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## Beyond liberal vs liberating

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## Beyond Liberal v.s Liberating: Women's Economic Empowerment in the United Nations' Women, Peace and Security Agenda

### ABSTRACT

This article is about women's economic empowerment within the United Nations Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. Based on analysis of the core agenda-setting documents, it traces where the two different versions of women's economic empowerment, "liberal" (including women in the formal economy) and "liberating" (women collectively mobilizing to challenge the status quo) appear in the WPS agenda. It argues that the two exist in uneasy tension in the UN's aspirations for women's economic security and well-being, but that when it comes to actual activities and achievements, the liberal version dominates over the liberating version. The article argues that it is important not to overstate the divide between the two approaches, and that the seeds of a liberating approach can be found within the liberal. It is initiatives to facilitate women's economic empowerment that contain opportunities for collective action to transform the structures of the economy that WPS advocates should push for in order to strengthen and deepen the WPS agenda.

### KEYWORDS

**Women, peace, security, economic empowerment, United Nations**

## INTRODUCTION

This article traces where and how attention to economic aspects of women's security appears in the United Nations Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. Early feminist IR scholarship persuasively argued that the concept of security needed to encompass economic dimensions, i.e. material well-being, if it was to be meaningful and emancipatory for women (Tickner 1992, 12, 55–56).<sup>i</sup> Many of the things that women identify as jeopardizing their security in wartime are economic issues. These include the destruction of livelihoods, disruption to education, health and other services, and pervasive food insecurity, which often compound pre-existing economic insecurities, such as women's lack of rights to land, property, and inheritance (e.g. Cohn 2013). I start from the premise, therefore, that for the WPS agenda to be feminist and to be effective, it needs to pay more attention to material dimensions of women's security.

There is a wealth of scholarship on the WPS agenda, but relatively little focuses on economic issues. Work that focuses on the implementation of the agenda tends to focus on the two dominant pillars: the protection of women against violence, including sexual violence (e.g. Aroussi 2011; Jenkins and Goetz 2010) and the participation of women in peace processes (e.g. Ellerby 2013; Paffenholz et al. 2016) or both (e.g. Olsson and Gizelis 2015; UN Women 2015). A significant proportion of work that adopts a more critical perspective tends to focus on the way in which the language of the WPS agenda reduces women to the status of victims or essentialises them as naturally peace-loving (e.g. Charlesworth 2008; Otto 2010; Kirby and Shepherd 2016). Several critical scholars argue that the WPS agenda helps legitimise military interventions that reinforce a neoliberal, neo-colonial global order, which ultimately does little for women's security (e.g. Cockburn 2011; Pratt 2013; Whitworth 2004). Economics is clearly not ignored in this strand of scholarship, but it appears as somewhat static: the logic of the argument is that there is little that a few United Nations Security Council resolutions can do given a neoliberal economic context. This sense of the scholarship on WPS led me to ask: Are there more fruitful ways for feminist WPS advocates to engage with economic issues,

specifically the material wellbeing of women and the economic systems that enable or prevent it? Could such scholarship help the WPS agenda challenge neoliberal economic policies, rather than accept them, as the critical feminist scholarship appears to do, as the structural constraints that ultimately undermine any good the WPS resolutions could achieve?

This article aims to contribute to such a challenge by considering where attention to women's economic well-being and security appears in the WPS agenda, how it is conceptualised, and where the gaps are to advocate for more progress. As such, this article builds on previous work which calls for more attention to economic processes in women, peace and security research and practice (Cohn 2017; Duncanson 2016; Bergeron, Cohn and Duncanson 2017) and responds to the increasingly-voiced call for Feminist Security Studies and Feminist Global Political Economy to speak to each other in order to further gender-equitable, sustainable and just peace.<sup>ii</sup>

I address where economics appears in the UN's aspirations for WPS by analysing the main agenda-setting texts: the eight extant Security Council resolutions on WPS and the UN Secretary General's (UNSG) regular reports on WPS. The resolutions are the core policy framework, setting the WPS agenda. As binding Security Council resolutions, they should be implemented by all member states and relevant actors, including UN system entities and parties to conflict. The UNSG's reports, while not having the same status as Security Council resolutions, also contribute to setting the agenda and providing guidance for implementation. The 2005 report (S/2005/636), for example, set out the first system-wide action plan for implementation of UNSCR 1325, and one 2010 report (A/65/354–S/2010/466) set out the Seven-Point Action Plan (7-PAP), "a detailed action plan aimed at changing practices among national and international actors and improving outcomes on the ground".

I also make a preliminary analysis of the WPS agenda's achievements. Given the challenges of assessing the entirety of the UN's activities related to women's economic security in conflict-affected areas over 18 years, the article focuses on the account of progress provided in the UNSG's reports. UNSG reports, as well as setting out plans, track progress made on implementation of the resolutions and highlight best practice. The reports, compiled through the analysis of data provided by United Nations offices, civil society and regional organisations, and Member States, represent that which key architects of the WPS framework consider to be important in terms of progress. Focusing on the UNSG reports, then, offers us an important insight, albeit preliminary and partial, into the UN's activities and its sense of what the WPS agenda has achieved.

I used the CAQDAS package NVivo 11 to analyse the text of the resolutions and reports using `econom*` to search for economic and economy. I also conducted searches on related terms such as "reconstruction," "financ\*" "budget\*" and "develop\*." I searched other terms for purposes of comparison e.g. protection, participation, and to identify relationships between terms e.g. "economic" and "empowerment" or "economic" and "decision-making." This gave me an overview of where, when and how economic aspects of women's security are conceptualised in UN WPS resolutions and reports.

I analysed the results with particular attention to the idea of women's economic empowerment because this has become the dominant term used to discuss women's economic well-being and security by institutions of global governance such as the United Nations, World Bank and numerous others. Empowerment is a concept of much interest to feminist scholars both because of its emancipatory origins and potential and because of its salutary lessons about how such terms, and feminist agendas more broadly, can be hijacked and co-opted. An overview of origins and trajectory of this much contested concept is outlined in the next section. This provides essential theoretical

framing for my investigation into if, where and how the WPS agenda pays attention to economic aspects of women's security.

### **WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT: FROM LIBERATING TO LIBERAL**

The idea of women's empowerment emerged from the reflection of feminist researchers, activists, and political leaders from the Global South, who formed the network known as DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era) in 1984. They argued that grassroots women need to act together to challenge the structures – both gender relations and dominant models of development – which were exacerbating their poverty and exclusion (Sen and Grown 1981; also see Batliwala 1993; Kabeer 1994). But, as the concept was taken up by international development institutions, it was redefined, and for many feminists, impoverished.<sup>iii</sup> For the World Bank, UN, nongovernmental organisations and various corporations who have involved themselves in supporting women's economic empowerment, the term has come to mean increasing women's access to jobs in the formal sector, improving the availability of credit for women entrepreneurs and investing in women's human capital, their education and health. It is often framed in instrumentalist terms: women are the untapped resource that can fuel growth and power our economies in the decades to come (see e.g., Roberts and Soederberg 2012). Cecelia Sardenberg (2008; drawing on Ferguson 2004) captures the evolution of the concept in her argument that a "liberating" approach, groups of people organizing themselves to challenge the status quo, has been hijacked by an approach more consistent with "liberal" goals of equality through inclusion as individuals into existing institutions.

The problem, for many feminists, is that individual engagement in the economy on the terms in which it is offered to many women, such as small-scale traders or entrepreneurs, factory workers and employees in the service sector, does not tend to yield great rewards. As such, the liberal

approach does not liberate women but burdens them; burdens them with more work (as they are expected to work in the productive sector whilst having little of the care work lifted from their shoulders – see e.g. Chant and Sweetman 2012); with debt (due to the punitive interest rates of most microfinance schemes – see e.g. Roberts and Soederberg 2012, 962); with the risk of violent backlash (from men who resent resources going to women – see e.g. True 2012), with expectations on them to lift their families, communities and even nations out of poverty, reinforcing their familial roles (see e.g. Bedford 2009); and by trapping women in low-paying stereotype-reinforcing work such as basket-weaving, sewing, beading, hair-styling and so on (see e.g. MacKenzie 2009). As well as burdening women, the liberal version of economic empowerment depoliticises empowerment. It offers no challenge to the broader neoliberal macroeconomic framework that has created and sustained gender-based inequality and oppression, through the global feminization of labour, the erosion of public supports for social reproduction and the protection of the rights of capital above those of the global poor (Roberts 2015, 9). In the words of a particularly damning recent report: “Instead of ‘power,’ women are given livelihoods. Instead of conscientization about the structures of oppression, skills training. And instead of agency, the choice between raising chickens or cows” (Cronin-Furman, Gowrinathan, and Zakaria 2017, 11).<sup>iv</sup> All too often, for International development organisations, empowerment has been reduced to economic empowerment, and economic empowerment reduced to the model that DAWN first raged against: the integration of women into mainstream development

For some, the agenda of women’s empowerment has become so compromised, there is a need to move on from the language of empowerment and revisit the language of rights (Cornwall and Rivas 2015). Suggesting that women’s empowerment in its liberal version is unlikely to deliver the kind of transformation that would create the more just, more equal and happier world that we would all like to see, Cornwall and Rivas (2015, 410) argue for a return to rights, which they suggest are “the higher-order normative principles that underpin feminist engagement with development.”

Jettisoning empowerment might be too hasty, however. Empowerment – if we can reinvigorate it with its original meaning – conveys the importance of building *critical consciousness*: empowerment is not something that can be bestowed by others, it “... must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to occupy ... decision-making space... so that the people affected come to see themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and have influence” (Rowlands 1995, 103). Importantly, by drawing attention to power, and the need for transfers of power, it keeps our focus on *collective action to challenge structures*: “recognising inequalities in power, asserting the right to have rights and acting individually and in concert to bring about structural change in favour of greater equality” (Cornwall and Rivas 2015, 405).

Empowerment, then, seems to involve elements not always conveyed in rights discourse. That may be as much to do with the privileging of civil and political rights over social and economic rights. Advocates of economic and social rights argue that structural change achieved by collective action is integral to economic and social rights (e.g. Cahill-Ripley 2016; Rees and Chinkin 2015; Balakrishnan, Heintz, and Elson 2016). Rights and empowerment need not be posed as alternatives, therefore, and can be seen as mutually reinforcing.

A different conceptual debate arises about whether feminists should use the term “economic empowerment.” For many, the concern with the take-up of the concept is the way the radical and holistic idea of empowerment has been reduced to the economic sphere (see e.g. Calves 2009; Shepherd 2017, 122). The term “economic empowerment” is itself, then, a part of the problem. Yet sometimes, as feminists, we may want to use the term “economic empowerment” to highlight the economic dimensions of empowerment lest empowerment become equated with political representation, for example, alone. To equate all uses of “women’s economic empowerment” with the liberal version is to concede too much to the mainstream development institutions and corporates who use the term solely in its liberal guise. In my view, economic empowerment need



not always be liberal; rather, there are liberal and liberating versions of economic empowerment, just as there are liberal and liberating versions of empowerment more generally.

Aspects of the liberal model of economic empowerment – support for entrepreneurs, literacy and training, and employment creation, for example – will be, for many women in the aftermath of war, welcome and beneficial to an extent. Sustainable and gender-equitable peace and prosperity, however, will likely require the liberating model of women's economic empowerment: women's collective reflection, advocacy and action for a restructuring of post-war economies (Abenda and Abbas 2017; Bergeron, Cohn, and Duncanson 2017). Of course, it is important not to overstate the divide between liberal and liberating version of economic empowerment. Sardenberg (2008, 23) herself noted that a project in Brazil which offered skills training and talks on women's rights might appear limited, but that it "created a space for women that could lead to consciousness-raising and collective action in the direction of 'liberating development'". All sorts of liberal-looking initiatives might have the seeds of a more liberating version of women's economic empowerment. If, for example, employment programmes also focus on the right to collectively organise at work, or savings and loans initiatives provide space for collective education and advocacy. Such initiatives alone would not, of course, challenge the dominant model of postwar reconstruction that is at the root of many women's poverty and insecurity, but they might facilitate reflection on and a challenge to that model in ways that microcredit or insecure employment rarely do.

With this rich body of feminist theorising on economic empowerment in mind, I looked in the WPS agenda for liberal and liberating economic empowerment, considering them to be points on a continuum rather than discreet categories. My analysis of the texts was interpretive. I did not have a set list of words which I was looking for to represent liberal and liberating forms of empowerment. Rather, when I found mentions of economic issues, I considered whether they leant towards the

liberal (such as mentions of employment creation, support for entrepreneurial activity, training, etc.) or leant towards a more liberating version (such as women's participation in economic decision making and planning, rights to collective organising at work in e.g. trade unions, and other economic rights).

### **ASPIRATIONS OF THE WPS AGENDA: LIBERAL AND LIBERATING EMPOWERMENT IN TENSION**

The first thing to note is that attention to women's economic empowerment of any kind is a marginal element of the WPS agenda. In the resolutions, economic aspects of women's security are mentioned much less frequently than other aspects of the agenda such as protection from sexual or gender-based violence or participation in peace processes. The WPS resolutions only reference anything to do with economics twelve times, in comparison to "protection," 45 times; "sexual violence" 134; "participation" 32; and "justice" 31.<sup>v</sup> This is in many ways unsurprising. The institutional mandate and ongoing politics of the UNSC means that it avoids economic issues as much as possible. This is why some feminists argue that by targeting their advocacy at the Security Council rather than the General Assembly or the Substantive Commissions of the Economic and Social Council, women's organisations and feminist advocates limited the scope of the issues which could be addressed, albeit through gaining ground in terms of attaching seriousness and institutional weight to the WPS agenda (Cohn 2008; Hudson 2009). The mandate of the Security Council does not exclude all economic issues, however; during the 1990s, it proved increasingly willing to interpret dangers to international peace and security more broadly, and repeatedly turned its attention to socioeconomic issues and their interrelationship with security (von Einsiedel, Malone, and Ugarte 2015, 11). It is not a foregone conclusion that the resolutions on WPS would neglect economic aspects of women's security then; yet they clearly have. In the action plans (the 2005 and 2010 reports), and in other UNSG reports, we see more attention to economic aspects of women's security, though still marginal in comparison to other elements of the agenda. Overall, consideration

of economic aspects of women's security waxes and wanes: it is strong in the first UNSG report of 2002, then all but disappears until 2010, when we start to see more attention, until 2013, when women's potential role in countering violent extremism takes over.

When we turn to *how* economic security is conceptualised when it is included as a goal, we see both the liberal and the liberating logics existing in an uneasy tension. Interestingly, given the absence of economics from the founding resolution, UNSCR 1325, the first UNSG report on WPS in 2002 (S/2002/1154) has a fairly strong emphasis on economic aspects of security, and, moreover, elements of a liberating logic of women's economic empowerment. The UNSG's first report emphasises the importance of ensuring "that attention to gender perspectives in economic reconstruction entails analysis of economic policy-making and planning from a gender perspective, as well as the increased participation of women in economic decision-making; and incorporate gender perspectives into all support for national budget processes" (action 18). In other words, it resists the idea that women's economic empowerment is just about income or support for entrepreneurial activity, but suggests it needs to include women collectively participating in economic policy-making and planning. Moreover, it makes explicit (in para 57) that "Microcredit should not be seen as a panacea for increasing women's access to economic resources and incorporating gender perspectives in economic development. Women should be fully represented in economic decision-making." This first report appears informed by feminist work in the preceding decade which questioned the dominance of microcredit in international development strategies (for example Akhter 2000; Goetz and Gupta 1996) and aimed for a more liberating interpretation of economic empowerment.

Elements of liberating logic are also in evidence in subsequent years. In 2008, for example, the UNSG's report highlights the UN's strategy on Post-Conflict Employment Creation, Income

Generation and Reintegration (ILO and UNDP 2009). This aspires to facilitating women's participation in trade unions and women's organisations in order to set out "new rules of the game" for post-war economies, recognising the need for care infrastructure including day-care centres for children, and labour laws which proactively address rights such as equal pay and maternity leave. It thus advocates a version of women's economic empowerment that goes beyond individual betterment, and addresses the need for structural change.

The Secretary General's 7-Point Action Plan (7-PAP), which was developed to progress more robust implementation of the agenda, notes that rebuilding after conflict represents an opportunity to "build back better" and draws attention to the importance of women's economic rights under the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The idea of building back better contains liberating potential, with its nod to changing the structures of the post-war economy. The mention of women's economic rights under CEDAW is also important, because it draws attention to rights to a fair wage, to holidays, to collectively organise at work – all things which can be left out of a liberal approach if it focuses primarily on encouraging entrepreneurial activity or work that is insecure. The 7PAP makes some specific recommendations that also capture elements of the liberating approach, such as calling for local development and infrastructure programmes, which are obviously central to postwar recovery, to "require the direct involvement of women and women's civil society organizations in setting priorities, identifying beneficiaries and monitoring implementation" (para 50).

It is in 2010 that attention to economic aspects of women's security makes it into the resolutions themselves with the adoption of UNSCR 1889 (2010).<sup>vi</sup> UNSCR 1889 "Urges Member States, international and regional organisations to take further measures to improve women's participation..., including by enhancing their engagement in political and economic decision-making

at early stages of recovery processes...” (para 1). The language is of the non-binding kind – the resolution “urges” and “encourages,” rather than, for example, “demands,” and contains the usual caveats that can undermine progress (“in accordance with their legal systems”) but nonetheless, UNSCR 1889 advocates a relatively liberating version of economic empowerment in its focus on women’s participation in economic planning. UNSCR 1889 also recognises the many constraints that undermine women’s ability to engage in economic decision-making which include, in an obvious vicious circle, economic factors. It thus encourages member states “in consultation with civil society, including women’s organizations, to specify in detail women and girls’ needs and priorities and design concrete strategies, in accordance with their legal systems, to address those needs and priorities.” The aim is to improve women’s “capacity to engage in public decision-making at all levels” (para 10).

There is continuing attention to economic aspects of women’s security in 2013. In the UNSG’s report of that year, much is made of the way women’s economic and social rights have been neglected, and the need to address this through bridging the gaps between the political, human rights and development arms of the United Nations. It is in 2013 that women’s economic empowerment is mentioned *explicitly* in the resolutions, although in language that is arguably not as strong as in UNSCR 1889 (2010). Resolution 2122 (2013) affirms the outcome of the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission’s (UNPBC) meeting on the importance of women’s economic empowerment for peacebuilding.<sup>vii</sup> The UNPBC’s declaration contains much that is of the liberal version (as I discuss below) but also contains elements of a liberating version in its emphasis on women’s participation. Para 8, for example, calls for “enhancing [women’s] engagement in political and economic decision-making at early stages of recovery processes, by, inter alia, promoting women’s leadership and capacity to engage in aid management and planning, supporting women’s organizations and countering negative societal attitudes about women’s capacity to participate

equally.” 2015’s UNSG report builds on this by calling for an approach to economic recovery which encompasses women’s collective involvement not just in economic decision-making but in transforming economic structures: “Economic recovery should aim to be transformative, encompassing not only the state of the inherited economy but also what the future economy should be and how women can lead, contribute to and benefit from a transformative recovery programme.”

Such liberating elements are interspersed between a fairly consistent focus on a more liberal conception: women’s inclusion in development as individual employees or entrepreneurs. The latter are mentioned as goals in all the reports. For example, despite its liberating elements, the UNPBC’s Declaration on Women’s Economic Empowerment focuses on nurturing women’s business skills, encouraging them to join the workforce, delivering the financial services they need (para 9) and financial literacy courses, vocational training, training on income-generating activities, and access to land, long and short-term credit facilities and other business support services (para 10). With the exception of land, discussed below, these are all measures which are focused on women’s individual entry into the market or labour force, rather than on facilitating their collective agency for transforming the economy.

There is also much evidence, in the UN’s aspirations, of the instrumentalist approach: women’s economic empowerment is good *because it facilitates the attainment of other goals*. Once economic recovery becomes a stronger theme in the UNSG’s reports (post-2010), the instrumentalist logic is especially apparent. Thus the 7-PAP claims, for example, that because women “devote a greater proportion of their income than men do to expenditures that benefit families — their own children and members of extended kinship networks,” they play a “key role” in “re-establishing the fabric of society” (para 7). In the “win-win” rhetorical framing familiar to feminist observers of the “smart economics” approach of the World Bank and others, the 7-PAP declares: “Ensuring women’s

participation in peacebuilding is not only a matter of women's and girls' rights. Women are crucial partners in shoring up three pillars of lasting peace: economic recovery, social cohesion and political legitimacy" (para 7). Many of the instances of instrumental logic, it needs to be acknowledged, are different from the World Bank's instrumentalising of women in the service of economic growth. In WPS agenda, economic empowerment is good because it leads to "preventing sexual violence" (UNSCR 2106), to "durable peace, security and reconciliation" and to "effective post-conflict peacebuilding" (UNSCR 1889), to "stabilization" (UNSCR 2122), and to mitigate the risk of women engaging in small-arms trading (UNSCR 2242). Here, in other words, women are instrumentalised for "peace" and "recovery," goals which are surely shared by feminists, making instrumentalism less of an injustice. Much depends, of course, on the particular model of "peace and recovery" envisaged. To be gender-equitable and sustainable, peace and recovery require more than the rebuilding a patriarchal state in a neoliberal global order (Duncanson 2016). The understandings of peace and recovery are rarely specified in the WPS resolutions or reports, but where there are elaborations, it appears the liberal vision of a state, integrated into the global economy is not in question. Moreover, the core problem of instrumentalising logic, that women are still expected to undertake the lion's share of the labour in order to aid recovery, is suggested by the 7-PAP's assertion that: "Several of the world's economies that have grown the fastest during the past half-century began their ascent from the ashes of conflict. Their success stemmed in part from women's increased role in production, trade and entrepreneurship" (para 7). Although it is always worth asking what precisely is wrong with instrumentalism rather than assuming it is always equally regressive, unless there is space for women to redefine peace and prosperity, the instrumental logic in the WPS agenda undermines its liberating potential.

Of course, feminists and many other advocates for social justice have learned that the deployment of an instrumental logic is one of the few effective tools available when trying to influence policy,

and as such often deploy it strategically (e.g. Caglar, Prügl, and Zwingel 2013; Eyben and Turquet 2013). This no doubt in part accounts for much of the instrumentalist framing in the UN's WPS discourse. In addition, advocating for a liberal version of women's economic empowerment has its attractions for feminists; given the longstanding tendency to see women as victims in war, liberal versions enable an emphasis on women as agents of change, with skills, knowledge and capabilities (Goetz and Jenkins 2016). The problem becomes, as Goetz and Jenkins (2016) note, this approach can supplant efforts to push for women's participation in the restructuring of economies that would result in more gender-equitable, sustainable peace.

#### **ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE WPS AGENDA: LIBERAL, BUT WITH LIBERATING POTENTIAL?**

When we turn from aspirations to the women's economic empowerment initiatives highlighted as achievements of the WPS agenda, usually presented in a section of the reports entitled "reconstruction and rehabilitation," or, post-2010, "relief and recovery," we see a similar tension between liberal and liberating versions of women's economic empowerment, but a clear shift towards more liberal approaches. The 2004 report is the first to start reporting on progress, and it acknowledges that the majority of reconstruction efforts do not systematically include gender perspectives. Future reports are able to report on more concrete progress regarding women's economic empowerment, but most of the achievements highlighted are limited to the liberal. In 2006, the examples provided are entrepreneurial programmes for returnee and refugee women in Angola and Mozambique, job training for women in Iraq, and literacy training in Kosovo. These sorts of projects dominate reports of subsequent years, whether it is ICT training in Lebanon (S/2007/567), support for women's employment as agricultural extension service providers in Rwanda (S/2012/732); temporary employment for female ex-combatants in Afghanistan, Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, occupied Palestinian territories and Somalia (S/2013/525), or vocational training for Syrian refugees in Turkey ( S/2014/693).<sup>viii</sup> The reports feature several



village savings and loans schemes in, for example, Liberia and Sri Lanka. Savings and loans schemes can have advantages over microcredit lending schemes, as it is less likely women will end up indebted. They are usually organised around groups of women, and have a capability-building element, so space for consciousness-raising and solidarity-building. But the sums are small, the solidarity more about survival than collective strategizing for change, and the education limited to budgeting rather than enabling women to engage in debates about the economy more generally, and as such, there is little sense that such schemes could be construed as contributing to a transformation of economic structures.

Of course, there are limits to what can be gleaned from the UNSG's reports about actual achievements. They do not present comprehensive accounts of the UN's work on economic aspects of women's security. They do, however, give us insight into what the UN system deems worth sharing in a report on progress, and as such, it is significant that most projects mentioned are relatively liberal in their version of women's economic empowerment. Even in the UN's own presentations of success, where most proud claims might be expected to be found, there are very few initiatives mentioned where women have a key role, repeatedly stated in the aspirations, in economic planning, decision-making and designing new economies. Eleanor O'Gorman found the same in her independent evaluation of the UNPBC's gender work: "Women are marginalised from critical formal planning process for post-conflict funding mechanisms, national plans for recovery, and financial engagement of the international community at the country level and internationally" (O'Gorman 2014, 46).<sup>ix</sup>

It seems that when it comes to implementation of the WPS agenda, we see a common phenomenon associated with the shift from liberating to liberal economic empowerment: a project-based approach to international development. The open-ended process of conscientization and collective

action to transform structures envisaged by the DAWN-era feminists becomes limited to the relatively technical exercise of improving access to education and health or other things which can be measured. Job training programmes delivered, funding for entrepreneurs, a designated number of jobs for women, all lend themselves much more easily to quantification than does women's political mobilization for structural change (Merry 2011).

In this regard, it is important to note the double-edged effect of the 7-PAP. Amongst its many contributions in terms of injecting energy into the WPS agenda, it devoted considerable attention to the challenge of financing. Drawing on studies which demonstrated that even in cases where post-conflict needs-assessments are attentive to gender equality, spending on outcomes and activities that address women's needs or advance gender equality was worryingly low, at just 4-6% of budgets, the 7-PAP committed to ensuring that at least 15 per cent of UN managed funds in support of peacebuilding would be dedicated to "projects" whose principal objective is to "address women's specific needs, advance gender equality or empower women" (para 36). Whilst this commitment opened up the potential to tackle the perennial problem of translating fine rhetoric about gender equality into action on the ground through demanding resources are committed and impact reported upon – if far from being achieved (Goetz and Jenkins 2016) – it has perhaps led to a reinforcement of the "project logic" undermining liberating versions of women's economic empowerment and drawn the attention and energy of WPS-advocates away from other ways of evaluating and furthering the WPS agenda. The reports subsequent to the 7-PAP, when they discuss women's economic empowerment, devote nearly all their attention to discussion of whether this 15% has been fulfilled. This marginalises any discussion as to how, for example, to facilitate women's engagement in economic planning or to fleshing out the ambition, expressed in the 2015 UNSG report, that women should lead in designing a "transformative recovery programme."

That said, the UNSG reports, particularly the more recent ones, also mention several projects which contain the potential for a more liberating version of women's economic empowerment. The UNSG's report of 2012 highlights UN Women's work in Yemen to facilitate women's inclusion in post-conflict needs assessment processes as an example of good practice (para 37). Yemen has consistently ranked at the foot of the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, as women face restrictions on their movement in addition to the poverty, food insecurity, and unemployment and the inadequate health services, education and clean water faced by the wider population (Shakir 2015; Naciri and Tabbara 2018). As part of the 2011 Arab Spring, many women who had not been politically active before took to the streets to demand change (Shakir 2015), and in the aftermath of the uprising, Yemeni women were supported by UN Women to set out objectives for women's participation in economic recovery (UN Women 2013). In women's subsequent participation in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in 2013-4, they were able to call for, amongst other things, the rights to women's equal access and control on national wealth (O'Reilly, Suilleabhain, and Paffenholz 2015, 15; Shakir 2015). Of course, implementation of this clause was always going to be a challenge, and in the meantime, such gains have been put in jeopardy with the return to war in 2014. In addition, as with all processes of national dialogue and constitution drafting, there are questions to consider about the extent to which female delegates represent grassroots women, female delegates are listened to by others, and economic systems which exacerbate women's poverty and inequality are on the table for discussion – all of which would be required for liberating empowerment. Nonetheless, participation in planning for economic recovery and subsequent NDC enabled women to reflect and act collectively on their needs and demand their rights, including economic needs and rights, and as such this is the sort of sort of initiative that might be said to have liberating potential.

The UNSG's reports often highlight the importance of women's right to land for economic security. and the 2014 report showcases the promising example of women's participation in consultations

on land reform in Liberia, which led to the granting of land ownership rights to women. Land is the most important asset for many rural Liberians, and is often a family's primary source of cash income, food and nutritional security. Though women play a central role in agricultural production in Liberia, women's rights and access to land are often not equal to those of men due to biases in the formal legal framework and customary law (Landesa 2018). As such, land reform is an important part of enabling women's material security. As with the Yemeni example, implementation of reform is perhaps an even bigger challenge than consultation, and recent evidence suggests there is a long way to go before women can be said to be participating in land governance in Liberia (Landesa 2018) but support for women's participation in land reform is a project that arguably has liberating potential.

## CONCLUSION

In post-war contexts, although women have often engaged as economic actors in a wide variety of ways as gender roles and relations are shaken-up by war, women are often in a precarious position. Although the specific details vary from context to context, livelihoods and access to education, training and markets, will all likely have been seriously disrupted. It is thus crucially important that women's economic empowerment is addressed. Although post-war states are clearly not *tabula rasa*, the post-war period often offers opportunities for women's economic empowerment, as it is a time when new constitutions are being written, new institutions are being established, and traditional gender roles may have been disrupted (Rees and Chinkin 2015). Despite the need, the opportunity, and feminists' persuasive accounts that material well-being has to be central to our understandings of security, economic elements of women's security have been neglected in the WPS agenda.

On the rare occasions attention is given to material aspects of women's security, we can identify both liberal and liberating versions of women's economic empowerment. In the aspirations of the WPS agenda, the liberal version is ever-present, but there is much to be heartened by in bold aspirations for women to participate collectively in advocating for their economic and social rights, in economic planning and even "transformation" of the economy. In the UN's accounts of its achievements, however, these aspirations are mostly replaced by a liberal focus on integration into the market or labour force. Few feminists would argue with literacy projects, training and employment opportunities for women. Such interventions can make a huge difference to individual women, of course, particularly in the aftermath of war. But as Carol Cohn puts it: "If you are concerned with transforming the structures that *led* them to be illiterate and unemployed, one can legitimately ask how literacy projects, and the project approach more generally, are going to amount to a challenge to the economic system which shapes people's life chances in the first place" (Cohn 2017).

Whilst Cohn is right to question whether literacy, job training and temporary employment projects could ever amount to a challenge to the dominant model of development that is so detrimental to the security and prosperity of the majority of the world's women, other types of initiative, whilst still projects, might facilitate a more liberating economic empowerment. Projects that involve collective action, include time for conscientization, and, crucially, that allow for a goal of structural change – such as when women are supported to engage in economic planning or land reform – come closer to the ideals articulated by the DAWN feminists almost four decades ago. I have suggested that there are indications of such liberating elements in some of the activities described in the UN reports, and it is initiatives such as these that WPS advocates should pursue. Given that not all women can participate in national level economic planning, there is also a need for village-level initiatives, but rather than always being centred around access to credit, with education always centred around

budgeting and financial literacy, there is a need for initiatives that focus on the provision of “information, forums for dialogue and exchange, and training and mobilization to enable people to be the engaged citizens they aspire to be” (Paprocki 2017, 268).

This article offers just a snapshot of the activities undertaken for women’s economic empowerment as part of the WPS agenda. More research is needed, to go beyond that which is highlighted as progress in the UNSG reports to consider what is said throughout the WPS architecture, including for example National Action Plans, and what has been carried out on the ground. A comprehensive evaluation of women’s economic empowerment activity in conflict-affected areas would enable feminists to further explore which version of women’s economic empowerment is being implemented, and whether and where there is scope for WPS advocates to push for the liberating. It is my hope that this article offers a useful starting point.

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<sup>i</sup> Early feminist conceptions also included ecological security, which is equally as important, but regrettably beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>ii</sup> See two recent collections in the journal *Politics and Gender* edited by Elias 2015 and Chisholm and Stachowitsch 2017.

<sup>iii</sup> The feminist literature on empowerment and its co-optation is extensive. See, for example, Arat 2015; Batliwala 2007; Bexell 2012; Calkin 2015; Calves 2009; Chant and Sweetman 2012; Chant 2016; Cornwall and Rivas 2015; Elias 2013; Gregoratti 2018; Parpart, Rai, and Staudt 2003; Prügl 2015; Roberts 2015; Roberts and Soederberg 2012.

<sup>iv</sup> There are other feminist critiques of empowerment, such as the way that it can reinforce myths of women’s inherent powerlessness and victimhood; or the way that the tools favoured by some international organizations to promote empowerment of the poor, such as community-based projects, reflect a “romantic” vision of local and community-based power wherein internal power

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relations, conflict, and social inequalities are deemphasized or ignored. Whilst important, they are beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>v</sup> This mirrors the findings of the NGO Working Group on WPS, which monitors the work of the Security Council and analyses resolutions, reports and presidential statements for the inclusion of information on WPS. In 2015, for example, more than 80% of all references to WPS focused on violations of women's rights, including SGBV, and in 2016, it was 85%; a point made by many academics too (see e.g. Aroussi 2011; Meger 2016).

<sup>vi</sup> Before this, the word "economic" is either not mentioned – UNSCR 1325 (2000) and UNSCR 1820 (2009) – or mentioned in the context of socio-economic services for victims of sexual violence 1888 (2009)

<sup>vii</sup> Available at:

[http://www.un.org/en/peacebuilding/pbso/pdf/women\\_economic\\_empowerment\\_draft\\_declarati  
on.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/peacebuilding/pbso/pdf/women_economic_empowerment_draft_declarati<br/>on.pdf)

<sup>viii</sup> The temporary employment for women results from the UN's commitment to a range-of-parity principle in all post-conflict temporary employment programmes so that neither sex receives more than 60 per cent of employment person-days generated.

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