nordstrom, 2010: 174). This relates to a broader problem of the gendered nature of post-war economic reform projects outside the WPS agenda. As Duncanson (2016) argues, there are two types of economic projects carried out in post-conflict environments, and these are deeply gendered: macroeconomic projects on infrastructure, mining or drilling, which provide employment opportunities primarily for men; and microeconomic projects such as microfinance schemes or small-scale



income-generation projects, which are primarily directed to women. This effectively makes it impossible for women to escape poverty and leave behind a subsistence economy that complements the earnings of the head of the household (Hickel, 2016; Kabeer, 2009: 83–84; Karim, 2011; Roodman, 2012).

Participation in formal employment is privileged; however, this does not consider the ways in which formal employment depends on the informal/unwaged or low-waged labour of the care economy. Women are still expected to undertake the lion's share of the reproductive labour. Therefore, even for women who do get formal employment, gendered and racialized barriers still determine who can benefit, how they benefit and, in some cases, how the low-waged labour of other women allows a few women to participate in formal employment. Overall, this tells us that greater attention needs to be paid to how women and economies are represented, how they are tied up in materialities of scarcity and how these interact with women's agency.

The third problem with the WPS agenda is the dominant view of economics as a tool to be instrumentalized, which fails to take into account what the value of women's economic empowerment might be for women themselves, and instead reflects gendered and racialized assumptions of global capital (Chowdhry, 1995; Griffin, 2007, 2009; Peterson, 2003). In UNSCR 2121 (2013), the UNSC '[r]ecogniz[es] that the economic empowerment of women greatly contributes to the stabilization of societies emerging from armed conflict, and welcome[s] the Peacebuilding Commission's declaration on women's economic empowerment for peacebuilding of 26 September 2013 (PBC/7/OC/L.1)'; in UNSCR 2106, the UNSC affirms that economic empowerment leads to 'preventing sexual violence'; and in UNSCR 1889, the UNSC affirms that women's access to the economy helps to achieve 'effective post-conflict peacebuilding'. Ultimately, micro-credits and similar schemes work under the assumption that women's economic empowerment is a means to achieve sustainable peace because women are more responsible and more likely to spend money on things such as health and education and ensure the future of their children.<sup>2</sup>

This is highly problematic because it treats women's economic empowerment as something of concern only insofar as it has the potential to undermine or contribute to the economic recovery and development of the state. Although empowering women instrumentally to achieve peace and the development of the state is not a bad thing per se, it becomes pervasive when what is sought is simply the rebuilding of a patriarchal state in a neoliberal global order (Duncanson, 2016). That is, much as with the treatment of formal/informal economies, treating women's economic recovery and development as a tool to be instrumentalized will result in a failure to see the structural relations of power at play between local, state and international actors, within the system of global capital, and in relations between gendered and racialized individuals.

Furthermore, this framing contributes to a construction of a particular relationship between security and development, whereby poverty in the Global South constitutes a security threat to the North, and the solution is therefore to promote economic empowerment. Nevertheless, violence cannot be discussed only as a security issue because it is also deeply imbricated in both the colonial project and current neoliberal capitalism (Agathangelou, 2017). Pratt (2013) argues that 1325 fails to take into account colonialism and race. In particular, she is interested in how gender, and more particularly 'women's

rights', intersect with racialized views of power and sovereignty, wherein the international community delegitimizes violence against 'brown women by brown men' but legitimizes the violence of international interveners. We expand on this by thinking more explicitly about the material economies of post-conflict states. Much as Cohn (2008) has pointed out that 1325 does not challenge the foundations of militarization as the root of global insecurity, 1325 also does not challenge the links between this militarization and global capital, and instead frames neoliberal economic reforms as potentially empowering for women. In fact, (re-)entry into the global economy after conflict is structured by neoliberalism's racialized and gendered capital. Programmes that focus on self-sufficiency, the conditionality of finance packages that require privatization and austerity are not gender-neutral and, at the same time, reinforce structural inequalities between the Global North and Global South.

Economic recovery in post-war states should be analysed within the logic of how it subjects women to neoliberal governmentality (Peterson, 2012: 21). This clearly necessitates a postcolonial perspective and fits within the agenda of postcolonial-feminist IR (Chowdhry and Ling, 2010) and its focus on materiality, relationality and intersubjectivity. Discourses and material conditions are both relevant for understanding women's economic recovery and development in post-conflict states, and a postcolonial perspective can be attuned to both by focusing on their mutual constitution or overlapping (Chowdhry and Nair, 2004: 24). Accordingly, understandings of material economic conditions should not be divorced from interrogations of meaning-making and discourse. Postcolonialism can offer a way of accounting for the materiality of IPE alongside the discourses that constructed gendered and racialized capital (Chowdhry and Nair, 2004). Drawing on Said, Krishna (2002: 174) argues that 'aesthetic practices have ever been imbricated with material ones and that is precisely why one ought to take them seriously'. In a similar vein, Hönke and Müller (2012: 393) suggest that postcolonial security studies can and should incorporate a practice turn alongside a discursive approach by bringing in 'sociological approaches, non-discursive practices and artefacts'.

Critically reflecting on the materiality of women's lives in economic development in post-conflict states (beyond paying mere lip service to the value of women's economic empowerment for the recovery of post-conflict states) necessitates paying attention to relationships between colonialism, liberalism and gendered power. It is insufficient to call for economic recovery without accounting for the gendered and racialized power of neoliberal economic reforms because these relations of power determine who participates in economic recovery, how they participate and what relations of power are (re) produced through economic recovery.

## **Towards a feminist-postcolonial theoretical framework**

In this section, in a bid to resolve some of the issues discussed in the first part of the article, we propose a postcolonial-feminist framework in which representation, materiality and agency are interconnected in a particular way in a specific space (Hudson, 2015). Postcolonial feminism makes visible the connections between the Global North and the Global South as interrelated cultural discursive representations and material relations of neoliberal production (Chowdhry and Ling, 2010; Kunz and Maisenbacher, 2017). We

argue that such a frame will help us answer better who is empowered and how they are empowered in post-conflict economies, as well as how, in turn, post-war economies produce gendered and racialized (in)securities. Approaches to developing and understanding women's empowerment in post-conflict economic recovery and development could, for example, focus on the formal and informal economic opportunities imbued in infrastructure projects. Potential ways to think through this include asking questions such as: what is revealed when we examine the kinds of infrastructure projects that are given priority in post-conflict states? Are they gendered? Who benefits? What kinds of projects are prioritized? Who gets economic opportunity through the projects' implementation and their final products? Do they increase women's opportunities for formal and informal economic prospects? Do they increase women's access to health care or other services? To answer these questions, we consider how political representations of women and economy, the materiality of scarcity and space, and agency interact within the economies of post-conflict states. A transformative WPS agenda should be attuned to these interactions because they determine women's security and economic empowerment. In the following paragraphs, we further elaborate on how we consider the processes of studying post-conflict women's empowerment as always already mutually constituted by representation, matter and agency.

### *Discursively representing women's empowerment*

Women are represented in particular ways in post-conflict economic recovery, requiring attention to political discourses of representation (Hudson, 2015). FSS analysis has engaged thoroughly with the ways in which women are represented in discourses of security and violence (MacKenzie, 2009; McLeod, 2015; Shepherd, 2008, 2011, 2017; Sjoberg, 2009; Martin de Almagro, 2018) author, 2017), but, as has been noted, there is less engagement with their representation in post-conflict economic recovery (Bergeron et al., 2017). Broadening the focus on women's economic security and its relation to physical security is crucial. However, we also argue that there is a need to think critically about the political discourses of the representation of economies. This requires questions such as 'How is the "informal" economy represented?' (Peterson, 2012). In representing the 'informal' in particular ways, how are gendered and racialized power relations reproduced? Within the logic of neoliberal governmentality, the informal is represented as a negative and frequently feminized space (Peterson, 2010, 2012). We claim that this representation obscures the dependent and co-constitutive relationship between the formal and informal, as well as the ways in which participation in informal economic activity can provide actual material benefit to women beyond the reach of the state. For example, Elias and Carney (2007) found that (informal) women shea butter producers in Burkina Faso enjoyed positive outcomes from new trade opportunities when international companies began to buy shea butter to produce cosmetics.

Relatedly, the implementation of women's economic empowerment programmes does not exist separately from how women are discursively (re)produced through these activities themselves. Here, we can think about National Action Plans (NAPs) for the implementation of 1325 as a primary means through which women in post-conflict states are discursively represented in relation to economies. In particular, NAPs 'can create

new spaces and entry points for a range of actors to dialogue with one another' (Hudson, 2017: 20) and they provide a contextual understanding of what is understood as 'gender security' (McLeod, 2013). As such, articulations of women and women empowerment in NAPs have the potential to transform or to maintain the material conditions of these individuals. For example, in the Liberian 1325 NAP, the primary proposed output for economic empowerment is directed at 'traumatized and vulnerable women, such as the demobilized and war widowed', who will be 'empowered through skills training, micro-credit and loan facilities and are provided plots of land to produce environmentally friendly bio-fuels grown from plants such as jatrophas, curcas and moringa' (Government of Liberia, 2009). The achievements of this objective will be measured by the 'number of traumatized and vulnerable women with access to skills training, micro-credit and loan facilities' and the 'number of traumatized and vulnerable women provided plots of land and follow-up support' (Government of Liberia, 2009). It is notable and relevant that: first, vulnerability is seen in terms of risk, something that must be identified and contained; and, second, representations of women's economic activity to contain vulnerability are framed in terms of 'provision' — such framing implies that women's needs should be 'provided for' (Hudson, 2017). This overlooks the myriad ways in which women provide for themselves, frequently outside the official view.

Where there is recognition of the existence of the informal sector as a gendered means of survival, it seems that formal and informal are dichotomous categories. Discourses that represent women as 'in need' of professionalization propose to regularize/formalize women's already-existing skills or activities, such as hairdressing or sewing clothes. There are multiple problems with such discursive constructions, one of which is its blindness to how women's informal economic activity is always already contributing to formal sector activities but whose work is not recognized as such. The lack of recognition of women's role in formal sector activities becomes apparent when examining the relative value of informal feminized labour vis-a-vis masculinized formal labour and the ways in which macro-structural projects subcontract certain feminized labour-intensive stages of production to the informal sector. Ultimately, the profitability of multinational corporations and macro-structural post-war projects relies, in part, on informal work and labour performed by women that allows the formal sector to maintain a competitive edge. For example, throughout the 246-kilometer Suakoko Highway linking Liberia's capital, Monrovia, with Gbarnga and the Guinea border, there is a high chance that the (formal) workers employed by the World Bank's Liberia Road Asset Management Project will stop for lunch at one of the women selling home-made food on the road. If we consider the total flow of lunches cheaply produced by women's market stalls, then we can see that this constitutes a large portion of the project's economy. Not only that, but the wages and functioning of the infrastructure project can keep within budget because workers can get cheap access to food and other goods and services provided at lower cost by the informal sector, reducing the direct and indirect costs of production and gaining access to a flexible labour pool.

Furthermore, feminized representations of the informal serve to reproduce the Global South as 'other' through its 'deviant' overreliance on informal economic activity, which the WPS agenda then seeks to formalize through access to micro-credits and trainings, while simultaneously obscuring the ways in which the Global North profits from such activity, or

how post-conflict interventions can foster informal and illicit economies (Jennings, 2014). The lack of recognition of this informal labour is situated within a broader blindness to women and their multiple roles in economic transformation. While certain women will receive training to ‘formalize’ their informal activities through micro-credit for tailoring or hair braiding, others will be rendered invisible even though their activity sustains the macro-structural projects carried out in the country. Nevertheless, empowering certain ‘women entrepreneurs’ is not going to change the whole reconstruction and development industry and its relationship to the larger national economy. For example, in early 2018, the Liberia Fourth Poverty Reduction Support Development Policy Operation was approved. It dedicates its economic transformation pillar to improving the operation and management of the electricity sector and of land, but it does not include the word gender or women once, nor does it integrate any kind of gender analysis to consider what the factors enabling economic transformation are and for whom. The discursive silence on women’s economic empowerment in relation to the Poverty Reduction Strategy is indicative of wider political representations of women in post-conflict reconstruction, as well as to its material consequences.

Despite what attention to discursive representations can reveal about women’s presence and silence in different policies, attention to discourse alone is insufficient, and the question of infrastructure and human capital provides a clear rationale for paying greater attention to the discursive relationship to the material. Only then does it become visible how an idea aimed in the first place at empowering women is now used to legitimize marketization and state retrenchment.

### *Matter matters*

Hudson (2015) argues that when considering materiality, attention should be paid to the interaction between matter, the materiality of scarcity and the socio-materiality of cultural relations. By ‘materiality of scarcity’ we refer to the power relations and structures that govern the allocation of scarce post-war resources. Such an analysis should interrogate how matter, economies and social materialities interact within post-conflict space. We argue that in the context of post-conflict recovery, thinking about materiality means considering how matter — such as infrastructure, property and possessions — is (re-)consolidated, (re)possessed and/or (dis)placed through the material loss that permeates all dimensions of violence. This analytical approach might consider how violence makes it possible to strip women of their productive and reproductive power, or what the function of violence is in (re)distributing resources within post-war recovery. Analysing the violence of resource (re)distribution requires being attuned to the structures and processes within aid programmes, institutional reform and economic recovery initiatives such as the privatization of oil plantations that determine the distribution of resources. To think about how this violence relates to social materialities — the power relations and resource distribution imbued in social relations — we need to consider how material conditions (such as landlessness) and social relations (such as determined by non-landowning status) influence this (re)distribution. In our earlier palm oil example, it is precisely the pre-war social materialities of land ownership that make it impossible in practice for Sierra Leonean women to have a say in negotiations with foreign companies’ acquisition of land as land belongs to families in the community who trace their (patriarchal) lineage to the original

settlers of the community. These social materialities are relevant insofar as they 'constitute the meaning material factors have for actors' (Wilcox, 2009: 219).

The material conditions of poverty are clearly relevant to whether and how women participate in economic recovery. Furthermore, the types of material infrastructure projects initiated after conflict have the potential to mitigate or exacerbate poverty, further structuring women's capacity to participate. As Duncanson (2016) and True (2012) highlight, large-scale infrastructure projects that link major resource-extraction areas to ports or major highways for export are likely to benefit men's long-term and short-term formal employment, while construction of feeder roads and links between markets, health centres and schools will have different material effects on poverty reduction and service provision. It is also clear that the materiality of scarcity tends to downplay the latter type of project in favour of large-scale enterprise and capital investment. In turn, structural adjustment programmes and major donors are likely to favour the types of projects that will diminish rather than increase long-term state spending, such as the building of artery roads that facilitate the export of raw materials over the building of small-scale infrastructure that the state would be responsible for running, such as health centres, vocational training or schools. In this way, competition for scarce monetary resources and the conditionality of these resource allocations need to be analysed and understood from the position of how they are gendered (Duncanson, 2016; True, 2012). In other words, while women continue to undertake the bulk of social reproduction, neoliberal economic policies have significantly cut social provisioning by the state and, under such conditions, poor women have often entered into paid employment to ameliorate livelihoods. In many parts of the Global South, it is the labour-intensive export sector that provides women with opportunities for paid employment. Further, as pointed to by Mbembe (1989: 8), the colonial state rested on the principle of 'regulating scarcity' through relations of patronage — due to continued conditions relegating the postcolonial state to primary commodity exports, the legacy of regulating scarcity for the postcolonial state is that the 'state and the ruling party attempt to monopolize and subjugate society while straddling positions of power and those of accumulation'. This matters when accounting for the materiality of women's lives under post-conflict development projects because of the gendered structures of patronage and actual material shortages that underlie many postcolonial states.

Access to land and competition for access illustrates the relationships between matter, the materiality of scarcity and socio-materiality, and the ways in which these relationships are structured by post-war reforms that privilege neoliberal models. Whereas neoliberal models of land governance frame land as a means of capital transformation and advocate for land tenure reforms that individualize and standardize tenure systems, these models greatly simplify the meaning tied up in the matter of land and overlook the complexity of land-use systems (Daley and Pallas, 2014). In turn, reforms aimed at standardizing tenure and, at the same time, facilitating outside investment result in increased competition over land, both between local people and between local people and outside investment. Therefore, even if legal reforms call for women's legal right to own land, their ability to transform that legal right into actual ownership will be constrained by complex norms and values around land, a lack of capital to guarantee access, and increased competition (Daley and Pallas, 2014; Ossome, 2014). In turn, their continued status as non-landowning will translate to socio-materialities of cultural relations that divorce them from decision-making practices within the community and family. In these ways, the 'matter' of land itself and

all its complex meanings are connected to competition, scarcity and the social relations tied up in land allocation (White et al., 2017). Privatization of land is merely one example of this, but it is clearly a relevant one given the high dependency on subsistence agriculture, women's informal economic activity in agriculture and the frequency with which 'women's land tenure reform' is included in the WPS agenda in an unproblematized way. It also serves as means of illustrating how neoliberal models of women's agency fail to capture the complexity of women's agency in post-war contexts.

### *Agency — idealized and otherwise*

Whereas there is a tendency in neoliberal reforms to reduce 'socially sentient human beings into utility maximizers' (Krishna, 2012), a postcolonial-feminist approach to post-conflict economies should be attuned to the framing of agency within the boundaries of how a 'good' subject of neoliberalism 'should' act, and the ways in which this reproduces gendered and racialized power (Biswas, 2010; Chowdhry, 2007: 103; Krishna, 2009). Neoliberal assumptions of agency situate individuals as responsible for their own well-being and position, assume the universality of the subject, and are blind to the role of gendered and racialized bodies underpinning these assumptions (Wilcox, 2015). Therefore, we argue, a contrapuntal reading of agency is key. As a tool in postcolonial studies, contrapuntality helps us to historicize 'texts, institutions and practices [by] interrogating their sociality and materiality [and] the hierarchies and the power-knowledge nexus embedded in them' (Chowdhry, 2007: 15). A contrapuntal reading allows us to juxtapose narratives of agency (Kunz and Maisenbacher, 2017), to 'interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting with others' (Said, 2012: 32). This encourages us to 'extend our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded' (Said, 2012: 66–67).

Within the logic of neoliberal post-conflict recovery as exemplified in UNSCR 1325, women are agents of positive change in peacebuilding processes, but primarily as 'individual' women (this is why evaluations of 1325 frequently focus on measuring the number of women who have received trainings), or as abstract groups of women acting in the overall interest of women more broadly (Gibbins, 2011). Therefore, the kind of agents recognized in the WPS discourse can be interpreted as those responsible for 'transformational change' (Cornwall, 2003), in a necessarily positive way, such as when the WPS agenda and many NAPs draw an explicit link between the political participation of women and the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence (Shepherd, 2017). This is, of course, blind to the ways in which agency may transgress the individual, the ways in which the bodies are constrained by socio-material relations, and the ways in which women's interests might be divergent or in conflict, leading them to deploy their agency in ways that undermine the 'collective' empowerment of women. Eyben and Napier-Moore note how older Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) documents talk about 'women and men ... shaping the social and economic choices of the future' (SIDA, 1998: 13), and about 'women and men hav[ing] equal opportunities to make choices about what gender equality means and work in partnership to achieve it' (OECD, 1999: 13). Therefore, they evoked ideas of

people collectively shaping structures, whereas more recent interpretations of empowerment contained in WPS documents and particularly in NAPs are more individualistic.

First, the materialities examined in the previous subsection are productive of a range of collective embodied and emotional responses that frame peacebuilding and economic empowerment as both an empowering and a disempowering experience, sometimes simultaneously (Harman, 2018; Meagher, 2005). Here, it is necessary to look at how the materiality of scarcity is experienced between bodies, recognizing scarcity's radical relationality. Women constitute over 60% of the employed in the informal sector in the developing world, and 89.7% (including agriculture, 79% excluding agriculture) in sub-Saharan Africa (International Labor Organization, 2018: 27). The feminized informal activity of street vending exposes street vendors to arbitrary harassment from public authorities or private security groups, putting women at risk of accident or illness. Further, as poverty structures women's capacity to participate in public decision-making, and neoliberal reforms that cut state spending and undermine tax revenue tend to also increase women's burden in the care economy and their likelihood of poverty, agency must be understood as related to the structural power relations that serve to frame women as 'self-sufficient individual agents' in economic reform (Duncanson, 2016; True, 2012).

Ultimately, individual agency is collectively learnt because of collective experiences of scarcity, or what might be referred to as the mundane practices and minutiae of everyday life — such as the affective and embodied experiences of (in)formal work and employment, consumption and spending habits, and household practices. For instance, this can be seen in the flourishing of informal women's markets associations, particularly in West Africa. These associations are not limited to the market space, but rather take on a 'rights'-based approach to citizenship and try to influence the market and work and living conditions (Meagher, 2005: 232). While women start by carrying water and selling bananas or mangos, they can rapidly join an association that also works as an informal bank. Women contribute economically every month, and one woman takes the collection home. When it is your turn, you can invest in something more productive and start a small business, enabling the woman to leave informality and become part of the formal economy. However, even then, there are many that still contribute to the money lending of their informal networks (Biggart, 2001). These practices challenge the official narrative of agency and empowerment in peacebuilding: from the individual female entrepreneur, to collective solidarity and empowerment.

Second, women's interests might be divergent or in conflict, leading them to deploy their agency in ways that undermine the 'collective' empowerment of women. As Elliott points out, transformational empowerment is usually collective. 'Changes in consciousness and individual agency may be the initial results of empowerment, but these cannot be transformative without larger-scale institutional change that requires action on many fronts and at different levels. Processes that move from single actions to the collective assertion of power, from private spheres to public arenas, from resistance to rule changes, are more likely to be transformative' (Elliott, 2008: 9). These collective decisions might be taken in the interests of powerful members of the collective, or in the interests of particular ethnic or religious identities (Sjoberg, 2016). This presents a challenge to the



discourses that frame women's agency as either individualized or deployed in the interests of other women.

## **Conclusion**

This article has argued that the WPS agenda cannot materialize its transformative potential because of its piecemeal and partial approach to economic empowerment, characterized by a lack of engagement with (in)formal economies and a blindness to the complex relationship between the postcolonial state, violence and gendered processes of reconstruction. There are serious questions to be posed to the WPS agenda and its implementation, particularly in relation to who is empowered in post-conflict economic recovery and how they are empowered. These questions cannot be posed strictly in terms of ideal and formal economic activity, and they must pay serious analytical attention to how the answers are determined by structural power (including racialized capital), actual material conditions (including the material relations between formal and informal economies) and discourses of representation (including gendered discourses of (in)formal economic activity and victims/actors). The three-legged conceptual framework we propose — made up of discourses of representation, matter and materialities — and contrapuntal agency allow practitioners and scholars to get a deeper view of the potential of the WPS agenda's potential — or lack thereof — for meaningful societal transformation. It also exposes the disempowering consequences for women in post-war states of not taking seriously (in)formal economies, discourses of representations, materiality and the agency of its subjects. With regards to the discourses of representation, we have demonstrated that dominant representations of women in relation to formal/informal economic activity obscure the co-constitution of these economies to the detriment of how we understand women to engage in economic activities. The challenge is therefore not to insert women's economic empowerment in the WPS agenda, but rather to rethink its logics of relation to how negative representations of informal economies serve to feminize and to reproduce the Global South as deviant, while obscuring how the Global North profits from such activities. A further challenge is to rethink the gendered consequences of how these representations serve to legitimize marketization and state retrenchment. Regarding matter and materiality, it is necessary to challenge the effects of structural relations of power that shape women's actual access to material resources. In this way, we can begin to rethink human agency as affected by collective experiences of material scarcity. We therefore argue that a contrapuntal reading of agency should constitute a third pillar of a postcolonial-feminist framework that enables the researcher to pay attention to agency beyond the individual, neoliberal subject.

For practitioners, taking this framework as a starting point can help to assess more realistically women's economic empowerment projects and activities, and make visible the material conditions that influence the socio-economic production of gender as a relation of inequality. The framework has the potential to unveil the everyday political and economic (in)security understood holistically in terms of women's complex socio-economic relations and how these are embedded within global structures of power. Women's empowerment should be more about transforming society, and less about making women more effective wealth producers.

The theoretical lenses offered by our three-pronged framework also have the potential to overcome the feminist scholarship divide between FSS and FPE. Our

framework draws strengths from the FSS approach to WPS by considering the role of discourses of representation, while equally considering the weight that FPE has traditionally given to materiality, and draws on scholarship from postcolonial scholars to bring questions of racialized agency to further elucidate the interactions between materiality and representation. The recent forums in *Politics and Gender* have similarly called for these two divergent subfields to draw on strengths from each other, and we hope this article offers one potential framework that does so.

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### Notes

1. The 15-year anniversary prompted the UN to carry out a formal analysis of the progress of the 1325 agenda, and thus represents an official view on the wider agenda.
2. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), ‘Report on austerity measures and economic and social rights’ (2013), para. 59; Yakin Erturk, ‘Report of the special rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences’, Human Rights Council, UN Doc. A/HRC/11/6 (United Nations General Assembly, 18 May 2009), para. 64 (UNWomen 2015).

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