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"Feminist Security Studies": Toward a Reflexive Practice

Carol Cohn, University of Massachusetts–Boston

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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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than tangential and insignificant. At best, that new pocket of knowledge might be accepted, but isolated, without significant impact on the fundamental questions of the field as a whole (such as how to understand the causes of, and most effective responses to, terrorism).

Another possible way to interpret the "feminist" modification of the subject "security studies," though, is to see its ambition as more than the creation of a subfield. Is the term *Feminist Security Studies* meant to imply that the central causal dynamics underlying the main preoccupations within (conventional) security studies need to be rethought? And would a fruitful transformation occur by bringing feminist analysis to the field? Again in this case, the boundaries of the conventional self-definition of the field would be accepted, but the suggestion is that (at least some of) the central assumptions and analytics have been wrong. If that is the case, then does "Feminist" modifying "Security Studies" aspire not to be a subfield but a *school*? Or even a paradigm shift?

Now if we return to the question of which two of the three words are most closely linked, however, then what if they are not "security" + "studies," but rather "feminist" + "security"? In that case, "Feminist Security" becomes the subject about which studies are created. Two problems immediately arise, at least in the context of this debate. The first, of course, is that this is not what scholars who identify their work as within Feminist Security Studies mean by the use of the term. The second is that *feminist security* is a term without an obvious meaning, at least without taking significant license.

A narrow literal interpretation might be that the term refers to the physical and psychological security of feminists, which, while perhaps desirable, is surely too parochial a referent to be useful. But could we use the term to mark and stimulate a feminist-informed rethinking of the concept of security itself? For example, even if "Feminist Security" Studies maintains the conventional focus on state security, might it then reference a state that is secure, not only in the common sense of border protection and stability but also in the degree to which the internal workings of the state reflect and actualize feminist social and political goals throughout the society? Alternatively, might the term *feminist security* reference the feminist realization that security cannot come from some fantasized, isolated, completely autonomous and self-sufficient, armed independence, but rather is always, inevitably, relational, based in interdependence (e.g., Baker Miller 1976) — and then apply this insight to models of state security, resulting, for example, in very different

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foreign policies and forms of military spending? Or does the term lead away from the state as the subject of security discourse and turn us to considering human beings as the central referent? In that case, what would differentiate it from human security studies? Is the answer to be found in the question of "which people?" or "which politics?" Or might an eco-feminist perspective lead to a "Feminist Security" Studies that is neither state- nor person-centric, but instead more focused on global ecosystems, climate change, resource degradation, and environmental crises? What other meanings might we imagine?

Although my discussion of the question of which two words are most closely linked (and the potential implications thereof) might appear a bit capricious, it is anything but. Asked to reflect on what Feminist Security Studies is as a field, I suppose my first question is whether it should even have the capital letters, whether it should be thought of or aspire to be a field. Of course, there is a kind of "facts on the ground" answer — scholars have created new research and theory that some people, at least, find useful to group under the rubric of Feminist Security Studies. But to the extent that this is still a fluid moment in the genesis of a new field of inquiry, there is an important opportunity — indeed, responsibility — to be reflective about the questions, parameters, and goals of the field. Although (and because) each of us makes personal decisions and commitments that narrow our work to a relatively small sliver of the entire intellectual project, it is important, I think, to pause and let our unfettered imaginings of what the field *might* be — no matter how (ir)relevant or (un)important any of the options might at first appear — push us past both those boundaries we have inherited and those we have created for ourselves.

So I suppose that, for me, the question is not so much "What is Feminist Security Studies as a field?" but "What are the intellectual and political commitments that motivate our research, and how do they shape not only our scholarship but also what we might choose to name it?" These are questions that each of us, as researchers, must answer individually. In my own work, my motivation centers on problems in the world I want to change — not on a field of academia I want to change.

My starting point is armed conflict. What happens during armed conflicts? What are the best ways to end armed hostilities? How can wars be prevented? What makes recovery from war possible? What are the best ways to work toward a peace that is sustainable and promises greater justice? I believe it is impossible to answer these questions without feminist analysis of the different institutions and structural power

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relations, from local to global, that shape an armed conflict. And because many of those institutions and power relations are excluded from the ambit of the academic field of security studies, that field would not only *not* be a helpful place for me to star, but would also be a confining one, a choice to put on blinders that restrict my range of vision. My sense of the inappropriateness of security studies as either a starting place or even just as a reference point, a discourse I might choose to interrogate or attempt to affect, is compounded by the certainty that what I mean by "peace" — or even "security" — and what the field means by "security" are profoundly different. And I do not see any way to achieve what I mean by peace or security by staying within the field's conventional focus on militarized attempts to secure the stability of state regimes.

In short, I cannot make progress on the problems I am most interested in ameliorating in global politics within the confines of security studies. Thus, I choose not to devote much energy to engaging with it. That judgment of the best emphasis for my own work, however, does not mean that I think others should necessarily make the same decision. I believe that the field of security studies is influential (although perhaps less so than some of its practitioners might think) and, thus, see some value in trying to change it. I respect and admire the efforts of many feminists who try to do so.

For those who do go down that path, as for the rest of us, what I hope for is a reflexive practice. My own experience of trying to have an impact on a mainstream field has made me painfully aware that trying to make a feminist contribution to a (nonfeminist) field can distort the very questions we wish to ask and/or lead us to spend (and often waste) tremendous time and energy in the attempt to convince others that our questions and answers are relevant to their paradigms and concerns. And, of course, for scholars who think that the goals of the field and the questions it asks are essentially the right ones, the issue of "distorting the questions we wish to ask" would not appear to be as much of a problem. For scholars who do *not* think that the field's questions are entirely the right questions, however, it would be important to ask not only whether our questions actually reflect our motivating concerns but also whether the core audience of work in security studies, that is, largely men with disciplinary power and/or political influence, is the community with whom we most want to be in conversation and to whom we most hope to make a contribution.

In closing, thinking about the community of feminist scholars who are, in one way or another, engaged in war, peace, and security-related research, I have a few hopes. First, I hope we all think hard about what we really

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mean by security, or whether "security" is even an adequate rubric for our motivating concerns. At the same time, we need to think hard about constituencies: About which do we care most, and with whom do we want to converse and serve? Then, we need to use our sharp feminist curiosity to ask important questions, employ feminist research methodologies and analytic frameworks to explore them, and make sure that the research talks to people who can really use what we have learned.

I also hope that feminists interested in war, peace, and security will undertake much more field-based, ethnographic research (whether the "field" is an insurgent's camp, a refugee camp, or the Pentagon). This should, in turn, also facilitate more participatory research agenda setting from the ground up, so that the very definition of what counts as a "security concern" or a cause of insecurity might come to look very different. It should also teach us a lot by providing access to the frames people use to analyze their own "security" problems — frames that should be put in conversation with our own received theories and analyses.

For feminist researchers in the United States and Europe, in particular, it is also important to recognize the responsibilities and access that come from being located in the epicenter of the exercise of military/political/economic power and to study up (Nader 1972). This involves asking questions such as how and why the masculinist institutions at the heart of this exercise of power function. If we study men in these institutions *as men*, then what can we learn?

Finally, I hope that some feminist researchers will be motivated by the question of which research projects are most likely to be useful to women's civil society organizations and women peace builders. While there is no doubt that the constituency security studies was created to serve — the civilian and military policy elite of world powers — has a major impact on the conditions of the lives of vast numbers of people, it is also likely true that no one is more likely to push a change agenda than the organized women who live in the shadows of those elite men's decisions.

Carol Cohn is the Director of the Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights at University of Massachusetts–Boston, Boston, MA: carol.cohn@genderandsecurity.org

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But Now Can See: One Academic's Journey to Feminist Security Studies

Valerie M. Hudson, Brigham Young University

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This essay expresses my gratitude for the spirit of inclusiveness shown by the first generation of Feminist Security Studies (FSS) scholars. I would like to see FSS remain a large tent, for in constructing boundaries for FSS, we may unintentionally make it smaller than it really is. Indeed, I would like to explore the value of inclusiveness to FSS by undertaking a bit of autobiography. I was a poor candidate to wind up as part of this field; the story of how FSS insights upended my academic life may be instructive as we endeavor to help others in the academy see the connections between gender and security studies that we ourselves see.

FSS calls us to see security as related in many important ways to issues of gender and sex. In most circles, that is now a self-evident statement requiring little justification. When I went to graduate school, however, not only was it not self-evident, but it was also not even possible to notice such a relationship in the fields of IR and security studies. As Tickner has termed it, I inhabited a "womanless world" during my doctoral program: I could, and did, finish the program without women or their concerns ever being mentioned by any of my professors in any of my classes. If the proverbial martian had taken these classes, then the alien would never have even known there were women on the planet.

As can be imagined, I found this completely natural even though I was a woman myself. The world of women and the world of national and international security seemed not to inhabit the same conceptual universe at all. But life has a funny way of making you see what your professors do not teach you.

As part of my efforts to get through school financially, I wound up in the 11th Special Forces Reserve (which was disbanded after the Cold War) as a wheeled vehicle and power generator mechanic. This was not your modern, more "PC" military. I joined a unit where the men had joined

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