

# Formations of gender, conflict and violence and the new security agenda

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In recent years, the nexus of gender, conflict and violence has become a frequent object of feminist research. This research has been significant for a number of reasons. It has documented the exclusion of women in the processes following war or violent conflicts, i.e. in peace-building processes, and demonstrated that this is the norm. It has also pointed out that conflict and war, security operations and security precautions are practices and policies which are conducted and experienced in gendered ways and have gendered consequences. This observation is relevant for the approaches found in the security-development nexus (Henry 2006; Al-Ali and Pratt 2009).

Apart from the detrimental effects of violent conflicts, such conflicts present some opportunities and obstacles to women and others to men (e.g. Al-Ali and Pratt 2009). In 2000, Resolution 1325 of the UN Security Council on Women, Peace and Security was adopted in order to raise

awareness of the role of women in conflict and in ensuing conflict-resolution processes and introduce gender mainstreaming at different levels of military and post-conflict operations.

As threats are defined in increasingly broader terms, the meaning of security has expanded accordingly to encompass not only military affairs, but also migration, food, health, etc. (Rothschild 1995). The burgeoning literature on gender, security and conflict coincides with the 9/11 2001 terrorist attacks in the US, which reconfigured the international political landscape and renewed the focus on conflict and security, in particular, it should be added, the security of Western countries (Parpart and Zalewski 2008). However, as feminist international relations scholars, international development scholars and anthropologists point out, security should not be a matter for the state alone, but is a concern of 'communities, societies and individuals' too (Hudson 2005, Shepherd 2008: 2). There are consequences of the expanded security agenda, and as Al-Ali and Pratt (2009) note, it is the population in countries that are regarded as a threat or where the population is constructed as constituting a threat (such as the HIV-infected or migrants) that will experience these consequences most significantly. Indeed, Al-Ali and Pratt argue that processes of securitization can serve both political and economic interests that are not necessarily related to security but often pushed forward by elites (often alliances between external and internal elites) to legitimize certain policies.

The UN Security Council Resolution adopted in 2000 made it clear that the above concerns had been noted by the member states that committed themselves to taking action on the basis of this realization. The Council recognized that the security and protection of women must be taken into account, protection from rape and sexual abuse included. Moreover, women

should be part of peace-maintenance and peacekeeping processes, a genderperspective is urged in peacekeeping operations, and the UN itself should be subjected to gender mainstreaming. The contributions in this issue duly note the significance of this step, while, each in their own way, express concern over its translation into practice. As much as these initiatives were called for, they may nonetheless prove to be insufficient. Carreiras notes that ten years after its adoption only sixteen countries have developed National Action plans (2010: 478). This is in line with Persson's analysis (this volume) of the implementation of the resolution in a Swedish peacekeeping unit where 'it appears to be more of a rhetorical than a practical commitment'. This calls for empirical scrutiny.

#### MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO VIOLENCE

Putting humans and their various conditions at the centre of security studies brings relations of power, dominance and, in many instances, violence to the fore. As the contributions in this volume suggest, this requires not only empirical insights, but also a critical approach to the theoretical conceptions deployed and an intersectional approach that activates several explanatory factors simultaneously. Security is multidimensional and includes *experienced* security. While writing on the gender and security nexus, feminist scholars are increasingly creating a path for multidisciplinary approaches, of which this special issue of *Women, Gender & Research* is an example. We wish to contribute to the discussion of the gendered nature of violence and conflict, particularly as related to military intervention and activities: their justification, costs and opportunities, the course they take and their consequences.

Tickner identified hierarchical gender relations as being at the heart of security

threats: 'A truly comprehensive security cannot be achieved until gender relations of domination and subordination are eliminated' (Tickner 1992: 2). A significant result of gendering security is the understanding of violence as a phenomenon that must be connected with dominant gender ideologies and the way they are transformed to sustain violent behaviour in conflict and war contexts: in short the political economy of gendered violence. Particularly, the central part played by the transformation of masculinities into extreme or 'hyper-masculinities' – which Baaz and Stern call 'impossible' – have been well researched and documented (Baaz and Stern 2008, Higate 2007, Dawson 1994), encouraging not just a consideration of 'the man-question' (rather than just a 'woman-question') but also a 'rethinking of the man-question' (Parpart and Zalewski 2008, Enloe 2004). International politics is practised as a gender-neutral – or gender-silenced – arena. Injured male pride or national pride have reinvigorated simple dichotomies: us/them, good/evil, protector/protected – which are all overlaid with gender ideologies. Gendered power relations must be a focal interest point, as must the question of why are they so enduring (Parpart and Zalewski 2008: 4).

#### VIOLENCE AS CREATED BY INTERACTING MASCULINITIES AND FEMININITIES

Therefore, perhaps unsurprisingly, in the research field covering gender, war and conflict, research on masculinities, frequently called for, has made great strides forward. As discussed by, for instance, Carreiras (2010: 474-475), the general research field of masculinities has been enriched, and 'feminist myths' have not been left untouched either by recent feminist research in conflict and violence. Parpart and Zalewski pinpoint the intimate connections of gender and violence:

It is imperative to work with manifestations of gender/sex in order to have some critical understanding of the re-production of violence and power in international politics, but also, crucially, of the reproduction of gender/sex. (Parpart and Zalewski 2008: 7)

In other words, rather than putting our lens on masculinities to explain and understand violence, we need to study the interaction of femininities and masculinities. A frequent observation is that, when men are absent during conflicts, women become breadwinners and take responsibilities that are otherwise ascribed to men. During the so-called Arab Spring in Egypt, Syria, Yemen and other Arab countries, women have been active in demonstrations and protests, shown courage, risked their lives and suffered from violence and loss. Nadje Al-Ali, with whom we bring an interview in this issue, is not alone in pointing out that post-conflict societies present an opportunity for women to renegotiate their status and participation in work and politics. But at the same time, women's liberation should avoid being co-opted by broader movements of national liberation. According to Al-Ali, the recent Egyptian Revolution in 2011, the war in Iraq and the occupation of Palestine are good examples of how women have sacrificed their struggle for broader issues of national, public concern. This complicated relationship between broader issues of reform and change and women's role in terms of having their rights realized as individuals and as a collective should also be untangled when seeking to understand local and national dynamics leading to the production of gender asymmetry. In fact the opportunity for women's liberation may be difficult to seize for many reasons. One strand of explanations, which is also put forward in a situation of war or violent conflict, is the essentialist notion that women are weak and in need of protection. This understanding of femininity features

in binaries with the hyper-masculinities, which serve as the value basis for violent and aggressive behaviour. As Robin Schott argues in her article for this issue, violence as related to gender is understood in multiple ways: it contributes to the constitution of subjectivities (Shepherd 2008: 2) and may have both 'destructive and constructive aspects'. In tune with 'security', violence may be understood as encompassing more than physical harm or threats.

Going beyond a narrow understanding of violence, as Schott suggests, may in fact be what brings opportunities to increase our understanding of how femininities and masculinities are forged; thus, we may ask, how is the production of violent women a possibility; or, in order to become possible, how are they represented and what meaning is attached to their violence? What kind of narrative sustains such women without disturbing the overall narrative of women as peaceful and men as aggressive and violent? It is to this that the study of Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry, *Reduced to Bad Sex: Narratives of Violent Women from the Bible to the War on Terror*, reprinted in this issue, gives a strong and detailed response: violent women in global politics are presented in what Sjoberg and Gentry term whore narratives, i.e. presented as either sexually dysfunctional – the feminine sex gone astray, mutated, gone bad – or as obsessed with having their sexual desires fulfilled. In both cases women's violence, as demonstrated in examples from Greek mythology to the three women involved in the Abu Ghraib sexual abuse is sexualized, depriving violent women of their agency, but restoring gender stereotypes. Different understandings and narratives of femininity, paradoxically including not only whores, but also mothers and monsters (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007), may sustain the national narrative under construction in a post-conflict situation. The line distinguishing 'post-conflict' from 'conflict' is not easily drawn, since violence and insecurity may

continue after some kind of political settlement has been made, as is currently the case in, for instance, Egypt. In the wake of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, the nexus of gender, conflict and security has also become a field of governance.

#### GENDER GOVERNANCE – A RISKY STRATEGY

More to the point, the activities, usually referred to as gender mainstreaming, could be termed 'gender governance', i.e. the institutionalization of gender perspectives, turning an awareness of gender differences in practices, possibilities and experiences into administrative practices and routine action. This transformation is not a straightforward one, especially considering the fact that central to military institutions and the value base they are drawing on are binary and, unavoidably, essentialist conceptions of masculine and feminine attributes. Indeed, Persson (this volume) argues that, after ten years, the Resolution appears to be more of a rhetorical than a practical commitment, and women 'remain excluded from formal peace negotiations and [are] marginalized from the decision-making processes that reconstruct their future' (see also Willett 2010: 156–157).

In other words, gender governance is a risky strategy. It is on the one hand 'a victory for feminist activism', since the gendered nature of war and conflict is now recognized and acted upon. On the other hand, the problems, dilemmas and difficulties of gender governance have consequently moved into this field of policies and action. As Schott points out (this volume), once more such recognition places a moral obligation on feminist researchers to point out the shortcomings, problematic assumptions and myths involved when gender equality becomes a part of political action and political strategizing. In other words, the victory that feminist activists could celebrate when

issues of gender, conflict and security were firmly placed in the field of action by governance institutions engaged in war and peace-building is bittersweet. The bitter-sweetness of this victory is spelled out in the new dilemmas and gendered divisions of labour confronting the practices that are installed and put in place in international peacekeeping in order to fulfil the objectives of SCR 1325.

The portrayal of women in politics is crucial to the process of constructing the gendered relations in question: women are considered to be doing men's tasks when committing violent crimes in global politics, as they are when they are integrated into institutions or contexts which are hitherto male privileged spaces, such as military organizations. Sjöberg and Gentry therefore call for studies that may shed light on whether such integration may similarly lead to unequal treatment (this volume), an inquiry that is taken up in the two case studies that we present in this issue. Persson's article is concerned with the training of military and civil personnel in Sweden in performing peacekeeping tasks. Drawing on discussions of 'post-national defence' where the tendency is to address security abroad rather than at home, and on work by Whitworth (2004) and Valenius (2007), she highlights that in such operations gendered divisions of labour persist, women being assigned tasks that make use of assumed feminine qualities like care, consideration and empathy. As Nadja Al-Ali points out, these qualities are in high demand in situations where 'culture' is being used as an argument for military intervention by Western powers. Ideas about women's culturally conditioned subordination in non-Western societies have been key justifications for, e.g., the NATO mission in Afghanistan, in accordance with Spivak's observation about 'white men saving brown women from brown men' (Spivak 1994), and they have contributed to the intensification of hostilities.

Solhjell's contribution is a study of how the tasks are performed, particularly by Norwegian forces in Afghanistan and in the UN peacekeeping forces in the Democratic Republic of Congo. She demonstrates the complexity of gender roles and the effect of gender stereotyping in the MONUSCO peacekeeping mission to DR Congo in her account of Pakistani soldiers' bewilderment at the very visible and active role played by women in everyday life in Kivu conflict zones. In situations where military missions are increasingly being coordinated with development initiatives, as in the Norwegian (and Danish) mission to Afghanistan, it is problematic that interventions 'do not reach half of the population'. Instead of creating awareness of the complex interplay of gendered expectations and practices both in the military and in the local communities that are being affected by conflict, the task of generating 'trust' is assigned to female military personnel. In situations on the ground it becomes clear that gender mainstreaming strategies pay far more attention to gender relations that are internal to the intervening institutions than to those that are prevalent in the local context (Whitworth in Valenius 2007: 512). However, it is in these situations of 'intricate civil-military crisis management' that awareness of gendered power structures and demonstrations of gender sensitivity are most needed (Valenius 2007: 510). From Solhjell's observations of peacekeeping in practice, the political goals of ensuring inclusive and gender-sensitive peacekeeping and of sustaining militarized masculinities are just as impossible as the hyper-masculinities that the male soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo are striving for, according to Baaz and Stern.

Have gender mainstreaming and the presence of women in international security and conflict-related operations had only symbolic importance? And are the real effects of a heightened gender awareness and the strategic deployment of women in

military and peacekeeping operations of such a nature that essentialist notions of the nature of women are perpetuated, rather than contributing to strengthening women's agency? As discussed by Schott in the present issue, these questions are asked by several feminist scholars.

The articles we bring in this issue of *Women, Gender & Research* do not give straightforward answers – they may even complicate matters – but we hope they will contribute to stressing the importance of understanding and addressing the innate gendered nature of violence in global politics, of power relations in institutions involved in military intervention and conflict resolution, and in their interaction with local communities affected by conflict and post-conflict interventions.

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