



Gendered silences in Western responses to the Russia–Ukraine war

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Revised: 12 September 2022 / Accepted: 16 September 2022 / Published online: 28 September 2022
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Abstract

Over last two decades the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda has formed an integral part of NATO's and many Western states' public diplomacy strategies, most prominently in relation to the war in Afghanistan. Yet in response to Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 the West has largely remained silent on WPS, this appears surprising given that WPS has been a cornerstone of the West's relationship with Ukraine since 2014. In this intervention, I reflect on my own and others' work on NATO, WPS and public diplomacy and consider what this can tell us about such gendered silences in Western responses to the war. In conclusion, I call for more feminist questions to be asked of public diplomacy.

Keywords Russia-Ukraine war · Women, peace and security · Gendered silences · NATO · Public diplomacy

Introduction

The response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine from the West has been vocal. This is a war fought not just on Ukraine's territory, but one fought in terms of values. Public diplomacy and strategic communication are therefore critical for reaching foreign but also domestic publics to ensure support for international policymaking and actions. War is also deeply gendered, this one being no exception, and given the West's commitment to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and frequent, albeit often instrumental, invocation of women's rights as part of public diplomacy, I expected WPS to form a part of the West's public diplomatic response. Yet, what has emerged is a significant silence in respect to the West's own commitments to WPS or what I refer to here as a "gendered silence". Implementing the WPS agenda would mean ensuring the voices of conflict-affected women are listened to and their agency acknowledged. Failing to do so has meant Ukrainian women's voices and concerns are absent from Western responses counter to the war. As Ukrainian feminist activist Maria Dmytryeva argues, coverage of the war 'almost never speaks about women as agents. We don't see the hundreds of thousands of women who locally work

with IDPS [internally displaced persons], refugees, those who need help right now. They are not mentioned in international media' (cited in O'Sullivan, 2022). This plays out against a broader gendered silence in the public diplomatic response by the West.

In this contribution, I reflect on my own work on WPS and digital diplomacy, which sits within a growing body of literature on gender, public diplomacy and nation branding (Kaneva & Cassinger, 2022). I consider what we know about how WPS has been used in public diplomacy to date and what this might tell us about the gendered silences in respect to Ukraine. I conclude with suggestions for future public diplomacy work, calling for greater attention to the gendering of public diplomacy, and specifically for attention to the use of WPS in public diplomacy.

Women, peace and security and public diplomacy

In 2000, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on Women Peace and Security, acknowledging for the first time the gendered impact of conflict and the importance of women's inclusion in matters of peace and security. At the heart of the WPS agenda should be a commitment to ensure the voices of conflict-affected women are heard, however uncomfortable the truths they speak about their lived reality are. This is essential to upholding the four pillars of WPS (participation, protection, prevention and relief

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and recovery) in respect to an ongoing conflict, but also as reconstruction efforts get under way and through to peace negotiations. The resolution was ground-breaking, not only in terms of its focus, but in respect to the involvement of feminist civil society in lobbying for, drafting and redrafting the final text. The decision to pursue a “feminist” resolution through the Security Council was not without controversy. The silences in the resulting WPS agenda draw attention to the contradiction between the Security Council, with its implicit support for the militarised interstate system, and the normative underpinnings of the WPS agenda to challenge militarism and transform the international system through overcoming gendered and racialised global hierarchies. Despite these compromises, Resolution 1325 and the WPS agenda, encapsulating nine further resolutions, have been claimed as a “feminist achievement” and have provided an important vehicle for the voices of conflict-affected women to be heard at the Security Council and beyond.

WPS emerged and grew in tandem with the global “war on terror” whose gendered strategies and practices also informed many public diplomacy narratives (Pratt, 2013). Specifically, in the post-9/11 world women’s rights were viewed as a civilisational marker and feminist aims, including gender equality and later WPS, were used to distinguish between “us” and “them” (Pratt, 2013, p. 328). In this way, feminism (or certain strands of it) were used not merely as a “rhetorical device to justify or camouflage the violence” of the “war on terror,” including through public diplomacy, but constituted a “racialising discourse that normalises the use of violence against the ‘Other’” (Pratt, 2013, p. 328). As a result, women’s rights are implicated in the geopolitical actions of powerful global actors, including states and international organisations, with public diplomacy part of this, making the use of solidarity politics problematic. This has led to WPS being critiqued for its use by the West as something done beyond their borders to the ‘Other’. The WPS agenda has obvious applicability to public diplomacy as a core foreign policy tool, the challenge is to ensure the agenda transforms, rather than reinforces, more problematic practices of foreign and security policy which support gendered and racialised global hierarchies.

The current inclusion of WPS concerns in public diplomacy is at first glance contradictory; it appears prominently when it suits actors but remains on the margins at other time and is easily absent. For example, to date WPS has been used instrumentally by actors, such as NATO, as a public diplomacy tool to reach “new” audiences (Wright & Bergman Rosamond, 2021). Despite this, WPS and gender concerns often remain marginalised from mainstream digital diplomacy despite proclamations that such values are a core part of an institution’s identity, including the EU and NATO (Wright, 2019). I have also shown that even where public diplomacy is incorporated into WPS actions plans,

it can work against the feminist aspirations of the agenda to transform the practice of international peace and security. For example, until 2016 the inclusion of public diplomacy in NATO’s WPS action plan was limited to increasing the visibility of the alliance’s engagement with WPS (an instrumental understanding of WPS as a public diplomacy tool), rather than mainstreaming gender perspectives into the alliance’s public diplomacy footprint (Wright, 2019, p. 88). Others have demonstrated how states such as Sweden, with its feminist foreign policy, have integrated WPS into digital diplomacy even as such ideas become increasingly contested in the digital sphere (Aggestam et al., 2021). Yet this is a selective use of WPS in public diplomacy given that in its nation branding Sweden has been silent on feminism to pave the way for the projection of a unified “progressive Sweden” brand (Jeziarska et al., 2021). This reminds us that the conduct of public diplomacy is itself a deeply gendered phenomenon.

So while WPS has been used by some states selectively as part of their public diplomacy in some instances, and women’s rights have become an increasingly visible part of public diplomacy strategies post 9/11, conventional public diplomacy research has paid relatively little attention to gender. Likewise, public diplomacy remains a neglected area of WPS scholarship. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and Western responses to it, including their gendered silences, make apparent why these gaps should be addressed in future research.

Making sense of the gendered silences on the war in Ukraine

Since the Russia-Ukraine War started in 2014, WPS has been a central building block of Ukraine’s relations with NATO and Western states. NATO has supported the development of Ukraine’s own WPS policy, and Ukraine is a signatory to the NATO/EAPC policy and action plan on WPS. Ukraine is also represented on NATO’s Civil Society Advisory Panel on WPS. Nevertheless, this has served to narrow the scope of WPS to focus on the integration of women into the Ukrainian armed forces and produced a militarised understanding of the agenda, which has had a particular gendered impact on wartime Ukraine (for example, see the work of O’Sullivan, 2019; Wright et al., 2019 and Mathers, 2020 amongst others). As I have argued elsewhere, NATO has used WPS as a “safe issue” to build partnerships with a range of states it might otherwise struggle to engage with. This instrumental understanding of WPS as a diplomatic tool within a militarised framework risks its redundancy when the agenda is no longer required to facilitate or justify a relationship. For example, following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the threat to NATO territory



necessitated a response; NATO no longer had to justify its relations with Ukraine, and the WPS agenda faded from view.

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, I expected WPS to be invoked in responses by NATO and Western states. However, feminists have long been wary of the disjuncture between the rhetoric and reality of the implementation of WPS, so was the absence of public discourse about the WPS agenda so unexpected? As I have pointed to, previous invocations of WPS or gender equality in public diplomacy, have often been done for instrumental reasons, primarily to gain public support for a course of action particularly where wider justifications fall short. A case in point is the intervention in Afghanistan which was justified with an essentialised focus on “saving Afghan women” that effectively removed women’s agency. This undermines the aspirations of the WPS agenda to promote women as agents in peace and conflict. Ukraine is a very different case, in contrast to the Western intervention in Afghanistan there are no NATO troops on the ground defending Ukraine. There has been significant public support for Ukraine and Ukrainians amongst Western publics; including for the West to “do more” and outrage at Russia’s actions (Ipsos, 2022). Western states’ public diplomacy therefore does not have to “sell” the West’s response towards Ukraine in the same way that it did in respect to Afghanistan; hence, there was no instrumental impetus to (re)gender public diplomacy or invoke WPS.

Future directions for public diplomacy research

There is much more to draw out to make sense of the West’s response to the Russia–Ukraine war and the gendered silences inherent within it. This preliminary reflection has, however, pointed to the disjuncture between policy commitments, and action in the implementation of the WPS agenda. It also highlights the limitations of the instrumental use of WPS as a public diplomacy tool which does not translate into the mainstreaming of WPS concerns into all public diplomacy, including in response to crisis. I have also focused on a case study within Europe; if and how these limitations to WPS and public diplomacy apply in different contexts beyond the Global North is also pertinent to consider going forward.

While a growing body of research has examined the gendering of public diplomacy by global actors including through the invocation of WPS as a public diplomacy tool (Aggestam et al., 2021; Wright, 2019; Wright & Bergman Rosamond, 2021), less focus has been given to the gendered nature of public diplomacy itself (Kaneva & Cassinger, 2022) or as this contribution highlights, gendered silences in public diplomacy. More attention is needed amongst

feminist scholars to the use of WPS as a public diplomacy tool, including an interrogation of *whether*, or indeed *how*, public diplomacy is incorporated into WPS policies and action plans. As the “war on terror” shows us, the instrumentalisation of WPS and women’s rights can work against transformative feminist aims by restricting women’s agency and obscuring their voices. Therefore, if WPS is included in public diplomacy initiatives, it should be more than a tick box exercise, and should seek to challenge and transform the current gendered practice of public diplomacy, rather than reinforce existing foreign policy structures. One way to accomplish this is to include the voices of conflict-affected women as agents, not just victims, in informing public diplomacy. In the case of Ukraine, this would mean making space for Ukrainian women to speak about their lived experiences on their own terms.

Future scholarship should consider: What work is gender doing in the practice of public diplomacy across the globe (beyond a focus on the Global North)? Where is WPS in public diplomacy? And how can WPS be applied to transform the practice of public diplomacy in line with feminist goals, including to challenge gendered and racialised global power hierarchies?

Declarations

Conflict of interest I can confirm that I have no conflict of interest to declare (a conflict of interest exists whenever an author has a financial or personal relationship with a third party whose interests could be positively or negatively influenced by the article’s content).

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