

Critical Feminist Justpeace: Grounding Theory in Grassroots Praxis. By Karie Cross Riddle. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. 272p. \$99 cloth.

Aiko Holvikivi, *London School of Economics and Political Science*

a.i.holvikivi@lse.ac.uk

The international Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda was instigated 25 years ago by UN Security Council Resolution 1325, and has become an expansive field of policy and practice addressing women's rights and participation in matters related to peace and security. This policy ecosystem, as Paul Kirby and Laura Shepherd refer to WPS in *Governing the Feminist Peace* (2024), has become *the* authoritative framework for addressing gender in the global governance of conflict. While the widespread take-up WPS is often hailed as a significant achievement, it has simultaneously been subject to critical engagement by feminist academics and practitioners. Among them, scholar-activist Rita Manchanda has warned both that the reach of WPS is limited to states who have adopted domestic frameworks to implement Security Council resolutions on the topic, and that the liberal feminist underpinnings of the agenda do not speak to the concerns of women activists in many parts of the world ('Difficult Encounters with the WPS Agenda in South Asia' in *New Directions in Women, Peace and Security*, 2020). In other words, while WPS has dominated much of feminist scholarship and practice in recent decades, this focus has produced political and analytical blind spots. There is a clear need to attend to women's experiences of conflict and peace work also outside of the dominant frame.

Against this backdrop, Karie Cross Riddle's new book, *Critical Feminist Justpeace: Grounding Theory in Grassroots Praxis* (OUP 2024), provides an important contribution

to knowledge. As Riddle demonstrates, the protracted conflict in the northeastern Indian state of Manipur – both between ethnic groups and between Manipur residents and the Indian state – remains out of the reach of WPS policies and practices. India refuses legal designation of the situation as conflict and thus prevents international and humanitarian actors from entering the region. To counteract this silence, and to fill gaps in knowledge about women, peace and security, Riddle focuses our attention on women's peacebuilding practice in Manipur. We learn about life under martial law, extrajudicial killings, inter-ethnic violence, and the struggles of women widowed by the conflict; as well as their remarkable acts of protest, practices of mutual care, and attempts at inter-ethnic dialogue. Presenting difficult to obtain ethnographic fieldwork data, the book draws lessons from a conflict and from peacebuilding efforts that remain outside of dominant institutional frames of peacebuilding practice and academic inquiry.

Critical Feminist Justpeace analyses the work of women (and) peace activists in Manipur in conversation with scholarship on the local turn in peacebuilding. In particular, Riddle engages in an intricate and sustained conversation with Jean Paul Lederach's body of work on just peace, which she places in conversation with her fieldwork findings and feminist theorising on method and epistemology. This conversation of ideas advances an understanding of the eponymous concept of 'critical feminist justpeace'. Riddle summarises the approach as 'an intersectional orientation toward conflict transformation that reduces structural power hierarchies and direct forms of violence; increases equitable justice outcomes across public and private life; and targets historically marginalized participants' (p.181).

Though the definition of the concept Riddle arrives at might sound abstract at first introduction, the book provides a careful and detailed empirical and theoretical account of how she arrived at the concept, and what it means in practice. The chapters in parts one and two of the book oscillate between high-level theorisation of peace, epistemology, and method on the one hand, and an account of Manipur's historical present and rich fieldwork findings on the other. The concluding part three of the book then weaves together these accounts in a generative and sophisticated manner, sketching out how local peacebuilders, international activists, and engaged researchers should work towards critical feminist justpeace. Throughout, the author's approach is characterised by a remarkable commitment to what she theorises as a feminist ethos of critique, which she describes as a commitment to 'privileging understanding rather than judgment, patience rather than hasty action, and contestation rather than certainty' (p.183).

Coupled with Riddle's commitment to transparency about the research process and her own positionality, this ethos in research and analysis produces some rich and insightful findings. Notably, the analysis resists the urge to gloss over complexity and contradiction. One example can be found in how Riddle discusses her process of 'deliberative inquiry and skeptical scrutiny', where she describes sharing her research participants' analyses with other interviewees from different organisations and ethnic groups. The author provides us first with quotes from an interview and her own reading of them, and then reports on how other research participants interpreted these quotes, either challenging the author's own initial response to the interview or providing additional context (pp.126-7). This practice meaningfully demonstrates that all views are partial and located, enables to author to walk us through the process of seeking

understanding over judgment, and allows the reader to sit with contestation rather than being fed a false sense of certainty.

Indeed, *Critical Feminist Justpeace* is as much a book about how to do ethical field research in a challenging context as it is a book about how women's grassroots praxis theorises peace. Riddle incorporates detailed accounts of her research process, her positionality, the challenges she encountered, the dilemmas she grappled with, and the decisions she made and why in her writing. This, as the author lays out, enacts feminist epistemological commitments to recognise that all knowledge is located – historically, politically, geographically – and to provide transparency by accounting for the politics of location in writing up research. Though this position is well established in feminist theorising, it can nonetheless be an uncomfortable exercise, and one which requires courage and a willingness to be vulnerable on the part of the authorial subject. This bold move results in a book that is rich in methodological detail, constituting a generous gift to others grappling with similar questions in their research. The book will undoubtedly serve as a guide to others doing field research – though I suspect Riddle herself would be more likely to describe her work as a thinking companion rather than a prescriptive guide.

At the same time – and without wanting to detract from the value of reflections on method and positionality – this aspect of the book might frustrate a reader who is primarily interested in learning about Manipur and women's peace work. This is partly due to the book's structure: a large portion of the introduction focuses on the author's own experience of fieldwork, and the conclusion similarly ends with discussing the implications of the work for researchers engaged in peace and conflict studies. The

structure results in the fact that at the outset, the reader learns more about the author than about the women of Manipur – although a rich account of the lives of women in Manipur follows in subsequent chapters. Recently, Jasmine K. Gani and Rabea M. Khan have cautioned that reflections on positionality can work to recentre the authorial subject in ways that may inadvertently run counter to the stated politics of the work ('Positionality Statements as a Function of Coloniality: Interrogating Reflexive Methodologies', *International Studies Quarterly* 68(2), 2024). The fine line to be tread in accounting for author positionality is navigated in the book more successfully in some places than others.

Overall, this nuanced, thoughtful, and carefully crafted book offers important theoretical and empirical insights into grassroots peace processes. It makes an important contribution to feminist literature on peace and conflict, and – as all good scholarship does – it prompts further questions and curiosities on the part of the reader. The attention to the grassroots is an unwavering commitment in Riddle's analysis, and she convincingly shows how the professionalisation and international engagement of some organisations she studied has limited their relevance to grassroots peace work. At the same time, this focus on local processes and priorities leaves the reader with the question of how structural violence emanating from the state and from global power structures could be challenged. This is not a shortcoming of the book – there is a clear reason to attend to marginalised voices that is superbly done here – so much as it is a reflection on what might be done next. Riddle's analysis pays careful attention to how colonial processes and state violence have shaped the conflict in Manipur, and the book's conclusion reflects on ways that outside actors can put pressure on the Indian state. Here Riddle joins scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who have long drawn

attention to the workings of imperial democracy in states including India ('Imperial Democracies, Militarised Zones, Feminist Engagements', *Economic and Political Weekly* 46(13), 2011). The question of how to enact transnational feminist solidarities in the face of violence remains a process in the works. As an invitation for future inquiry, I would be curious to read the author's reflections on how to do solidarity work that attends to transnational structures of oppression that set the stage for local conflicts.