

“Where Does Gender Fit [In]?” A Student-Led Quest for Gender-Expansive & Inclusive Peace Curriculum

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Despite the centrality of gender to peacebuilding, gender perspectives are often treated as supplementary rather than foundational within peace studies curricula. This chapter presents a case study of how students and alumnae advocated for the intentional inclusion of gender into the curriculum and extracurricular activities at the Kroc School of Peace Studies at the University of San Diego. Although our individual advocacy occurred at different times, our voices came together through a shared interest in addressing gender exclusion. These efforts, culminating in the co-creation of a new elective course entitled *Gender, Power and Peace* (offered Fall 2024), invite readers to incorporate gender into their own learning journeys, not as an add-on but as a core theoretical framework for peacebuilding work.

In this call to action, we value reflexivity, listening, and learning, particularly regarding power and positionality. We come to this work with an understanding of how our lived experiences, rooted in our named identities and socio-political positionalities, shape our perspectives on issues related to authority, privilege, and the systems through which power thrives. With this, in our academic space, where power inequities are often underexamined, we pay particular attention to gendered and feminist analyses.

Drawing on feminist scholars (hooks, 1994; Nagar, 2003), we weave our perspectives into suggested actions to invite others into the conversation. We acknowledge our graduate program is situated in the Global North and that these actions emerge from our experiences; we do not assume that these actions are universal or need to be sequential. Rather, we offer actions as adaptable strategies coupled with critical questions for reflection to support the integration of gender into higher education programming.

Why Include Gender? A Process of Decolonizing Dominant Epistemologies

Decolonizing dominant epistemologies is one step toward a more expansive global understanding that reflects the voices driving peacebuilding. However, “the problem with many articulations of decolonising feminism is that they are based on the assumptions of readiness: of having the capacity to listen, to learn and, thus, to decolonise” (Paramaditha, 2022, p. 34). Meaning that while decolonizing knowledge is integral to peacebuilding, it is an ongoing process (not an endpoint) that requires continuous interrogation, acknowledgment of inconsistencies, revision, and repositioning.

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As we initiated our efforts, we found that one major obstacle to integrating gender structurally is the dominance of “universal” gender and peacebuilding frameworks in academia, often rooted in Global North assumptions and (neo)liberal paradigms (Richmond & Mac Ginty, 2015). In many cases, these frameworks are institutionalized as the default approach to understanding gender, leaving little space for diverse realities experienced in other contexts. In reflecting on our diverse lived experiences, we propose the following rationale for gender inclusion in peacebuilding curricula:

- For students of peacebuilding and related disciplines, gender analysis is crucial for transforming conflicts and sustaining peace. Conversely, omitting gender from academic programs constitutes epistemic harm by limiting knowledge of future practitioners (see Cremin et al., 2018). A peacebuilding education without a gendered analysis risks reproducing the inequalities that gendered norms created within societies and institutions (Verge et al., 2018) and are often exacerbated during violent conflict.
- If the curriculum includes gender, it is often conflated with women's experiences, particularly through the centrality of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. While WPS remains essential, and research has indicated the inclusion of women increases the sustainability of peace agreements (Krause et al., 2018; Stavrevska, 2025), we call for the inclusion of gender more broadly - to consider the impact of conflict for those who identify within the LGBTQ+ community through an examination of queer theory¹ (Hagan, 2016), hegemonic masculinity, power, and scholarship from the Global South.
- Integrating gender into institutions of higher education benefits future practitioners by illustrating how gender analysis shapes conflict and influences peacebuilding efforts. A comprehensive gendered analysis draws on diverse epistemologies (e.g., feminist, decolonial, anti-racist), to foster deeper conversation and more nuanced peacebuilding approaches (see McLeod & O'Reilly, 2019).
- Furthermore, educational initiatives that incorporate diverse perspectives are more likely to reflect the experiences of the student population, creating more opportunities for creative problem-solving and transformative social action, both of which are needed in the field (see Cook-Sather, 2018; Verge et al., 2018). A peacebuilding education limited to one way of understanding and seeing the world will, in turn, be limited in how change is realized and understood.

¹ *A decolonial lens helps to identify how colonial legacies have played a significant role in reshaping gender norms, institutionalizing moral regulations, and marginalizing diverse indigenous understandings of gender and sexuality that had previously existed in many colonized societies. For example, in Indonesia, some frame discrimination against the LGBTQ communities as a consequence of religious conservatism. While religion, tradition, and local culture undeniably shape the lived realities of LGBTQ individuals, these circumstances must also be understood within broader historical and structural contexts.*

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What does it mean to integrate decolonial, intersectional, and anti-oppressive perspectives in a curriculum? Where is structural integration of gender possible in the spaces you practice, learn, and live within? Drawing on the literature, how would you justify the inclusion of gender in academic programming and define decolonial feminism?

Suggested Action One: Audit Where Gender Is to Identify Enablers and Gaps

Our first recommendation is to assess the institutional readiness of the faculty, administration, and student body to make programming and extracurricular activities more gender-transformative. Specifically, we adapted [UNICEF's \(2022\) gender continuum](#) to highlight key considerations for assessing an institution's readiness to integrate gender (see Table 1 below). Despite critiques of gender mainstreaming (Milward et al., 2015), we find it a useful framework to consider what an ideal gender-transformative program could look like within higher education.

Table 1: Moving Toward a Gender Transformative Curriculum²

	Gender Exploitative	Gender Blind	Gender Sensitive	Gender Responsive	Gender Transformative
Gender Continuum Definitions (UNICEF, 2022)	Educational initiatives “reinforces or takes benefit from gender inequalities and stereotypes”	Educational initiatives that “operates without any consideration of gender differences”	Educational initiatives “that acknowledges but works around gender differences and inequalities”	Educational initiatives that “deliberately addresses gender differences and gender inequalities in roles, responsibilities, rights and relations”	Educational initiatives that “transforms gender stereotypes and gender norms and relations for gender equality and an enabling environment”
Practical Applications to Education for Peace within	Part-time/adjunct and non-tenured track faculty are	Content (e.g., conflict analysis, peacebuilding, negotiation,	The curriculum includes some diverse scholars	Gender is named in learning objectives and course	Gender is a cross-cutting theme (not stand-alone) - e.g., a degree requirement includes explicit

²Note. Row 1 definitions reprinted from the gender continuum concept in *Gender Equality Marker and Gender Tag Guidance Note*, by UNICEF, 2022, as reproduced in *UN Women, Gender Marker Implementation in UNICEF* (<https://gendercoordinationandmainstreaming.unwomen.org/gender-marker-implementation-unicef>). In the public domain. Row 2 (Practical Applications to Education for Peace within Higher Education) is the authors' own contribution.

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Higher Education	mostly female. If content on gender is taught, it is focused on gender inequalities in the Global South (i.e., it is not visible as an issue to address in the Global North)	etc.) is absent of a gendered analysis, rendering it not important. Gender is not discussed in hiring, curriculum, or scholarship. Readings and class materials are not balanced for identity (gender, race, sexuality, location/region)	representing a gender analysis (e.g., Women, Peace, and Security) The tenured track faculty includes some women. Some readings on Women, Peace and Security are included.	descriptions / theoretical constructs. The faculty is actively recruiting candidates who offer diverse gender identities. Course content (e.g., books, guest lectures, assignments) materials, curriculum, reflect gender differences & inequalities	reference to gender as a key theme/track. Gender is embedded in the culture and strategy of the institution, included in all courses as a standard, and institutions require at least one course specialized in gendered analysis. Gender is not conflated with feminism or women, but is inclusive of gender topics, including LGBTQ+, masculinities, etc. Pedagogy alignment: postcolonial feminism, decolonial practices, critical peace education. Faculty composition reflects a diverse representation of gendered identities, instructing to their expertise and not restricted to gendered curriculum.
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When we ensure gender is intentionally included in *everything we do*, we remove the barrier and challenge of scarcity. If gender is woven into the curriculum through weekly discussions, diverse readings, programmatic endeavors (e.g., speakers), removing any single instance has minimal impact due to the inclusive approach across multiple activities. Gender thus becomes integrated into the institution's pedagogical, epistemological, and ontological norms and standards.

For example, the Women PeaceMakers Program (WPM) was created in 2003 within the Institute of Peace and Justice (IPJ). The goal was to “document in detail the stories and best practices of women leaders who are involved in human rights and peacebuilding efforts in their home countries” (Noma et al., 2012, p. 9). This program paved the way for a new course, *War, Gender and Peacebuilding (PJS 494)*, developed in 2015 to connect with Kroc School students. The elective course was discontinued in 2022 following consistently low enrollment. However, the Kroc School continued to collaborate with the Institute to offer fellowships, student events, and create connections with the Women PeaceMakers. Nevertheless, incoming students in the 2023 cohort were not offered classes on gender or other formal spaces to have these conversations. This led to an identified curricular gap that was responded to by the student body through a student-led auditing and assessment process.

Where is gender already integrated into your classes and institutional culture? What sustainable funding sources exist to support your gendered programming or curricula?

Suggested Action Two: Conduct a Readiness Evaluation and Assess Student Interest

Grounded in the teachings of Johan Galtung (1969), we believe that it is our responsibility to continuously train ourselves to recognize and counter structural forms of violence. We argue that the omission of courses on gender from the institution's program offerings is an act of structural violence, in which the perspectives of diverse identities are less likely to be taught, discussed, or legitimized. Further, the omission of gender in peace studies curriculum is one example of epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988), where perspectives become marginalized within knowledge production, and peacebuilding curriculum becomes obscured. Despite the past course, *War, Gender and Peacebuilding*, having been removed from the schedule, we recognized interest among the student body in reintegrating gender into the core curriculum. Through small-group discussions among peers and informal surveys, we found the majority of the students were interested in events, reading groups, or a for-credit course on gendered peacebuilding. We also understood that the relevance of gender and the *ability to speak about gender norms* varied across institutional, cultural, historical, and political contexts. At our institution, gender had become specialized rather than integrated into the curriculum. Our evaluation (see appendix A) found that the gap could be addressed by working with other students to create a more inclusive program.

Based on your readiness evaluations, how can gender be integrated as a normative standard, rather than a specialized topic of discussion? What existing student groups could facilitate discussions on the importance of gender?

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Suggested Action Three: Advocate for Student-Led Events and Educational Opportunities

Student advocacy, such as hosting events and reading groups, can be an effective entry point for integrating gender. In our work, this manifested as the *Gender Advocacy Group*, led by a few students who hosted a series of events throughout the academic year. These events created student-led spaces to discuss gender and peacebuilding in relation to coursework, lived experiences, and professional practices.

From a feminist pedagogical perspective, student-led activities serve as spaces of empowerment, critical reflection, and collective knowledge-making. Rather than treating students as passive recipients of knowledge, these gatherings position them as active participants in naming exclusion, connecting lived experience to structural analysis, and imagining more inclusive forms of peace education (hooks 1994; Cook-Sather 2018). Such spaces can challenge exclusion and marginalization while creating opportunities to share previously unspoken experiences, develop relationships across differences, and create the momentum for curricular and/or institutional change.

Often, these events were organized in partnership with on- and off-campus organizations to strengthen students' relationships and networks. Examples include celebrating International Women's Day with the University's Women's Commons, co-hosting workshops with local and regional nonprofits (including the city's LGBTQ+ center), inviting international peace activists to share their work, and supporting research and events hosted by the Institute's Women PeaceMakers Fellowship (see Appendix B for sample event flyers).

The advocacy group also organized a single-credit reading course to establish a formalized space for integrating gender into the program (see Appendix C). This action shifted the approach from student-led advocacy toward collaboration with faculty and the co-creation of a syllabus.

How could you use a gathering or event to begin building allies to identify systemic barriers and create momentum for change?

Suggested Action Four: Audit a Syllabus to Consider Where Gender Could Be Included

Before proposing a new course, it is useful to examine where and how gender already appears in existing curricula through a course audit. A syllabus is not neutral: it reflects decisions about what knowledge is prioritized, whose voices are centered, and which issues are treated as foundational or peripheral. Reviewing syllabi through a gender lens can therefore help identify both gaps and possibilities for stronger integration. Decolonizing education and research require critical reflection on who produces knowledge, how knowledge is legitimized, which topics are emphasized, and the purposes of knowledge generation to reject notions of power hierarchies, essentialism, and othering (Manion & Shah, 2019).

In our experience, gender was often confined to a single week of coursework, limiting meaningful engagement with the topic. To address this gap, the Gender Advocacy Group called for a course-facilitated reading group to be developed, offering students a for-credit space to

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discuss recently emerging literature and practice. Within the space, the students developed a complete syllabus for a three-credit course and presented the idea to the faculty and staff.³

This action was an effective form of collaboration between the students and faculty. This process invited students and faculty sponsors to analyze course structures, readings, themes, and identify absences. Here, co-creation did not imply equal power but a shared pedagogical process in which students and faculty contributed differently to identifying opportunities for change. As Cook-Sather et al. (2018) argue, such partnerships foster student agency and meaningful participation in curricular conversations, while Bovill (2020) reminds us to remain attentive to the hierarchies of higher education.

Auditing syllabi also connects course-level revision to systemic change. If gender appears in optional weeks, isolated readings, or during informal conversations, it remains marginal to the program. Identifying these patterns strengthens the case for integrating gender consistently across the curriculum and creating a dedicated gender course. In this way, syllabus auditing becomes a strategic step toward structural transformation.

Where does gender show up in your course offerings (as a core topic within a course, as a singular discussion within other topics, as a separate course)? How can the concept of “gender” be expanded and integrated more intentionally? Which scholars do you turn to, and what diverse perspectives do they represent?

Suggested Action Five: Connect with Faculty, Administration, and Other Leaders to Co-create Learning Opportunities

Importantly, the student-led advocacy efforts aimed to de-center traditional hierarchies through a praxis of co-creation. Co-creation in higher education centers pedagogical partnership as a transformative approach to teaching and learning. Bovill (2020) points out that the hierarchical structures of higher education may block the achievement of an entirely equal partnership between students and faculty. By using the term co-creation, we remain responsive to the reality of working within systems not built for equal partnership, centering “students’ active participation, learner empowerment, shared decision-making, student agency, and negotiation of learning and teaching” (Bovill, 2020, p. 1024).

Establishing a for-credit reading group and student-hosted gender events helped generate faculty support while requiring engagement with formal institutional processes, including the appointment of a faculty advisor. The support of both the advisor and the reading group professor enabled more integrated student–faculty collaboration in course development. At the same time, institutional hierarchies between students, faculty, and administrators continued to limit the scope of advocacy efforts.

³ *The new Gender, Power and Peace syllabus emerged as a required deliverable of the for-credit reading group course. Collaboratively working on the final project and presenting our version to the faculty and staff was a decision made by the student group based on the feminist epistemologies studied and discussed as a group.*

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This experience speaks to a challenge across actions seeking change from within a structure or system (Verge et al., 2018). Broadly understood as a harm-reductive approach, working within a system is synonymous with ideas of reform (Bohrer, 2022). Within these processes, advocates and changemakers are often challenged by common aversions to organizational change, often caused by discomfort with shifts in control, a preference for the familiar, and fear of the unknown (Hubbart, 2023). Additionally, there is a tendency to prioritize changes that evoke *urgency* as opposed to making long-term, relational progress (Fredberg & Pregmark, 2022). These patterns point to the need to reframe toward transformative paradigms realized through co-creation.

Despite the rigidity of the process, a three-credit course was approved as an elective for the Fall 2024 semester, and syllabus development deepened co-creation among the hired adjunct professor⁴, an alumna of the program, and a few students from the reading group. Together, they refined the course themes, readings, and theoretical foundations, incorporating recommendations from the curriculum committee and updated materials to reflect current scholarship. The professor then continued this collaborative approach with the enrolled students, inviting their experiences and perspectives to shape the course as it unfolded.

How do authority and institutional structures impact your work? How can legitimacy be sourced through creative means? How can you address dynamics of power and hierarchy and reduce barriers within the institution? Who within the systems of authority might act as a sponsor for your group to support advocacy and navigate institutional norms?

Suggested Action Six: Integrate Gender as Structural

Integrating gender structurally into a peace studies program is itself an act of working toward positive and prefigurative peace (Bohrer, 2022) by modeling the inclusive and just institution we seek to build. However, this is not a universal process, and it is important to name its barriers openly. In our experience, sustaining integration over time proved to be one of the greatest challenges. Resistance can stem from institutional inertia, socio-political and cultural pressures, competing priorities, or limited faculty buy-in, reflecting organizations' tendency to prioritize urgent issues over initiating long-term changes. Even when advocacy efforts successfully introduce gender-focused courses, institutional systems, and administrative policies may still undermine their continuity.⁵ Issues related to enrollment requirements, funding limitations, or cultural or socio-political pressures within a context may compromise the sustainability of an educational initiative (see Appendix E for a letter from Kroc students to the Dean, requesting continued conversation after the conclusion of the three-credit course). This demonstrates that barriers to gender integration are not always overt forms of resistance but can also emerge

⁴ Katie Zanon was hired as the adjunct professor and is also a co-author. Previously both a Program Officer for the Women PeaceMakers program and a professor of the War, Gender and Peacebuilding course, she worked with the student committee to integrate content from the Women PeaceMakers program and included some foundational readings from the War, Gender and Peacebuilding course.

⁵ Initially we were told the course would be offered as a rotating elective, every two years, with Fall 2026 being the second term the course would be listed. However, as of writing this in August 2026, the course is not on the fall schedule.

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through seemingly neutral institutional mechanisms, such as enrollment thresholds, scheduling priorities, and resource allocation. There is no single roadmap; what works in one program may not translate to another. Instead, the process begins with critical questions: *Whose voices are missing from the curriculum? And who has the power to initiate the integration of gender-transformative programming?*

Concluding Thoughts: Toward a Gender Transformative Approach

Efforts to integrate gender are ongoing and provide a framework for addressing persistent gaps in peacebuilding education. Throughout this process, we recommend pausing to revisit your institution's strategic plan or mission and using reflexivity to guide praxis. *Does the mission consider critical gender analysis in different educational spaces? Are stakeholders protecting gender as a valuable pillar of analysis?* If you answered ‘no’ to these questions, an important next step is to propose a strategic plan that ensures there’s space for these conversations.

Embedding gender in an institution’s guiding documents creates opportunities to establish gender as a core value and strategic priority. Ideally, this becomes a form of accountability in that it [should] predefine what is important to the institution and thus should be considered in all program development to make gender systematic, not personal or individual. Together, we hope that these suggested actions culminate into gender-transformative peacebuilding programming where gender is woven into the fabric of institutional strategy, course offerings, and embodied by the faculty and leadership. In closing, we invite others to join our call to action with a final question: *How can we, as peacebuilders, ensure that topics like gender are normative, not specialized, within our programs (both in education and in practice) now and in the future?*

Programming Examples:

- Gender and peace reading course syllabus, Fall 2023
- Gender event flyers
- Gender, power and peace syllabus, Fall 2024
- Gender: Sample readiness evaluation questions

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