

Promises to Keep: Reflections from the 2016 UN Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security

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Dr Laura J. Shepherd reflects on the most recent United Nations Security Council open debate on Women and Peace and Security, exploring the role such events play in global politics and identifying common rhetorical themes in member state contributions.



*The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.*

Robert Frost, 1923, 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'

The UN Security Council hosts an Open Debate on the thematic area of 'Women and Peace and Security' (WPS) each year, traditionally in October to coincide with the anniversary of the adoption of the foundation resolution, UNSCR 1325. I attended my very first Open Debate this year. I passed through the airport-style security, proceeding to the third floor of the Secretariat, and took a seat in the gallery, above the famous horse-shoe table. As we waited for the debate to begin, people all around me (and on the floor of the Council chambers as well) took selfies and scenery shots, clearly as excited as I was to be witnessing this performance. And what a performance it was: surreal, fabulous, fascinatingly dull.

One of the things I was most struck by was the fact that the purpose of this debate is clearly not to debate. Each statement is given, and received, and while there is 'right to reply' there is no real interaction between the actors involved. After several hours, moreover, there can be no reasonable expectation that those present are paying close attention to the statements as they are delivered. So, it is manifestly not a *debate*, as such, which led me to wonder what it was... A performance, I concluded. A tightly scripted, exceptionally well-staged, and well-rehearsed performance, with particular political functions.

The first of these political functions is outward-facing, and relates to the affirmation to an external audience that the Council itself, and its member states, are enacting their support of the WPS agenda. Video snippets of the debate have been archived through the UN's [WebTV](#) channel and it is live-streamed. There is widespread discussion of the debate on Twitter, with various media departments tweeting pictures of their representatives. So there is a sense in which the performance of the Open Debate is indeed *open*: its mediation – through television, Twitter and other platforms – opens up the Council chambers, normally assumed to be (or in actuality) closed to public scrutiny and public engagement.

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And then there is an inward-facing function: it delimits the parameters of Women, Peace and Security discourse, producing (while simultaneously productive of) the boundaries of intelligibility in the sphere of Women, Peace and Security politics and practice. This changes – slightly, sometimes imperceptibly – year on year; part of my ongoing research is to investigate the process and implications of these discursive shifts because one of the key contentions I make in relation to Women, Peace and Security (and other political phenomena) is that *discourse matters*. Women, peace, security itself *emerge* through the discourse that is (re)produced, in part, at these Open Debates.

There are five key features of contemporary Women, Peace and Security discourse in the Council chambers (noting,

of course, that discourse is contextually, and temporally, specific) that I perceived as particularly prominent:

1. *Women are not only victims of violence but agents of change.* Feminist scholars and practitioners have consistently argued that to consistently represent women as broken, bleeding bodies, as violated and/or inherently vulnerable victims of violence is to diminish or preclude entirely the possibility of constituting women as agents in peace and security governance. The significance of this invocation, then, is in the very fact of its ritual incantation: the boundaries around the subject of women are differently constituted when women's agency is acknowledged.
2. *Peace agreements are 35% more likely to last 15 years when women are involved in peace processes.* This is a statistic drawn from the 2015 Global Study; I draw attention to this articulation in part because it was striking how many member state officials recited this statistic in their statements, and in part because it speaks to the construction of women's agency: the *change* that women are expected to effect in Women, Peace and Security discourse relates to nothing less than lasting peace.
3. *We commend the creation of the Informal Experts Group and/or the National Focal Points Network and/or the adoption by the UN Peacebuilding Commission of the institution's first Gender Strategy.* The Informal Experts Group was founded in UN Security Council Resolution 2242 (2015), the eighth Women, Peace and Security resolution. The National Focal Points Network, by contrast, is a member state initiative led by the Spanish government that brings together government officials to discuss best practice in the formulation and implementation of National Action Plans. Overall the performative function of holding up these moments of practice for recognition and plaudits is to firmly situate the 'hard yards' of Women, Peace and Security work within the practices of member states and the UN itself. Reciting commendations for these practices – valuable though they might well be – serves to anchor Women, Peace and Security in the realm of the state and/or inter-state co-operation.
4. *Boko Haram/ ISIL-Daesh are perpetrating terrible violence against women.* This is doubtless empirically, shockingly, horrifically, true. But the repeated invocation of this reality also functions not only to locate violence against women *over there* in Syria, Nigeria, Iraq (and, simultaneously, locate the perpetrators of this violence *over there*, thus configuration the perpetrators of violence according to specific logics of gender and race) but also brings Women, Peace and Security into closer alignment with global efforts to counter terrorism and violent extremism. This move has significant implications for the future of the Women, Peace and Security agenda.
5. *We've come a long way, but there's still more to do...* This is, at first glance, a refreshingly honest admission from member states about the limitations of implementation, which is also a commitment to continued effort in the sphere of Women, Peace and Security activities. But there is another reading of this little lament. As Nadine Puechguirbal notes, "["We still have a long way to go" is the catchphrase used by patriarchy to gain time, justify its opposition to change and lull feminist analysers into believing that real progresses are made](#)". It seems churlish indeed to refuse to celebrate the modest achievements of member states and of the UN itself when they are *by their own admission* modest, and when *by their own admission* they 'still have a long way to go'. Churlish, unreasonable, idealistic, even radical to demand not just incremental gains and little wins but transformational change. The function of this statement, then, is to appease and to discipline. 'Be patient', is the message, which too often means 'Be quiet'.

The performance of the Open Debate forces member states to recite their achievements and commitments, to articulate – on one day each year – their account of Women, Peace and Security. It is for civil society organisations and individuals to leverage this account into accountability. The four-minute statements delivered by each ambassador or delegate are seductive, alluring in their promise of change underway, but it is the change to come we must focus on, and we cannot rest. Member states have promises to keep – and we indeed have miles to go before we sleep.

About the author



Laura J. Shepherd is Associate Professor of International Relations at UNSW Australia and a Visiting Senior Fellow at the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security. In addition to very many scholarly contributions on gendered representations of security and violence, often but not exclusively related to the WPS agenda, Laura is also a member of the Steering Group of the Australian Civil Society Coalition on Women, Peace and Security which was formed in 2012 to champion the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda in Australia.

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