

Seeing Gender in International Security

Written by Laura Sjoberg

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LAURA SJOBERG, JUN 5 2012

When s/he stood up to defend him/herself from charges of espionage (related to being a source for WikiLeaks), Bradley Manning (still technically a Private in the United States Army), through his lawyers, asserted that his/her gender identity disorder impacted his/her judgment, and that s/he should therefore not be held accountable for his/her participation in leaking information.[1] The lawyers' arguments strongly insinuated that uncertainty about one's gender identity is a sign of deep psychological disturbance such that one struggling with these issues should not be expected to make reasonable decisions.[2] After the assertion of the 'gender identity disorder' defense, news about Manning's prosecution dried up, and information about evidence discovery has been kept "under lock and key." [3] Reading into the story of Pfc. Manning shows that, though the United States recently paved the legislative pathway to allow 'gays' to serve in the military, [4] gender conformity remains discursively and politically related to safety while gender ambiguity is related to danger. [5]

It is not only gender ambiguity that is securitized in the international arena, but femininity as well. For example, 'women's immodesty' recently sparked a conflict between ultra-Orthodox Jews and other Israelis, which a *New York Times* story suggested risks Israel's relative position compared to its enemies in the Middle East. [6] In this story, conflict over what women are and what they should do is characterized as a risk to national security. A *Huffington Post* editorial recently suggested that the publication of images of the brutal abuse of women in Egypt and Bahrain increase the likelihood that Americans will endorse military intervention in Iran. [7] In this account, the need to protect (brown) women from (brown) men can start interstate wars. [8]

While there are those who would characterize gender as irrelevant to, or one of many variables in thinking about 'security.' Feminist IR scholars, however, and recently a sub-group self-identifying as "Feminist Security Studies," [9] have argued that gender is across all areas of 'international security,' and that gender analysis is transformative of Security Studies. [10] I will briefly discuss what feminist analysis is, and how it focuses the study of gender and security.

It is first important to note that there are many ways to think about gender and security – both 'feminist' [11] and 'non-feminist.' [12] What, in my view, primarily distinguishes feminist approaches from non-feminist approaches is attention to gender as a power relation, where associations with masculinities and femininities position people (and states) relative to each other. [13] While some people believe it is possible to study 'what women do' and 'what men do,' I argue that is inseparable from the power dynamics of the associated masculinities and femininities. That's why, when I study security, I do it from a feminist perspective.

That said, there is not just one feminist perspective on security, but many. Feminists think about security from realist, liberal, constructivist, critical, post-structural, and post-colonial perspectives (among others). Those approaches offer different empirical, methodological, and normative contributions to the study of security. What they share, however, is an interest in revealing and redressing gender subordination in global politics.

Understanding that requires understanding what is meant by 'gender.' 'Gender' is not which bathroom a person goes in or the box that someone checks on their taxes or drivers licenses. While biological sex categories are noted in gender analyses, gender is more than, and distinct from, biological sex. 'Gender' is the socially constructed expectation and performed result that persons perceived to be 'of' a particular biological sex will have particular

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characteristics, mapping onto masculinities for men and femininities for women. Not only people, but states, militaries, and organizations can be assigned gendered characteristics, where they are *masculinized* or *feminized*. In Security Studies, feminist work looks for men and women, for the masculine and the feminine, for masculinization and feminization, and for the times that those boundaries are artificial and some liminal space between traditionally understood sexes and genders is important.

As such, feminist work argues that it is inadequate to define, analyze, or account for security without reference to gender and gender subordination. Gender subordination can be found in military training routines that refer to slow or underperforming men as 'girls.'^[14] Gender subordination can be found when one state challenges another state's masculinity in its willingness to perform invasive military maneuvers.^[15] Gender subordination can be found in the use of rape and forced impregnation as weapons of war.^[16] Gender subordination can be found in the intentional victimization of (women) civilians as the symbolic center of state and nation.^[17] Gender subordination can be found in the assumptions discussed at the outset of this essay: that gender ambiguous people are dangerous, that crises of identities of women are crises of national security, and that the instinct to 'protect' women leads to war and conflict. Feminist work in security not only looks for that gender subordination but also:

reformulates mainstream approaches to traditional security issues, foregrounds the roles of women and gender in conflict and conflict resolution, and reveals the blindness of security studies to issues that taking gender seriously shows as relevant to thinking about security. Together, these works, as a research program, show that gender analysis is necessary, conceptually, for understanding international security, important for analyzing causes and predicting outcomes, and essential to thinking about solutions and promoting positive change in the security realm.^[18]

As such, with many other feminist security theorists, I argue that gender is not just a variable in or tangential to the study of security. It is, instead, always in, and constitutive of, security. The centrality of 'gender identity disorder' to Pfc. Bradley Manning's case is not about Bradley Manning, 'gender identity disorder,' and the temporary disruption of a gender-ordered military in a gender-ordered international system. It is, instead, because the military Manning is/was in is built on (and impossible without) a dichotomized sense of what 'gender' is that has no room for (either gender or legal) aberrations like Manning. It is about the dangers of rejecting traditional gender roles being matched with the dangers of national insecurity. That sentence also fits the story of the Israeli women whose 'immodesty' became a significant domestic conflict in Israel, where the fight about where 'women' belong threatened national belonging. The story of the pictures of women in Egypt and Bahrain are different – they are about women as victims, rather than threats; about the protection of women, rather than being protected from women and/or gender uncertainty. Still, a very gendered narrative can be found – where 'innocent' women need to be 'saved,' given their relative weakness vis a vis abusive men.

Gender is not just *in* these stories – it *is* these stories. I am not claiming that gender is the only lens, idea, concept, or 'variable' that one needs to explain security. At the same time, I am arguing that security cannot be fully defined (where feminist attention to the margins of global politics would broaden the definition), understood (where gender is a key factor in both causal and constitutive security processes), or obtained (where redressing gender subordination is a key part of obtaining security) without the aid of feminist theorizing.

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[1] Larry Shaughnessy, "Bradley Manning's Gender Identity Disorder Comes Up in Testimony," *CNN* 17 December 2011, accessed 4 May 2012 at http://articles.cnn.com/2011-12-17/us/us_bradley-manning-hearing_1_bradley-manning-manning-s-article-gender-identity?_s=PM:US.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Joe Wolverton II, "Petitioners Challenge 'Outrageous Secrecy' of Bradley Manning Trial," *The New American* 30

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May 2012, accessed 31 May 2012 at: <http://www.thenewamerican.com/usnews/constitution/item/11559-petitioners-challenge-outrageous-secrecy-of-bradley-manning-trial>.

[4] Peter Nicholas, "Don't ask, don't tell' repeal signed by Obama," *Los Angeles Times* 22 December 2010, accessed 31 May 2012 at <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/dec/22/news/la-pn-dont-ask-20101223>.

[5] Laura Shepherd and I analyze this in a different context, related to airport security and terrorism, in "trans- bodies in/of war(s): cisprivilege and contemporary security strategy," *Feminist Review* 101 (Summer 2012), forthcoming.

[6] Ethan Bronner and Isabel Kershner, "Israel Facing a Seismic Rift Over Role of Women," *New York Times* 14 January 2012, accessed 4 May 2012 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/15/world/middleeast/israel-faces-crisis-over-role-of-ultra-orthodox-in-society.html?pagewanted=all>.

[7] Lyric Hughes Hale, "The Accidental Coming War with Iran," *Huffington Post* 27 December 2011, accessed 4 May 2012 at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lyric-hughes-hale/the-coming-accidental-war_b_1170574.html.

[8] The idea of "white men saving brown women from brown men" was originally discussed in Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988). For a post-9/11 discussion, see Miriam Cooke, "Gender and September 11: A Roundtable: Saving Brown Women," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28(1) (2002):470-71.

[9] See Laura Sjoberg and Jillian Martin, "Feminist Security Theorizing," in *International Studies Compendium* (ed. Robert Denemark) London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010; Laura Shepherd, "Feminist Security Studies," in *International Studies Compendium* (ed. Robert Denemark) London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010; Laura Sjoberg, "Introduction to Security Studies: Feminist Contributions," *Security Studies* 18(2), 2009; Laura Sjoberg, ed. *Gender and International Security: Feminist Perspectives* London: Routledge, 2010; Annick Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach* London: Routledge, 2011; Lene Hansen, "The Little Mermaid's Silent Security Dilemma and the Absence of Gender in the Copenhagen School," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29(2) (2000): 285-306; Christine Sylvester, "Tensions in Feminist Security Studies," *Security Dialogue* 41(6)(2010):607-14; Megan MacKenzie, "Securitizing Sex?," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 12(2)(2010):202-221; Annick T. R. Wibben, "Feminist Security Studies," in Victor Mauer and Mariam Dun Cavely, eds. *Routledge Handbook of Security Studies* (London: Routledge, 2010). For a discussion of progress, see Elisabeth Prugl, "Feminist International Relations," *Politics and Gender* 7(1)(2011):111-116; Laura Sjoberg, Jennifer Lobasz, J. Ann Tickner, Carol Cohn, Valerie M. Hudson, Annick T. R. Wibben, and Lauren Wilcox, "The State of Feminist Security Studies: A Conversation," *Politics and Gender* 7(4)(2011):573-604.

[10] I make this argument with more complexity in *Gendering Global Conflict: Towards a Feminist Theory of War* (Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

[11] See work cited in note 9

[12] e.g., R. Charli Carpenter, "Gender Theory in World Politics: Contributions of a Non-Feminist Standpoint," *International Studies Review* 4(3), 2003, p.153-165

[13] e.g., Jill Steans, *Gender and International Relations: An Introduction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

[14] See feminist discussions of militarized masculinity, e.g., Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[15] e.g., my discussion of the United States and Iraq in 1991, in *Gender, Justice, and the Wars in Iraq* (New York: Lexington Books, 2006).

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[16] e.g., Lene Hansen, "Gender, Nation, Rape: Bosnia and the Construction of Security," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 3(1)(2000):55-75.

[17] Laura Sjoberg and Jessica Peet, "A(nother) Dark Side of the Protection Racket: Targeting Women in War(s)," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13(2)(2011):163-82.

[18] Sjoberg, "Introduction to *Security Studies: Feminist Contributions*," p. 184

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