

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Conceptual resources for gilding the cracks

Non-essentialist vulnerability and epistemic justice

Elisa PIRAS

Sant'Anna School for Advanced Studies, Pisa

Abstract

Recent academic debates concerning the WPS agenda have highlighted the existence of several cracks undermining the conceptualisation as well as the operationalisation and implementation of the principles and actions stemming from the WPS framework. After proposing to consider the WPS Agenda as a norm lab and recognising the urgency to repair its conceptual cracks, this article critically analyses two main conceptual weaknesses limiting the emancipatory potential of the Agenda, namely the conceptualisation of identity and agency that it reflects and projects, arguing that the former reveals a stereotypical and ambiguous formulation, while the latter is thin and unfit for sustaining a transformative political project. The article discusses insights from the discussion on epistemic (in)justice, which originated from the work of Miranda Fricker, arguing that they are valuable heuristic resources for developing a WPS conceptual framework able to escape the essentialist trap, identifying the injustices done to women and men as discriminated and marginalised subjects in their capacity as knowers and active contributors to the dialogues concerning the planning and deployment of measures for conflict and post-conflict management.

Keywords: WPS Agenda; Gender; Vulnerability; Essentialism; Epistemic justice

Introduction

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda has been discussed in domestic and international debates concerning security for more than two decades and it has raised curiosity, enthusiasm and disillusionment in a number of scholars and commentators interested in IR and gender studies. Despite the well-studied limits to its operationalisation and implementation (George & Shepherd, 2016; Kirby & Shepherd, 2016; Deiana & McDonagh, 2018; Cohn & Duncanson, 2020; Scheuermann & Zürn, 2020) and the persisting ambivalences and omissions that characterise its formulation (Hagen, 2016; Jansson & Eduards, 2016; de Almagro, 2018; de la Rosa & Lázaro, 2019; Duncanson, 2019; Parashar, 2019; Duriesmith, 2020; Haastrup & Hagen, 2021), the concepts and ideas at the heart of UNSC Resolution 1325 (Res. 1325) and of the subsequent nine resolutions included in the WPS Agenda have entered a number of security-related discussions in a wide variety of fora and they have spread throughout hundreds of policy documents issued by states as well as by regional and international organisations.¹

¹ Paul Kirby and Laura Shepherd (2021, pp. 9ff) have mapped the core body of policy texts adopted between 2000 and 2018 within the framework of the WPS Agenda, distinguishing three subsets, i.e. documents issued by UN offices and agencies, states' National Action Plans (NAPs) and other WPS-related documents issued by states or by international and regional organisations. They counted a total of 213 WPS policy documents.

CONTACT Elisa Piras, elisa.piras@santannapisa.it, at DIRPOLIS Institute, Sant'Anna School for Advanced Studies, Pisa

After more than twenty years from the start of this potentially transformative normative project, the WPS Agenda exhibits visible conceptual and practical cracks which undermine its robustness, i.e., its ability to gain consensus and to constrain actors' behaviours within the international realm (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2019). Aiming to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the WPS Agenda as a relevant case for studying the dynamics of norm diffusion and norm contestation and introducing the concept of 'norm lab', this article engages specifically with conceptual cracks, i.e. the ambiguous concepts which leave the WPS Agenda open to discursive and nondiscursive forms of contestation and dissent. Such practices eventually risk undermining the robustness (and resilience) of the norm of gender equality applied to the field of activities related to international security. Conceptual cracks constitute elements of fragility, but their fixing offers precious opportunities for making the norm at the core of the WPS Agenda more robust and resilient and for adding value to it, as happens in the Japanese art of Kintsugi. This art, which originated in the 1400s, consists of repairing broken pots by filling the cracks with gold, combining craftsmanship and art to redefine the form and uses of a common object. This article argues that in order to fix the WPS Agenda's conceptual cracks diagnostic capacity and creative effort are needed; scholars willing to gild the cracks might look beyond the disciplinary boundaries of IR and security studies for heuristic resources.

The article proposes an original reconstruction and critical discussion of the main conceptual cracks undermining the transformative potential of the WPS Agenda. The conceptual analysis is based on the critical study of a heterogeneous body of literature and it connects and elaborates on inputs elaborated by scholars from different academic disciplines: security studies, international relations theory, political philosophy. Thus, it adopts an interdisciplinary approach to theoretically investigate processes of norm production and diffusion in the international realm, looking at how the norm of gender mainstreaming in the field of security, conflict management and peacebuilding has been produced and reproduced after the launch of the WPS Agenda. The critical discussion highlights the tensions and aporias characterising the discursive practices and interactions among the actors involved.

Relying on constructivist assumptions, the second section conceptualizes the WPS Agenda as a 'norm lab', in order to highlight the complex and dynamic processes of norm creation and norm diffusion. Picking up on the insights provided by scholars and practitioners who have developed critical readings of the WPS Agenda, the conceptual analysis developed in the third section offers a brief but systematic critical reconstruction of how identity and agency have been framed within this ambitious normative project, accounting for the main claims for conceptual changes that have emerged with the occasion of the 2020 milestone.² Then, in order to detect conceptual resources that might be useful to gild the cracks, the article looks at contemporary political philosophy and it presents a theoretical exploration of the discussion on epistemic (in)justices, i.e. injustices emerging within processes of

Between 2019 and 2022 two UNSC resolutions have been added to the corpus of the WPS Agenda (Res. 2467 and Res. 2493 in 2019) and 16 NAPs have been adopted during the same period of time. For the present article, it is not necessary to attempt at making an exact count; it suffices to notice that the total number of WPS policy documents is increasing at a steady pace – similarly to what happened in 2010, the celebrations of the 20 years of the WPS might have produced a boost of policy documents' adoption. Res. 1325 and all the UNSC resolutions pertaining to the WPS Agenda are accessible on the dedicated UN Women website: <https://wps.unwomen.org/resolution/>

² Although conceptual inconsistencies and ambiguities have been detected since the adoption of Res. 1325, this article will focus especially on those critiques that have been expressed during the recent debates concerning the twentieth anniversary of Res. 1325, in articles and books published approximately between 2019 and 2021.

knowledge production and reproduction, discussing its potential contribution to the redefinition of identity and agency within the WPS Agenda.

The WPS Agenda as a 'norm lab'

Recently, the WPS Agenda has been considered under the light of the literature on norm diffusion and norm contestation in order to grasp its achievements and acknowledge its limits (de Almagro, 2018; True & Wiener, 2019; Kirby & Shepherd, 2021). Based on the constructivist assumption that the ideas circulating at the international level drive actors' behaviours and thus produce effects on the international structure, early studies on norm diffusion aimed at explaining how norms, intended as *standards of appropriate behaviour*, emerge and gain consensus within the international realm (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). More recently, constructivist scholars have proposed new formulations of norms as complex social phenomena carrying 'specific contextualised meanings' which might originate dynamics of contestation and persuasion (Petrova, 2016; Wiener, 2018), or as processes, i.e. ideas in the making that change in response to internal as well as external inputs (Wiener, 2009; Krook & True, 2010). Generally speaking, these theoretical accounts have contributed to shifting the analytical focus from ideas to practices and processes in the study of international norms (McCourt, 2016; 2022). The practices of norms' contestation or dissent which manifests itself through discourses and behaviours is especially important for explaining how norms evolve over time: different and potentially incompatible meanings of norms compete to gain consensus and sometimes minoritarian interpretations of widely accepted norms might challenge established ones when their proponents exploit favourable conditions and publicly propose alternative understandings (Stimmer & Wisken, 2019; True & Wiener, 2019). Also, playing with the plurality of meanings that can be attached to any norm – or, to say it differently, exploiting a norm's vagueness – is a convenient possibility for actors who do not have the power to resist a certain norm in diplomatic settings but at the same time do not have the will to abide by it. This explains why even norms that are largely uncontested within the international realm, such as the WPS Agenda, do not constrain actors' behaviours: they obtain 'validity', or rhetorical acceptance, but they lack 'facticity', that is, the ability of constraining behaviours (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2019). In similar cases, thus, discursive allegiance and nondiscursive noncompliance are combined and the effect of this ambivalent conduct is to weaken the norm's strength and to reduce its transformative potential.³

The brief discussion of the literature on norm diffusion and norm contestation presented above explains why the WPS Agenda has been considered a valuable case study for testing and revising the explanations about norms' 'life cycle' (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 892). However, it is apparent that the WPS agenda is not a norm like women's suffrage or humanitarian law – the first examples analysed by Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink in their path-breaking study on the relationship between norms and political change in international relations – or of the abolition of the death penalty, which has been investigated by Ian Manners (2002) in his influential attempt to theorise the EU's potential as norm entrepreneur in terms of a strategic resource for developing its normative power. As a matter of fact, the WPS Agenda embraces not only the ten resolutions constituting

³ It is important to keep in mind that actors' attitudes towards a certain norm are not irreversible. They might change over time, as shown by the UK's shift from 'norm spoiler' to 'norm champion' that occurred throughout the negotiations of the Oslo Process to Ban Cluster Munitions, from 2006 to 2008 (Petrova, 2016). Of course, opposite shifts from 'norm champion' to 'norm spoiler' can occur, too – as for governments that, despite having signed Res. 1325, directly or indirectly obstruct the domestic implementation of the WPS Agenda (Sanders, 2018). Such examples show the importance of dialogue and persuasion in discursive interactions on international norms in order to create, maintain and enlarge the consensus for transformative norms.

different articulations of the conceptual nexus between women and security, but also the institutional architecture that this impressive normative corpus has generated, as well as the many actors that participate to the norms' formulation and implementation. Thus, the WPS Agenda has been recently defined as a 'norm bundle' (True & Wiener, 2019) or a 'policy ecosystem' (Kirby & Shepherd, 2021),⁴ in order to better account for its complexity, porosity and dynamism. Unlike the norm on women's suffrage, which aimed at affirming a universal principle of equality through the well-established practice of voting, the WPS Agenda advocates the critical deconstruction of many consolidated practices and the introduction of new concepts and practices in a wide-ranging field of activities. Unlike the norm regarding the abolition of death penalty, which has been intermittently proposed in UN fora but has not gained global consensus, since 2000 the WPS Agenda has been constantly present on the UNSC's agenda and it is now considered to be an integral part of the Council's mandate. Although limited, its implementation record is far from being 'derisory' (Longhurst, 2021, p. 53): overall, the WPS Agenda has proved to be a resilient project, with high potential for changing discourses and practices connected to international security in many areas of the world.⁵

As of September 2021, 98 countries have adopted at least one National Action Plan (NAP) for the implementation of UNSC Res. 1325 and of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. Over the last two decades, the implementation of this landmark resolution has had its ups and downs and it has progressed unevenly. On the one hand, there are countries, like Canada, Denmark and Sweden, which show remarkable continuity in their efforts to implement the WPS Agenda, through the adoption of several NAPs – for instance, Denmark, which was the first country to adopt a Plan, adopted its fourth in 2020 – as well as through the active participation to the international debate concerning the WPS Agenda. In particular, since 2014 Sweden has associated its commitment to the promotion of the WPS Agenda to the endeavour of adopting a feminist foreign policy and more in general to project abroad the norm of gender equality as a Swedish 'brand' (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016; Jezierska & Towns, 2018), while Canada has repeatedly highlighted its gender-sensitive approach to the conduct of international relations during the last years, notably through the adoption of a Feminist International Assistance Policy in 2017 (Aggestam

⁴ In their study focused on norm contestation, Jacqui True and Antje Wiener (2019) argue that, in order to better appreciate its specificities with respect to other normative agendas, the WPS Agenda should be considered a 'norm bundle', consisting of fundamental norms (e.g. the prohibition against the use of sexual violence in conflict) as well as of 'hidden' or 'emerging' norms (e.g. women's right to inclusion in peace processes). More recently, Paul Kirby and Laura Shepherd (2021, pp. 3–4) propose to adopt an 'ecological perspective' and to consider the WPS Agenda as 'a complex field of ongoing activity with defined but porous boundaries, within which multiple entities and processes interact' in order to promote the 'supernorm of gender equality'. According to them, an ecological perspective would be better able to embrace the plurality of actors participating to the development of the WPS Agenda as well as to the different claims made on a wide range of issues, 'because it does not presume a set horizon but instead treats the field of practice as inherently open and plural' (ibidem, p. 2).

⁵ The articles included in this Special Issue that focus on the empirical and conceptual cracks of the WPS Agenda seem to confirm the mixed record of the implementation processes in geographical areas as diverse as the Eastern Mediterranean and the Post-Soviet regions (Bellou & Chainoglu, 2022; Myrntinen, 2022). However, the studies looking especially at the interplay between governments and civil societies that occurs throughout the processes of NAP formulations reveal that the WPS Agenda has opened some promising spaces for participation (Borrillo, 2022; Cittadini & della Valle, 2022; della Valle, 2022). Notwithstanding the permanence of macroscopic governmental resistances and backlashes to the mainstreaming of inclusive policies in the field of security (Dogan 2022), it seems that the transformative potential of the Agenda is not limited to the inclusion of women in police or military forces, but transcends the security sector, contributing to the transformation of states' attitudes towards international humanitarian law (Nagel et al., 2022) and to the emergence of novel forms of transnational activism on behalf of women's rights (Budabin & Hudson, 2022).

et al., 2019). On the other hand, other countries – among those, regional powers like Egypt, Israel, Turkey, and Security Council’s permanent members like China and Russia – have not yet actively engaged in the implementation of the WPS Agenda through the adoption of any NAP, though they have occasionally contributed to the debates within international fora like the UN, NATO and OSCE (Basu, 2016; Lukatela, 2016; Degirmencioglu & Kahana-Dagan, 2020).

To some extent, the current pandemics has downsized the attention paid by governments and media to the many initiatives that had been organized for celebrating the twentieth anniversary of Res. 1325. However, the debate on the WPS Agenda has not stopped. On October 29, 2020 the UN Security Council was asked to vote for passing a resolution on the WPS Agenda proposed by Russia.⁶ Having failed to obtain the required number of votes (5 votes in favor, 0 votes against, 10 abstentions), Draft Res. 1054 was not adopted. Among the main problematic aspects of the draft text, the abstaining states highlighted its preposterousness and shallowness. Moreover, they regretted that the many suggestions for the text’s improvement expressed during the negotiations had gone unheeded and several governments highlighted their fear that Russia and China – the latter, together with Indonesia, South Africa and Vietnam voted in favour of the Russian proposal – had the intention to water down the WPS Agenda.⁷ During a heated press conference held the day after the vote, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation at the UN Vassily Nebenzia affirmed that the draft was intended as ‘a commemorative text that was not meant to “add to” or “deduct from” the topic’ and claimed that the abstentions revealed the

“(…) attempts by certain countries to usurp and establish a monopoly on the protection of the rights of women while denying others the right to take part in the dialogue on how to improve the standing of women, how to work on the establishment of terminology and produce recommendations in this regard”.⁸

On the same day, the Permanent Mission of Russia at the UN issued an official Explanation of Vote, lamenting the ‘unconstructive behavior’ showed by those members of the Security Council who had ‘no genuine will to compromise, bridge the differences and search for solutions’ and made WPS ‘a controversial topic’. Moreover, taking note of the fact that ‘apparently the Security Council has reached the critical mass of resolutions on WPS’, the Russian government stated its intention to act accordingly in the future, implicitly threatening to disregard the principles and actions envisaged by the WPS Agenda.⁹

Leaving diplomatic nastiness aside, this episode illustrates that the WPS Agenda is a *norm lab*, a complex and multidimensional field, where actors try to exert their power and contribute to the production of knowledge (Bourdieu 1993) in order to propose competing interpretations of the same norm through discursive and nondiscursive means. Within the norm lab, different options for the norm’s operationalisation and implementation are envisaged, tested and evaluated. Nebenzia’s words also reveal the (perceived) existence of asymmetries of information within the international realm concerning the issue of women’s rights and the power struggles that, behind the veil of alleged consensus characterise the

⁶ The text of the draft is available at: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/s-2020-1054.php>

⁷ The brief note on the explanation of vote issued by the Estonian government is indicative of the positions held by abstaining states: [Explanation of vote on draft resolution on Women, Peace and Security – Estonia in UN \(mfa.ee\)](https://www.mfa.ee/en/press-releases/2020-10-29-explanation-of-vote-on-draft-resolution-on-women-peace-and-security-estonia)

⁸ The press conference transcription is available at: https://russiaun.ru/en/news/press_conference301020

⁹ The official note *Explanation of Vote on a draft resolution on Women, Peace and Security* is available at: https://russiaun.ru/en/news/wps_3010

development of the WPS Agenda. Contrary to Nebenzia's interpretation, however, the political and controversial character of the WPS Agenda is no news; rather, it has accompanied it since the very beginning of its life cycle, resurfacing during every negotiation concerning WPS resolutions (Tryggestad, 2009; 2018). However, Nebenzia hits the nail on the head when he claims that when it comes to discussing and deciding on the issues related to women, peace and security, some actors – although it is questionable if these coincide with those represented by the Russian government – are not fairly recognised in their capacity as knowers, i.e., they might suffer *epistemic injustice* (Fricker, 2007); therefore, their contribution to the definition, operationalization and implementation of the norm is not valorised. The question of epistemic injustice will be analysed in detail later, but here it suffices to note that epistemic asymmetries has received little attention so far, although recently epistemic violence has been mentioned in postcolonial critiques on the mainstream interpretations of the WPS Agenda (Parashar, 2019).

Defining the WPS Agenda as a norm lab, with respect to the alternative definitions of policy ecosystem or norm bundle (True & Wiener, 2019; Kirby & Shepherd, 2021), allows to better highlight the open and experimental character of the normative framework in the making while focusing on the interplay between discursive and nondiscursive forms of contestation and dissent as well as on the co-constitutive relation of its conceptual and practical elements. It stresses the fundamental role of academic research for the study and development of the WPS Agenda and furthers the reflection on the possibility of a 'WPS episteme', a field of scientific investigation, which has been thematized by Laura Shepherd (2020, p. 625). Also, confirming the insight about the porous borders of the policy ecosystem, the research lab metaphor hints at the constant expansion of the topics considered (Cohn & Duncanson, 2020; Kirby & Shepherd, 2021, pp. 14–16;) as well as at the need to pinpoint useful conceptual and practical tools developed in other fields of research (Basu & Eichler, 2017, pp. 211–214). Moreover, it opens up to the possibility that the resources developed for the study of the WPS Agenda might generate spillover effects and cross-fertilisation in other fields of investigation. Since any research requires adequate funding and reliable data, the definition of a norm lab serves to draw attention on two of the main obstacles that the WPS Agenda faces in view of the third decade of its life cycle, namely the lack of consistent financial funding and the lack of gender-disaggregated data, which risk to thwart its implementation or to allow only for piecemeal applications of its ambitious normative framework (Newby & O'Malley, 2021, p. 2). Furthermore, it helps to consider the shortcomings of the norm's operationalisation and implementation not as evidence of the project's failure, but as the result of experiments that can be replicated with more attention to their planning and realisation. In this perspective, the hurried and improvident Russian attempt at passing a 'commemorative' resolution and the resistances which emerged within the Security Council is not proof of the reach of a normative saturation point within the international realm on the issue of women, peace and security; rather, it is the signal that different understandings of the conceptual elements of the WPS Agenda, revealing political divergencies and allowing normative contestation (True & Wiener, 2019), persist and risk to undermine its strength.

The WPS Agenda as a 'norm lab'

Considering the WPS Agenda as a norm lab, this section analyses its conceptual tenets to assess the norm's overall transformative potential and to shed light on the cracks that undermine the (current interpretations of the) norm of gender mainstreaming in the security sector. The discussion proposed here relies on Alexander Wendt's influential understanding of the so-called 'agency-structure problem', which 'situates agents and social structures in relation to one another' (Wendt, 1987, p. 337) and investigates the ontological and

epistemological elements of this dyadic relationship. Proposing an understanding of the WPS Agenda as a norm lab constitutes an attempt at redefining the agency-structure problem within a specific sector of activity from a gender-sensitive perspective. While the structure indicates the *quid* that the WPS Agenda aims at transforming – that is, the norms and practices which characterize institutions and policies aimed at the prevention and resolution of conflicts and at the deployment of peacebuilding operations – the agency broadly understood spells out who might bring about the transformation of this structure, and how. For the sake of the present analysis, then, Wendt's understanding of agency is fine-tuned by distinguishing its separate but connected conceptual elements, namely *identity* (who are the agents?) and *agency* (how does agents' capacity to act within a certain structure in order to transform it manifest itself?). Keeping in mind that the definitions of agents and agency underpinning the WPS Agenda have been changing during the last twenty years and that they will continue to do so, the analysis' main goal is diagnostic: it aspires to shed light on the conceptual cracks that limit the transformative potential of the WPS Agenda, before proposing – in the next section of the article – possible conceptual resources for gilding these cracks.

Identity: victims of war or agents of peace?

Since the elaboration of the text of Res. 1325, the debate on women, peace and security has been represented as a *discursive intervention* undertaken by feminist scholars and practitioners to unpack the hegemonic discourse on security, revealing its gendered implicit dimensions and spotlighting the hidden co-protagonists of conflicts, namely (non-combatant) women and the people that they take care of (children, elderly people, sick and disabled people). However, in so doing it has reproduced the binary and stereotypical conceptions of male perpetrators/female victims and male protectors/female victims; moreover, it has reinforced the distinction between a public sphere where politics and violence occur daily and a private sphere where women conduct their caring lives in their maternal, filial and bridal capacity within a supposedly pacific environment. Although these stereotypical representations have been challenged since the auroral stage of the discussions that preceded the adoption of Res. 1325 by influential feminist scholars such as Catharine MacKinnon (1993),¹⁰ the WPS Agenda reproduced the dichotomous, stereotypical and essentialising thinking focusing primarily on conflict-related violence. Hence, its transformative potential was reduced.

Especially in its early articulations, the WPS Agenda has represented women – always together with children and other vulnerable groups – as the blameless victims of violence, while men have been mainly depicted as the primary agents of violence. Women are usually included in groups of people who are defined as vulnerable: vulnerability becomes an

¹⁰ In her analysis of the available evidence concerning human rights' violations harming women that were occurring on a mass scale in the Balkan conflict, McKinnon challenged the simplistic yet widely held association between gender-based violence and war – according to which women arguing instead that women are target of sexual and reproductive violence even in peace time and often within their homes, by family members. With reference to the gendered experiences of violence in war contexts within the broader framework of the just war theory, Jan Bethke Elshtain (1982) deconstructed the archetypes of the 'beautiful souls' and 'just warriors' (and their variations) used to represent women and men well before the start of the debates that eventually led to the drafting and signing of the WPS Agenda. According to Elshtain, these archetypes have been perpetuating the social imagery of war, from time to time associating all women to the 'collective projection of a pure, rarified, self-sacrificing, otherworldly and pacific Other' (ibidem, p. 342). As a feminist reaction to the imposition of this imagery, she proposed to substitute the archetypical images of war with the relational and peaceful images of 'maternal thinking' – a solution embraced and developed by influential feminist scholars (Ruddick, 1993; Cohn, 2014) and criticized by others for its pro-family stance and essentialising effects (Dietz, 1985; Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015).

ontological state for women, children, elderly people and sick or disabled people: they are inherently vulnerable. Thus, vulnerability is neither a common condition of all human beings nor a social label: rather, it is a tattoo, an indelible mark defining the identity and social perception of people belonging to specific groups (Cohn, 2014). Drawing on Adriana Cavarero's feminist reflection, one might notice that in contemporary discourses on international security women and other groups of non-combatant agents within conflict and post-conflict contexts are conceived of in terms of *inclined vulnerability*. While men fight, negotiate and rebuild as (self-)standing autonomous individuals acting 'on a vertical axis', vulnerable people are depicted as inclined, unbalanced, always caring for someone or in need of care (Cavarero, 2014). This kind of vulnerability is indeed stereotypical – based on sedimented impressions of traditional representations of the female condition, epitomized by caring or grieving holy virgins – and it risks crystallising the identities of people belonging to certain groups, depriving them of the possibility to interact as equals and peers with 'vertical' (male) individuals. There is another problematic aspect with women being often represented primarily as caregivers: although they contribute actively to peace and war economies and to post-war society reconstruction, their needs and claims as workers or entrepreneurs are rarely taken into account and this limits their empowerment opportunities.

It is true that Res. 1325 aimed at highlighting women's transformative potential in the field of conflict prevention and conflict resolution, launching and spreading globally the trope of women as 'agents of peace': it stated 'the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peace-building' and stressed 'the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution'. Moreover, in art. 13 it acknowledged the existence of female ex-combatants and encouraged all the parties involved in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) to take into account their needs. However, in Res. 1325 – as well as in other WPS resolutions and documents – women are represented as men's 'others':¹¹ all the calls and urges to take action are addressed to 'actors' and 'parties' whose identity is gendered: it is up to (*male*) combatants, mediators, peacekeepers, to 'take into account the particular needs of women and girls' and to take 'special measures to protect women and girls', especially as far as (conflict-related) gender-based violence is concerned. Hence, although one cannot easily conclude that the WPS Agenda only proposes stereotypical and essentialised images of women, it is possible to shed light on its ambiguity, a tension between women depicted either as victims of conflict or as agents of peace, that reveals a macroscopical conceptual crack.

After the adoption of UNSC Resolution 1820, the stress on conflict-related sexual violence reinforced the stereotypical characterisation of women as (sexually objectified) victims, entrapping them in the condition of defenceless, vulnerable and traumatised 'others' of combatants while depriving them of the possibility to define themselves in non-victimising terms. The suffering resulting from a trauma is often a basis on which the subject

¹¹ Simone de Beauvoir (1949) has introduced in the contemporary feminist debate the idea, rooted in her reading of Hegel's depiction of the 'Other' within the framework of the master-slave dialectic relationship, that men discursively construct women as 'absolute others', denying them a fully-fledged subjectivity and relegating them to an alienated status. This idea has been influential among feminist scholars, although during the last decades critical interpretations have been advanced to overcome the problematic notion of agency proposed by de Beauvoir. For instance, Luce Irigaray (1995) challenged the singularity of the subject and advanced a collective and relational understanding of subjectivity instead, in order 'to extricate the two from the one, the two from the many, the other from the same, and to do so horizontally, suspending the authority of the One' (ibidem, p. 12).

(re)constructs his or her own identity, but it is not necessarily articulated in victimizing terms and it does not need to produce a proliferation of victims, which would create incentives to transform the imaginary of victimhood into a power device (Fassin & Rechtman, 2007). Within the conceptual framework of the WPS Agenda, adopting a 'women-as-victims identity' and an idea of harm centered on physical suffering has led to the development of humanitarian practices – i.e., practices inspired by compassion –¹² for the protection of civilians in conflict, leaving aside the need to implement policies and practices inspired by justice, compensation or redress for the DDR and post-conflict phases. Also, this focus on sexual violence has reduced the attention for non-sexual forms of violence experienced by women during and after conflicts, such as psychological and especially economic gender-based violence (Duncanson, 2019; Ertürk, 2020). Furthermore, representing 'others' almost exclusively in terms of innocence, vulnerability and victimhood ultimately turns out to be a mere rephrasing of the discourse of the strong, i.e., a tool of domination and control exerted under the veil of 'protection', which can assume paternalistic tones and contribute to the reassertion of a patriarchal social order (Åse, 2018).

It is important to notice that women are not the only agents who tend to be misrepresented because of an essentialised identity in the WPS Agenda: men are similarly reduced to the stereotypical models of the (non-Western) bloody combatant/rapist and of the (Western or Western-allied) enlightened peacekeeper. As UNSC Resolution 2538, adopted in 2020, shows, 'allegations of sexual harassment in peacekeeping operations' are still worrisome after twelve years of 'zero tolerance' policy, declared in UNSC Res. 1820, the first document to focus especially on sexual violence and sexual abuse in conflicts. Generally, in discussions concerning the WPS Agenda masculinities – like femininities – are not seriously taken into consideration or their integration within the WPS normative framework has been pursued haphazardly (Myrntinen, 2019; Duriesmith, 2020; Wright, 2020). This is especially problematic when, within the norm lab, attempts at enlarging the critical mass of people embracing the principles and goals of the WPS Agenda target men and boys. Drawing on the insight that 'feminist curiosity' – or more generally, a critical perspective – is needed to unpack fixed (stereotypical) notions of masculinity and femininity (Enloe, 2004) – it is possible to appreciate the recent calls for including masculinities and non-binary gender identities in the WPS (Hagen, 2016).

UNSC Resolution 2106, adopted in 2013, called for the 'enlistment of men and boys in the effort to combat all forms of violence against women' as one of the 'long-term efforts to prevent sexual violence in armed conflict and post-conflict situations'. Moreover, it recognised that men and boys can suffer when they happen to be 'secondarily traumatized as forced witnesses of sexual violence against family members'. The first mention of men and boys as targets and victims of sexual gender-based violence eventually appeared in a WPS document in 2019, with the adoption of UNSC Resolution 2467. This recent development signals the ongoing contestation to the reproduction of stereotypical images of women and men which characterizes the discussion on the WPS Agenda as well as the need to broaden its scope to focus on everyday masculinities and not only on harmful masculinities, in order to positively influence men and boys' worldviews and to mobilise them for achieving the goals of gender mainstreaming in peace and in war (Duriesmith, 2020). As far as the recent appearance of alternative forms of masculinities challenging traditional hegemonic and militarised masculinities is concerned, it is important to inquire whether they allow to

¹² Hannah Arendt (1963) used the expression 'politics of mercy' while discussing the political logic based on a non-empathic recognition of the suffering of others; Arendt criticises this kind of politics as well as the politics based on compassion and supports a politics based on solidarity, which is grounded on human reason, instead.

change not only individual and collective behaviours, but people's worldviews and cultural perceptions, contributing to the rejection of patriarchal social orders and not only to the reproduction of patriarchy in disguise (Myrntinen, 2019). In order to avoid agents' essentialisation, a thorough reflection on the possibility of considering non-binary identities is needed, blurring the dichotomous distinction between men and women. Although the WPS resolutions and main official documents still reflect the women-centered and 'heteronormative assumptions' lying at the heart of the WPS Agenda (Hagen, 2016), recent implementation documents such as the third German NAP (2021-2024) are proof of the fact that, within the norm lab, there are actors keen on adopting a multidimensional and inclusive concept of gender. Such a conceptual shift would make the implementation of the WPS Agenda more apt to detect and address gender-based violence directed against men and LGBT+ people, to protect and support movements and activists defending LGBT+ people's rights, to recognise and meet specific LGBT+ people's needs in crisis or emergency situations.¹³ Scholars' and activists' calls for redressing the WPS Agenda focusing on gender, rather than on women only, have been circulating within the norm lab and they seem to produce some effects (de Jonge Oudraat & Brown, 2020).

The dynamic character of the WPS Agenda's norm lab has brought to the fore feminist and postcolonial critiques to the images or 'conceptual metaphors' conveyed by WPS Resolutions and policy documents, producing a gradual shift over time from images of victimhood and notions of protection towards the image of agents of change and empowerment (de la Rosa & Lázaro, 2019). For instance, UNSC Resolution 2242, adopted in 2015, calls for planning, funding and implementing aid programmes aimed at furthering gender equality and women's empowerment. Along the same line, UNSC Resolution 2493, adopted in 2019, explicitly recognises the efforts of 'formal and informal community women leaders, women peacebuilders, political actors, and those who protect and promote human rights' and requires the international community to actively support them. These examples – as well as the more general shift of attention from the protection pillar to the participation pillar – show that there is still room for transformative conceptual innovation within the WPS Agenda's norm lab.

Political agency: assessing the WPS Agenda's transformative potential

As Hidemi Suganami (2008) suggests, the reality of contemporary international norms and structures is so complex and multidimensional that the classical constructivist dyad 'agency-structure', which constitutes the theoretical basis of the literature about norm diffusion, appears too restrictive. Therefore, this article distinguishes between the broader concept of agency which has been proposed by Wendt (1987) and used by many constructivist IR scholars (Debrix, 2015; Zanotti, 2019) and a narrower concept of *political agency*, which is helpful to investigate agents' capacity to act within given social structures with the intention of transforming them. Political agency refers to the capacity of social actors – individuals or collectivities – to make an impact on their social world, to change the socio-political structure they live in, contributing to human emancipation and therefore advancing moral progress. Having this moral dimension, political agency is akin to definitions of agency that have recently been proposed and discussed by political philosophers in the framework of contemporary debates on global justice and international ethics (Ypi, 2012).¹⁴ With respect to the broader concept presented above, a narrower

¹³ The text of the third German NAP is available online: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2445264/d7d78947490f454a5342c1dff737a474/aktionsplan-1325-2021-2024-en-data.pdf>

¹⁴ For instance, in her philosophical-political account of avant-garde political agency, Lea Ypi (2012, p. 131) contends that 'political agency obtains when it is both feasible, that is, relevant political, legal, and social

concept of political agency can better emphasise the transformative potential of individuals' and institutions' behaviours for the advancement of progressive values such as gender equality. Thus, political agency refers to transformative action, i.e., an action oriented by the deliberate and meaningful intention to change (in its entirety or in part) a given social context. Moreover, agency pertains to *moral agents*, be they individuals or collectivities, and therefore it relates to concepts of justification and responsibility: actions can be questioned and judged in light of moral values, e.g. justice, and actors request and provide morally acceptable reasons for justifying action (or inaction) (Erskine, 2003; Debrix, 2015).

The question that one needs to ask, thus, is the following: which actors have the capacity to act effectively and consistently with transformative values for the implementation of the WPS Agenda? It is worth pointing out that the agency required to bring about the advancement of Res. 1325 is strictly connected to the actors' identity as well as to their positioning within the framework of world politics. This means that international and regional organisations, states and civil society actors (be they organisations, groups or individuals) operating in the field of security, all play a role within the norm lab. However, if one looks at the UNSC resolutions pertaining to the WPS Agenda, these roles are not well defined and the goals for the medium and long term are not spelled out. This means that the conception of agency emerging from the official documents is extremely 'thin' from a moral perspective and it does not seem apt for sustaining a transformative project.¹⁵ In order to make it thicker, a broader consensus on the transformative effects of the WPS Agenda ought to be built through a straightforward discursive engagement within the norm lab, addressing the *vexata quaestio* of reconciling its validity and facticity (Deitelhoff & Zimmermann, 2019), facing the existence of norm contestation and requiring justifications for the cases of noncompliance with the norm of gender mainstreaming.

As far as states' engagement is considered, during the last years there have been attempts at thickening the notion of agency through the adoption and updating of the NAPs. However, they generally developed non-reflexive understandings of agency, since they have been focusing excessively on their ability to intervene within conflict and post-conflict contexts, neglecting the prospects for internal change and the daily practices reproducing gender injustices even where conflict is absent.¹⁶ Moreover, the agency of the women and men operating in conflict and post-conflict settings – whose identity has been represented in

mechanisms are in place to operate the necessary changes in the system, and when the outcome of political action is sustainable, that is, it has a chance to survive without disrupting existing social ties'. As far as the WPS Agenda norm lab is concerned, paying attention to the dimensions of feasibility and sustainability of the norm of gender mainstreaming in the security sector might help to develop a diagnostic, analytical reflection on the current limits of the norm's implementation and a prognostic, open-ended and creative investigation about the possible heuristic resources to overcome these limits.

¹⁵ Political philosopher Michael Walzer (1994) has advanced the distinction between thin and thick forms of morality and moral actions. Universal principles – e.g. gender equality – are thin forms of morality, while their adaptations to specific historical circumstances are thick forms. In order to be transformative, political agency needs to be grounded on the knowledge of the existing circumstances of injustice and of the institutional settings and dynamics in order to transform them.

¹⁶ For instance, with the document 'Comprehensive approach to the EU implementation of the UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820', adopted by the EU Council in 2008, and with the 'Revised indicators annex' elaborated in 2016, the EU tried to define its agency. However, by stating that its Comprehensive approach 'covers the whole spectrum of EU's external action instruments throughout the conflict continuum, from conflict prevention to crisis management, peace-building, reconstruction and development co-operation', the new comprehensive approach seems to envisage a thin conception of agency and replicates the non-reflexive engagement with the WPS Agenda that has been undertaken by the majority of EU member states so far. The 2008 document is available online at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15671-2008-REV-1/en/pdf>

stereotypical and distorted ways, as discussed above – has been underestimated or misunderstood, leading to the exclusion from or marginalization within the WPS Agenda norm lab of a number of individual and collective actors. For instance, while female combatants' and ex combatants' agency is hardly considered in debates concerning conflict management and peacekeeping (Henshaw, 2020; Schneiker, 2021) and the involvement of civil society actors is piecemeal and non-organic (Kirby & Shepherd, 2016, pp. 383–385), female peacekeepers' agency within change-resistant institutional settings is misunderstood, leaving the door open to practices of 'gender-sidestreaming', i.e. to the instrumental use of the norm of gender mainstreaming aimed at neutralising its transformative potential and reasserting the *status quo* (Newby & Sebag, 2021). Similarly, within the WPS Agenda norm lab men's and boys' political agency has been poorly developed; their 'enlistment' in the WPS project or their vague status as 'allied' do not seem to envisage a thick political agency (Myrntinen, 2019; Duriesmith, 2020).

To conclude this brief analysis, it is important to point out that contestation can constitute a form of political agency potentially leading to the advancement of the WPS Agenda's transformative project, but not all kinds of contestation serve this purpose. On a recent contribution to the debate on the WPS Agenda, Jacqui True and Antje Wiener (2019) look at the capacity of different actors – namely civil society organisations, states and intergovernmental organisations – to produce impactful change within the international society and to contribute to the realization of the norm of gender mainstreaming in the security sector. They highlight the 'plurality of political agency in global society' while discussing the different interests of actors who take part in the debate about the WPS Agenda and they examine the different forms of discursive and behavioural contestation that actors have been raising throughout this debate. The distinction between reactive and proactive contestation – the former being an actor's objection to norms that are explicitly rejected or ignored, while the latter entails 'critical engagement' with norms, meant as a political act – sheds light on the fact that only some forms of norm contestation have a transformative effect and produce norm change and structural impact and can, therefore, be considered expressions of political agency bearing transformative potential (ibidem, pp. 556–561). With respect to the WPS Agenda norm lab, as the case of the 'commemorative' draft resolution proposed by the Russian government shows, critical engagement seems to be lacking, while reactive contestations expressed through words, omissions and actions seem daily practices. Such contestations, rather than contributing to the strengthening and transformative reinterpretation of the norm, depotentiate it, opening new conceptual cracks and widening the old ones.

Looking for conceptual resources for gilding the cracks

The previous section has presented and discussed two main conceptual cracks – identity and agency – that undermine the robustness and resilience of the WPS Agenda, reducing the transformative potential of the norm of gender mainstreaming within the field of security and conflict management. In order to find conceptual resources and elaborate transformative concepts of identity and agency, this section proposes to look at some insights from the contemporary political-philosophical debate on epistemic injustices. This discussion is based on the assumption that knowledge production is a social endeavour and it revolves around the power asymmetries underlying the production and circulation of knowledge and information within contemporary societies. Considering the WPS Agenda as a norm lab permits to shed light on the mechanisms and circuits of knowledge production and knowledge circulation. Since the two cracks analysed above derive from the difficulties of elaborating transformative concepts of agency and identity, incorporating them in the documents of the WPS Agenda as well as in operational documents, it is possible to argue

that they pertain to the sphere of knowledge production. As has been recently highlighted by many within the debates on the twenty years of the WPS Agenda, the collection of reliable data and the inclusion of marginalised perspectives within the norm lab has proved to be problematic. Since the success of the WPS Agenda is crucially linked to its capacity to obtain consensus and diffusing the norm of gender mainstreaming within the security sector, knowledge exchanges and discursive strategies are fundamental. Therefore, looking at epistemic injustices might help to pinpoint the persisting blocks to knowledge exchanges and to devise solutions to overcome these blocks and improve the functioning of the norm lab.

Detecting epistemic injustices within the WPS norm lab

About fifteen years ago, Miranda Fricker (2007) notably defined epistemic injustice as a two-faced manifestation of problematic (unequal) knowledge/information exchanges. First, *testimonial injustice* occurs when a person's testimony is not considered reliable or is not taken seriously because of her/his (misperceived and essentialised) identity; second, *hermeneutical injustice* applies when a person suffers injustice but she/he is not fully aware of it because lacks the conceptual resources to clearly articulate a claim for justice. Two examples concerning issues relevant for the WPS Agenda may help to illustrate the two parts of the concept of epistemic injustice. While the non-inclusion of (combatant or non-combatant) women in the negotiations for peace agreements can be associated to testimonial injustice, the difficulty of male combatants who are victims of sexual violence to recognise the specific form of violence they have suffered is an instance of hermeneutical injustice. The persistence of epistemic injustices hampers the WPS Agenda's transformative potential. On the one hand, they limit the norm lab's inclusiveness, since not all the participants to the discussions concerning the norm of gender mainstreaming in the field of security are assigned the same level of credibility and some of them are progressively marginalised or excluded from the discussions. On the other hand, asymmetries of credibility tend to reinforce power asymmetries and to hamper the discussions within the norm lab, preventing the reconciliation of the discursive and nondiscursive dimensions of norm acceptance and compliance.

Besides the two forms of epistemic injustice described above, it is possible to identify a variety of ways in which marginalized individuals or groups are unjustly denied the opportunity to take part in the generation of knowledge. Without looking in detail at the many different forms of epistemic injustice, it suffices here to briefly note that the WPS Agenda norm lab is characterised not only by testimonial and hermeneutical injustices, but also by practices of epistemic silencing, appropriation, exploitation and trespassing. A brief explanation of these terms is in order. First, practices of *epistemic silencing* occur when an audience systematically fails to identify someone who wants to communicate a message as a knower or when this someone is inhibited because she/he perceives the audience as unwilling to listen (Dotson, 2011). In both cases, the result is that marginalised voices are silenced. For instance, in debates about the WPS Agenda focusing exclusively on women, LGBT+ people might perceive the audience as hostile to queer claims, giving up the opportunity to contribute to those debates (Hagen, 2016). Second, the concept of *epistemic appropriation* refers to the (wrongful) appropriation of informational resources created by marginalized individuals and groups by dominant discourses which eventually benefit relatively privileged people (Davis, 2018). Third, *epistemic exploitation* takes place whenever marginalised persons are required an unpaid and often unacknowledged work of providing information, resources, and evidence of oppression to privileged persons in order to educate them (Berenstain, 2016). Examples of practices of epistemic appropriation and exploitation concern the problematic and understudied relationship within the WPS norm

lab between people in conflict or post-conflict societies and researchers: very often, their contributions to the production of research might contribute to the strengthening of the researcher's professional profile and to an up-to-date and evidence-based education for students, improving the overall knowledge on the prospects and challenges for a global diffusion of the norm of gender mainstreaming in specific contexts. However, very often the researches and educational/training programmes developed within the norm lab produce minimal (if any) beneficial effects on the actual implementation of the norm of gender mainstreaming in those societies, because of the loose links that scholars and activists activate with local policymakers and the difficult engagement with the local education system (Parashar, 2019). Fourth, *epistemic trespassing* indicates the practices of experts of a certain field – people who occupy privileged positions in the circuit of knowledge production – issuing judgments or opinions on questions beyond their expertise, i.e. their training and competence (Ballantyne, 2019). Instances of this form of epistemic injustices can be found in cases revealing patterns of feminism's cooptation by international governance and militarized actors (de Almagro, 2018; Chappell & Mackay, 2021). Moreover, recently some attention has been raised within the racialized hierarchies of knowledge production revolving around the WPS Agenda, thanks to the creation of 'a system of knowledge production supported by selective sites of WPS expertise situated within the "secure" global north often based on work on the "insecure" global south' (Haastrup & Hagen, 2021, p. 27). The epistemic asymmetry between (academic and non-academic) experts and the women and men working toward the achievement of peace and gender equality in conflict and post-conflict settings is striking; even more striking is the fact that some individuals and groups struggle to make their voices heard within the WPS Agenda's norm lab, as is the case for LGBT+ people (Hagen, 2016).

In general, all the six forms of epistemic injustices are the product of credibility asymmetries rooted in (positive and negative) identity stereotypes: because of their privileged identities, some people are normally accorded credibility by a majority of people; on the contrary, people belonging to discriminated and marginalised groups are (consciously or unconsciously) considered as lacking in credibility by a large number of people. What is especially worrisome is that institutions tend to reproduce these credibility asymmetries and filter knowledge accordingly, even those who engage in transformative experiments, such as states and organisations actively involved in the activities of the WPS norm lab. This has important implications: even when potentially transformative policies aiming at improving the social conditions of marginalised people are elaborated and implemented, they are the product of knowledge produced by privileged people and they can lack a thick conception of political agency and an accurate perception of the phenomenon because of the geographical, social or emotional distance from the context where injustices occur. In processes where conflicting narratives about a given violent event or process (e.g. a present or past conflict) are weighed up, epistemic injustices can play a crucial role in the perceptions of the actors involved, and the dynamics of the economy of credibility can matter more than the determination of factual truth for the elaboration of the mainstream interpretations of the event or process and the assignment of the stereotypical and misleading identities of victims and perpetrators of violence.

Conclusion

The article proposed an original and interdisciplinary analytical perspective to contribute to the ongoing debate concerning the conceptual cracks characterizing the WPS Agenda. Claiming that the ambiguity of some of its key concepts reduces the WPS Agenda's strength, the article analysed, in the light of the constructivist reflection on norm diffusion and norm contestation, the main conceptual cracks threatening the validity and facticity of the norm

of gender mainstreaming in the field of security. Like the Japanese artists/artisans who keep alive the ancient technique of Kintsugi, gilding pots' cracks with gold, scholars willing to adopt an interdisciplinary approach might explore other debates in their search for new conceptual resources.

Conceptualising the WPS Agenda as a norm lab, in the second section the article proposed to stress the importance of the dimension of the production, reproduction and circulation of knowledge, shedding light on the underlying discursive dynamics that at the same time allow the expression of norm contestation and create opportunities for persuasion. Moreover, the norm lab model highlights the complex interactions among a plurality of heterogeneous actors who participate to the norm lab as well as the compresence of political, cultural and economic interests. The strong reactions shown by several members of the UNSC towards the draft resolution proposed in 2020 by the Russian government – perceived as an attempt to water down the transformative character of the WPS Agenda – are presented as evidence that, for the diffusion of the norm of gender mainstreaming in the field of security, the conceptual dimension is at least as important as the dimension of its operationalization and implementation, although the literature has focused mainly on the latter.

One way to contribute to the crucial task of gilding the WPS Agenda's conceptual cracks – combining conceptual craftsmanship and creativity and using diverse materials, in line with the Kintsugi tradition – might be to resort to new conceptual tools, suitable for reconstructing the patterns and dynamics characterizing knowledge production and reproduction within the norm lab. The article's third section unfolded a critical discussion of the WPS Agenda's main conceptual cracks, expanding the discussion which has emerged with the occasion of the twentieth anniversary celebrations, to propose a creative solution: going beyond the traditional repertoire of feminist security studies to assess the WPS Agenda's capacity to reframe the concepts of identity and (political) agency, in order to open up new paths and conceptualise to overcome the limits to the transformative potential of the norm of gender mainstreaming in the field of security posed by the essentialist understandings of identity and the thin interpretations of agency that have characterized the Agenda so far.

In the fourth section, finally, the article explored some conceptual resources that have been developed by political philosophers to investigate the role that credibility asymmetries play in discursive contexts of knowledge production and reproduction. Although a fully-fledged theoretical exploration would require a more ambitious research design, the article presented a first attempt to move in this direction, proposing – as one among many experiments carried out within the norm lab – to recast the concepts of identity and agency, drawing on the resources developed within the recent debate on epistemic injustice. Detecting the different forms of epistemic injustice occurring within the WPS Agenda's norm lab – which hamper the creation and circulation of knowledge and worsen the discursive interactions among the actors, fostering reactive contestations and endangering the possibility to reach a genuine consensus – can be a first step towards the development of further interdisciplinary research projects, aimed at locating the short circuits in the production and circulation of knowledge within the WPS Agenda norm lab which produce the conceptual cracks. While the main goal of the present contribution was primarily diagnostic, future projects should focus on prognostic theorization, experimenting within the norm lab for forging new interdisciplinary conceptual resources for gilding the cracks.

ORCID

Elisa Piras 0000-0003-3115-6334

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