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# The (Dis-)Appearance of Race in the United Kingdom's Institutionalization and Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

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In contrast to earlier, more celebratory accounts, more recent scholarship on the United Nations Security Council's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda reveals the racial-colonial logics deeply woven into the very fabric of the agenda that contribute to reproducing hierarchies, inequalities, and exclusions. Building on this body of literature, this article investigates in more detail how race shapes the United Kingdom's engagement with and institutionalization of the WPS agenda, reinforcing particular domestic identities. Drawing from a rich body of new empirical material, including documentary sources and interview data, the analysis excavates four interlinked racial-colonial practices: (1) the erasure of Britain's imperial and colonial history; (2) the production of new geographies of empire; (3) the construction of cultural inferiority of the "other"; and (4) nation branding efforts that construct the UK as the repository of leadership and expertise. I argue that the UK serves as an illustrative case that yields significant empirical and theoretical insights regarding how race is central to the institutionalization and implementation of the WPS agenda by national governments in the Global North and how, in turn, the WPS agenda enables those governments to identify as morally and culturally superior, thereby justifying racialized hierarchies in international relations.

En contraste con los estudios anteriores, más positivos, los estudios más recientes sobre la agenda «Mujeres, Paz y Seguridad (MPS)» del Consejo de Seguridad de la ONU revelan las lógicas raciales-coloniales, profundamente arraigadas en todos los aspectos de la agenda, que contribuyen a reproducir jerarquías, desigualdades y exclusiones. Sobre la base de esta literatura, este artículo investiga con más detalle cómo la raza conforma el compromiso del gobierno del Reino Unido con la agenda MPS y su institucionalización, reforzando determinadas identidades nacionales. A partir de un rico corpus de nuevo material empírico, que incluye fuentes documentales y datos de entrevistas, el análisis explora cuatro prácticas raciales-coloniales interconectadas: 1) la supresión de la historia imperial y colonial de Gran Bretaña; 2) la producción de nuevas geografías del imperio; 3) la construcción de la inferioridad cultural del «otro»; y, 4) los esfuerzos de creación de marca nacional que presentan al Reino Unido como el depositario de liderazgo y experiencia. Sostenemos que el Reino Unido es un caso ilustrativo que aporta importantes conocimientos empíricos y teóricos sobre cómo la raza es fundamental para la institucionalización e implementación de la agenda MPS por parte de los gobiernos nacionales del norte global y cómo, a su vez, la agenda MPS permite a esos gobiernos identificarse como moral y culturalmente superiores, justificando así las jerarquías racializadas en las relaciones internacionales.

Par opposition aux comptes-rendus antérieurs plus élogieux, des travaux de recherche plus récents concernant le programme pour les femmes, la paix et la sécurité (FPS) du Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU révèlent la logique raciale coloniale profondément ancrée dans ce programme, qui contribue à la reproduction des hiérarchies, inégalités et exclusions. En se fondant sur cette littérature, le présent article analyse plus en détail la façon dont la race influence comment le gouvernement britannique aborde et institutionnalise le programme FPS, renforçant ainsi des identités nationales spécifiques. À partir d'un ensemble de nouveaux documents empiriques particulièrement riche, y compris des sources documentaires et des données issues d'entretiens, l'analyse fait ressortir quatre pratiques raciales coloniales interreliées : 1) l'effacement de l'histoire impériale et coloniale de la Grande-Bretagne ; 2) la production de nouvelles géographies d'empire ; 3) la construction d'une infériorité culturelle de l'« autre » ; et, 4) les efforts nationaux de construction d'une image de marque où le RU apparaît comme une ressource en matière de leadership et d'expertise. Selon moi, le cas du RU constitue une illustration qui recèle d'informations empiriques et théoriques importantes quant à l'importance de la race dans l'institutionnalisation et la mise en œuvre du programme FPS par les gouvernements nationaux du Nord et, ensuite, à la façon dont le programme WPS permet à ces gouvernements de considérer leur morale et leur culture comme étant supérieures. Ainsi, ils justifient les hiérarchies racialisées au sein des relations internationales.

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## Introduction

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is an international political framework that derives from the unanimous adoption on October 31, 2000 of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) and nine subsequent resolutions.<sup>1</sup> The agenda now constitutes a diverse field of practice—a complex, plural, policy ecosystem (Kirby and Shepherd 2021), which aims to advance gender equality and mainstream a gender perspective in matters of international peace and security. Despite these laudable aims, a growing chorus of post- and decolonial feminist scholars criticize WPS for (re)producing racial-colonial logics as well as geospatial hierarchies, inequalities, and exclusions. Race and coloniality are deeply woven into the very fabric and implementation of the agenda, evident in, for example, the (feminist) discourses embedded in the key texts that govern the implementation of WPS, including the Security Council resolutions (SCRs) (Pratt 2013; Weerawardhana 2017; Parashar 2018) and national action plans (NAPs) (Shepherd 2016; Achilleos-Sarll 2020; Haastrup and Hagen 2020; Holvikivi and Reeves 2020); the political economy of WPS (Martín de Almagro and Ryan 2019; Haastrup and Hagen 2020; Muehlenoff 2022); the role of civil society organizations (Achilleos-Sarll 2021; Hamilton et al. 2021); the production of different subjects, particularly the “women-in-conflict” (Cook 2016; Jauhola 2016; Martín de Almagro 2018); and the integration between WPS and other policy agendas, most notably counterterrorism/countering violent extremism (CT/CVE) (Heathcote 2018; Parashar 2018; Shepherd 2022).

While these studies examine how race and coloniality shape both the formulation of the agenda on the one hand and how it is implemented in conflict and post-conflict countries on the other hand, the way race structures how powerful donor governments, especially former colonial powers, engage with and reproduce the agenda has received much less attention. In other words, the racial-colonial logics that underpin the practices of the implementers have largely gone unscrutinized. Moreover, although analyses of WPS regularly critique the “outward-facing” orientation of the agenda in the Global North, wherein most European NAPs are foreign policy documents that “reproduce a world in which problems occur ‘elsewhere,’ but solutions can be found ‘here.’” (Shepherd 2016, 325), WPS scholarship also at times reproduces this binary and narrative of diffusion. Focusing overwhelmingly on implementation efforts in “post-conflict” states (usually located in the Global South) can obscure the racial-colonial practices of the implementers—in both the Global North and Global South. This invites analyses at a national level that examines the relationship between race and the institutionalization and implementation efforts of so-called WPS “champion” states. To shift the focus to the implementers is therefore both an attempt and a call to invert the colonial gaze of WPS research, discourse, and practice.

This article combines an analysis of documentary sources and interview data to answer the primary research question: *How does race (dis-)appear in the United Kingdom's institutionalization and implementation of the WPS agenda and with what effects?* The analysis reveals how the WPS agenda reproduced and implemented by the UK bears the direct imprint of its colonial past, and, furthermore, that the UK's engagement

with WPS is in part a strategic investment: an integral part of nation branding efforts that enables the UK government to identify as morally and culturally superior, thereby justifying racialized hierarchies in international relations. My interest in institutionalization and implementation is not because I wish to evaluate whether the UK has “successfully” implemented WPS or not, although recognizing this would be a worthwhile endeavor. Rather, my intention is to question *how it becomes possible* for the UK to institutionalize and implement the agenda in the way that it does, and the constitutive political effects thereof (Doty 1993a, 298; Shepherd 2021, 7). I argue that any attempt to understand how a former colonial power, such as the UK, engages with and reproduces WPS must attend to questions of race and empire because these were not adjuncts or peripheral to the formation of modern Britain, they were its very lifeblood.

The UK therefore serves as an illustrative case that yields significant theoretical and empirical insights. First, I demonstrate how race reverberates in and through liberal projects such as WPS through the dual practices of erasure and the (re)production of different imperial imaginaries. Constituted through structural relations of (post)colonial difference that reproduce self/other identities, I argue that the UK's engagement with and institutionalization of the WPS agenda exists on a (dis)continuum of racial-colonial logics that ultimately shape the scope of implementation and its effects. I further argue that the centrality of race delimits the terms of the WPS agenda by prescribing and proscribing different forms of activity and engagement. In other words, race determines the boundaries of implementation: where, to whom, and how the WPS agenda is implemented, and thus the locations, subjects, and issue areas permitted inclusion and exclusion. This ultimately affects the conditions of possibility for transformational, structural change. Second, by analyzing an extensive body of new empirical material affords insights about this specific context, revealing instantiations of racial-colonial logics in a concrete site of WPS political activity, but that has applicability elsewhere. Indeed, these analytical findings suggest much potential for future research to study the relationship between race, coloniality, and the WPS agenda in different national contexts and provide comparative insights. This study therefore contributes primarily to the post- and decolonial WPS scholarship; however, it also speaks to the literature assessing the nature of institutionalization and implementation.

The article is organized as follows: the first section outlines the conceptual framework, theorizing how race structures engagement with WPS with implications for the scope of implementation. The case selection and materials of analysis follow, and then the methodology, where I explain how I excavate discourses on race through a (loose) discourse theoretical approach (DTA). The article then moves to the findings and analysis, which is subdivided into four sections and reveals: (1) the erasure of Britain's imperial and colonial history; (2) the production of new geographies of empire; (3) the construction of cultural inferiority of the “other”; and (4) nation branding efforts that position the UK as the repository of leadership and expertise. The conclusion brings these strands of analytical thinking together, discusses the implications of these findings for WPS research and advocacy, and ends on a cautionary note regarding the possible future(s) of the WPS agenda.

## Race, Racialization, and Radical Im/Possibilities

Colonialism not only reproduced the “colonized,” but also infiltrated and restructured the social relations of the

<sup>1</sup> The WPS agenda comprises ten resolutions, which are UNSCR 1325 (2000), UNSCR 1820 (2008), UNSCR 1888 (2009), UNSCR 1889 (2009), UNSCR 1960 (2010), UNSCR 2106 (2013), UNSCR 2122 (2013), UNSCR 2242 (2015), UNSCR 2467 (2019), and UNSCR 2493 (2019).

colonized societies, for example, by flattening the (gendered) pluralities that existed before colonialism (McClintock 1995; Lugones 2010). The racial structures and hierarchies created by colonialism and inflected through relations of social power such as gender, class, and sexuality continue to structure and order the international system. (Post-)colonialism (unhyphenated), therefore, does not signal a temporal break with the past—the “end” of colonialism and the beginning of the postcolonial; instead, it unsettles colonialism itself, highlighting how colonialism continues to reshape societies, as well as ideas around authority, expertise, and the sociology of knowledge production. “Coloniality” is therefore often defined in a temporal relationship to colonialism, being that which survives after the end of formal colonial rule: “the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations, produced by colonial cultures and structures in the modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system” (Grosfoguel 2007, 219).

The “UK” (like other former colonial powers) can therefore be described as a geopolitical construct with its histories and legacies of empire and colonialism that continue to pervade multiple aspects of social and political life, with “race” a primary constitutive reference for those histories. Patrick Wolfe (2016, 4) thereby describes race as a “trace of history” or “colonialism speaking” (10). Race is therefore not a fixed essence (akin to physical markers of difference) but a *power relation*: a system of categorization that is socially and historically constructed, as well as being spatially contingent (among others, Doty 1993b; Mills 1997; Anievas, Manchanda, and Shilliam 2015). The invocation of race and racial difference operates through various modalities as race bespeaks different (though interlinked) histories of empire, slavery, colonialism, (neoliberal) capitalism, and patriarchy. Race “registers the state of colonial histories” and is “intrinsically performative,” meaning that “rather than describing human groups, it brings them into being” (Wolfe 2016, 10). As a pervasive organizing structure of the international system (Anievas, Manchanda, and Shilliam 2015), race *works* (Machold and Charrett 2021, 39) to construct, categorize, and place in hierarchies different “subjects” and “spaces” by attributing them meaning in ways that reproduce certain dispositions about identity and spatiality. As both a practice and an analytic (Nisancioglu 2020, 41), racialization thereby exposes “the enactments through which colonial relations are created and reproduced” (46) making visible the discursive and the material legacies of colonialism.

Analytically, I seek to demonstrate that race underpins the UK’s institutionalization and implementation of the WPS agenda and is a form of domination that has constitutive political effects, upholding and justifying global hierarchies of power in international relations. In other words, race determines the conditions of possibility for transformational change, with implications for political claims and judgments, ergo, by making some WPS policies possible and desirable while foreclosing others. I further demonstrate that the dual erasure *and* reproduction of race is co-constitutive and works to disable certain demands made on the state that might activate a potentially more radical and broader vision of what the WPS agenda could be. Dependent on the context, this could include, for example, acknowledging indigenous rights and demands for justice, reparations to colonized and enslaved peoples, advocating the safe passage of refugees, or even the replacement of a Security Council with a “Peace Council” (Feminist International Law of Peace and Security Project 2020).

For the UK, it could mean heeding to long-standing civil society recommendations to recognize the Northern Ireland conflict and peace process and include it in the UK NAP. Yet inclusion would require the UK to admit not only that there was a conflict within its own borders, but also that they were a participant and colonial power to/in that conflict. That is not to suggest that inclusion would be a remedy, as “domesticating” the UK NAP could also reinforce postcolonial borders—a discussion that is beyond the scope of this article. However, the exclusion of Northern Ireland is illustrative of how global hierarchies of power impact the scope and field of WPS implementation in the UK. Recognizing colonization as a source of, and historical context giving rise to, many (armed) conflicts would be an initial move that would potentially alter the contours of WPS implementation in terms of shaping the politics of what/who is permitted in/exclusion under the auspices of NAPs. Yet, as it stands, racial-colonial hierarchies curtail the domestic implementation of the agenda, especially in the Global North—where the charge of failing to implement the agenda within their own borders is often levied (with Northern Ireland being a case in point). Indeed, it is states that resist domestic implementation (such as the UK) that often claim that they have reached, or who use the WPS agenda to signal that they have reached, the requisite level of gender progressiveness and peacefulness.

I therefore advance the theoretical claim that race affects (the possibilities of) WPS institutionalization and implementation in the UK (and potentially elsewhere) by placing certain limits upon *where*, to *whom*, and *how* the WPS agenda is implemented. The simultaneous erasure and reproduction of constitutive histories of empire, colonial conquest, and slavery not only serve as a form of complicity that upholds colonial relations that manifests in global hierarchies of power, but its consequences are profound and far-reaching. In the case of the WPS agenda, it steadily chips away at any possibility of transformation by fortifying the boundaries of what WPS is and what it can be.

### Case Selection and Materials

The UK has been relatively understudied in the WPS literature (for exceptions, see Kirby 2015; Shepherd 2016; Achilleos-Sarll 2020, 2021; Kirby, Wright, and Swaine 2022), especially in relation to its colonial past and postcolonial present. This is particularly surprising not least because, having acquired its power through centuries of colonialism, the UK occupies a prominent position on WPS as a permanent member (P5) of the Security Council. It therefore holds considerable institutional power to influence the trajectory of WPS far beyond its borders. Additionally, since its inception, the UK has engaged extensively with the agenda through the publication of multiple NAPs as well as through proximate campaigns, most noticeably the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI). However, beyond analyses of UK NAPs (e.g., Shepherd 2016), few studies examine a larger dataset of UK-WPS materials. For example, there are other important UK documents about WPS or that cite WPS that lend themselves to examination but are not codifiable as distinct WPS policy. To obtain a more comprehensive picture, I expand and diversify the body of policy texts to include an examination of UK NAPs, alongside Annual Reports to Parliament, Freedom of Information (FOI) Documents, and parliamentary debates, as well as interviews with both UK government officials and nongovernmental organization (NGO) professionals.



The four UK NAPs under examination were published in 2006, 2010 (which was subject to revisions in 2012), 2014, and 2018 (which covered the period until 2022).<sup>2</sup> The two UK parliamentary debates included were held on WPS in 2014. Although there have been other parliamentary debates conducted on topics related to WPS, namely around conflict-related sexual violence and PSVI, the 2014 debates are included because they cover the broader WPS remit and focus on progress made against the NAP at the time. Parliamentary debates along with the Annual Reports to Parliament both monitor progress and challenge the work of the government. Lastly, in 2019, under the 2000 FOI Act, I requested additional documents from the former Department for International Development (DFID) about WPS. In response, DFID released several different documents, although rarely in their entirety, dated between 2004 and 2006, including email exchanges, policy briefs, and press releases, which are also included in the dataset.

Analysis of these documents is supplemented with an analysis of interview data. As part of a larger research project, of which this article is one component, I conducted sixty-five in-depth semi-structured interviews with fifty-four policymakers and NGO professionals working on WPS.<sup>3</sup> The interviews conducted and transcribed during fieldwork, which took place between December 2017 and January 2019, provide a large repository of new empirical material. Government participants were identified in the departments that until the 2020 merger jointly owned WPS: DFID, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO, former lead WPS department), the Ministry of Defense (MoD), and the Stabilization Unit (SU), which provides cross-governmental and technical support.<sup>4</sup> In civil society, NGO professionals were identified across several different humanitarian and development organizations that work on and advocate for WPS, usually as part of a wider civil society network.

When sourcing and conducting interviews, “snowball sampling” was naturally introduced (Patton 2015). This meant that those who I interviewed often introduced or recommended colleagues to speak to, usually within their wider social and professional networks, which gradually increased the pool of participants. The response rate was higher for NGO professionals than for the government, unsurprising given the history of civil society engagement with WPS and the many organizations now working on the agenda. Conversely, civil servants and other policymakers, who are mostly generalists, work on WPS for a shorter time as they are required to move around government departments, making it harder, to identify individuals who had historically worked on the agenda but had subsequently moved on.

NGO participants working on WPS in the UK are mostly white, middle class women, who have professional roles as either “gender experts” or “gender advisors.” This meant that our interactions were often structured more by a power balance than an imbalance because I share many of the same identities as those I interviewed. Here, I follow Brid-

get Byrne, who, in her book *White Lives* (Byrne 2006, 40), explains: “I have not chosen to research myself but have chosen to research those who are quite like myself.” This dynamic sometimes shifted during interviews with government officials or civil servants.

The interviews are fully anonymized to protect the identity of individuals. Therefore, the government departments policymakers were working in, the period in which they were working on WPS, and specific NGOs/projects are not disclosed. Drawing from a selection of these interviews, they should not be read as representative but rather examples that illustrate, when read alongside the other materials, how race structures the wider discursive terrain of UK-WPS institutionalization and implementation. I therefore interpret interviews not simply as standalone dialogues but as active, relational processes of meaning-making (Fujii 2018) that travel in two directions—quite literally an *inter-view* that is “co-produced” (Shepherd 2017, 108, fn6).

### Excavating Race

The research I carried out was inductive, meaning that although I was interested in certain themes/topics, I wanted to see what emerged from the data, and through the course of interviewing and analyzing the materials many common themes did emerge. To make sense of this material in a more structured manner, I (loosely) followed a DTA, which is the combined deconstruction of both text and discourse. Following Shepherd and Griffin, I treat both interviews in the form of transcripts and documents as “discursive artefacts” (Griffin 2009, 26; Shepherd 2015, 890). Notwithstanding that they are produced/coproduced differently, I did not separate the analysis of interview data from the analysis of documents.

Discourses are understood as “systems of meaning-production rather than simply statements of language; systems that ‘fix’ meaning, however temporarily, and enable us to make sense of the world” (Shepherd 2008, 20). Through the description and/or depiction of people, places, and things within “text,” a discourse comprises a series of representations about subjects/objects/spaces/issues that render them meaningful and knowable (Doty 1993a; Hall 1997; Shepherd 2021). They are therefore constituted within, and are the products of, representational practices of discourse (Hall 1997). Furthermore, while a discourse may refer to “texts” (broadly understood), it also relates to the linguistic and behavioral social practices which are linked to the text (Doty 1996, 239).

Methodologically, DTA combines “double reading,” which calls for each text to be subject, firstly, to a descriptive reading, and, secondly, to a discourse-theoretical reading (Shepherd 2008, 21, 28). I therefore, first, familiarized myself with the data, searched for recurring themes, and manually developed analytical codes to capture these (e.g., erasure, geography, culture, and branding), usually aligning with question topics. On the second reading, I paid particular attention to the way that subjects, objects, spaces, and issues are constructed and given priority in the text, (partially) fixing meanings and identities (Doty 1996, 240; Shepherd 2008, 29). This requires the identification of “nodal points” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 112), privileged anchors that “[function] at the centre of the structure” whereby the “dominant signifier [is] the reference points for the oppositions by which identities [are] constructed” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

At this stage, I paid close attention to the subject positions and geospatial constructs that emerged

<sup>2</sup> A fifth NAP is expected to launch in 2023.

<sup>3</sup> The code for NGO actors is: “Interview data, UK, NGO01a-2018,” and for the government: “Interview data, UK, GOV01a-2018.” The number refers to the interview, whereas the letter signals whether the interviewee has been interviewed more than once. Dates are omitted to provide an added layer of anonymity. Most of the interviews—which typically lasted between 1 and 2 hours—were recorded and manually transcribed; only a few were not, and, in those instances, notes were taken. Before commencing fieldwork, the project went through ethics approval in 2017 at Warwick University.

<sup>4</sup> In September 2020, DFID merged with the FCO to form the FCDO, which is now the lead WPS department. Most of the primary research for this project was conducted prior to the merger and therefore the departments are discussed as separate throughout.

from the data, which are made to appear natural through reference to, for example, (racial) dispositions about identity or (racial-)spatial imaginings that demarcate “European” from “non-European” spaces. These patterns of racialization occur through the discursive processes of “naturalisation” and “categorisation” (Doty 1996, 10), placing subjects/spaces in particular categories/hierarchies to which they are said to belong “naturally.” This is where dispositions about identity/spatiality are reproduced through perceived binaries/hierarchies such as Global North/South, rational/irrational, civilized/barbarian, us/them, and European/non-European. These can be highlighted in various “texts” through attention to statements of “fact,” in other words, what is stated as being “fixed” or timeless, what Doty (1996, 10) terms *pre-supposition*. At this stage, although I was attentive to literal mentions of race, because explicit references are, unsurprisingly, uncommon, it was necessary to search for subtler invocations, which I have analytically organized around three dominant themes.

#### *Colonial Amnesia and the Erasure of Race*

The first theme concerns the erasure of race, Britain’s colonial past, and the effects thereof on national security policies, including the WPS agenda. The erasure of race is evident in the documents analyzed, particularly the UK NAPs, through the privileging and prioritizing of gender over and above other power relations, supporting a liberal feminist approach to WPS (Pratt 2013; Henry 2021). Intersectional forms of oppression that inform experiences of war and conflict are omitted from mention in UK NAPs. These omissions are problematic not least because how the WPS agenda is implemented partly reflects which feminist ideas and historical concerns are recognized and consequently acted upon and which are either devalued and/or ignored (Pratt 2013). As such, gender is continually reaffirmed in UK NAPs with terms such as “gender equality,” “gender inclusion,” or a “gender perspective” frequently articulated compared with terms such as “intersectionality” or “race” that rarely feature. In the 2018–2022 UK NAP, for example, there are 157 mentions of “gender,” which are mainly articulated alongside references made to either “equality” or “violence” and often conflated with women. In the same NAP, race is mentioned only once as an add-on identity marker said to produce different forms of gender discrimination (UK NAP 2018–2022, 5).

Such textual exclusions and essentialisms are reproduced in the interview transcripts of policymakers. When I asked government officials whether there was a relationship between race, colonialism, empire, and the UK’s institutionalization and implementation of WPS, I was sometimes met with a quizzical furrow of the brow or a roll of their eyes. These nonverbal cues could suggest several things: that some were unconvinced that there was any relationship to speak of, for others it may have just never occurred to them that race had any bearing on national security policies, least of all the WPS agenda, or perhaps they were signs of indifference. Regardless, it can be inferred that these responses reflect how discourses on race in Europe and its settler colonies reflect a collective and actively produced state of amnesia (Wekker 2016). Although I was conscious to do my utmost not to either influence how participants responded to questions or steer conversations in particular ways, I felt a responsibility to ask these questions. However, by just mentioning the words race or colonialism, the skepticism I often encountered and the rather unconformable atmosphere it

appeared to produce made it difficult to ask follow-up questions. This view was reinforced by several NGO professionals who explained that it was a taboo subject—a point I revisit later.

Despite the foregoing, during a few interviews with policymakers, Britain’s colonial history—irrespective of its relationship to the WPS agenda—was raised voluntarily and mostly viewed in a positive light. One government respondent told me:

Our colonial past and the British empire give us a big advantage around the world...things like the Commonwealth are very important over which we have a big influence...We’ve got interest and networks that probably every other country envy largely because of our history, and we should make the most of it. (interview data, UK, GOV01a)

This follows a narrative regularly peddled by successive British governments that the end of empire represented its logical conclusion, the fulfilment, rather than the renunciation, of Britain’s imperial mission. Therefore, rather than condemning Britain in that role, the interviewee instead extols its lasting “positive” effects. While this type of explicit comment was indeed rare, as I will discuss later, race was often mentioned in more coded terms, suggesting that while there was a general unwillingness to discuss race openly, it was not entirely erased.

NGO professionals working on WPS were more willing to discuss these issues, although rarely discussed them unprompted. Out of a total of thirty-eight interviews, only five voluntarily discussed the effects of colonialism and the British Empire on UK foreign policy and, more specifically, the WPS agenda, or NGO WPS advocacy. Therefore, while race is mostly rendered invisible in the wider civil society sector, there were degrees of awareness of this silencing. The few who discussed these issues felt that colonialism should be a fundamental part of the WPS conversation in the UK (and indeed elsewhere). One interviewee remarked: “WPS sits so firmly under foreign and international policy, policies that are inherently racist in the first place. It’s very hard to remove a discussion on WPS from that context” (interview data, UK, NGO06a), while another mentioned the failure of the organization they work for to acknowledge colonial legacies in their campaign and advocacy materials. They stated: “Colonialism is really off the table, even in civil society it’s off the table. You don’t see it in the policy papers of development organisations” (interview data, UK, NGO09a). Qualifying their initial statement that colonialism is “off the table” with “*even in civil society*” suggests that the erasure of colonialism by NGOs in comparison with the UK government is viewed as being more surprising, arguably because NGOs are assumed to be more critical because part of their role is to hold the government to account.

There is not only a general silence around race, but one NGO professionals talked about *being* silenced. They told me that bringing up the relationship between race, colonialism, and the WPS agenda was discouraged by the government, but also (although less so) within the NGO sector, where white men are overrepresented at senior decision-making levels. As mentioned, interviewees implied that race was a taboo subject, which one described as being “actively suppressed” (interview data, UK, NGO06b). That same interviewee explained that if they were to mention race, it would likely be trivialized: “I don’t think I could ever go into a government meeting and talk about race: I would be laughed at.” They continued: “We are operating in the constraints of government policy that doesn’t

acknowledge empire and colonial atrocities,” expressed similarly by another as “the general problem ... and that is not having dealt with the legacy of empire” (interview data, UK, NGO19a). This interviewee partly attributed this to the government’s physical makeup, an environment conducive, they felt, to maintaining these erasures: “Frankly, the kind of people that are recruited to these roles, particularly government ministers, skew white males, certain class, skew a certain attitude, doesn’t provide fertile terrain to address these silences” (interview data, UK, NGO19a). Therefore, while a few NGO professionals opined about these issues during interviews, it was clear that they were wary doing so during encounters with the government. I inferred that this was partly due to a concern that it could jeopardize the close working relationship civil society had established with the UK government over WPS, which one interviewee described as “quite spectacular” (interview data, UK, NGO02a).

### *New Geographies of Empire*

Race also emerges through the compartmentalization and demarcation of space. That is, how the UK’s implementation of WPS is spatialized to construct new geographies of empire. Racial-spatial configurations and geospatial constructs, such as “focus countries” and “spheres of influence,” reinforced through the outward-facing orientation of UK NAPs, I argue, are (postcolonial) spatializations of power. UK NAPs facilitate the “othering” of violence by confining it to certain (non-white) geographies that act as a form of civilizing marker, marking “us” from “them.”

UK NAPs determine the geographies of conflict where WPS is to be implemented. They are directed outwards, toward countries beyond the UK’s (and Europe’s) borders, described in UK NAPs as “fragile and conflict-affected states.” The 2006 UK NAP resolved “to ensure gender elements are incorporated into the objectives of Council missions to areas of *conflict*” (UK NAP 2006). Successive iterations have articulated this more explicitly. For example, the 2014–2017 UK NAP includes a “Statement of Intent” (UK NAP 2014–2017, 1), which directly orients the NAP outward. Similarly, the introduction to the 2018–2022 UK NAP “sets out how the UK government will integrate a gender perspective into its work to build security and stability overseas” (UK NAP 2018–2022, 3). This orientation is reinforced by the physical contours of policy ownership whereby WPS is located within the jurisdiction of the UK government departments concerned with *foreign* (and development) policy—excluding, for example, the Home Office. For all intents and purposes, therefore, UK NAPs are *foreign* policy documents.

Following this outward-facing orientation, UK NAPs have evolved to include a list of “focus countries,” all of which are in the Global South where implementation is determined bilaterally. That said, the 2018–2022 UK NAP states that WPS activities also extend beyond focus countries (UK NAP 2018–2022, 21). “Focus countries” were first introduced in the 2014–2017 UK NAP as a descriptor for “countries where the UK is actively supporting women, peace and security” (UK NAP 2014–2017, 20). This was described by a policymaker as targeting specific countries rather than sprinkling, “fairly dust everywhere” (interview data, GOV03a). The 2014–2017 UK NAP outlines a rather ambiguous selection criterion as justification for the six focus countries, which include Afghanistan, Myanmar,<sup>5</sup> Demo-

cratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Libya, Somalia, and Syria. This increased to nine in the 2018–2022 UK NAP; the additional countries are Iraq, Nigeria, and South Sudan.

One policymaker explained: “Well before my time it was agreed that it was an international tool to help move the agenda forward in other countries, but not in our own” (interview data, UK, GOV07a). This positions the UK and other Northern countries as mediators of peace and security rather than as places where conflict also occurs. Emphasizing that these were decisions taken prior to this individual being in post, the policy decision is described as a *fait accompli*. One NGO professional attributed the division between the “foreign” and the “domestic” to “the liberal paradigm where the boundary between the ‘foreign’ and ‘domestic’ is there and it is naturalised” (interview data, UK, NGO04b). The liberal paradigm presupposes the territorial state whereby “‘democracy’—refers to a particular set of electoral institutions and political and civil rights within the boundaries of a sovereign state and ‘war’ [the antonym of ‘peace’] refers to interstate relations” (Barkawi and Lafey 1999, 412). For a world that is networked, however, *foreign policy* is a problematic descriptor in that it presumes the primacy and coherency of the nation state and so delimits the terms of the WPS agenda. It effectively prescribes “where” is conflict-affected, “who” is conflict-affected, and “what” constitutes conflict-affected harms and, therefore, who/what/where is afforded (gendered) interventions in the form of WPS (or otherwise).

Responsibility for the implementation of WPS lies primarily with UN member states, meaning not only that state approaches and commitments vary but that WPS is often implemented in accordance with national security interests (Basu 2016a). This was expressed by an NGO professional, who remarked: “That’s the point of foreign policy, it’s what you need as the UK but that’s not what WPS is about” (interview data, UK, NGO06a). It is apposite that this participant makes a distinction between foreign policy as the reflection of national interest and WPS as potentially disruptive to the maxim of foreign policy as usual. A former WPS official further elaborated on the primacy of national interest and need to maintain regional and global balances of power:

You’ve got to understand that there are spheres of influence in the world. The spheres of influence are where Britain traditionally has had a relationship, a longer-term relationship. We wouldn’t for example go into places where the French would have a sphere of influence, we would leave them to do their thing, or where the Germans had a sphere of influence, or the Americans had a dominant sphere of influence. You have to remember that we are talking about geopolitics here. (interview data, UK, GOV14a)

Although a sphere of influence is commonly used to refer to the Cold War period, it is pertinent that “the first historical idea resembling that of a sphere of influence is the notion of empire or imperialism” (Hast 2014, 37; Jackson 2019).

This was reiterated by another policymaker, “the French will probably be more successful in francophone Africa” (interview data, GOV02a). “Successfully” implementing WPS was partly inferred to be a result of intervening strategically based on prior colonial relations—as the same interviewee

<sup>5</sup>The UK continues to use the English name Burma rather than Myanmar in UK NAPs. The name of the country has been a matter of disagreement, reflecting Myanmar’s colonial past and British rule that lasted from 1824 to 1948.



explained: “focus[ing] on efforts where you were likely to get a good result for the efforts you are making.” In that sense, “focus countries” represent a rather unsuspecting example of where Britain’s formal empire has been replaced by an informal one, such that Britain’s contemporary relationship with the “focus countries” can be traced back to the British Empire as most are former British colonies, British protectorates, or a colony of another European state.

### *Cultural Inferiority*

Race also appears in the materials analyzed through cultural references to the “other,” often used synonymously with the “local” (Achilleos-Sarll and Chilmeran 2020; Chilmeran 2022), and through repeated references to the primary target and referent object of the WPS agenda, the “women-in-conflict” (Cook 2016). The subject of the “women-in-conflict” is often reproduced as culturally bound, backward, and underdeveloped, and invariably located in the Global South. This follows broader cultural distinctions made between “international” and “local” actors and institutions that are imbued with notions of civilization. While scientific discourses on race justified through so-called biological theories were discredited with the dissolution of formal empire, the racial hierarchies and inequalities already woven into the fabric of the system were not suddenly dismantled (Chandler 2010, 373). Race quickly gave way to references to culture as well as the “local”—including women and girls *overthere*, which, in many iterations, became homogenized and reified as a system of beliefs, values, and personality traits, so dividing the world into “competing cultures” (Pratt 2005) and ushering in a “new racism” (Barker 1981; Baliber and Wallerstein 1991).

On a few occasions, NGO professionals told me that a civilizing narrative was how the UK government interpreted their role implementing WPS. Starkly put by one interviewee: “This is still something we hear, ‘that we are just trying to bring culture and democracy to the Global South ... and the British values.’ I don’t know if it’s just the empire in their heads” (interview data, UK, NGO20a). This familiar colonial narrative sees the “local population,” including the “women-in-conflict,” as “lacking” in democracy and gender norms, and thus “in need” of help by the “international community.” They therefore become the “ultimate beneficiaries” of WPS policies and programs. Indeed, a poor record on women’s rights is often cited as the consequence of “failing” cultures, whereas the attainment of women’s rights has become a key indicator or marker of “progress” (Al-Ali and Pratt 2009; Towns 2009).

This divisive language resonates with that used in several FOI documents that both predate and immediately follow the adoption of the UK’s first NAP in 2006. These documents provide evidence highlighting the initial institutionalization of UNSCR 1325 into UK foreign policy. For example, FCO document “Women, Peace and Security: Putting UNSCR 1325 into Action,” dated October 17, 2006, sets out the UK’s framework for the implementation of the agenda. Following a question and answer format, one response in particular is worth highlighting. In answer to the question, “What progress has been made?”, the document states, “UNSCR remains largely unimplemented in many parts of the world, and discussions often run into ‘cultural’ objections, or apathy... The problems that UNSCR 1325 seeks to address remain serious” (FOI 2006).

A lack of progress in places where WPS is to be implemented is attributed to “cultural objections,” mirroring some of the language used in the 2014–2017 UK NAP. For

example, when explaining how the UK identifies the “focus countries” that it actively supports on WPS, the NAP provides two rationales. The first is whether the country is a priority for the work of all three departments as well as the National Security Council (NSC) and the second through local-level consultations where the UK has “determined there is local appetite for change” (UK NAP 2014–2017, 20). The justification for a lack of progress is attributed to the culture (or apathy) of local “recipients,” ergo, that they lack an “appetite for change” that is presented as a statement of fact. This was contested by an NGO professional who remarked:

Does the government look at the historical context in government conflict analysis...in terms of the colonial powers creating the conflict dynamics, or certainly having a legacy in those conflict dynamics?...If we don’t acknowledge our role in all of these countries that we have presence in, from Afghanistan and Iraq to the start of the British Empire...if you can’t do that because we don’t want to, then we can’t acknowledge power dynamics. (Interview data, UK, NGO06b)

Feminists have long argued that violence and insecurity (including violence against women) are not the consequence of a (particular) “failing” culture but of, *inter alia*, a lack of state institutions that provide essential services, a political system without widespread legitimacy, the unequal distribution of resources, institutional legacies of colonial rule, large-scale military interventions, and the inflow of arms from external actors (see, *inter alia*, Giles and Hyndman 2004; Cockburn 2007; Kandiyoti 2007; Al-Ali and Pratt 2009; Shalhoub-Keorkian 2009).

FOI document “Putting UNSCR 1325 into Action” goes on to state: “The politics of peace and war are still largely male-dominated. This is particularly so in Africa—in local level reconciliation as well as framed negotiated settlements, community dialogue through local elders, traditional chiefs or religious figures, all overwhelming male.” Generalized in relation to an entire continent, this statement singles out Africa as a “particularly” bad example, an emphasis that reflects the racial hierarchies that colonialism produced wherein “Africa” was relegated to the bottom rung (Grovgui 2001; Gahutu 2016). The statement also draws distinctions between “well-governed” and “weak” states/continents in two ways. First, it reinforces the idea that Africa lacks progressive gender discourse and, second, that their governance structures and (male) leaders are rooted in the community, as in the “local,” thereby lacking in agency outside the particularities of religious, ethnic, or political structures and differences (Gibbins 2011, 531), in comparison with the “modern” and secular structures of European governments. This not only reproduces a discursive circularity in which discourses on race, alongside notions of African ethnicity, religiosity, and culture, become linked through a process of gendering and racialization, but also erases the agency of African women and the prominent role they played in advocating for UNSCR 1325 in the first place.

Across the two parliamentary debates on WPS held in the House of Lords on February 24, 2014, and on July 14, 2014, race also appears through references to culture. Predating the adoption of the third UK NAP (2014–2017), the agenda for the debate held on February 24 focused on its development, while the subsequent debate addressed progress on the development of the UK NAP. The format of the first debate included several speeches made by members (mostly women), while the second debate directed a series of questions at the then (Conservative) Senior Minister of State in the Foreign Office, Baroness Warsi. The “average third



world women" (Mohanty 1984) is described in these debates through stories told by (senior) white women about Black and Brown women who experience conflict "over there," in the "developing," "less civilised" world. Both debates are replete with racially coded language, attributed in part to the fact that they are a substantially verbatim record of what is said in Parliament and therefore the language is much more arresting than that found in more carefully curated policy documents. For the sake of progressing the argument, I will proceed to discuss only a few pertinent examples.

Some countries, such as Afghanistan, are particularly visible across both debates, owing to British military involvement from 2001, and justified in part by an emphasis on Afghan women's "liberation." In one of the debates, women's rights are mentioned as an important factor that led to British involvement: "I am pleased to understand that Afghanistan remains a focus country, as women's rights there was one of the reasons for our engagement, and we must not allow the gains that have been made for women there to roll back" (House of Lords, Hansard, February 24, 2014). Here, it is evident that an accommodation between WPS and 'white feminism' is being used to justify military involvement. Feminist and post- and decolonial scholars have long-contested justifications for intervention based on "liberating" others, especially in relation to advancing women rights (Kandiyoti 2007; Al-Ali and Pratt 2009). There is also a total erasure of the historical involvement of the British in Afghanistan, including how Afghanistan has been represented. This, Manchanda (2020, 75) argues, includes rendering Afghanistan a weak state to serve British colonial and imperial interests at different historical junctures, as well as "the place Afghanistan occupied both in the colonial mindset and in the colonial order."

Although less prevalent, other contexts are also mentioned. For example, one member recalls a visit to South Sudan:

I remember in South Sudan years ago being asked to talk to the women of a certain area about their problems and possible ways of engaging them in decision-making. It took me all morning to persuade the men that we did not want them present at the discussions. A compromise was eventually reached in the end and the men encircled us, but at a distance where I thought that if we talked quietly they would not hear our conversation. I hope the women did not get beaten that evening, but they probably did. (House of Lords, Hansard, February 24, 2014)

While the above account is anecdotal of the member's lived experience, they make two rather stark generalizations about the community visited. First, they assume that it is likely that the men will be violent toward the women they talked with when they leave. Second, they seem intent on speaking to these women despite, as suggested, the possibility that this would result in violence. Notwithstanding the patriarchal structures highlighted by the member and the need to dismantle such structures, the anecdote conjures up a colonial hierarchy inflected through white feminism, ergo, between the "passive" and "victimised" "brown women" in contrast to the predatory and pathologically violent "barbaric brown men" whose women need "saving" by Western intervention (Spivak 1988, 296).

These statements are in addition to repeated mentions of sisterhood by members, expressed in terms of solidarity with women and girls affected by conflict. One member "welcome[s] the positive moves taking place which we are all pleased about, and which give us confidence on

behalf of our sisters around the world" (House of Lords, Hansard, February 24, 2014). However, as postcolonial feminists have shown, the self-presentation of Western women as privileged and liberated is enabled and sustained by this othering (e.g., Mohanty 1984, 74). Indeed, it is precisely that self-presentation, based on the relational constitution of gendered and racialized categories of "self" and "other," that infuse UK-WPS discourse with an imperial, white feminism (Amos and Parmar 1984; Shepherd 2022).

#### *Nation Branding*

Lastly, race appears through the construction, branding, and performative enactment of UK "leadership" and "expertise." I argue that this is an extension of how the UK's institutionalization and implementation of WPS produces new geographies of empire and sites of intervention. The dual construction of both leadership and expertise firmly establishes the UK (along with other European states) as "exporters" and "first movers" rather than "importers" and "recipients" of WPS norms and policies, contributing to a rejection by most Northern states to implement WPS domestically.

The UK has sought to establish a position on WPS as both a global "leader" and an "expert," and repeatedly articulates this in numerous statements, speeches, NAPs, and Reports to Parliament. To evidence its leadership on WPS, the UK regularly boasts that it was one of the first states (and the first permanent member of the UNSC) to adopt a NAP on March 8, 2006. Pursuant to the 2004 recommendation of the UN Secretary-General, European governments, and specifically the "good citizen" states including Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (Dunne 2008; Tryggestad 2014), led in first adopting NAPs, despite not having experienced recent armed conflict on their territory (Lee-Koo and Trojanowska 2017, 290). When launching the 2014–2017 UK NAP, then foreign secretary William Hague emphasized the UK's "strong global reputation" on WPS, stating: "The UK was one of the first countries to publish a National Action Plan" (Hague, House of Commons Statement, 2014).

This hubris was reiterated during an interview with a civil servant: "Every time we start a briefing on this agenda, we always say that the UK is a global leader on WPS. We do this because we hold the pen at the Security Council, so we have that responsibility to be a leader" (interview data, UK, GOV07a). An NGO professional told me that they and others were often amused by such pronouncements: "One of the things that we all laugh about is that every donor government—the UK, Swedes, Finns, even the Portuguese for a while, are saying they are the leaders on WPS" (interview data, UK, NGO16a). The story repeatedly told about how WPS developed through the adoption of NAPs first issued by European governments is central to establishing the Global North as the "institutional home" of WPS (Basu 2016b, 362). This narrative is evidentially partial, excluding, for example, the fact that the earliest policy document to implement UNSCR 1325 outside the UN was the Maputo Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, agreed by the African Union in 2003 (Basu 2016b; Kirby and Shepherd 2021). This narrative therefore not only reinforces widely held colonial assumptions that the Global North is the "institutional home" of WPS (Basu 2016b, 362), but also firmly anchors WPS as an instrument of foreign policy.

Reiterating UK leadership on WPS intersects with its soft power branding. As one policymaker remarked: "1325 has helped in that we want to portray ourselves as a country that cares about human rights, equality, gender perspectives ...

[but] it will never be a central plank of our foreign policy” (interview data, GOV03a). They went on to distinguish the UK’s foreign policy from that of the so-called good citizen states, emphasizing British exceptionalism: “The UK is always going to have a different foreign policy to Sweden, we are a member of the P5 ... we are expected to be *edgy*” (interview data, GOV03a, emphasis added). The same interviewee continued, “The brand that the UK has with WPS and with some of the PM initiatives ... I like that. In a way that Scandinavian countries have brands, ‘peace brands,’ and some countries have ‘bad brands,’ and I think that we should be pursuing WPS as a national brand” (interview data, GOV03a). Additionally, the interviewee describes WPS as more palatable than, say, feminist foreign policy (FFP), commenting on the unlikelihood Britain would ever adopt an FFP: “I just don’t think we will get there” (interview data, GOV03a). WPS is therefore as much a brand as it is a policy, although one clearly peripheral to, and sometimes even at odds with, national security interests: “There is still the view that [WPS] is good and worthy but largely peripheral work. The sort of *realpolitik* is probably predominating” (interview data, GOV03a), or, as another commented, “foreign policy is about pursuing your national interests. That’s the beginning and end of it for me” (interview data, UK, GOV01a).

European governments assumed, albeit rhetorically, initial responsibility for the implementation of UNSCR 1325, which was part of a concerted effort to “encourage and promote” the wider development of action plans. Consequently, the UK has led and advised other countries whom they support in the implementation of WPS, most notably in the development and implementation of their own action plans (which has included Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kenya, Lithuania, and South Africa), the justification for which was expressed in an FOI document on the UK’s implementation of UNSCR 1325 dated November 10, 2005: “We believe that it is essential for the UK and other developed countries/countries not experiencing conflict to develop action plans,” referring to the UK as “one of the leading advocates.”

This document, and many others besides, established UNSCR 1325 as part of the UK’s foreign policy, and justifies this orientation based on the classification of “developed” and “developing” countries mapped onto the binaries of “peace” and “war/conflict” and “exporter” and “importer” (with the attending racial-colonial associations implied in the dichotomy). Racial-colonial signifiers imbue the temporal distinction between “developed” and “developing” countries with meaning in relation to the oft-cited narration of WPS as originating first in the Global North before being diffused elsewhere. That is, “developed” countries are established as the model of peace and cooperation and, based upon that framing, assume responsibility for exporting WPS, thus positioning themselves as role models who should lead by example. The construction of UK-WPS leadership thus has a distinctly temporal dimension, as [Dipesh Chakrabarty \(2007, 7\)](#) explains: “the inhabitants of the colonies were assigned a place ‘elsewhere’ in the ‘first in Europe and then elsewhere’ structure of time.”

The spatial and temporal binary between “developed” and “developing” countries, which further provides justification for the agenda as a foreign policy instrument, is further reiterated in UK NAPs, as well as across the wider corpus of UK national security documents that cite WPS through a stated emphasis on the international community, international partners, and like-minded countries that are bound by international norms, commitments, standards, and inter-

ests. Indeed, in the dialect of international governance, European governments worked in concert to establish the parameters and language of NAPs. As a 2006 FOI document states:

We compared notes with other like-minded countries about National Action Plans, most recently with the Swedes in October. This debate provided the opportunity to further raise awareness of the importance of developing NAPs with other like-minded countries.

This statement suggests that the “international” consists of an exclusive group of “like-minded” states that share similar ideas and preferences regarding foreign and development policy in contradistinction to those outside the bounds of “international society.” They are defined in relation to a series of formal and informal networks based on frequent interactions that include information-sharing and coordinating initiatives ([Elgström 2016](#); [Guerrina and Wright 2016](#)). These are, therefore, states that are seen as agenda-setters on areas like gender equality. As [Elgström \(2016, 229\)](#) explains, “the ambition is to spread the norms of the like-minded to reluctant actors.” However, to gain access to this “society,” those on the “periphery” must strive to imitate and access “the European” ([Koskenniemi 2002](#)). As such, when policymakers discussed any form of coordination or information-sharing, it was always with European or North American partners, never with countries in the Global South; instead, they were discussed almost exclusively as sites of intervention, not sources of knowledge.

The UK self-presents not only as “champions” of the agenda’s principles but also as “experts” on WPS policy. This dual branding was articulated by a civil servant: “Even those seen as leaders on gender equality look to the UK for expertise, particularly DFID—sometimes for leadership, but even more than that they look to us for expertise” (interview data, UK, GOV06a). They reiterated the UK’s position on WPS as one of the prominent “experts” among the “like-minded countries,” but specifically as one of the leading “gender experts.” Until the merger, although the FCO was technically the lead department on WPS, it was DFID that was regularly cited during interviews as being the most progressive and left-leaning, housing considerable expertise on WPS, as well as gender equality and women’s rights more broadly.

In the 2014–2017 UK NAP, mentions of expertise and/or experts are framed according to both a unidirectional transfer of knowledge and the deployment of technical experts and resources to fragile and/or conflict states. A commitment to providing “technical expertise and advisory help,” “lessons on best practice,” “monitoring and evaluation support” (UK NAP 2014–2017, 25) positions the UK as a WPS “expert.” The intention is to “[make] UK resources and technical expertise available to foreign governments” further stating that “We want our officials to ... help push best practice in protecting, including, and empowering women and girls” (UK NAP 2014–2017, 8, 11). Particular emphasis on gender expertise, and the transfer of that expertise, was mentioned during an interview with a government official: “The UK should be an exporter of gender expertise, working on gender equality is the same thing as the promotion of women’s rights” (interview data, UK, GOV06a). The discursive construction between the “subject” (active) and the “object” (passive) of UK-WPS implementation reinforces the agency of the “subject,” the UK, as the “doers” or implementers who perform the act of knowledge acquisition and resource transfer. At the same time, the Global South are expected to “perform the site of innumerable case studies” ([Parashar 2018, 833](#)), but remain passive in the process.

Moreover, claiming the UK should be an exporter of gender expertise reinforces several colonial assumptions: first, that gender equality is a uniquely Western export (Oyèwùmí 1997; Lugones 2016); second, that knowledge about gender is universal and thus can be exported in any given context; and third, that the UK is not in need of (gendered) interventions such as WPS (or otherwise) because they have achieved both peacefulness and gender progressiveness. This categorizes gender as universal and separate from European imperialism enabling it to be assumed uncritically for other cultures (Oyèwùmí 1997). This is a colonial imposition (Lugones 2010) that reproduces the figure of the “expert”—and particularly the (Global North) “gender expert”—as “international/global experts,” with everyone else designated “local”/“regional” experts (Hastrup and Hagen 2021, 29).

The “technical” expertise of Global North “experts,” and the Western and masculine notions of progress and rationality embodied within them, are reinforced through the power asymmetry embedded in the unequal relationship between “donor” and “recipient,” “exporter” and “importer,” and “knowledge producer” and “knowledge object.” As scholars variously document, these so-called technical experts are then sent on “development missions” to states that are seen to be lacking in an equivalence of gender expertise despite often having little (if any) prior knowledge of the local context and usually unable to speak any of the local languages (Kothari 2005, 426). Thus, what is understood as professional expertise in UK-WPS discourse does not necessarily reflect in-depth geographical knowledge of the focus countries but is mostly attributed to “technical know-how” (Kothari 2005, 43). This shapes “the constitution of the ‘expert,’” which is not a neutral term but is deeply political, attributed to someone not necessarily because of what they know but because of who they are and where they come from (Kunz, Prugl, and Thomson 2019, 36). This also extends to how the government utilizes the “expertise” of civil society. On several occasions, I was told that the government encourages civil society to focus on the technicalities of how to implement WPS. Thus, many more NGO professionals reiterated the pressure on NGOs to be “solutions-oriented,” as it is frequently described in the sector. Comparing the government with civil society, a policymaker remarked: “it’s the business of government to provide policy based on a bit more objectivity and balance” (interview data, GOV03a).

### Conclusion

As demonstrated in the post- and decolonial literature on WPS, the agenda is a colonial product that reproduces racial-colonial logics both in terms of the formulation of the agenda and how it is implemented in conflict and post-conflict countries. Yet, the racial-colonial logics that underpin the practices of the implementers have largely gone unscrutinized. Building upon this scholarship, and anchored in theorizations about race, radical im/possibilities, and boundary fortification, the article shifted the focus to donor governments, particularly the UK. This was not simply to scrutinize the UK’s NAPs, but to cast a much wider empirical net that examines in more detail the (dis-)appearance of race in the UK’s institutionalization and implementation of WPS. Through an analysis of numerous UK government documents and hundreds of pages of transcribed interview data, the analysis revealed the operation of race through: (1) the erasure of Britain’s imperial and colonial history, (2) the production of new geographies of empire through spatial configurations of power and geospatial constructs, (3)

the construction of cultural inferiority of the “other” on the basis of how women are treated “over there,” and (4) nation branding efforts that construct the UK as the repository of both leadership and expertise.

The empirical findings reveal not only that race is central to the UK’s engagement with the agenda, but also that the WPS agenda enables the UK government to claim moral and cultural superiority. The article therefore sheds new light not only on how the WPS policy architecture of powerful donor governments is dependent on racial-colonial understandings of international relations, but also that race and racialized hierarchies deeply shape engagement with the WPS agenda (as an already imperial formation). This enables the reproduction of certain subjects, spaces, and identities, and points to the strategic use of WPS as a civilizing marker used by donor governments to further justify global hierarchies of power in international relations.

These findings have implications for several related areas of WPS research and advocacy. First, they highlight not only how a former colonial power engages with the WPS agenda and therein reproduces the coloniality of the agenda, but also how race effects the terms of the agenda by proscribing and prescribing the scope of implementation. Race not only structures UK engagement with WPS, but its centrality has profound implications for how WPS is implemented in terms of the subjects, geographies, and issues included and excluded, for example, in UK NAPs, as well as the boundaries associated with those identifications. For example, the inclusion of certain subjects, such as refugees, and geographies, such as Northern Ireland, would unsettle the UK’s identity as gender progressive and peaceful (Holvikivi and Reeves 2020), which engagement with the WPS agenda in its current iteration facilitates, but which are excluded from mention in the UK NAP on the basis that are beyond the WPS remit. However, without rethinking the WPS agenda itself, advocating a broadening of WPS may simply further justify and legitimize global hierarchies and postcolonial borders.

Second, in the context of an ever-expanding WPS agenda, discourses on race have evolved in the UK and elsewhere through, for example, the controversial link established between WPS and CT/CVE in Resolution 2242 (2015). Moreover, and as mentioned, the UK’s unwillingness to recognize the conflict in Northern Ireland and ongoing peace process remains particularly contentious which has direct links to British colonialism. At the same time, the agenda appears unable to address the climate emergency, racial inequality, settler colonialism, and the “refugee crisis.” There is therefore scope to say much more about the pervasiveness of these discourses and practices both in the UK and elsewhere, but also what this means in the current global context with the rise of right-wing, populist governments, and misogynist forces. Therefore, while the analysis presented here highlights important empirical details particular to the UK, it is likely that broader patterns of racialization can be discerned across other case studies, with comparative analysis likely to offer additional insights.

As the agenda continues to pluralize, with new actors, organizations, and institutions drawing on and seeking to extend the agenda’s principles, we must remain cognizant of how the WPS agenda is being institutionalized and implemented, sometimes in ways that are at odds with the pursuit of racial and gender justice and feminist peace. Unmasking race and coloniality, and their relationship to wider systems of hierarchy and oppression, including how they impact the boundaries of implementation, unsettles state-centric accounts that leverage the WPS agenda as a form of nation



branding, which is a step toward challenging these global hierarchies of power. The danger is that the WPS agenda is increasingly becoming another tool for the Global North to find redemption through new kinds of liberal interventions and civilizing missions in the Global South. Ultimately, this article calls into question the WPS agenda as a tool that can advance a revolutionary feminist peace project. The very nature of the seemingly “gentler” words that comprise the “women,” “peace” and “security” “agenda” can act as an emollient on the racial-colonial entanglements and circulations foundational to the formulation of the agenda and reproduced through its institutionalization and implementation.

### Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the *International Studies Quarterly* data archive.

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