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Feminist Security Studies: Celebrating an Emerging Field

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As feminist international relations enters its third decade as a subdiscipline within IR, it is particularly fitting that we recognize and celebrate the stimulating and important new research that is being done in Feminist Security Studies. In the early days of feminist IR, feminists tended to stay away from security studies, at least as it is conventionally defined, a tendency that, fortunately, is no longer the case. The rich and varied research being done by contributors to this volume is evidence that the field has taken off and that its research agendas are flourishing.

First, I will briefly situate Feminist Security Studies in historical perspective and highlight the many different ways that feminists are investigating security issues; then, I will say something about the importance of efforts to connect scholars and practitioners. Finally, I will reflect on the potential (or lack thereof) for dialogue between feminist and mainstream security studies, which I define as research that does not recognize gender and which uses social scientific methodologies.

One of my earliest motivations for thinking about gender issues in international relations came during the 1980s when I began to notice a sense of disempowerment and disinterest that my female undergraduates often expressed when I discussed nuclear weapons and strategic issues in my introductory IR courses. This led me to my initial recognition (which came relatively late in my academic career) of the profoundly gendered nature of international politics, particularly issues of national security, where identities and policies associated with a militarized form of masculinity are so very evident and where women are usually absent. With some notable exceptions — the work of Enloe (1989, 1993, 2000) and Cohn (1987, 1993) come immediately to mind — much of the early

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research in feminist IR in the 1980s and 1990s focused on issues concerning the global economy, human rights, and development, issues other than military conflict and war.

Reflecting these broader concerns, the subtitle of my 1992 book, *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security*, adopted a multidimensional definition of security that other feminists have also tended to use (Tickner 1992). Security is not just about the security of states but also about the security of individuals and groups; it is about violence of all forms, including structural violence and violence we are committing against our natural environment.

While all of this work on the many dimensions of security has been of enormous value to the field, it is gratifying to see an increasing body of research — much of it being done by authors in this volume — that is more directly focused on issues of "high politics," a gendered term that IR has used to describe research dealing with war and national security. In spite of this turn to security issues conventionally defined, however, feminist research in this area asks very different questions about "security" and frequently uses very different methodologies to answer them. To illustrate this, I briefly discuss some of the chapters published in Ackerly, Stern, and True's *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations* (2006). I select these texts because all of the chapters in Part II of the book, the section that deals with methods for feminist IR, talk about security. In the words of the editors, they demonstrate "just how broadly feminists interrogate even one IR concept" (Ackerly, Stern, and True 2006, 89). The concept to which the editors are referring is, of course, security.

Even though each of these five chapters deals with security as it is conventionally defined, each asks very different questions from those that would be asked by more traditional scholars, and each uses different methodologies for going about answering them. Examining the context within which national security discourse about nuclear weapons and nuclear strategy is situated, Cohn, who began her research on security during the Cold War — earlier than most feminist IR scholars — conducted interviews with military personnel and civilian defense planners. One of her main questions was how defense intellectuals, and indeed all of us, can think in the dispassionate and unemotional way we do about nuclear weapons. She uses linguistic analysis, cultural analysis, and qualitative ethnographic methods to help answer her questions. Also studying the military, Kronsell investigated the culture of hegemonic masculinity in the Swedish military. Her field research revealed a

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profound silence with respect to gender, which led her to conclude that hegemonic masculinity is so deeply entrenched in military thinking and action that it is taken as normal and natural. Only the presence of women reveals these deeply masculinized structures; Kronsell believes that women's presence in the military offers opportunities for change in military culture.

In her chapter, D'Costa takes on quite a different issue — the effects of war on the most marginalized populations. Her interviews with women who suffered sexual violence during the Bangladeshi war of independence of 1971 reveal some of the tragedies of the survivors of mass rape — a phenomenon common to all wars but one that has rarely been studied in IR. As D'Costa tells us, her fieldwork shows how marginalized subjects have much to teach the field of IR and what (in)security means to those who are usually forgotten in the stories we tell about war. Jacoby's interviews with women on both sides of the Palestine/Israel conflict also reveal the dilemmas and difficulties of doing research in zones of conflict and the importance of entering into the research with an open mind, rather than a preconceived set of questions. Discovering what security, or insecurity, means to people in conflict zones was also the subject of Stern's research with Guatemalan women in the 1990s, when she discovered that their vision of security was far different from the way it was conceived by the Guatemalan security elite.[1]

I have provided these brief snapshots of the kind of research being done in Feminist Security Studies to illustrate the type of questions that feminists ask, the ways they go about answering them, and the profound dilemmas they face in conducting their research. Rather than focusing on states and the causes and consequences of war, more typical of the way IR usually talks about security, feminists have tended to focus on what goes on during war and on individuals, both civilian and military, and how their lives are affected by conflict. They have examined the different meanings of (in)security; they have also demonstrated that militarized masculinity is deeply embedded in military institutions and strategic thinking. Feminists have claimed that the way we frame policies about national security and the language used in formulating them is important in legitimating certain policies and delegitimizing others. Doing this kind of research involves fieldwork, sometimes under dangerous or traumatic circumstances; it also involves a degree of

1. All of these authors' research appears in Part II of Ackerly, Stern, and True (2006).

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reflexivity on the part of the researcher herself, not typical of social scientific methods.[2]

Indeed, feminists working in this area have tended to stay away from social scientific and quantitative methods, methods they claim are not adequate for answering the kinds of questions they ask. Yet it is important to acknowledge that collecting and analyzing quantifiable data can only strengthen claims about these various insecurities that war and conflict inflict on people's lives. Several of the authors in this volume are founders of the WomanStats Project, which is constructing a database on the status of women cross-nationally; many of these scholars do work with quantitative methods. One of the ways that women's security is being assessed is through the collection of data on the incidence of rape. The WomanStats Project is also interested in investigating the relationship between the status of women and the security and peacefulness of nation-states.[3] It is important that feminists working on security, whatever their methodological inclination, recognize the importance of collecting reliable data and establishing conversations across methodological divides. As we continue with our different research agendas, it is important to recognize the value of all this rich and varied research.

I turn now to the importance of efforts to connect scholars and practitioners — an effort reflected in the research and activism of some of the contributors to this volume. The passage of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000, the first time that the UN Security Council recognized women and gender as a security issue, is an important milestone. While UNSC 1325 has been somewhat disappointing in terms of its impact on the international policy community, it has provided an important framework for feminists and women activists seeking to bridge the policy/activist/academic divide. As a way of furthering dialogue among these communities, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom convened a conference at the UN in New York in 2002 focused on UNSC 1325. The policymakers and activists at the conference emphasized the need for more scholarly research on the implications and implementation of 1325. It is gratifying to see feminists, some of whose work is represented in this volume, working across the academy/policy divide. It is vitally important that we support the work of those in the policy and activist

2. For a useful exposition of feminist research methodologies, see Ackerly and True (2010).
3. Information about WomanStats can be accessed at http://www.womanstats.org.

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communities who are trying to get feminist issues onto the security agenda of states and international organizations. It is often a frustrating and uphill battle.

Finally, a word about the problems and possibilities of dialogue with the security studies mainstream. Because security studies is a particularly masculinized field in which there are very few women, this is a particularly challenging issue. The publication of a special issue of the journal *Security Studies* in 2009, edited by Sjoberg, was a milestone event in this regard. Feminists are investigating very different issues, many of which would not be considered security issues by the mainstream, many of whom are readers of this journal. I do think, however, that there is some opening in this respect. Issues such as trafficking and violence against women in war are now more prominent on the agendas of national governments and international organizations and, consequently, are coming to the attention of mainstream scholars.

Answering the kinds of questions about insecurity asked by much of the research I have described, however, involves much deeper epistemological study than adding issues to the research agenda of security studies. Expecting feminists to present their ideas about gender identities and the implications of the deeply masculinized structures that pervade security thinking and policy in ways that are intelligible to social scientists is deeply problematic. Security studies scholars must recognize that there are many valuable and legitimate ways of conducting "scientific" research outside of positivist social sciences practices. This is evident in the stimulating and important work that feminists who work in the field of security studies are doing. It is evident also in the rich and innovative work of authors in this volume, whose research is broadening and deepening our understanding of the multiple insecurities faced by people around the world.

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"Feminist Security Studies": Toward a Reflexive Practice

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My comments take the form of a brief rumination about the politics of "Feminist Security Studies" — as a field of knowledge and as a practice. I start by raising some questions about the meaning of the term itself and the politics of defining the field. Then, in light of these questions, I turn to the politics of the practice of Feminist Security Studies.

In thinking about Feminist Security Studies, my first impression is that there is — potentially, at least — an inherent ambiguity in the label itself, related to which two of the three words one sees as most closely linked. If the two words most closely linked are "security" and "studies," then the preexisting field of security studies is the subject, and the question — both grammatical and epistemological — is in what way the adjective "feminist" modifies it. Does it suggest a claim to the legitimacy of a new *subfield* within security studies, a particular substudy that has value in and of itself, and that secondarily might or might not have any impact on security studies' other subfields or the field writ large? In this case, a researcher brings a "feminist curiosity" to the field of security studies as it has been conventionally defined, and asks some new questions — questions that were previously overlooked by researchers whose thinking was hobbled by a lack of feminist curiosity, but which the feminist researcher sees as still legitimately within the conventional ambit of the field (Enloe 2004). The resulting research may be seen as opening up a new pocket of knowledge (e.g., how do we understand the motivation of female suicide bombers?), although it may be a challenge to have that new knowledge seen by security studies as genuinely relevant, rather

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