

Feminist Perspectives on Gender, Peace & Security

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Inaugural Lecture* – January 9, 2019

“Gender analysis is a *skill*. It’s not a passing fancy... And it’s not something one picks up casually, on the run... one has to *learn* how to do it, practice doing it, be candidly reflective about one’s shortcomings, try again” (Enloe, in Cohn 2013: xv).

Dear Minister Wallström, Vice Chancellor Enmark, Assembled Guests –

It is a great honor to have been chosen as the first Anna Lindh Professor for Gender, Peace and Security and to speak to you today about this important work. In what follows, I will give an overview of why and how feminist perspectives on peace and security matter.

Let me begin by talking about feminism – though it might not need to be explained in Sweden – let me outline the concept as I work with it in a few brush strokes:

Feminism can be described as a **political project to make the world a better place for women**;

the tricky part being that

- “the world” looks quite different depending on where you stand (or sit, in your case), that
- what is “better” for some, might not be liberating for others and hence we are having a hard time agreeing on what better actually means, and
- last, but certainly not least, what defines “women” are is not as straightforward as it might seem... and what is more, is always relational, meaning, we cannot have an understanding

of women/ femininity, without a corresponding conception of men/ masculinity (as Raewyn Connell has so well documented).

Consequently - while feminists would argue that making the world better for women, such that they are able to live less violent/ more fulfilling lives will also mean that men are better off; clearly the shifts required from men to accommodate women's aspirations for more equity also imply that they reflect on and disavow the many privileges they have enjoyed due to the subordination of women. What is more, as bell hooks reminds us, not all men (nor women!) are equal either, such that shifts in gender relations – alongside class, race, religion, ability, and more – also necessitate renegotiations about hierarchies among men (and women).

Fortunately, feminist scholars do not have to rely on a uniform understanding of women (or men) to do our work: We can stress diversity among women even when using a singular notion. Indeed, I like to point out that focusing on those who are identified as women highlights the social positioning associated with womanhood, rather than some essentialist character traits. Christine Sylvester proposes to “think of women as stick figures [...] while also realizing that we cannot talk to stick figures” (1994, p. 13). In other words, while researchers often to think about women (or men) as a group – and of the structures that make it necessary to think of them as such and that also affect their everyday lives – we also need to pay attention to the ways in which individual women (and men) are situated in varied contexts which shape not only their experience in the world, but also how they identify themselves and make sense of their lives – and how they are subject to violence.

To summarize, what these different concepts that make up my working definition of feminism describe is always contextually specific and needs to be carefully established as each research project progresses – hence feminist scholars’ emphasis on being reflexive throughout the varied phases of research: From the formulation of the question, where (as feminist philosopher Sandra Harding notes) the majority of bias gets established, through the selection of appropriate methods (I have variously written about this, e.g. Wibben 2016), to the collection, evaluation and presentation of data. **Reflexivity is key!** And – it is enhanced when scholars, activists, policy makers and practitioners interact because the tensions that arise in their engagement propel all of us to do better/ to think harder.

What is more, **feminism, as an explicitly political project that also requires the personal reflexivity on the part of the researcher and those around her, is also attacked as such** – whether in public fora, in political circles, or in the academy. Examples include, the bomb threat at the National Gender Secretariat at the University of Göteborg here in Sweden this past December – but also attacks on Gender Studies in Hungary and Poland, both EU members, and just last week the new president of Brazil Jair Bolsonaro announced he will fight the “ideology of gender teaching”. Inside academia, as I’ve been able to observe first hand as a scholar and long-time advocate for feminist scholarship, how this plays out on the conference cycle, in how publications are selected and valued. One key strategy to dismiss feminist (and other critical) scholarship is embedded in the claim that traditional approaches to research are neutral and apolitical when in fact all research is political as has been well established by philosophers of science – from Max Weber’s *Methodenstreit* with his contemporaries, to the Frankfurt School’s development of Critical Theory (most succinctly outlined in Max Horkheimer’s (1972) essay on

Traditional and Critical Theory/ brought to bear on IR by the late Robert Cox, for those of you familiar with these debates). Horkheimer notes that traditional theory (which prides itself on describing the world as is) often reinforces the status quo and hence is profoundly conservatively oriented, while critical theory questions the established consensus to make progressive or emancipatory claims. Other examples of studies on how research is always intensely political include George Reisch's (2005) study of the transformation of U.S. philosophy of science "to the icy slopes of logic" during the Cold War or Sandra Harding's (1986) classic *The Science Question in Feminism*, which I also draw on heavily for my book, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach* (Wibben, 2011).

In actuality most research projects contain elements of traditional and critical thought, but the disposition of the researcher and the way they envision the project do make a notable difference. What I am saying here is that the dismissal of feminist scholarship (and for that matter feminist foreign policy) as only political is not only a misrepresentation of how research works, but also itself a political move in each moment (as my examples show, political actors realize this and transform this "intellectual disagreement" into actual violence – scholars would do well to consider whether they want to provide support for such actions).

Let me return to the question of feminist perspectives (plural) ... because **our visions of the world, as well as our ideas of what might be better and for whom, are so deeply contextual, we are bound to have multiple, overlapping, but also at times contradictory feminisms and feminist perspectives.** Examples here might include the state feminisms that are so familiar in the Nordic context, but have also historically been found in places like Egypt, the USSR and more. Here a

particular version of feminism is sanctioned by the state and informs its policies – from childcare to housing to labor and, of course, security policy - on a variety of levels (in the process also providing grounds to dismiss other feminisms). A different, oppositional, example might be postcolonial or indigenous feminisms, that directly challenge (modern) state practices and the violence inherent in them. They are often directly at odds with the state, even when the state might consider itself quite progressive – e.g. in the case of Canada and the Idle No More movement whose intersectional goals include “stopping environmental degradation and economic and social inequality” and which has links to other movements such as that of the Lakota/ Dakota water protectors in the U.S., or indigenous activists such as the late Berta Caceres in Honduras who are protesting extractive industries in Central and Latin America. In between/ in addition we find a variety of other feminisms, attuned to the particular contexts within which their grievances arise – as María Lugones and Elisabeth Spelman have noted, “our visions of what is better are always informed by our perception of what is bad about our present situation” (1983, p. 579). Indeed, “how we think and what we think about does depend in large part on who is there - not to mention who is expected or encouraged to speak” (ibid.).

While these questions are of concern in any research project, it is important to remember them specifically in feminist scholarship when it goes global, given historical and present power relations. The same, of course, goes for foreign and security policies. Western feminists in particular need to be aware that “from the vantage point of the colonized [...] the term ‘research’ is inevitably linked to European imperialism and colonialism” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 1). Given these histories, feminist methodological considerations, particularly in the context of global politics, must always include attention to epistemic violence. Reflexive practices that consider the

limits of knowledge generation in general and the researcher's position as a knowledge producer in particular, is a crucial first step (see also Wibben, 2016).

So – feminist scholarship (and feminist foreign policy making as well as feminist activism) clearly constitutes a radical intervention, but one that is much more broadly relevant than outsiders often presume [it really provides new lenses to view the world] because it reveals:

- What has been taken for granted;
- How institutions and practices (and hence our understandings of peace, security, international law, war, etc.) are gendered... as well as raced, classed, sexualized and shaped by colonialism, indigeneity, ableism, religion and more.

Once we understand what is taken for granted – and how that is **shaped by existing power relations** (because it has taken a lot of power to make the world as we see if today appear “natural” as Enloe, 2004, would say) – we gain better insights into conflict(s) and how to move beyond violence/ solve conflicts without resorting to violence. Let me now give a few examples:

- Conflict transformation/ peace processes are deeply imbued with gendered assumptions, take Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR) efforts for example: As Megan MacKenzie (2012), Helen Basini (2016) and Leena Vastapuu (2018) have shown in the case of Liberia, assumptions about men's and women's roles in the fighting forces, as well as heteronormative conjugal orders shape who has access to DDR programs and, more broadly, where resources are assigned leaving women/ former “girl soldiers” to fend for themselves and setting the stage for their continued exploitation (sex work is an obvious

choice for these women) as well as involvement in further violence (gangs, etc.). This has consequences not just for the individual girls/ women (and their children), but also the broader aim of reintegration and peaceful futures.

- Another example are transitional justice processes that fail to properly address gendered violence due to a number of reasons – from the definition of what makes for “political violence” as Catherine O’Rourke (2013) points out (e.g. does rape count? If rape is part of institutionalized torture is it different than when it happens on the side of the road? Or if it happens to men?) to the lack of consideration of women as a heterogeneous group – Pascha Bueno-Hansen (2015 & 2016), for example, has written about how the experience of Andean Quechua speakers, who have experienced sexualized violence during the long war, with the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission is shaped by assumption about women which fail to consider the need for not just translation of the victims testimony from Quechua but a much broader need to incorporate indigenous cosmologies and languages that shape these women’s experiences. **Context matters in so many ways!**
- Consider the women and peace thesis, which continues to shape feminist research on war: Are women inherently peaceful? According to the women and peace thesis, women are seen as peaceful (due to biology or to their social role as mothers) while men are considered the violent sex. However, while it might be politically more advantageous to posit women as peacemakers, and there certainly are many women peacemakers (Boulding, 2000; Cockburn, 2007; Meintjes, Pillay & Turshen, 2001), the overall women and peace thesis has been thoroughly debunked in feminist scholarship (see Aharoni 2017 for an overview), even as it is still prevalent in activist and policy circles. What is more, seeing women only

as peacemakers is incorrect; it devalues women's work in other areas; it limits the field unnecessarily; and it supports the status quo.

- Finally, I want to give some examples from some of my own current book project which looks at women's integration into the U.S. military and how this is, among other things, shaped by shifting, yet enduring understandings of military masculinities – but also plays out differently depending on whom we ask. When we work with intersectional feminist perspectives we might notice that Native Women are overrepresented in the U.S. military and ask questions about whether this is simply a matter of the so-called poverty draft or whether there is something else going on here. Or we might notice how, for Black women, the U.S. military has provided important opportunities to join the U.S. middle class and receive equal pay for equal work – when we homogenize women in the military, we miss important insights.

More broadly, the recent move to open all combat positions in the U.S. military to women and the attendant debates, offer an excellent case study to delve into many of these issues (cf. MacKenzie 2015). How, we might ask, does the push to integrate women across all military occupational specialties challenge notions of heroism and sacrifice? How does this vary across the branches of the U.S. military given that some, such as the U.S. Air Force, have a longer history of women in combat (women have been flying fighter jets since the early 1990s)? As Hutchings also points out, “this picture is complicated by the fact that the norms of masculinity are variable and enforce not only hierarchical distinctions between men and women, but also between different men” (2008:397). This is an important caveat that appears in discussions regarding the conditions under which drone pilots can be considered heroes, suggesting a variety of gendered hierarchies at play (Bayard de Volo

2016). Another example is the rational masculinity of civilian defense intellectuals described by Carol Cohn (e.g. 1987), which is similar to that required of a general, but different from the attributes an infantry soldier would emphasize. As societies and militaries change, so do these norms – though not always in the manner one might expect – partly because these issues are also shaped by considerable economic interests and efforts to shape a particular image of the nation – e.g. women only became attractive recruits when the U.S. military wasn't able to recruit enough reliable (read: white) men (Enloe, 2007).

If feminist perspectives on peace, security, war & more are NOT intersectional – looking at gender alongside race, indigeneity and more - they run the risk of replicating the very structures they aim to resist/ dismantle... here Feminist Security Studies and Feminist Peace Research (both efforts I am involved in) are developing an ever-increasing body of research that deserves to be taken seriously, read widely and – to inform policy and practice. I hope that my presence here at the Swedish Defense University, in my role as the inaugural Anna Lindh Professor for Gender, Peace and Security can further contribute to this effort.

Thank you.

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