

Interview – Katharine Millar

Written by E-International Relations

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Katharine Millar is an Assistant Professor of International Relations in the Department of International Relations at the London School of Economics. Her broad research interests lie in examining the gendered cultural narratives underlying the modern collective use of force. Katharine just published her first book, *Support the Troops: Military Obligation, Gender, and the Making of Political Community*, with Oxford University Press. The book examines the relationship between support the troops discourses and gendered, normative citizenship in the US and UK during the early years of the so-called Global War on Terror. It outlines a theory connecting gendered notions of political obligation with the transformation of civil-military relations, and the normative use of violence, in contemporary liberal democracies. Her other on-going research examines gender, race (particularly whiteness), militarism, and contemporary populism(s); gender and cybersecurity; and the politics of hypocrisy. Katharine has also published on female combatants, gendered representations of violent death, military and civilian masculinity, and critical conceptions of militarism. She is also researching, supported by a British Academy/Leverhulme Small Research Grant, the relationship between grief, mass death, and social order in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Katharine does policy engagement on a range of aspects of gender and security politics/policy for various national governments and international organisations, particularly on gender and the armed forces, gender and professional military education, and gendered dimensions of cybersecurity. Previously, Katharine was at the University of Oxford, where she held a Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada doctoral fellowship at Somerville College. Before entering the academy, she worked as a policy researcher for a major Canadian political party. Katharine holds a Masters of International Studies from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, Switzerland, and a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) from the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

You've asked me this at an interesting moment, as I've just finished a book project, and so am contemplating what (or where?) exactly my field is. Beyond that, I've often found that "fields" tend to more disciplining than descriptive, and don't capture the most interesting or exigent thought and research about politics, power, and the international. Like a lot of feminist and critical scholars, my research examines the intersections of the everyday – even banal – and the formally political, and the processes through which particular events, phenomenon, etc are produced as "political" per se. I'm interested in how political community hangs together, and the relationship between dynamics of violence and belonging. My work also has an interest in the politics of, for lack of a better word, very harmful things, and how they are made possible. All that said...

In writing up the book, I was fortunate to engage with amazing work that might be thought of as critical military studies, feminist security studies, critical international relations theory, and critical security and IR theory more broadly. I am really indebted to feminist security scholars such as Cynthia Enloe, Laura Sjoberg, Megan Mackenzie, Carol Cohn, Annick Wibben, Laura Shepherd, Aaron Belkin, Maria Stern, Harriet Gray, Aiko Holvikivi, Joanna Tidy, Tina Managhan, Maria Martin de Almagro, and so many others, for their work affirming the analytical and political importance of gender and sexuality to the politics of security – and their subsequent work unravelling its multiple operations. I'm also really informed, and compelled by, feminist political thought on political community and violence more broadly, such as that by Kim Hutchings and Elizabeth Frazer, as well as critical takes on social contract theory

Interview – Katharine Millar

Written by E-International Relations

by scholars including Carole Pateman, Beate Jahn, and Charles Mills.

I also think work challenging the meaning and politics of militarism – as empirical politics, as academic concept, and the collision of the two – is currently in a fascinating place. Alison Howell, Chris Rossdale, Jesse Crane-Seeber, Victoria Basham, Zoe Wool, Marsha Henry, and Ziyanda Stuurman, to mention only very few, are working to reveal the constitution of militarism with, and through, other important logics of power, belonging, and marginalisation/oppression, including disability, class, race, sexuality, and empire/coloniality. I learned so much about coloniality, race, and militarism co-editing a special issue of *Security Dialogue* with Nivi Manchanda and Chris Rossdale – from their article and the excellent pieces by Jasmine Gani, Seongsook Moon, and Haya al-Noaimi.

Now that I'm at the beginning of a new research arc and agenda (which is exciting but a bit intimidating), I've had the opportunity to engage with and learn from an even broader body of work engaging with these big questions of the politics of violence, suffering, and what makes up a (good? livable? for whom?) political community.

Following that logic, I'm really compelled by work interrogating the international politics of death, and its relationship to various forms of social structure/power, such as gender, race, coloniality, ability, etc. Here, I'm reading Achille Mbembe, Himadeep Muppidi, Heonig Kwon, Thomas Gregory, Charlotte Heath-Kelly, Jessica Auchter, Michael Barnett, Jasbir Puar, and Katherine Verdery, among others. I'm also particularly taken with critical political economic takes on this question, including insights on slow violence, disposability, and austerity by scholars such as Rob Nixon, Lauren Berlant, and James Tyner. I also really appreciate the special issue of *Environment and Society* that critiques and builds upon these and related ideas from a feminist and anti-racist perspective, including thinking with/through ideas of racial capitalism (theorised by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Cedric Robinson, Robbie Shilliam, and many others). Though it's a body and tradition of work that I've engaged with only very recently, I am also struck by political thought and activism on carcerality and abolitionism. It's key to understanding the transnational politics of harm, loss, and grief.

I've also been reading scholarship thinking through – and resisting – the legacies and conditions of settler colonialism. I've learned a lot from theorists, thinkers, and scholars such as Audra Simpson, Kim Tallbear, Glen Sean Coulthard, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, and Desirée Poets. Political thought engaging seriously with settler colonialism is crucial to thinking about the big questions of violence, suffering, and political belonging I examine in my research. I also appreciate the support and challenge of this work, and much of the other scholarship I mentioned earlier, in reckoning what it means to work in the academy as a white settler citizen – I'm originally from Canada – and white woman.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

It's funny, when you asked me this question, my first reaction was to think: am I really going to admit to the internet that I started out as a West Wing liberal teenager before morphing into a (pretty obnoxious, honestly) neo-Gramscian undergrad? More seriously though, I think parts of my worldview have stayed the same – the parts that are intellectually and politically invested in understanding and addressing various forms of violence. What's changed most is the way I understand those things, and the complexities that bring them about. I grew up in a fairly small farming community in Alberta, and as a younger person, my perspective on the world was – I'm tempted to say smaller, but that's not quite right. It was just a partial one, that's been expanded and shifted and challenged through reading, travel, research, the usual. I realise that's sort of at risk of sounding like something you'd print on a coaster, but I'm not sure how else you do it.

But, to actually give some examples of things that changed my worldview...the US invasion of Iraq was a formative political event for me. Watching ostensibly liberal principles and ideas about equality, democracy, freedom, etc. leveraged to justify war, and the deaths and suffering of so many people, was disillusioning. This is when I got into neo-Gramscian ideas about ideology and hegemony, as well as committed to disarmament and contesting militarism. (Actually, though I now find quite *how* into Gramsci I was a bit...over the top, my general investment in those principles and questions has more or less continued). In graduate school, reading Foucault (though he doesn't figure

Interview – Katharine Millar

Written by E-International Relations

so highly in my current work/thought) and, particularly Judith Butler's work on the politics of grief, life, death, and vulnerability, was like a light going on. During my grad work, I also deepened my understanding of feminism, which I had previously taken/worn relatively lightly, in the sense of liberal rights/judicial equality, though reading, empirical research, general life (hello, sexism), and a wonderful class taught by Elisabeth Prugl. Doing my doctoral work, and writing up my book, I've become more sceptical of absolutes and universals, both politically and intellectually. It's so tempting to be certain, but it's often not very helpful.

Also, I should definitely say that in my day-to-day work now, I change my mind all the time following conversations with students and colleagues at LSE. I'm really lucky to work with (or have worked with) Yuna Han, Nivi Manchanda, Aiko Holvikivi, Chris Rossdale, Martin Bayly, Tarak Barkawi, George Lawson, Paul Kirby, John Sidel, Mark Hoffman, Milli Lake, Ellie Knott, Shruti Balaji, Tarsis Daylan Brito Sepulveda-Coelho, Megan O'Mahoney, and Woohyeok Seo.

A great deal of your research is focused on the gendered narratives which underpin international politics in general, and the use of force and militarism more specifically. Why is it important to adopt such an approach?

Honestly, I don't think you can understand the politics of violence – or politics in general – without thinking about and through gender. Gendered (and sexualised) dynamics and understandings of protection, heroism, dependence, vulnerability, the family, the state, and so on are, empirically and conceptually, essential to understanding how violence and militarism are legitimated, practiced, and made possible. In a 2019 article in the *Review of International Studies*, I make the case that in liberal democracies and “Western” political thought, gender, masculinity, agency, and violence are all co-constituted (*i.e.* the meanings and authority of the terms make sense with reference to each other, they're intertwined) in such a way that contesting one without considering/taking on the other is incredibly challenging. If political/public agency is consistently framed, even implicitly, with reference to the masculine capacity for righteous violence, then resisting militarism and resisting heteronormative patriarchy – neither of which is easy – are likewise bound up together.

I should also say, the broad point here – gender constitutes war and violence, and is constituted by war and violence – is not new. It's something that feminist scholars and activists from all over the world have known and argued publicly for a very long time (though, frustratingly, we do seem to keep needing to do it). And so in analysing that relationship, we also need to be willing to challenge our assumptions about how it might work empirically, in context, and what the implications of certain forms of dissent, protest, change, etc. might be. Which is just a long way of saying that to avoid essentialism (and, often, forms of neo-colonialism), it's really important not to just assume that the relationship between gender, violence, and agency works the same in all times and all places.

Likewise, though I really do believe that we can't understand violence without gender, that doesn't mean that gender is, necessarily, driving all or most of the political dynamics or outcomes that might be of interest to us as critical scholars of violence. What about race? Or sexuality? Or class, disability, or coloniality? Or gender identity and expression? Feminist research on violence is attentive to gender, but should also be attentive to how gender works alongside and with other axes of power and oppression – we could think of this in terms of the concept of intersectionality, articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the Combahee River Collective, and many others in the Black feminist tradition. It also just means being open-minded to the possibility that, just as gender may not contextually “work” in the way one might expect, it may also not be the most important or substantial dynamic of power or identity at work in a given situation. So it's crucial to centre the knowledge and experiences of marginalised and minoritized people – frequently, though not always or exclusively women – in our analysis of the politics and legitimation of violence.

In a 2015 article you argued that female soldiers occupy a liminal subject position. Why is this the case and can the situation change in the future?

Oh, that's interesting – the argument in this article (and in a bit of my other earlier work as well), draws on a fairly sharp, binary account of gender dynamics. I think that this binary is often how discourse and practice still work, empirically, in terms of assumptions, power dynamics, etc. but I think the way I'd present this now would be a bit

Interview – Katharine Millar

Written by E-International Relations

blurrier and more nuanced. Hopefully I succeeded in drawing upon while also messing with and problematizing binary accounts of masculinity and femininity a bit more in my book.

But, in any case, the quick version of the argument is this: in many places, including the United States, which is the context I'm talking about in the article, we see a gendered division of violent labour, wherein the use of violence is constructed as righteous, just, protective and masculine, and those in need of protection, be it the family, society, etc, are constructed as dependent, virtuous, passive, and feminine. (With thanks to Jean Bethke Elshtain and Iris Marion Young, among others, for that quick sketch). At the same time, many places, including, certainly, the US, are characterised by nationalist, frequently militaristic, understandings of citizenship and military service, wherein sacrifice for the state, particularly in the form of military heroism/death, needs to be formally and public recognised and valorised. In lots of places throughout history, but also in the US during the early "global war on terror", which is what I was writing about, this gendered division of violent labour is contradicted in practice, when women began serving in the military, on deployment in Iraq and Afghanistan, in increasing numbers, with increasing visibility, and in ways that meant women soldiers were wounded and killed.

And so, I argue in a somewhat schematic way, in addition to sadness for their loved ones, the visibility of women soldiers' deaths presents something of gendered political conundrum for the state, whose ideological claims to the legitimate use of force rests on its patriarchal ability to protect feminised subjects but whose ability to justify risking citizens' lives in the armed forces rests on the provision of nationalistic recognition and veneration of military sacrifice. (Ben Schrader calls a version of this set-up the 'veterans' contract'). In other words, nationalism demands that military sacrifice be recognised but the patriarchal division of violent labour is called into question by that sacrifice being made by women (and so, implicitly, is the state's ability to provide security). And we can track that – the seeming ideological incommensurability of the ideas of "soldier" and woman" – through various forms of commemorating the deaths of women soldiers, including statues, memorials, obituaries, and so forth. (This article was also the beginning of an arguably slightly morbid theme in my research – but the unarguability of death makes it a very interesting, if incredibly sad, lens on ideological/social structures and deeply held political commitments).

The upshot of the argument was that, at time of writing, it was possible to represent deceased women soldiers as "good women" or "good soldiers" – and they were – but not as both simultaneously. That's where the liminality comes in. The last bit of your question, about how to change liminality is interesting, in part because it maybe suggests that liminality is negative or undesirable. And I do make that point, in my paper, as I suggest that an inability to recognise lost loved ones in the whole of who they were can contribute to trauma and complicated grief on the part of their survivors – something that the current literature on the politics of grief does tend to support. But I don't think liminality, or ambiguity, is inherently negative or traumatising. It can also (though not in this particular case) be liberating, or a space of resistance. In this case, there's a version of "eliminating" liminality that just requires more investment in one (or both) of nationalistic militarism or binary patriarchal gender. And while that might eliminate liminality, and ambiguity, I'm not sure we'd find that to be more desirable and laudable than the circumstances of the present. It seems, instead, that contesting both militarism, and cis-normative heteropatriarchal gender, and, again, the way, gender, and force, and political agency are woven together might be something to try. This may require, as much of queer theory suggests, working to become more comfortable with ambiguity, and accept various forms of uncertainty.

In your new book, you argue that when it comes to liberal wars, "support is the new service". What does this mean, and what are the implications of your argument for how we understand anti-war resistance?

Thanks for asking. Bluntly, I argue that support for the military, now constituted as masculinised/ising, has supplanted the masculine obligation of military service as the hallmark of citizenship and political belonging. I go through a couple of steps to make that argument. In doing so, I'm indebted to the work of earlier scholars who identified "support the troops" as a distinct and noteworthy political phenomenon, and began to unpack how it works politically, particularly Roger Stahl, Kenneth MacLeigh, Tina Managhan, Patrick G. Coy, Gregory M. Maney and Lynne M. Woehrle.

Anyway, I begin from the premise that there is a growing disconnection between enduring cultural narratives of war and contemporary Western civil-military relations. In the past, it was assumed that all good citizens, as good men,

Interview – Katharine Millar

Written by E-International Relations

would serve in the armed forces in wartime (note how the gendered division of labour gets back in here right away). This obligation was ostensibly accepted in exchange for social and political rights. I argue that there is what I call a “military contract” underlying our typical understanding of the liberal social contract. In the present, though, and particularly during the so-called “global war on terror”, which is the main timeframe of my study, liberal democratic states increasingly rely on small, volunteer militaries. And so though there is a generalised expectation that “good citizens” and particularly “good men” ought to serve in the military in wartime, today, in most liberal democracies, most people don’t.

And so, I argue that the post-World War II normative structure of civil-military relations, particularly in the US and UK, is undergoing a process of transformation. This, I think, is producing uneasiness about what it means to be a “good” citizen, “good” person, and, crucially, “good” man in a context where neither war nor military service easily align with existing cultural myths about wartime obligations and collective sacrifice.

I suggest that we read “supporting the troops” as an attempt to grapple with these gendered civilian anxieties regarding “good” citizenship and “good” masculinity. “Support the troops” discourses articulate several multi-layered, ostensibly apolitical representations of society’s implication in the collective use of force. In doing so, supporting the troops shifts the locus of normative citizenship (and, with it, normative public masculinity) from the now un-common experience of military service to the obligatory and easily accessible practice of support for the troops. Support is not, as might be assumed, constituted primarily as a practice of feminised/ising support and morale – even stereotypically feminine things like loving the troops and holding bake sells are contextually constructed as either contributions to the war or as the protection of a counter-intuitively vulnerable and dependent troops.

And so, if you’re with me so far, support is the new service. It is naturalised as the new sine qua non of normative masculinity and, with it, political membership. It also, troublingly, shifts the central ethical and political concerns of liberal war-making away from questions of legitimacy and harms to distant civilians to a more internal, apolitical matter of maintaining the appropriate form of gendered civil-military relations through solidarity with the troops. And, if that’s not enough, this masculinisation of support as the new service also interacts in complicated ways with transnational hierarchies of race, colonial legacies, and contemporary patterns of neo-imperialism. To be really brief, for people(s) racialised as “Other”, support is expected, and required, to offset a pre-existing presumption of enmity and threat. Even actual military service, however, is often not sufficient for the recognition of political belonging.

As you might imagine, the implications of this for democratic debate and anti-war dissent are not great. The first thing we see is that since support for the troops is framed as an apolitical matter of basic morality, it’s not open to political contestation. Failures to “support the troops”, as well as criticisms of the troops, which can indeed be quite hurtful, are dismissed as offensive bad taste. This facilitates a depoliticization of war itself, as support for the troops starts to replace engagement in democratic debate as the key duty of citizens. Particularly in the US, we see a situation where supporting the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan are framed as the default and consensus positions, with opposition to the wars – or even just requests to debate or consider the war seriously – framed as an inappropriate (and potentially disloyal) politicisation (that, in turn, implicitly fails the troops).

Anti-war organisations and protestors have, in recent decades, attempted to get around this rhetorical trap by framing their war opposition as for the troops – this is where the idea of “support the troops, bring them home” comes from. In the short term, this can be effective in getting a hearing for anti-war dissent, which is no small thing. In the longer term, however, it plays into the idea that “the troops” are the normative foundation of all decisions about war, as one can either support the war to support the troops, or oppose the war to support the troops...but the central point is the troops must be supported. And, as a result, this underlying nexus of normative masculinity, violence (in this case, martial violence), and political agency and belonging that I’ve been discussing for much of this interview remains intact.

In a UNIDIR report you co-wrote with James Shires and Tatiana Tropina, you discuss the relevance of gender norms to cybersecurity. How is this area affected by gender stereotyping and how can this be reversed? Are other areas affected as well?

Interview – Katharine Millar

Written by E-International Relations

Oh, that's an interesting piece to pick up on; it's worth noting that the UNIDIR report is a policy, rather than formal academic, publication. There's been a growing recognition in recent years that cybersecurity – whether understood broadly, in terms of security concerns arising from the use of information and communications technologies, or narrowly, in terms of malicious interference with devices, systems, and works – has gendered dimensions and implications. In other words, as cybersecurity and ICT is embedded in the social and political world, it reflects – and can magnify – pre-existing patterns of marginalisation, oppression, and intersectional inequality. (It also, in theory, can help to alleviate those patterns – but no one other than technological utopians thinks that this will/could be achieved without substantial and concerted social and political work and activism that simultaneously addresses these larger social structures and patterns).

To feminist scholars this of course is in no way new – the gendered (and sexualised, racialised, classed, etc) nature of technology has been pointed out by feminist science and technology studies (STS) scholars, such as Carol Cohn, Judy Wajcman, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Simone Browne, Alison Adams, Louise Amoore, Ruha Benjamin, and many others, for many years.

To technical cybersecurity practitioners and policymakers, however – and, honestly most people – the gendered nature of cybersecurity isn't particularly obvious. Given that cybersecurity seems to be (mostly) about the internet, networks, devices, and systems, it seems somewhat removed from people's bodies, from specific lived experiences, from societal power dynamics – and thus, it can seem quite far from gender. And so, a lot of existing cybersecurity policy, practice, regulation, concepts, etc. make the somewhat classic mistake of assuming that because a technology or policy is not specifically aimed at men, women, or people of diverse gender identities, expressions, and sexualities, it is therefore gender neutral. In fact, we see, not unlike conceptualisations of national, state, and even human security before feminist interventions, that mainstream cybersecurity is, instead, gender-blind.

What James and Tanya and I try and do in the report – and in our other policy work on the subject – is to provide a framework for thinking about how we might see the gendered dimensions of cybersecurity. We borrow the way many cybersecurity professionals think about/conceptualise cybersecurity to demonstrate the gendered assumptions and outcomes that even ostensibly technical cybersecurity practices contain and proliferate. (More specifically, we look at the design of cybersecurity devices, systems, and responses; the gendered assumptions that inform cybersecurity defence strategies; the gendered makeup of the cybersecurity workforce; and the gendered assumptions and dynamics of legal and regulatory responses to cybersecurity failures).

In other policy work for the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of the Armed Forces, we take a different angle, looking more schematically at the gendered assumptions that inform how we think about cybersecurity, the gender dynamics at work in who participates in making cybersecurity policy and practice, and the gendered outcomes of cybersecurity policies and failures – all with an eye to incorporating cyber into broader practices of good security sector governance and gender equality. People interested in the topic should also have a look at the great APC-WILPF report on why Gender Matters in Cybersecurity.

I really want to underline, though, that, as usual, gender is not the only important element to consider when thinking about the way cyber, and technology more broadly, relates to pre-existing patterns of marginalisation, hierarchy, and inequality. Race, nationality, rural/urban location, age, class, sexuality, gender identity and expression, caste, and disability all also strongly inform people's ability to use and benefit from – or be further excluded by – digital technologies. And so in addition to applied policy work – and ours, here, is pretty preliminary, and mostly aimed at challenging the presumption that gender and intersectional inequality don't matter to cybersecurity at all – we badly need academic research that empirically traces how various dynamics and modes of hierarchy and marginalisation work together.

Do you believe that the “gendered” reading of IR has been developed enough or do you think there are areas that have been neglected?

Wouldn't it be funny if I said, yeah, actually, I think we've basically got it? No, of course there's more to be done. Basically everything is, at least in some ways, implicated with gender dynamics, assumptions, and power hierarchies

Interview – Katharine Millar

Written by E-International Relations

– and so long as we’re doing social science, we should be thinking about gender. Though this needs to be done carefully, of course, without subsuming all other forms of social hierarchy, marginalisation, identity, oppression, power and experience to, or under, gender.

In terms of more specific things, I think institutional feminist IR, particularly though not exclusively that theorised and practiced by feminists identifying as white, needs to continue its push towards reflexivity in examining both the relationship between gender, race, and colonialism and academics’ positionality. Feminist praxis should be as attuned to complicity in racialised, colonial, and classed power dynamics as it is to the analysis of gendered hierarchies and practices of solidarity.

While recognising that queer and trans theory, like feminism, are deep and living critical and scholastic traditions in their own right, there is also much more to be done in examining the international and transnational politics of sexuality and gender identity and expression. Scholars like Rahul Rao, Melanie Richter-Montpetit, Cynthia Weber, Dibyesh Anand, Lilly Nellans, Jasbir Puar, Jamie Hagen, and Koen Sloopmaeckers, among many others, are already engaged in this work. I’m also really compelled by the important conversations navigating the legacies of colonialism for people of diverse gender identities, expressions, and sexualities around the world and the related politics of knowledge production. (The 2014 roundtable “Decolonising Transgender”, in *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, is a good example).

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

I’m not sure I have any special insights to offer here, but I think I’d say, particularly for critical and/or interpretive scholars, the best defence is a good offence. By this I mean (sorry for the mildly martial metaphor) that understanding the philosophy of science, and how one makes claims within various epistemologies and approaches to knowledge, can be incredibly useful. Knowing the terms upon which people doing your form of work make claims, and how they are accurately and fairly evaluated, can help you learn the difference between criticism that you may want to attend to, and criticism you may let pass.

It’s also worth noting that the situation this advice is referring to, which is basically that people doing critical and/or interpretive work are expected to know the knowledge standards and expectations of the “mainstream” (whatever that is), as well as their own, is in no way fair. And so I also totally respect completely blowing off this suggestion in favour of doing your own thing. Other than that, my advice is the usual: if you can, ask for help. And join a union.