

A decade of feminist security studies revisited

Maria Stern

School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Annick TR Wibben

Department of Politics, University of San Francisco, USA

Introduction

Feminist security studies has become a vibrant field that produces innovative and timely research on issues of war, peace, security, conflict, and much more. While feminist work in these fields has a long and rich history (see Sylvester, 2010; Wibben, 2009), feminist security studies as a distinct and established field of study is still expanding within international relations and security studies.¹ Publishing a path-breaking special issue on gender and security in December 2004 (Hansen and Olsson, 2004) as well as a piece by Gunhild Hoogensen and Svein Vigeland Rottem (2004) earlier the same year, *Security Dialogue* distinguished itself early on as a welcoming venue where feminist security studies could flourish, important discussions could be had, and innovative methodologies could be explored.

In this virtual special issue, we are taking the ten-year anniversary of the special issue on gender and security as an opportunity to take stock of the work within feminist security studies that has appeared in *Security Dialogue* since. The articles included in this virtual issue were selected as specific voices in a larger many-threaded conversation within feminist security studies that have taken place in *Security Dialogue* and elsewhere.² Additionally, some of these voices resonate in other articles published in the journal that are not figuring here, but are no less important to this wider conversation.

Virtual Collection Introduction

Before we briefly explore some of these threads as an introduction to this virtual issue, we want to pause and explain the move from 'gender and security' (the title of the 2004 special issue) to 'feminist security studies'. The label feminist security studies (FSS) has blossomed in recent years as the marker for a growing body of work that explicitly engages in feminist research questions, approaches and politics (albeit to varying degrees, as the chosen contributions show). It thus 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. 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. As such, FSS is located at the crossroads of security studies, feminist international relations and feminist theory (which considers gender as one of many intersecting relations of power). What is more, foregrounding the feminist inspiration for this work indicates a broader challenge to mainstream international relations and security studies that resists tendencies to simply 'add gender and stir'.

In terms of subject area, FSS shares many concerns with other critical approaches – which partly explains why *Security Dialogue* was open to considering and publishing this feminist security scholarship. One shared area of concern is the critical attention to the question of human security (see also the special issue edited by Burgess and Owen, 2004) and many of the FSS articles published in *Security Dialogue* over the last decade critically engage with human security. Heidi Hudson (2005), for instance, offers a feminist reading of the ways in which human security was being conceptualized at the time, warning of the dangers of masking difference when the multiplicity of identities and experiences suggest that relationality and contextualization must be taken seriously in any operationalization of human security. Natasha Marhia (2013) reengages many of the questions raised by Hudson, and further troubles the notion of the 'human' as universal. Focusing on the conditions under which the human of human security can be recognized, she finds exclusions within supposedly universal notions of humanity produced through gendered (and raced and classed) demarcations as morally relevant. Both Hudson and Marhia propose that context, empirically and conceptually, is what shapes multiple and varied understandings of human security and therefore call for sustained critical feminist interrogation of it as both concept and practice. Charli Carpenter (2006) also critically addresses the human

Virtual Collection Introduction

security policy agenda and troubles the understandings of gender-based violence (GBV) that prevail under its banner. She renders visible how discussions about GBV tend to conflate gender with one sex – more specifically, women and girls *as* sexed bodies. She invites us to consider what a move to gender (from sex) that does not immediately equate gender-based approaches with women and girls might entail in practice by exploring how violences specifically directed against civilian men and boys are *also* gender-based violence.

The insistence on the need to pay attention to complex, multiple, and context-specific dynamics of gender relations evident in the feminist work on human security, is a theme that characterizes much work within FSS. Indeed, such attention to complexity, multiplicity, and context is evident in many of the articles (re)collected here. Jutta Joachim and Andrea Schneiker (2012), for example, raise questions about the multiplicity of military masculinities and the constitution of norms that shape legitimate security actors by examining how gender discourses inform the production of private military and security companies. Hakan Seckinelgin, Joseph Bigirmwami, and Jill Morris (2010) explore how the securitization of HIV/AIDS ignores complex and context-specific gender-based vulnerabilities in situations of conflict and post-conflict processes. Kathleen M. Jennings (2014), in turn, queries how peacekeeping economies interact with and shape the societies they operate in by paying attention to different – sometimes contradictory – gendered registers that unsettle notions of both the ‘peacekeeper’ and the ‘local’. These articles showcase how FSS scholarship speaks to key concerns of security studies as well as international relations more generally.

Many of the articles we have chosen for this virtual issue also explore distinct, innovative methodologies not commonly found in international relations contexts (e.g. visual analysis in Joachim and Schneiker, 2012), but that are necessary for feminist inquiries that often aim to highlight neglected topics (Wibben, forthcoming). FSS, for instance, has been at the forefront in the inventive uses of narrative methodology to query security in ‘unlikely’ international relations places – as several of the articles included here demonstrate. Maria Stern’s (2006) article makes use of life history interviews to examine how the ways in which people attempt to secure their identities through particular grammars of security – ‘who we are’ (and conversely aren’t) – reproduce violence. Employing a narrative methodology, Stern challenges dominant logic(s) of (in)security by showing how identities, and subsequently securities, are multiple, intersecting,

Virtual Collection Introduction

and always incomplete (see also Stern, 2005; Wibben, 2011). Laura McLeod (2013) similarly highlights how paying attention to the temporality of narratives allows us to achieve a deeper understanding of security. She investigates the narrative content in the divergent personal political narratives about gender security among activists in Serbian feminist and women's organizations in relation to the past, present and future of conflict and post-conflict. In a related vein, Sarai Aharoni (2014) employs a postcolonial reading of the narratives of negotiators and administrators to unsettle the stereotypical framing of gender and culture as reasons for women's exclusion from/inclusion in Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. She suggests that the rigid (as well as, in this particular case, gendered and Orientalist) framings present in these narratives not only restrict women's participation in the peace process, but also hinder more imaginative approaches to conflict resolution in general.

The conversations about and within FSS are not without difficulties, of course, as feminisms are highly contested. Tensions exist both with regard to disagreements among feminists as well as to attacks that continuously aim to dismiss feminist insights entirely.³ Christine Sylvester (2010) questions FSS as a field or 'camp' within the 'capacious' field of international relations by exploring its tensions, lines of distinctions, and its (self-)disciplinary tactics through which certain differences are similar enough to be acceptable, and others are not. We agree with Sylvester that the ethico-politics of knowledge production and the risks of self-confinement at play in the establishment of knowledge camps must always be considered. Her attention to tensions remind us that, as a field committed to reflexivity, openness, and multiplicity, FSS can only grow through the passionate curiosity (Enloe, 2004) and the rigorous scholarship (see Ackerly, Stern and True, 2006; Wibben, forthcoming) of its engaged scholars – and through the insights gained by critically querying the tensions, and inclusions/exclusions such engagement involves.

Reading these pieces as a whole – and as a representation of some of the many-threaded lines of inquiry, conversations and innovations that have occurred in FSS over the past decade, we also call to mind the productive potential of a long-overdue, interdisciplinary, global engagement attuned to how particular contexts shape (in)security, violence, war and peace, as well as the lines of distinctions that delimit them. Simultaneously, we appreciate that such contexts and limits are never totalizing forces but contain within them the potential for

Virtual Collection Introduction

alternatives. It is here, in this double attention to the specific, the contextual, and the intersectional, as well as in the fleeting, the excessive and the contingent, that feminist security studies is making a crucial contribution to security studies today.

Notes

¹ The first mention known to us is in Aradau (2004) and the term gained prominence with the organization of FSS panels for the annual International Studies Association (ISA) conference (Shepherd and Wibben organized the first set of these for ISA 2008 – see Feminist Security Studies network - <https://groups.yahoo.com/groups/FeministSecurityStudies/> - for details).

² Special issue of *Security Studies* (edited by Sjoberg, 2009) and much work published in the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, including a special issue on UNSCR 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security agenda (edited by Pratt and Richter-Devroe, 2011).

³ See e.g. a special conversation section on 'The State of Feminist Security Studies' (edited by Sjoberg & Lobasz, 2011) in the journal *Politics & Gender* based on an ISA roundtable from 2009 as well as the series of short essays *International Studies Perspectives* (edited by Shepherd, 2013) that point to several flaws in the first conversation and call for a continuation of the conversation(s).

References

- Ackerly BA; Stern M and True J (eds) (2006) *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Aradau C (2004) Security and the democratic scene: Desecuritization and emancipation. *Journal of International Relations and Development* 7(4): 388- 413.
- Burgess PJ and Owen T (eds) (2004) Special section. What is 'human security'? *Security Dialogue* 35(3): 345-388.
- Enloe C (2004) *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in an Age of Empire*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hansen L and Olsson L (eds) (2004) Special issue. Gender and security. *Security Dialogue* 35(4).
- Hoogensen G and Vigeland Rottem S (2004) Gender identity and the subject of security. *Security Dialogue* 35(2): 155-171.
- Pratt N and Richter Devroe S (eds) (2011) Special issue. Critically examining UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13(4).

Shepherd L (ed.) (2013) Special section. The state of the discipline: A security studies forum.

International Studies Perspectives 14(4): 436-462.

Sjoberg L (ed.) (2009) Special issue. Security studies: Feminist contributions. *Security Studies* 18(2).

Sjoberg L and Lobasz JK (eds) (2011) Critical perspectives on gender and politics section. The state of feminist security studies: A conversation. *Politics & Gender* 7(4): 573-604.

Stern M (2005) *Naming Security - Constructing Identity: 'Mayan Women' in Guatemala on the Eve of 'Peace'*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Wibben ATR (2009) Feminist security studies. In: Dunn Cavelti M and Mauer V (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Security Studies*. London: Routledge (84-94).

Wibben ATR (2011) *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach*. London: Routledge.

Wibben ATR (forthcoming) *Researching War: Feminist Methods, Ethics and Politics*, London: Routledge.

Maria Stern is Professor at the School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg and associate editor of *Security Dialogue*. Her research interests span (feminist) critical security studies, feminist theory, post-colonial theory, international political sociology and research methodology. Her recent books include *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War? Perceptions, Prescriptions, Problems in the Congo and Beyond* (co-authored with Maria Eriksson Baaz, Zed books, 2013) and *Studying the Agency of Being Governed* (co-edited with Stina Hansson and Sofie Hellberg, Routledge, 2014).

Annick TR Wibben, Ph.D., is associate professor of Politics and International Studies at the University of San Francisco. Her research contributes to critical (particularly feminist) security studies, international theory, and feminist international relations. She also has a keen interest in issues of methodology, representation, and writing, particularly in terms of feminist and narrative approaches. Her book, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach* (2011) addresses these issues and her forthcoming edited book examines feminist approaches to researching war.