

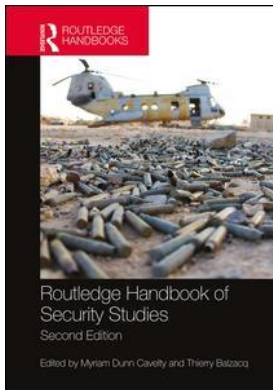
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Myriam Dunn Cavelty, Thierry Balzacq

### **Debates in Feminist Security Studies**

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## 8

# DEBATES IN FEMINIST SECURITY STUDIES

*Annick T. R. Wibben*

Until women have control over their own security a truly comprehensive system of security cannot be devised.

*(Tickner 1992: 30)*

When feminist scholars began to make their mark on the field of International Relations (IR) in the 1980s, security was at the top of their agenda. IR feminists drew on a long history of writing about issues of peace, war, and violence largely in the form of historical or cross-cultural case studies (Gioseffi 2003). These writings, and the associated feminist activism, form the basis for Feminist Security Studies (FSS) today. Since 1915, the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom (WILPF) has been actively involved in security debates (Confortini 2012);<sup>1</sup> in the 1960s, women (and WILPF) helped create the International Peace Research Association. Despite their efforts, peace research became a male-dominated field, with gender noticeably absent even from debates about structural violence, where gender should be a central category. Still, feminist peace researchers were, by the late 1960s, analysing power and emphasizing empowerment over coercion; by the 1970s, they had moved on to developing notions of security with an adversary and broadened security to include security against want, security of human rights, and the security of an empowered civil society.<sup>2</sup> In the 1980s, they focused on the linkages between war and patriarchy (Boulding 1992: 56–7).

In the early 1990s, feminists began to phrase their insights on peace, war, and violence in terms of security, thus engaging debates in IR's sub-field of Security Studies more directly. The advent of FSS is traced to Ann Tickner's 1992 *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security* (Blanchard 2003). In 1993, feminist peace researcher Betty Reardon wrote *Women and Peace: Feminist Visions of Global Security*. Both books, notable in their emphasis on global security (rather than national security), draw on the long tradition of feminist engagements with issues of peace, war, and violence – now framing them explicitly as security issues. Feminist insights on alternative conceptions of power, cooperative security, and non-state-centric perspectives (Brock-Utne 1989; Stiehm 1972) have also influenced Security Studies through alternative approaches, such as Critical Security Studies (Booth 1997; cf. Tickner 2001).

Since the turn of the century, a veritable explosion of feminist work in Security Studies has ensued, with FSS emerging as an important field at the intersection of Security Studies and

feminist IR. This chapter provides an overview of this multifaceted literature in three main parts. First, I discuss the commonalities, and even more crucially, the differences between FSS researchers and their scholarship. Thereafter, I turn to outline some key contributions of FSS to the study of security. Finally, the theoretical diversity within FSS, which is ground for sustained debate, is shown.

### Debates in Feminist Security Studies

A decade after the publication of the first special issue on gender and security in the journal *Security Dialogue* (2004), no singular feminist position on security has emerged, as recent debates among feminist scholars make abundantly clear (see Sjoberg and Lobasz 2011; Shepherd 2013). Nonetheless, the label FSS has flourished ‘as the marker for a growing body of work that explicitly engages in feminist research questions, approaches, and politics (albeit to varying degrees)’ (Stern and Wibben 2014: 2). Importantly, FSS is interdisciplinary – with scholars trained in peace research and Security Studies, but also in anthropology, history, literary theory, philosophy, or sociology. Feminist (methodological) commitments unite these scholars: They (1) ask feminist research questions; (2) base their research on women’s experiences; (3) adopt a (self-)reflexive stance; and (4) have an emancipatory agenda (Tickner 2006: 22–9). Whereas IR, like many traditional sciences, assumes gender neutrality, feminists make gender (the socially constructed femininity/masculinity distinction) a central category of analysis – it is ‘a socially imposed and internalized lens through which individuals perceive and respond to the world’ (Peterson 1992b: 194). Consequently, FSS scholars argue that concepts and ideas about security, as well as security practices and institutions, are shaped by gender. To analyse these, ‘FSS includes approaches, for instance, that pay attention to the workings of gender in order to ask questions about security; it also includes scholarship that refuses any line of distinction that separates “security” from the workings of gender’ (Stern and Wibben 2014: 2).

Adopting a bottom-up approach to security, feminist scholars pay close attention to the impact of security policies, including war, on the everyday lives of people (Sylvester 2013), departing from a large part of traditional Security Studies research. FSS scholars challenge the notion that wars are fought to protect vulnerable populations (such as children and women) and show that civilians are often explicitly targeted (especially in ethno-nationalist wars) (Enloe 1998; Hansen 2000, 2001). Rather than offering security for all their citizens, states often threaten their own populations through direct or structural violence reflected in war-fighting priorities and embedded in institutions (Enloe 1993, 2000; Peterson 1992a; Reardon 1985; Tickner 1992; Tobias 1985; Young 2003). Feminists assert that the increasing technologization of war, from nuclear strategy to the current revolution in military affairs, depersonalizes killing, offers the illusion of clean warfare, and obscures accountability (Blanchard 2003; Cohn 1989; Masters 2005; Molloy 1995). Finally, FSS scholars also directly engage traditional theories of security (Sjoberg 2013) and policy questions familiar to any security scholar (Hudson et al. 2008/9; MacKenzie 2015).

Feminist contributions to Security Studies are varied, and it is not currently possible to trace a dominant position in FSS with a progressive history. However, significant debates about the scope and direction of this body of work have emerged. The first of these, ‘The State of Feminist Security Studies: A Conversation’, published in *Politics & Gender* (edited by Sjoberg and Lobasz 2011) represents a varied set of short pieces. Carol Cohn’s contribution queries the ‘inherent ambiguity in the label [Feminist Security Studies] itself, related to which two of the three words one sees as most closely linked’ (2011: 581). She proposes that ‘if the two words most closely linked are “security” and “studies,” then the pre-existing field of Security Studies is the subject, and the question – both grammatical and epistemological – is in what way the adjective “feminist”

modifies it' (2011: 581). This question is important because FSS, as Maria Stern and I argue, 'signals a commitment to feminism as a reflexive, many-faceted, and expansive field of inquiry and ethico-politics that is intertwined with the interrogation of security' (2014: 2).

A set of replies to these concerns, published in 2013 in *International Studies Perspectives* (edited by Shepherd) raised concerns about the fact that all authors featured were US-based and that citation practices replicated Anglo-American dominance in IR. In the opening essay, Laura Shepherd asks that 'we remain attentive to the question of who gets to be part of the conversation, and ask whose contestations are seen as legitimate challenges to dominant ways of knowing both within and outside of FSS' (2013: 2). This sentiment is echoed by Swati Parashar who asks, 'just where are these conversations taking place, where are the disagreements, and what are the compromises?' (2013a: 441). These debates are crucial for the politics of FSS: 'Given the proliferation of feminist security scholarship, which is based on a variety of feminisms, feminist scholars should begin to debate the content and scope of their research [. . .] there are some real differences in feminist scholarship – and these differences matter' (Wibben 2011b: 591).

### **Contributions of Feminist Security Studies**

Asking 'where are the women (in security)?', feminists have subverted traditional approaches to Security Studies which do not include women. 'There are states and they are what is' Elshtain quips, asserting that 'professionalized IR discourse [. . .] is one of the most dubious of many dubious sciences that mask the power plays embedded in the discourse and the practices it legitimates' (1987: 91). Why do IR and Security Studies fail to notice diplomats' wives who provide safe spaces for back-room manoeuvres; barmaids and sex workers who serve military personnel (cf. Enloe 2000, Moon 1997); and women who fight for national causes, even in combat roles (cf. Goldman 1982; Herbert 1998; Lorentzen and Turpin 1998; MacKenzie 2015; Solaro 2006; Stiehm 1996)? Why these silences when women's existence is central to the workings of IR and security politics?

Contrary to generalized narratives of women as peacemakers or as victims needing rescue and protection, feminists document broader involvement of women in matters of international security. They reveal how armed forces need men and women to function in gender-specific ways that underline and reinforce skewed cultural norms and structural inequalities (Belkin 2012; Enloe 1998, 2000; Herbert 1998; Whitworth 2004). For example, states mobilize women to support wars, drawing on them as mothers (Bayard de Volo 2001; Haq 2007; Nikolic-Ristanovic 1998), as symbols of the nation or bearers of tradition (Yuval-Davis 1997), or by employing them in factories while men are deployed (Woolacott 1998). Women's acceptance of these roles, deemed acceptable for them, glamorizes the role of men as just warriors and positions women as the rebuilders after men's wars (Boulding 1988; Elshtain 1987). For many feminists, therefore, women and men 'share complicity in warfare and militarism through their participation in the dual mythology of masculinity and femininity' (Burguières 1990: 8).

Feminists have also probed the topic of women as aggressors (Alison 2009; Hamilton 2007; MacKenzie 2012; Nacos 2005; Parashar 2013b; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007; Stiehm 1996; Sylvester 1987, 1989), presenting evidence that many women are violent (just as many men are peaceful), shattering the often-assumed affinity between women and peace – what some have called the women and peace thesis. These scholars highlight the need to examine the relationship of both women and men to violence and the gendering of violence itself, particularly its association with masculinity. This should not obscure the fact that women are still predominantly victims of war (and of militarized societies). One gendered form of victimization, the rape of conquered women, has long been considered a normal aspect of war (and peace, as True 2012 highlights). More recently, due to its use as a tactic of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia

(e.g., Nikolic-Ristanovic 2000; Stiglmayer 1993), rape as a strategy of war has achieved renewed attention. While researchers have found evidence of rape as a strategy of war in a variety of conflicts, more recently researchers have begun to question this singular focus and caution that more careful attention to the varied context within which such violence takes place is needed. In their research on sexualized violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Maria Eriksson-Baaz and Maria Stern (2013) found that soldiers raped for a variety of reasons and that there was not enough evidence to support the widely accepted narrative of rape as a strategy of war. Their research also highlights a phenomenon that feminist scholars/activists have observed more broadly – that there is a continuum of violence between peace and wartime (Cockburn 2004; Cuomo 1996; Reardon 1993).

More specifically, in the case of the former Yugoslavia, Zorica Mrsevic raises the following question: ‘Did the civil war [. . .] cause an increase in domestic violence, or did domestic violence cause the war?’ (Mrsevic 2001: 41). She argues that the high prevalence and tolerance of domestic violence in Yugoslav society before the war ‘contributed significantly to the “ease” with which young men suddenly changed from apparently decent boys to brutal perpetrators of violent acts’ – the underlying cause being patriarchal society where ‘aggressive masculinity is not only tolerated, but encouraged’ (Mrsevic 2001: 42).<sup>3</sup> Exploring the linkages of patriarchal societies and aggressive masculinities with violence and militarism has been an important theme of FSS (Cockburn 2004; Cockburn and Zarkov 2002; Duncanson 2013; Enloe 1987, 1998; Higate 2003; Reardon 1985; Whitworth 2004). When performing feminist gender analysis, men and masculinity need to be analysed alongside women and femininity – and, Cockburn cautions, ‘we need to observe the functioning of gender as a relation [. . .] of power that compounds other power dynamics’ (2004: 25). The relationship between masculinity and violence, however, is culturally specific and always changing because gender hierarchies are constructions that intersect with hierarchies of class, nation, race, or religion.

### Theoretical commitments of Feminist Security Studies

Epistemologically and politically, FSS scholars are diverse. Feminist empiricists, for example, address the security puzzle by strictly adhering to mainstream scientific norms and inserting women as data. Standpoint feminists theorize from the position of subjugated women to bring their silenced perspectives into the conceptualization of security. Feminist poststructuralists decry ‘universal (or universalizing) claims about the existence, nature, and powers of reason, science, language, and the “subject/self”’ (Harding 1986: 28), questioning the entire framework of Security Studies. Postcolonial feminists study gender subordination as one of many intersecting forms of oppression women face; they critique the myopias of Western feminists’ theorizing, such as in the case of Afghanistan, where the ‘feminist focus on women under the Taliban rang with superior tones of enlightenment and righteousness, singling out the most exotic and distant situations, and representing the women of Afghanistan as passive victims’ (Young 2003: 230).

These differences among feminist (security) scholars provide an impetus for continual engagement in the conversation and for a continual questioning essential to feminist approaches. This variety is at odds with traditional Security Studies, which prefers a single coherent narrative of security with immutable answers (cf. Wibben 2011a).<sup>4</sup> While some commitments, such as the liberal feminist goal of achieving equality also by integrating women into the armed forces, and the anti-war feminist analysis of militaries as a central element of patriarchal control, are directly at odds with one another, most feminists see disagreement as a necessary and productive element of scholarly debate (Sylvester 1987) and debate differing political implications. ‘Any feminist perspective would argue that a truly comprehensive system of security cannot be achieved until

gendered relations of domination and subordination are eliminated' (Tickner 1992: 23). The commitment to theorizing on the basis of women's experiences to achieve meaningful security arrangements is common to all feminists (Wibben 2011a).<sup>5</sup>

Due to the centrality of women's experiences in feminist research, the most fundamental and far-reaching debate among feminists is about essentialism, or the question of whether or not women and men have underlying, universal essences – a uniquely female or male nature – that is more fundamental than any variations among them. Feminists presupposing this essence point to biological roots: gender difference follows sex difference. Conservatives use claims about women's biology to argue that only men should fight wars and women should support them in home-front, feminine roles. Cultural feminists similarly conclude that women, as natural peacemakers, should resist war and seek power in world affairs to make the world less violent. Liberal feminists argue that women can surmount biology's limits and train to become more like men to gain equal access to public affairs and institutions like the military (cf. MacKenzie 2015; Solaro 2006). Feminist poststructuralists sceptical of essentialism argue that gender is mutable and socially, or even performatively (Butler 1990) constructed, even in the military; thus, women joining the military conform to, and simultaneously challenge, institutional gender stereotypes. Postcolonial feminists, concerned with the deeply gendered implications of colonialism, illuminate how contemporary military endeavours still rely on colonial tropes; they vehemently resist the recruitment of colonial subjects into militaries of the colonizer (Riley et al. 2008; Smith 2006).

These debates are key – the way feminists conceptualize gender shapes their entire analytical endeavour. When gender is the main category of analysis, what one sees depends on the gender-lens adopted. Consider the women and peace thesis already mentioned, which stereotypes women as peaceful, whether due to biology or to their social role as mothers, and which casts men as the violent sex. Burguières (1990: 2–9) outlines three feminist lenses used to address this thesis: (1) accept binary male and female stereotypes, but try to subvert them to a feminist purpose (cultural feminism); (2) reject the female stereotype to argue that women should seek equality by becoming more like men (liberal feminism); (3) reject both male and female stereotypes as historically inaccurate and supportive of peaceful mother/violent man constructions of patriarchy and militarism (poststructuralist feminism). These lenses have different political implications and shape feminist recommendations on peace, war, and security issues accordingly: 'Broadly, the goal of the first approach is peace grounded in feminine values; the second has equality with men as its main objective; and the third approach aims at peace based on a new world order centred around new gender relations and structures' (Burguières 1990: 9).

FSS encompasses all three positions; however, essentialism is increasingly scarce and the focus tends towards studying women's everyday lives and intersections between gender, class, race, religion, or nation. The latter move, a result of influences on FSS from transnational and postcolonial feminists, examines how these intersections produce particular subject positions and distinct forms of oppression. 'Embracing an intersectional approach, which emerges from a critical political stance as a "vision of generating counter-hegemonic and transformative knowledge production, activism, pedagogy, and non-oppressive coalitions" requires scholars to pay attention to specific contexts and their politics' (Wibben 2014: 754, citing Bilge). As Sylvester warns, 'the differing lived experiences and multiple fractured identities women have in the contemporary era, and the many political struggles to which these identities give rise' (1987: 500) need to be taken seriously. Without addressing the specificities of particular struggles within which narratives of identity politics are articulated, feminist scholarship mimics hegemonic representations of identity in which some, usually already marginalized members, are repeatedly excluded from belonging (Yuval-Davis 1997).

When heeding these warnings, the contribution of FSS and its addressing of the lacunae in traditional Security Studies is clear: 'feminists contest the possibility of a perfectly controlled,

coherent security policy that could handle every international contingency' (Blanchard 2003: 1290). They question the quality of survival from a feminist standpoint that moves beyond survival (of the state) as the unitary and ultimate goal of security efforts, incorporating the historically complex relationship of women to states. They look beyond questions of military capabilities – and how to maintain or achieve peace through war (relying on 'power over') – advocating violence if at all only as a last resort and seeking common ground and pathways to negotiating the end of (armed) conflicts. The origins and implications (in peacetime) of wartime violence can thus both be located on a continuum and can be understood from the vantage points of the struggles of everyday life, a positionality that unravels stark distinctions of before and after war (Cuomo 1996; Wibben 2011a). The contributions of FSS are considerable – they shine a light on issues that traditional security scholarship and practice continuously fail to consider.

### Conclusion

Since the publication of the first edition of this Handbook, feminist scholars have conducted ground-breaking research probing these questions, making crucial practical, political, and theoretical interventions (e.g. Detraz 2015; Gentry and Sjoberg 2015; MacKenzie 2012, 2015; Parashar 2013a; Pratt and Richter-Devroe 2014; Sjoberg 2013; Sylvester 2013; Wibben 2011a).<sup>6</sup> As Steve Smith noted, 'the contribution of feminist writers to Security Studies is [. . .] both considerable and ultimately destabilizing for the subfield [. . .] looking at security from the perspective of women alters the definition of what security is to such an extent that it is difficult to see how any form of traditional Security Studies can offer an analysis' (2005: 48). As feminist scholars are addressing questions that traditional scholarship misses, they are keenly reflexive in their research practices (Wibben 2016) and their work has important policy implications.

One example, the Women, Peace & Security (WPS) Agenda, which arose out of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325 and was specified in subsequent resolutions, has led to a veritable explosion of research on its policy consequences.<sup>7</sup> A historic milestone, 1325 was the first resolution of the UNSC to specifically address women in war and to recognize women not simply as victims but as agents 'in building peace and guaranteeing security' (Pratt and Richter-Devroe 2014: 2). The WPS Agenda has been promoted primarily by mainstreaming gender, urging the incorporation of a gender perspective into all policies and programmes related to peace and security at the UN (Cohn et al. 2004; Hudson 2009), but also mandates National Action Plans (Gumru and Fritz 2009). While the need for further analysis of this process remains, the mainstreaming of gender and the inclusion of women in the security sector is significant.

More broadly, feminist scholars have begun to debate the politics of FSS (Wibben 2011b), challenging both traditional and critical security scholars, particularly for their lack of engaging with the political implications of their work. Transnational and more radical feminist scholarship made important contributions here (see Riley et al. 2008) by challenging the parameters of traditional Security Studies and its Anglo-American exceptionalism that commonly supports US imperialism. The 'war on terror' has accentuated the need to examine epistemic violence embedded in the appeal to women's liberation as a justification for intervention and to recognize the importance of looking at violence (and war) as part of a historically and culturally situated continuum (see Wibben 2016). As Ayotte and Husain summarize: 'While the physical and structural violence inflicted upon women must remain a central component of feminist theory and criticism, the war on terrorism in Afghanistan also demonstrates that the Western appropriation and homogenization of third-world women's voices perform a kind of epistemic violence that must be addressed along with material oppressions' (2005: 112–13).

Given the state of global politics, a move toward intersectional approaches that recognize the fundamental simultaneity of gender, race, nation, and more, and their impact on research practices and findings, is desperately needed in FSS. An intersectional approach is less 'concerned with the institutional success of the knowledge it produces [and more focused on] institutional and social change through counter-hegemonic knowledge production' (Bilge 2012: 409). FSS must, therefore, remain true to its origins by constantly engaging in a critique of the ways in which (also its own) theoretical and methodological practices might lend themselves to perpetuating physical, structural, and epistemic violence.

## Notes

- 1 Of course, not all women are also feminists, nor are all feminists women – but WILPF is representative of a particular, anti-war feminist stance also to be found in FSS today (cf. Cohn and Ruddick 2002). More recently, WILPF created an academic network to strengthen the activist–academic conversations (<http://www.wilpfinternational.org/academic-network/>).
- 2 Much as human security does today (Hamber et al. 2006; Hoogensen and Stuvøy 2006; Hudson 2005).
- 3 Sharoni (1994) makes eerily similar observations for the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.
- 4 These epistemological and methodological choices of feminists also have important ethical and political implications; it matters how we study issues of peace, war, violence, and security and whether our aim is to challenge existing power relations or simply to describe the status quo. Once we take people's experiences in all their multiplicity and specificity seriously, rather than focus solely on states, different ethical commitments must follow (cf. Introduction in Wibben 2016).
- 5 It is important that theorizing on the basis of women's experience does not imply an essentialized construction. Instead, women are identified in particular contexts (usually by others). Womanhood, therefore, is always a question of social positioning. As such, we cannot think woman without examining gender, race, class, and other intersections simultaneously.
- 6 The Feminist Security Studies Network (<http://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/FeministSecurityStudies/>) aims to connect these scholars also via Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/48680787483/>).
- 7 There is also a Women Peace and Security group on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/160475027434631/>).

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