# The 'woman-in-conflict' at the UN Security Council: a subject of practice

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Madame President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning,

I am here for my friends and colleagues, Samira al Nuaimi and Umaima al Jebara, who were recently killed defending women's rights in Iraq; Razan Zaitouneh who was abducted for documenting human rights violations in Syria; and all activists who risk their lives daily to make women, peace and security not just a resolution, but a reality.

—Statement by Ms Suaad Allami, UN Security Council open debate on 'Women, Peace and Security', 28 October 2014[1]

It was with these words that Suaad Allami began her address to the Security Council open debate in October 2014,[2] on the occasion of that body's now-familiar marking of the anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and the inauguration of Women, Peace and Security as a thematic item on its agenda.[3] Just as the holding of an open debate has become a ritualized form through which to mark this occasion, statements such as Ms Allami's have also become part of the regular practice of the Security Council policy community. A civil society speaker has, since 2004, appeared at each of these debates, including those now held earlier in the calendar year to consider the specific sub-theme of 'sexual violence in conflict', and three women took up this position in the open debate held recently to mark the resolution's 15th anniversary.[4]

Beyond the ritualized incantations of greeting with which Allami begins, her words are striking for bringing something unusual into the austere space of the Security Council—names. These are not names of states in which wars are fought, or names of the government officials or bureaucrats who are required by form and relationships of power to be thanked and acknowledged. These are names of women who have died and been tortured and abducted in war for their activism in seeking, as Allami puts it, to 'make women, peace and security not just a resolution,

[1] United Nations Security Council (UNSC), *Provisional meeting report, 7289th meeting*, 28 Oct. 2014, S/PV.7289.
[2] The open debate is a form of debate in the Security Council that allows for the participation, through the Council's rules of procedure, of UN member states outside the Council membership, as well as UN entity and civil society representatives.
[3] UNSC, S/Res/1325, 31 Oct. 2000.
[4] UNSC, *Provisional meeting report, 7533rd meeting*, 14 Oct. 2015, S/PV.7533.

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but a reality'. In that naming, the statement that follows becomes a tribute, and Samira al Nuaimi, Umaima al Jebara and Razan Zaitouneh become a present reminder to the audience that it is in the lives of real, individual, embodied and very particular women that the (now eight) Women, Peace and Security (WPS) resolutions matter,[5] and do so in ways that go beyond simply being resolved to act. There is also embedded in Allami's words the subtle reminder of how feminist activism, advocacy and scholarship—including those that resulted in the adoption of UNSCR 1325—have sought to shift and complicate the way in which women and their roles in relation to conflict are understood within international security discourse.[6]

One of the often-cited claims of feminists working for Resolution 1325 was that women play multiple, and often concurrent, roles in conflict situations that go well beyond that of the passive victim requiring protection. Each of the names spoken by Suaad Allami is that of a woman whose life is not defined solely by victimhood; whose life, indeed, complicates any simple dichotomy between victimhood and its imagined opposite, agency. The act of saying names into the Security Council space in that moment then seems to negotiate a way through the dichotomy and produce a very particular, material and complex sense of the figure I refer to here as the 'woman-in-conflict'. This naming carries with it the lived experiences, needs and interests of women whose lives are affected by conflict. It is these, feminists have argued, that should form the basis of knowledge upon which policy and programmes are built.[7] It is, of course, not possible to determine—or meet—the needs and interests of the uncountable, faceless and nameless women affected by and living through war. Rather, the inevitable representation of these women takes place through imbuing the figure of the woman-in-conflict with particular meaning or characteristics. These meanings shape how the figure is understood in WPS discourse, which, in turn, constructs the horizons of possibility for both current and future policy and its implementation. This article explores how this figure is produced as a subject in the civil society statements delivered over time at the Security Council's thematic WPS open debates.

The moment of naming with which this article began could be seen as one that, in opening space for particular experiences and complex identities, represents the successful shifting of the dominant security discourse. There is, however, a general sense that the WPS discourse that has emerged over time has not lived up to the transformative promise of UNSCR 1325 and has, in some ways, undermined the

[5] Resolutions 1820 (June 2008), 1888 (Sept. 2009), 1889 (Oct. 2009), 1960 (Dec. 2010), 2106 (June 2013), 2122 (Oct. 2013) and 2242 (Oct. 2015).

[6] See e.g. Cynthia Cockburn, *From where we stand: war, women's activism and feminist analysis* (London: Zed, 2007).

[7] This position is expressed in a vast literature that seeks to capture the myriad roles and experiences of women in conflict. For a sample of such work, see C. Moser and F. Clark, eds, *Victims, perpetrators or actors? Gender, armed conflict and political violence* (London: Zed, 2001); Sheila Meintjes, Anu Pillay and Meredeth Turshen, eds, *The aftermath: women in post-war transformation* (London and New York: Zed, 2001). On the importance of experience to International Relations theory and practice, see Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without borders: decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2003).

feminist intent behind its adoption.[8] Concern has been expressed that the concept of gender has been entirely depoliticized and the holistic approach of UNSCR 1325 reduced such that women continue to be portrayed primarily as victims.[9] Many argue that the increasingly limited focus on sexual violence in conflict, seen in several of the thematic resolutions adopted since 2008 and within the Council's country-specific work, is detrimental to the long-term feminist peace and security agenda.[10] It is further argued that comprehensive and nuanced understandings of sexual violence and its connections with political participation and with militarism have been lost in policy that simply reinforces the image of women as victims in need of the paternalistic protection of international security actors. To the extent that claims for women's full and equal participation in peace and security decision-making have been met, this has primarily been through increasing the number of women in national militaries—a 'success' antithetical to the goals of most WPS activists.

The perceived failure to produce and sustain international policy that is properly 'feminist' (and thus presumably more likely to successfully address feminist concerns) is one that has been tackled by a number of scholars.[11] It is a problem not unique to feminist activism but faced in other arenas by those seeking to introduce progressive or emancipatory agendas to the work of institutions.[12] For many, the explanation is that as concepts such as 'gender' have been mainstreamed, feminist goals have been 'co-opted' by other agendas as 'gender is turned into a technocratic tool and stripped of its critical content'.[13] Similar arguments are made in other arenas—for example, in relation to the introduction of the concept of 'social capital' to the work of the World Bank. Some claim that these failures are attributable to blockages such as the hegemonic forms or 'sedimented meanings' that exist in institutions or to particular actors within those institutions having the power to 'dictate the terms of the debate'.[14] Others allege that those who are meant to be 'working on the inside' for the feminist project have abandoned the struggle.[15] While for the most part I agree with these various critiques in terms of

[8] See e.g. Dianne Otto, 'The exile of inclusion: reflections on gender issues in international law over the last decade', *Melbourne Journal of International Law* 10: 1, 2009, pp. 11–26; Laura J. Shepherd, *Gender, violence and security: discourse as practice* (London and New York: Zed, 2008).

[9] Otto, 'The exile of inclusion'; Shepherd, *Gender, violence and security*.

[10] See Paul Kirby and Laura J. Shepherd, 'Reintroducing women, peace and security', *International Affairs* 92: 2, March 2016, pp. 249–54 above.

[11] See e.g. Otto, 'The exile of inclusion'.

[12] See e.g. Anthony Bebbington, Michael Woolcock, Scott E. Guggenheim and Elizabeth A. Olson, eds, *The search for empowerment: social capital as idea and practice at the World Bank* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian, 2006); John Harriss, *Depoliticizing development: the World Bank and social capital* (London: Anthem, 2002); Christie Ryerson, 'Critical voices and human security: to endure, to engage or to critique?', *Security Dialogue* 41: 2, 2010, pp. 169–90.

[13] Audrey Reeves, 'Feminist knowledge and emerging governmentality in UN peacekeeping', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 14: 3, 2012, p. 349. See also Sally Baden and Anne Marie Goetz, 'Who needs [sex] when you can have [gender]? Conflicting discourses on gender at Beijing', *Feminist Review*, vol. 56, 1997, pp. 3–25. McRobbie suggests that gender mainstreaming 'can be thought of as a non-conflictual accommodating kind of programme or schema which follows a path which has some equalizing potential, but which in essence can be absorbed and taken on board by the structures and institutions of capitalism': Angela McRobbie, *The aftermath of feminism: gender, culture and social change* (Los Angeles and London: Sage Publications, 2009), p. 154.

[14] Ryerson, 'Critical voices and human security', p. 184.

[15] See Amanda Gouws, 'The rise of the femocrat?', *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 12: 30, 1996, pp. 31–3.

their analysis of overall outcomes, I argue that it is necessary to find other modes of analysis to think through the problem.

This article presents a way in which we might begin to account otherwise for the disjuncture between the outcomes and understandings envisioned by feminist policy interventions—such as that resulting 15 years ago in the adoption of UNSCR 1325—and the way in which these are then manifested in institutional policy discourse. I explore the ways in which the understandings of the figure of the woman-in-conflict are produced through the quotidian practices of the WPS policy community engaged at the Security Council.

Doing so will, it is hoped, offer WPS advocates a better sense of how feminist understandings come to be excluded, shifted or incorporated in the production and reproduction of dominant discourses in institutions like the Security Council, and in the process also indicate possible opportunities for resistance and challenge.

## Discourse: linguistic and other practices

The impetus for the approach taken here begins with the contention that interventions made to shift policy, for example on international peace and security (which is how many see the WPS agenda), are made in and through *language*—it being, after all, the very 'stuff' of policy.[16] Of course, this starting point rests in some way on the assumption or belief that if we get the words right, if meaning is fixed 'appropriately' or in some 'right' way, this will shift material conditions in the spaces in which policy is implemented. If we assume for a moment that the aim is to 'get the words right' or ensure a particular feminist understanding of those words, what can we learn about how to do that if we think of these interventions more explicitly as attempts at *making* meaning?

Thinking of contestations over meaning in this way guides our attention towards identifying where linguistic interventions are 'vulnerable' to the sorts of failures under consideration, to how they are in fact built on inherently unstable ground. The very openness and contingency that allow language to be a space of contention also leave it vulnerable to future contestation. Although systems of meaning may become more or less hegemonic, they cannot be fixed and are always vulnerable to that which was excluded in their making.[17] Even if hegemonic meanings are established in the face of already existing discourse, those meanings have to be actively and continually reproduced.[18] Certainly many feminist critics are vigilantly engaged in critiques of shifts in meaning.[19] Nevertheless, *how* that

[16] Giandomenico Majone, *Evidence, argument, and persuasion in the policy process* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 2.

[17] Systems of meaning are, by their nature, essentially open and contingent. For Gramsci, 'nothing is anchored to fixed and certain meanings; all social and semantic relations are contestable, hence mutable': see Jean Comaroff and L. John Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution: Christianity, colonialism, and consciousness in South Africa*, 2 vols, vol. 1 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 20.

[18] Alan Hunt, 'Rights and social movements: counter-hegemonic strategies', *Journal of Law and Society* 17: 3, 1990, pp. 311–14.

[19] Good examples of this approach are Otto, 'The exile of inclusion'; Shepherd, *Gender, violence and security*; Laura J. Shepherd, 'Sex, security and superhero(in)es: from 1325 to 1820 and beyond', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13: 4, 2011, pp. 504–21.



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meaning is created and reproduced needs to be part of the analysis. Failure to do so may result in the misidentification of barriers to producing or sustaining the meanings intended by any particular intervention.

Some take the position that failures to sustain feminist ideas within policy discourse can be attributed to the ways in which particular concepts in those policies are constructed or understood. Shepherd, for example, argues that the particular conceptions of '(international) security' and 'gender (violence)' within UNSCR 1325 condemn that policy to failure in practice.[20] There is an implicit sense here that the problem is a lack of appropriate or sufficiently 'feminist' conceptualization on the part of those engaging in policy work; that what is needed is to provide them with 'the possibility of alternative concepts with which to proceed'.[21] It is far from clear, though, that the disconnect between feminist conceptualizations and those emerging in policy and policy discourse can be attributed to a theoretical or conceptual deficit on the part of those engaged in policy-making. What seems more likely is that even those fully equipped with the 'appropriate' meanings may still face significant challenges in getting those meanings adopted in the first place or sustained in the long term; this may be because of specific resistance to their adoption or vulnerability to the pressures of the institutional spaces into which they emerge.[22]

A useful starting point for thinking through this problem can be found in the work of scholars who take political and social contestation over and in language as a central concern. Their work is helpful in thinking more specifically and closely about *how* such struggle within language happens and is manifested.[23] Much of this work tends to focus on words of a particular type—*concepts*. These are 'inescapable, irreplaceable parts of the political and social vocabulary' which become crystallized into a single word but contain a range of meanings within them.[24] The concepts on which these scholars focus their attention as key sites of political struggle are often somewhat abstract or ambiguous; it is this quality that makes them attractive and amenable to deployment to effect social and political change.[25] In consensus-based policy-making environments such as the United Nations, concepts of this sort are particularly appealing sites of contestation. They provide 'a spacious kind of hanger on which those of different persuasions are able to

[20] Shepherd, *Gender, violence and security*, pp. 5–6. In a similar vein, a significant body of feminist scholarship in international law and policy has unpacked contested understandings of such key concepts as 'security'. See e.g. J. Ann Tickner, *Gendering world politics: issues and approaches in the post-Cold War era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); J. Ann Tickner, *Gender in international relations: feminist perspectives on achieving global security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

[21] Shepherd, *Gender, violence and security*, p. 5.

[22] See Bebbington et al., *The search for empowerment*; Sophie Bessis, 'International organizations and gender: new paradigms and old habits', *Signs* 29: 2, 2004, pp. 633–47.

[23] See Raymond Williams, *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society*, rev. edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures past: on the semantics of historical time*, 'Studies in contemporary German social thought' (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985); Quentin Skinner, 'Language and social change', in *Meaning and context: Quentin Skinner and his critics*, ed. James Tully (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

[24] Melvin Richter and Michaela W. Richter, 'Introduction: translation of Reinhart Koselleck's "Krise", in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67: 2, 2006, p. 345.

[25] Koselleck, *Futures past*, pp. 77, 85, 105.



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hang their coats'.[26] Concepts that are malleable and non-specific also allow policy-makers a space in which to fit a range of future practical programmes.[27] Several feminist policy interventions at the UN (and by activists in other institutional arenas) have taken this form of 'conceptual' engagement—whether attempting to fix the meaning of particular signifiers as they enter new institutional spaces (as in the case of 'gender') or attempting to shift or expand the meaning of existing concepts (as in the case of 'international peace and security').

In the case of WPS policy, despite cogent reasons for attending to the concept of gender, the figure of the woman-in-conflict has become the site of contestations over meaning. Even when not named as such, she is the ever-present referent in policy discussions, the shadow figure on whose behalf advocacy is carried out and policy adopted, criticism advanced or action demanded; deployed by a wide range of actors, in a multitude of ways and to various ends, she appears 'in person' from time to time on behalf of civil society at the Security Council open debates. Credibility and recognition are given, at least partly, on the basis of the perceived 'authenticity' of those representing her 'needs and interests'. The woman-in-conflict and her ostensible needs and interests emerge in discourse that is created through the various meaning-making practices within the policy community, not all of which are linguistic phenomena. Discourses are not simply 'sets of ideas' deployed and then shared by policy communities, politicians or social movements.[28] Even where attempts are made to shift ideas and understandings through language, meaning emerges not only as a matter of particular linguistic choices but through what people do—that is, through social practices which are intelligible and meaningful only if considered in their relational social context and with reference to the 'rules of the game' in that context.[29]

As 'systems of meaningful practices', discourses establish a structure of relations, forming the identities of and connections between subjects and objects, and 'providing subject positions with which social agents can identify'.[30] Particular subject positions may be made available and others precluded, and it is these positions that allow or foreclose the possibilities for future actions—including those thought of as 'implementation efforts' to make 'real' the WPS resolutions.[31] The civil society statements at the open debates, such as the one delivered by Ms Allami in 2014, provide rich material for thinking about the production of the WPS discourse and, as the focus here, the production of the subject position of the woman-in-conflict.

[26] Harriss, *Depoliticizing development*, p. 1; Sidney G. Tarrow, *Power in movement: social movements and contentious politics*, 'Cambridge studies in comparative politics' (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Ryerson, 'Critical voices and human security', p. 170.
[27] Ryerson, 'Critical voices and human security', p. 176.
[28] David R. Howarth and Yannis Stavrakakis, 'Introducing discourse theory and political analysis', in David R. Howarth, Aletta J. Norval and Yannis Stavrakakis, *Discourse theory and political analysis: identities, hegemonies and social change* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 4.
[29] David R. Howarth, *Discourse*, 'Concepts in the social sciences' (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2000), p. 18.
[30] Howarth and Stavrakakis, 'Introducing discourse theory and political analysis', p. 4.
[31] See Shepherd, *Gender, violence and security*.



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## Security Council open debates as a site of practice

Of course, the open debates are not self-evidently worthy of analysis. Some maintain that they are nothing but an empty ritual which, rather than producing any concrete outcome (except, on occasion, another resolution whose provisions must be implemented), serve simply as an opportunity for governments to engage in listing their accomplishments in mutual self-congratulation even as they bemoan, in mostly general terms, the 'lack of effective implementation'. Having attended many such debates during five years spent as a policy advocate for an NGO in the UN WPS policy community, I am well aware that these day-long events can turn into a mind-numbing fog of undifferentiated speeches of just this sort—a sensation not alleviated when analysing them in transcript form in my new location in academia. Sheri Gibbings, in her research in the same UN policy environment, notes concerns expressed to her that member states 'might be making public statements that express their commitment to gender equality, but in reality they would act differently'.[32] Yet it seems clear from the number of states delivering statements in each such debate (and from the interviews I am conducting for the research project out of which this article emerged) that even those jaded by the experience of 'non-productive' open debates over the years seem unwilling to pass up the next opportunity to speak.[33] In the 2015 debate, civil society speaker Julienne Lusenge of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in fact began by noting that she had first addressed the Council in 2008 and that seven years later she 'thought long and hard before deciding to come back here, and wondered whether or not it was worth the effort'.[34] Clearly she had decided it was; and, as Gibbings notes, despite complaints that the 'UN was just words … [advocates] afforded importance to its speeches and language'.[35]

The open debate forum has attracted significant numbers of representatives from UN member states that are not members of the Security Council and, while not directly engaged in policy-making, are implicated in its implementation. This has particularly been the case in anniversary years considered in the UN as especially significant (multiples of five and ten).[36] The 15th anniversary debate saw 112 member states requesting speaking slots and was the largest open debate ever hosted on any theme.[37] The tenth and 15th anniversary debates were also declared to be 'high-level' events—signifying the attendance of high-status government ministers (such as, for example, the US Secretary of State and other foreign ministers in 2010 and the Spanish Prime Minister in 2015) and, on several occasions, the UN Secretary-General. In the absence of formal accountability mechanisms, the open debates also function as a way to mark or evaluate progress

[32] Sheri Lynn Gibbings, 'No angry women at the United Nations: political dreams and the cultural politics of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13: 4, 2011, p. 535.

[33] This article emerged out of research I am conducting towards a PhD in Politics at University of California, Santa Cruz.

[34] UNSC, *Provisional meeting report, 7533rd meeting*, 14 Oct. 2015, S/PV.7533.

[35] Gibbings, 'No angry women at the United Nations', p. 535.

[36] See e.g. the open debate to mark the tenth anniversary of UNSCR 1325: UNSC, *Provisional meeting report, 6411th meeting*, 26 Oct. 2000, S/PV.6411.

[37] UNSC, *Provisional meeting report, 7533rd meeting*, 13 Oct. 2015, S/PV.7533.

(or lack thereof) on the WPS agenda. The broad participation also makes this venue an attractive one for NGOs seeking to use the naming and shaming tactics of international human rights advocacy, which depend for their persuasiveness on being performed before an audience (although, as I argue below, this performance takes place in a very circumscribed manner).[38] Furthermore, it is my sense that, although there may be differences in the specific form, content and tone, government, UN and NGO participants speak in these debates in ways broadly consonant with the general tenor of the conversation within the policy community. As such the debates are a useful forum in which to examine the shaping of discourse within the UN WPS policy community.

As I will show below, the civil society statements at these debates make visible not only the points of contact between various actors implicated in policy but also some of the myriad social practices in the policy community through which meaning is shaped and various subject positions produced.[39] As civil society advocacy interventions, the statements and their attached recommendations are, quite directly and self-consciously, continuing attempts to construct 'meaning' in respect of what enacting the WPS agenda should entail. But even as they do this, they produce particular understandings of the woman-in-conflict not only through what is said but also by whom and in what way. The remainder of this article will explore the contestability of this subject position and the way in which the woman-in-conflict appears in the Security Council space. It will look at the individuals and groups (such as the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security) who fill out her contours and express the needs and interests to which policy-makers are expected to respond.

## The woman-in-conflict as a contestable figure

Exploring the production of this figure is not intended to suggest that there is some universal or essential 'woman' who exists in a similarly universal/essential 'conflict' and whose views, interests and needs can be fully known or discovered. The notion of a stable and universal identity 'woman' that is assumed by some laws and policies (and much western philosophical discourse) has been the subject of significant feminist critique, as has the way in which some (primarily western) feminist texts have produced a singular monolithic 'Third World woman' as subject.[40] As Gayatri Spivak, whose work here is particularly helpful, notes,

[38] The similarity to the human rights framework is a point made by Hesford in relation to her choices of text selection. Hesford reiterates the point made by Sally Merry in *Human rights and gender violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) that: 'Human rights law is itself primarily a cultural system. Its limited enforcement mechanisms mean that the impact of human rights is a *matter of persuasion* rather than force, of cultural transformation rather than coercive change': Wendy S. Hesford, *Spectacular rhetorics: human rights visions, recognitions, feminisms*, 'Next wave: new directions in women's studies' (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 21.

[39] Hesford, *Spectacular rhetorics*, p. 17.

[40] See e.g. the essays in Linda Seidman and Steven Nicholson, eds, *Social postmodernism: beyond identity politics* (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995). See also Wendy S. Kozol and Wendy Hesford, eds, *Just advocacy? Women's human rights, transnational feminisms, and the politics of representation* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Mohanty, *Feminism without borders*; Judith

'woman' has been constructed in the interests of prevailing economic orders—from the ending of European colonialism through the initiation of neo-colonialism to today's globalizing post-modern electronic capitalism.[41] The figure who passes through these orders emerges in today's UN Security Council as the woman-in-conflict. Within that context, one of the primary concerns of feminist intervention has been that understandings of women as historical subjects, and their varied and particular relations to conflicts, have very often been reduced to representations of woman as victim, while the international community and the West are produced and situated as saviour and protector.[42] There is little space in this view for understandings of women as, for example, soldiers, peace negotiators, holders of political office or perpetrators of horrific violence. Furthermore, any specificity of race, class, sexuality and other identifiers fades from view.

In many ways this reductive form, which suppresses singularity in order to establish a 'fact', may be an inevitable by-product of recourse, as with UNSCR 1325, to forms of law as a way to some imagined social justice.[43] Law, by its nature, requires an abstract placeholder in order to make future action possible in the diversity of specific situations for which it is impossible to account in advance—even if that accounting for possible futures is constrained by current understandings. However, for all the limitations and exclusions surrounding the category of 'woman', and its ultimate impossibility, it has enabled and grounded political action, including that which resulted in UNSCR 1325.[44] Perhaps most importantly in the present context, inside such spaces as the Security Council it may be a category that cannot simply be left behind. As Spivak points out, '"Woman" is the word that has been taken for granted by the UN'; and

> within a certain broadly defined group of the world's women, with a certain degree of flexibility in class and politics, the assumptions of a sex-gender system, an unacknowledged biological determination of behaviour, and an object-choice scenario defining female life[45] are shared at least as common currency

—a currency that is no longer a mere convenience but one without which no movement can now work.[46] However, it is not sufficient to argue that invoking 'woman' in policy is simply a 'strategic use of a positivist essentialism in a scrupu-

Butler, *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 'Thinking gender' (New York: Routledge, 1990); Marysia Zalewski, *Feminism after postmodernism: theorising through practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

[41] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a discipline*, 'Wellek Library lectures in critical theory' (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 98–9.

[42] This description is reminiscent of the subjects produced in human rights discourse; feminist legal scholar Makau W. Mutua, 'Savages, victims, and saviors: the metaphor of human rights', *Harvard International Law Journal* 42: 1, 2001, pp. 201–45, describes a triangularized metaphor in western human rights discourse that pits 'savages' against both their 'victims' and 'saviours'. See Elora Helim Chowdhury, *Transnationalism reversed: women organizing against gendered violence in Bangladesh* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), p. xvii.

[43] Spivak, *Death of a discipline*, p. 44.

[44] Chantal Mouffe, 'Feminism, citizenship, and radical democratic politics', in Seidman and Nicholson, eds, *Social postmodernism*, p. 328.

[45] Listed as '(children and/or public life; population control and/or development)': Spivak, *Death of a discipline*, pp. 44–5.

[46] Spivak, *Death of a discipline*, pp. 44–6.

lously visible political interest.'[47] As Spivak notes in a later interview, her notion of 'strategic essentialism' was often taken up in ways that left strategy behind, erasing the move's critical potential and leaving it to become an alibi for capital.[48] But, rather than rejecting out of hand (as some taking an anti-essentialist position have done) the 'impulse toward generalization' in feminism as it engages with policy, Spivak seeks to explore how one can work with the form. In fact, she argues, to do otherwise (and she notes that some 'have the ignorance and/or luxury' of so doing) would be to 'throw away every good of every international initiative'.[49]

If this category cannot be abandoned and we must take seriously the challenge of learning to work with the general form 'woman', as those engaged in policy must in some way do in order to remain legible, what does this mean? Chantal Mouffe suggests that the first step is to understand the form 'woman' as it appears and is produced as subordinate in particular discourses. This is preliminary to attempting then to transform that meaning through articulatory practices.[50] There is significant feminist scholarship on war and on security that has done this sort of work.[51] It is, however, also a way in which one can think about the work of feminist activists working within the Security Council policy field. The statement by Suaad Allami with which we began, for example, can be read as an attempt to (at least partially) fix the meaning of the figure of the woman-in-conflict in non-subordinate forms, including by bringing in the particularity of individual women's lives, so as to open up alternate subject positions and possibilities. It is of course impossible in both theoretical and practical terms for the stories (and even the names) of the many millions of historically situated women connected to various events framed as war over time, to come before the Security Council to speak.

To think, then, about the forms of subjectivity that are produced by these statements requires attending closely to the ways in which they inevitably function as moments of representation enacted in practice, moments that are deeply political and shot through with relations of power: 'The issues of who has the power to represent whom and which events are rendered visible or invisible are profoundly important.'[52] How is the figure of the woman-in-conflict constructed and performed in relation to other subject positions, objects and practices in the policy community? Who tries to describe and fill its contours and at what moments? It is hoped that exploring the answers to these questions will help those concerned with shifting the WPS agenda to think about what possibilities for action are made available or foreclosed by the logics of practice of the Security Council and the WPS policy community.

[47] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the teaching machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 3.
[48] Spivak, *Outside in the teaching machine*, p. 3.
[49] Spivak, *Death of a discipline*, p. 46.
[50] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and socialist strategy: towards a radical democratic politics* (London and New York: Verso, 1985), p. 113. Laclau and Mouffe define articulation as 'any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice': p. 105.
[51] Laura Sjoberg, *Gendering global conflict: toward a feminist theory of war* (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2013).
[52] Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'Invisible empire: visual culture, embodied spectacle, and Abu Ghraib', *Radical History Review*, vol. 95, 2006, pp. 21–44 at p. 23, cited in Hesford, *Spectacular rhetorics*, p. 22.

## Appearing in the Security Council

The honorifics with which Allami's statement begins—'Madame President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen'—and the profusion of deferential expressions of thanks for the 'honor and privilege' and the 'opportunity' to speak, are reminders of the institutionally subordinate position into which the woman-in-conflict must emerge. In fact, viewing the statements as separate written texts, it is easy to miss the point that their delivery in the Security Council, even before it begins, is situated in a subordinate position by the convergence of both *realpolitik* and the somewhat arbitrary rules of procedure and formalities of ritual. Although hosting an open debate has become a regular practice, doing so, and setting its boundaries through prior acts, including the selection of a specific theme for debate, remain the prerogative of the Council; and that prerogative is specifically held and exercised by the member state holding the Council presidency for the month by virtue of the somewhat arbitrary fact of the position of that state's name in the English alphabetical order of names of Council members for the year.[53]

The power of the Council presidency is a significant one and was felt most recently when Spain, which held the position in October 2015, decided only a month before the event to shift the date of the 15th anniversary debate by ten days. This decision was taken despite a year-long planning process during which government, UN and civil society actors had organized events to coincide with the debate, giving rise to an infuriating and frustrating situation, as was pointed out by several NGO and government representatives in the weeks that followed.[54] Civil society groups were left with the burden and expense of scrambling to change travel plans and visas for the women scheduled to speak; participants in the many other anniversary events were rendered unable to attend the debate itself or found themselves having to arrange to stay in New York for a longer period. The reason for the upheaval was that the Spanish Prime Minister, unavailable on the original date, had, as one activist at an NGO presentation put it, 'decided he wanted a photo opportunity', and by personally chairing the debate to show the level of support his government gave to the agenda; this support, ironically, meant his own schedule and convenience taking priority over those of the women ostensibly at the heart of that agenda.

Appreciating the power of the Council presidency also affects the significance one attaches to the substantive theme put forward to frame the debate. Although the theme could be read as reflecting the concerns of the Security Council or of consensus in the policy community, it is perhaps more likely that it is a theme of interest to the state holding the presidency, to which the prerogative of setting

[53] Rule 18: 'The presidency of the Security Council shall be held in turn by the members of the Security Council in the English alphabetical order of their names. Each President shall hold office for one calendar month': UNSCR, 'Provisional rules of procedure of the Security Council'.

[54] PeaceWomen Project of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 'Delivering on the Women, Peace and Security agenda: overcoming challenges for peace and gender justice', editorial, *PeaceWomen E-News*, 5 Oct. 2015, http://www.peacewomen.org/e-news/delivering-women-peace-and-security-agenda-overcoming-challenges-peace-and-gender-justice. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 13 Jan. 2016.)



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the theme falls. Consciousness of this arbitrarily allocated power is evident in the practice of NGOs meeting with staff of newly elected Council members to discuss, for example, the practices and possibilities of the open debate form. Certainly work can be, and is, done by feminist advocates to shape the thematic frameworks of debates ahead of time. This can be done, for example, by finding ways (including through ongoing conversations with supportive government representatives within the Council's permanent membership) to provide input on the concept notes circulated to member states announcing the hosting of an open debate. These notes set out the theme on which the debate will be centred and on which governments are expected to focus their speeches. There are also advocacy letters written each year to all member states encouraging their participation and presenting NGO working group recommendations for action; these recommendations are often referenced by member states in their statements, thus reinforcing the ideas put forward or supported by NGOs.[55]

Once inside the space, however, the president's formal words of introduction and ritual framing serve as a reminder that the civil society speaker is there on sufferance and as a result of arrangements reached by the Council away from public view: 'In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations and in the absence of objection, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to [insert here name of civil society].'[56] Procedural rule 39 produces a particular relationship between the Security Council as an entity and those speakers who are invited because they are 'consider[ed] competent for the purpose, to supply it [the Security Council] with information or to give other assistance in examining matters within its competence'.[57] The woman-in-conflict is thus positioned in a particular subordinate position that is explicitly instrumentalized as a source of information or 'other assistance' but, it must be remembered, is also imbued with a measure of authority. Her role in this moment is to present a 'first-hand' account of her experience as some sort of 'native informant', constructing her narrative perhaps so as to meet, at some level, the Council's expectations of usefulness. This positioning of the woman-in-conflict as a 'resource' is not limited to the Council's open debates but operates alongside rights-based arguments as a central logic of the WPS discourse. For Gibbings, a 'focus on the value of women's knowledge and their contribution to great efficiency' emerges from UNSCR 1325 itself but must also be understood as part of a larger shift in UN discourse. This has seen the 'logic of the market … extended to the operation of state functions' in a variety of arenas.[58]

Although the instrumentalizing of the figure of the woman-in-conflict can and should be critiqued, the act of presenting her narrative in these debates also bears the trace of the success of feminist practices and feminist International Relations theory which, as Christine Sylvester points out, has looked to physical,

[55] See e.g. the letters here: http://www.womenpeacesecurity.org/advocacy/letters/.
[56] UNSC, *Provisional meeting report, 7289th meeting*, 28 Oct. 2014, S/PV.7289.
[57] UNSC, 'Provisional rules of procedure of the Security Council'.
[58] Gibbings, 'No angry women at the United Nations', pp. 529–31.



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emotional and socio-ethical experiences as a way to understand war.[59] In the Security Council, in some general sense, the 'experience' of the figure of the woman-in-conflict becomes determinative of the 'needs and interests' of historically situated living women in various places.[60] So-called first-hand experience is read as giving 'authentic' form to these inevitable moments of representation. As Spivak reminds us, however, there can be no real claim of authenticity and the brandishing of concrete experience by those situated as elites within socialized capital can only serve to consolidate the international division of labour.[61] We should not pretend that transparency is possible, but rather should carefully attend to the act of representation itself and examine the positions of those engaged in such representational acts.[62]

## Filling the space

Who is it, then, that is here 'considered competent for the purpose' of the Security Council and imagined as being somehow close to this almost mythical figure of the woman-in-conflict in whose interests these debates are being held? What can be gathered about how this figure is understood through thinking about the individuals who hold the position and fill the space in debates? If the logic here is one of the 'authentic' experience holding a measure of authority, whose experience is it to which our attention is directed, and who decides what experience matters?

In each of the statements the speaker is someone coded as biologically female, and in the majority of cases embodies a claim to *relevant* experience through a statement of national origin in a country understood (at least within the UN space) as being in or having emerged from a state of conflict and officially 'on the agenda' of the Council. So Amina Megheirbi, who spoke in the debate in 2012, said immediately after her statement of organizational affiliation and representational authority: 'I have lived through the violence imposed on the Libyan people by a brutal dictator for 42 years.'[63] This point is significant in that from it we can derive some possible explanation for 12 of the 18 speakers being from countries on the African continent (ten of those claiming this explicitly), one from Afghanistan and another from Iraq. These women are meant to bring information useful to the Council, from places in which the peace operations mandated by it are situated—a fact which itself speaks to global politics. However, what if there is a desire, for argument's sake, to go beyond serving the call for immediate utility? What if

[59] Christine Sylvester, *War as experience: contributions from international relations and feminist analysis*, 'War, politics, experience' (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 65.

[60] At least as measured by what the UN or other international organizations 'provide', both materially and otherwise.

[61] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', rev. edn, from the 'History' chapter of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A critique of postcolonial reason: toward a history of the vanishing present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), repr. in Rosalind Morris, ed., *Can the subaltern speak? Reflections on the history of an idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 27.

[62] See Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', in Morris, ed., *Can the subaltern speak? Reflections*, p. 27; Spivak, *A critique of postcolonial reason*, p. ix; also Joan W. Scott, 'The evidence of experience', *Critical Inquiry* 17: 4, 1991, pp. 773–97.

[63] UNSC, *Provisional meeting report, 6722nd meeting*, 23 Feb. 2012, S/PV.6722.

civil society wishes to draw the attention of the Security Council, the UN or the international community more broadly, to a conflict which is not officially under the Council's gaze? What of having civil society representatives from Ukraine or Colombia or Burma or Syria speak? What about using these speaking spaces as an opportunity to shift understandings of these wars and of war as a concept? It is here that the power of the institution of the Security Council again becomes visible, and realist visions of international relations and the post-Second World War hegemony held in place through the UN's structures come rushing back in.

Approving a speaker from one of the countries mentioned above would draw attention to conflicts that members of the Security Council (especially the five permanent members) might prefer not to be considered in the public space of an open debate—whether because of a desire to limit scrutiny of their own involvement or because such consideration might otherwise be viewed as complicating or threatening for them or their allies. So while women from Iraq have addressed the Council on several occasions since 2007, their doing so in the debate held in 2003 was 'considered too controversial at the time'.[64] While a particular speaker may have been explicitly refused at some time, it seems that the Security Council can depend on a level of self-discipline on the part of NGO representatives who look to secure this speaking position. The consequences of their trying to insist on a controversial speaker would be, at least to some member state representatives with whom I have spoken, wasteful of political capital and damaging to longstanding relationships of trust on which the exchange of sensitive information depends—access to information being one of the key imperatives in this policy space. It is because of these potential consequences—and perhaps a self-understanding on the part of NGO representatives at the UN that they bear a responsibility to hold space open for the future and in the interest of a longer-term feminist agenda—that they refrain from controversial action. This holding of space, however, functions in the present to limit the range of individuals who give particularity to the general form of the woman-in-conflict in the Security Council. The production of this subject position then takes place against other subject relations that have both a history and a potential future.

## Institutionalized relationships of access

The most obvious of these relationships is that of any particular speaker or potential speaker with the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security (referred to here as the 'NGO Working Group'). In all but three of the cases considered here, it was the NGO Working Group and its members who facilitated the presence and statements of the individual women appearing before the Council (including the provision of financial support in many cases), and the group's coordinator has filled the position on two occasions.[65] The support of the group has been important to

[64] Gibbings, 'No angry women at the United Nations', p. 524.
[65] UNSC, *Provisional meeting report, 5766th meeting*, 23 Oct. 2007, S/PV.5766; *6005th meeting*, 29 Oct. 2008, S/PV.6005.

women who have come to New York to speak: the city and the UN complex can be intimidating and confusing, and the group's members provide valuable assistance in navigating these spaces successfully. Furthermore, the group's contacts and continuing relationships with member states enable women visiting to set up bilateral meetings that are important for their work at home. Certainly the absence of this support was felt in at least one case where a government chose at the last minute to select an additional civil society speaker beyond those put forward by the NGO Working Group.

This dominant NGO coalition in the New York policy space positions itself as a 'bridge between women's human rights defenders working in conflict-affected situations, and policy makers at UN Headquarters'.[66] However, although the trip offers visiting women opportunities to further their own work, this bridge does not simply provide a path for women to come to New York on their own initiative and address the Council in their own interest. Each speaker delivers her statement not only on her own behalf and that of her local constituency (however that is formulated), but in other capacities too. In ten of the statements, the speaker begins the act of representation by saying that she 'speak[s] on behalf of the NGO Working Group' before then adding: 'I am also here in my capacity as' head/founder/president of/advocate for an organization and constituency in her country of origin. Here, the woman-in-conflict becomes a subject created in subordination to the NGO Working Group on whose behalf she is speaking, and at times she almost disappears from view. In most of the statements, the first-person pronoun 'I' appears very seldom. It appears in the beginning—'I am speaking'; in introducing the substance of the statement—'I want to address/I will address'; and in closing—'I ask/I appeal/I thank'. This first-person pronoun also appears as a reminder of the authority on which the speaker draws as being one connected to war and particular wars through relevant experience. So we see, for example, in the statement of Amina Megheirbi in the debate in February 2012 the majority of her points are made in the voice of 'civil society' expressed as 'we'—'We urge all actors to address the root causes of sexual violence'; just once, towards the end of the statement, she said: 'As a Libyan, I want to emphasize the necessity of holding all parties involved in any act of sexual violence accountable, and that they be prosecuted accordingly.'[67] Similarly, Bineta Diop in November 2012 noted in her statement when detailing the situation in the DRC: 'I saw for myself the degrading situation of women.'[68] The civil society speaker from April 2013, Saran Keita Diakite, provides an example of the way in which the concrete experience of the speaker serves to solidify the authority of the request, demand or recommendation made. In that statement, Diakite said that the NGO Working Group (and she goes on to use the collective 'we') welcomed a report of the Secretary-General in which the urgency of sexual violence in conflict was addressed and around which subsequent recommendations have been built. In

[66] See www.womenpeacesecurity.org and the mission set out there.
[67] UNSC, *Provisional meeting report, 6722nd meeting*, 23 Feb. 2012, S/PV.6722.
[68] UNSC, *Provisional meeting report, 6877th meeting*, 30 Nov. 2012, S/PV.6877.



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introducing this report, Diakite established the authority (her own and that of the NGO Working Group) to be staking these claims by stating: 'The report also highlights the devastating impact of sexual violence in the conflict in my own country, Mali.'[69]

The presence of the NGO Working Group is also apparent in the content of statements and the recommendations that most of them contain. The sheer number of specific issues crammed together in one statement and the use of previously agreed 'advocacy language' remind the reader (audience) that these statements are made by/on behalf of the NGO Working Group as an ongoing advocacy presence at the UN. As has been noted elsewhere, and in my experience, these statements are not simply drafted by the women speaking. Rather, they are part of a practice whereby speakers are 'typically briefed and their speeches written in collaboration with the NGO Working Group … [with the] specifics of the particular country and its women's activities … framed into a motivational and inspiring story.'[70] Activists new to the international advocacy space are likely to trust the opinions of the group and/or may not feel confident enough to challenge their views. Although this is certainly not always the case, in general these dynamics of power mean that the statement will inevitably be the product of a compromise among the desires of the various members of a group to see their 'pet project'/focus, issue or approach taken up in this rare opportunity to put forward an NGO position within a formal setting. There is also in the tone of the statements a consciousness of the perceived need to maintain the group's own credibility within the UN.[71]

It seems, then, that in order to understand the production of the figure of the woman-in-conflict through these debates, we have to contend with another layer of representation and the positions of the various members of this (not entirely fixed or monolithic) coalition—a group whose institutional membership rose from the five in the initial group engaged in the adoption of UNSCR 1325 to a high point of 16 before falling somewhat to twelve (including mainstream human rights and humanitarian organizations).[72] It is not possible here to examine thoroughly this group's positioning in the policy space, nor do I want to suggest that it wholly determines the content and form of the civil society statements. It is

[69] UNSC, *Provisional meeting report, 6948th meeting*, 17 April 2013, S/PV.6948.

[70] Gibbings, 'No angry women at the United Nations', p. 526. This practice is one I both observed and participated in (to a limited extent) during the time I worked at the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and has been confirmed in my discussions with current member representatives in the NGO Working Group.

[71] For similar concerns in relation to statements made at 'Arria formula' meetings—the off-the-record briefings by civil society groups held by the Security Council—see Gibbings, 'No angry women at the United Nations', p. 526.

[72] The initial members of the NGO Working Group were Amnesty International, Hague Appeal for Peace, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, International Alert and WILPF. In many ways the Working Group was, at this point, fairly international in character. All but one of the organizations had offices in New York in order to be able to pursue advocacy at the UN's headquarters there. International Alert, the London-based organization, had a research presence in several countries around the world and the work of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children was also concerned with a multitude of geographically dispersed conflicts and refugee situations. Amnesty International and WILPF could, however, be seen as international or transnational organizations, each having members and local 'chapters' or 'sections' in multiple countries. WILPF itself is described by Cockburn as a venerable, formal and widely recognized transnational network: Cockburn, *From where we stand*, p. 132.

worth observing, however, that it introduces another layer of representation, and that several practices are visible in the civil society statements that make evident the considerable presence and power of this formation.

Although the NGO Working Group is well known in the UN policy community, and its coordinator is a highly visible figure, the names of its member organizations are fully listed in the version of the text that is circulated in hard copy to governments during the debate (although these are seldom included in the version delivered in speech). This could be read as an attempt by the NGO Working Group to account for a shifting coalition or to display an extensive and inclusive constituency. But it is also, according to some participants in statement drafting, done in an attempt to make very clear who is *not* represented. It is a careful dance with the access and power the position of civil society allows. The logic here is that participation in debates meets the desire of governments to obtain the civil society 'stamp of approval'; that it displays their compliance with the norm of consultation (the manufacturing of consent in the service of hegemony?). If there is a claim to be speaking on behalf of some broad and amorphous 'civil society', then it can be claimed that *all* have participated and 'consented' in some way to the outcomes. For civil society groups, taking advantage of the access that satisfying this desire affords must be carefully balanced with the risk of being co-opted. The limits of consent must be outlined (through explicitly listing membership) without undermining that which confers position (the authority of a broad constituency implied by the list's length and breadth).

We see here another instance of the general and the specific in tension. The NGO Working Group is attempting to capture the credibility and authority of both the general breadth of the 'represented groups' and the specificity of the material and speaking presence of an individual woman and the 'experience' she brings to the meeting. This sort of negotiation between generality and specificity is visible at different points in these statements; it is mostly the experience of the embodied speaking woman that is positioned as bringing the specificity and support of 'the real' to the generality of this coalition's advocacy positions. And so again we circle back to the subject position of the speaker.

## Embodying the woman-in-conflict

As already noted, who comes to occupy the position of speaker is already constrained by which countries the Security Council is willing to discuss. Furthermore, NGOs seem expected to carry the material cost of the speaker's attendance in order to claim the privilege. Unsurprisingly, there is not usually much money available to fund extensive travel, although individual member states have been known to specifically support such journeys. Obtaining a US visa to attend the session carries its own costs and complications, and is a reminder of US hegemonic control of ostensibly international spaces. First recourse, then, is to candidates who are in the United States for some reason, either temporarily or in a more settled situation. While this is understandable, by implication individuals in these circum-



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stances are often already inserted into the circuit of global capital in a particularly privileged way. Many of the speakers do come directly from the global South, but these are primarily the indigenous but elite women upon whom the UN so often relies. That these are elite women can be read from their stated occupational identities. Several of the speakers are lawyers—at least one a practising magistrate. Several have, at different points in time, held senior positions in the UN bureaucracy or in their national government (a reminder of the ease with which individuals in this area of policy move between sectors and thus adopt new subject positions).[73] Others speak as founders and heads of national-level NGOs presenting the experience of 'their work', thereby also revealing their elite status.

It may be inevitable that the position of the woman-in-conflict at these debates will be occupied by someone of the elite class. For a start, to be even minimally legible in the Security Council space this person has to be articulate in one of the five UN languages (preferably English, which is the language that dominates at the UN's New York headquarters). This linguistic capacity in many places implies a high degree of education and thus a particular class background and socio-economic status. Furthermore, the majority of the statements acknowledge the UN as the pre-eminent actor in relation to peace and security, and so the woman-in-conflict—particularly in the last five years—has to be represented by someone with a sophisticated grasp of the workings of the UN and its language, and how these interact with her national context. This may be indicative of civil society having to develop and display in these statements a sophisticated knowledge of UN documents, processes and relationships, which gives them the ability to credibly and productively engage with the increasingly detailed and complex framework that has developed in the UN as the WPS agenda has matured and become linked to other agendas. The specificity of the institutional requests made—such as calls for support for particular appointments or the establishment of bodies with particular features—also indicates an awareness of the ease with which governments are able to ignore more general calls for support. Furthermore, the content of the statements, particularly in the last six years, seems to reflect a keen awareness of and involvement in UN institutional issues of the moment and campaigns of particular concern to UN-focused international NGOs in New York. The statements are used, for example, to elicit support for the appointment of a Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Women, Peace and Security; for the negotiation of an arms trade treaty; and for a new UN entity for women. While such claims are important, their expression does take away from the statements' functioning as the means by which the Security Council could come to understand better the lived experiences of women in war and what it is that they need and want.

The focus on UN institutional policy and structures may in part explain why so many civil society speakers are lawyers. The national legal system is a very visible point of contact between UN policy and people in countries in which

[73] Particularly, perhaps, those in the diaspora who are coded as authentic and credible but have been 'proven' legible to the West.



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the UN operates. A speaker *au fait* with the workings of law as an institution is better able to traverse the technicalities of the UN system and credibly link it to what is required nationally. But concern for this sort of legibility and credibility is not the only factor driving the selection (by the NGO Working Group) of such individuals; also in play is one of the key principles driving the WPS agenda—and one that is evidence of the success of feminist interventions: that the woman-in-conflict should be understood as someone who is empowered and not simply a victim. Gibbings notes—and this seems particularly true of the statements in the years immediately following UNSCR 1325's adoption—that the most valued narratives in the UN are those that are 'positive, hopeful and future oriented'.[74] The attempt to modify and resist the victim narrative remains important in the civil society statements. In fact, on more than one occasion these women have made claims along the lines of that in the 2009 statement: 'we women are not only victims in conflict, but agents for positive change'.[75] By their occupational and organizational status, these individual women are coded as other than victims. However, this identification is somewhat diluted by the content of their statements. Whereas earlier statements—from 2004 to 2006—were almost entirely focused on specific aspects of the crisis from which the speakers emerged and at times directly addressed the politics of those situations, in later years those circumstances have been given less prominence. The statements at the most recent debate, in 2015, may be indicative of another shift in that they were far more situation-specific and overtly political interventions that returned to messages of ending militarism with which advocacy for UNSCR 1325 began. However, on the whole the civil society statements, even when they address and promote specific political positions, do so in ways that are consonant with the UN's norms of diplomatic speech.[76] For example, civil society, state and UN representatives alike avoid what is seen as impolite or angry language, or statements directly critical of particular governments.[77] The experience of the speaking woman who is 'empowered' and 'powerful' remains in many cases one that channels the experience of anonymous victims in need of UN support or action—again setting up a negotiation between the general and specific and producing the woman-in-conflict embodied by the speaker in the role of supporting subordinate.

I do not mean by the exposition so far to portray these individual speakers as entirely lacking agency or as speaking in what Spivak refers to as 'the native-informant style subject of oral histories who is patronizingly considered *incapable of strategy toward us*' (emphasis added).[78] Certainly there are those for whom the opportunity to speak at the UN offered a significant chance to meet directly with policy-makers in government and the UN in service of their own goals. Nor is it necessarily an opportunity that is automatically accepted, as is evidenced by the

[74] Gibbings, 'No angry women at the United Nations', p. 527, also describes the norms requiring particular narratives of hope that were visible in the WPS community in the early 2000s.
[75] UNSC, *Provisional meeting report, 6196th meeting*, 5 Oct. 2009, S/PV.6196.
[76] Gibbings, 'No angry women at the United Nations'.
[77] Gibbings, 'No angry women at the United Nations', p. 524.
[78] Spivak, *Death of a discipline*.



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comment of the 2015 civil society speaker Julienne Lusenge that she had to think 'long and hard' before taking up the offer.[79] But for each woman whose experience as speaker is a manifestation of personal agency, there is another moment of production of the subject position of the woman-in-conflict that looms larger than the individual. The embodied speaker is not simply a revelation of some 'real' beyond representation. Rather, there is an inevitability of representation here that is also deeply embedded in the practices of the Security Council's WPS policy-making community.

## Conclusion

The figure of the woman-in-conflict is a deeply significant one in the discourse of the Women, Peace and Security policy community. How this figure comes to be understood by that community in turn affects what policies and programmes are thought appropriate to meeting the needs and interests of the uncountable and anonymous women affected by conflict. For many feminist advocates, transforming how these women's lives and experiences are imagined or understood has been an important aspect of the WPS agenda at the Security Council. Over time, however, criticisms have been levelled that this agenda has failed to live up to the transformative promise of UNSCR 1325 and that, for example, women continue to be portrayed primarily as victims in need of protection. Many explanations have been advanced for this disjuncture; I have argued that it is critical that the day-to-day practices of the WPS policy community be part of the analysis. This article has explored the civil society statements at the Security Council's open debates on WPS as a way to reveal some of these practices and their effects. The statements themselves remain important opportunities for feminist advocates to influence how the figure of the woman-in-conflict is understood—and thus also to influence both overarching policy discourse and its implementation. They are, however, inevitably complex moments that reveal the woman-in-conflict as a subject constructed through layers of representation and deeply embedded in the practices and relationships of power in the policy community. It may be that many of these practices and relationships cannot easily be changed. However, perhaps shifting the gaze, and accounting for the operation and effects of these otherwise banal practices and everyday relationships, will offer an opportunity for feminists (and others advocating social justice) to engage in and through institutional spaces in more effective ways.

[79] UNSC, *Provisional meeting report, 7533rd meeting*, 13 Oct. 2015, S/PV.7533.