

# Gender and Security: Redefining the 'State' and a 'Threat'

Written by anon

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## Gender and Security: Redefining the 'State' and a 'Threat'

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Thinking about international security from a gender perspective allows us to re-define what is meant by the term 'international security'. Currently, the definition of 'security' is heavily influenced by classical and neo-realist theory (Beer and Hariman, 1996: 1). While realism is a long-standing major player within International Relations (IR), it is in the field of security studies in particular that realism truly claims the 'throne' (Wibben, 2011: 77). There is a close relationship between those working in foreign security policy, and political realism (Tickner, 1992: 29), therefore realist ideas about security tend to have a very tangible impact on the policies that affect people's everyday life and experiences. For many gender scholars, challenging the hegemony of realism is key to creating a feminist definition of security studies (Chenoy, 2000: 18). Thus, this essay will use a gender perspective to critique realist security studies, challenge the dominant definitions of 'security' and 'threat', and use gender-inspired ideas to redefine these key concepts. The structure of this essay is as follows: firstly, I will establish what the dominant, traditional discourse of IR tells us about the world system, what constitutes a threat, and what it means to be 'secure'. I will then examine the way in which the world has undergone fundamental changes since the Cold War, thus requiring that security as a concept is re-defined. I believe that the most useful way to do this is using a gender perspective, therefore I will re-define the two concepts that are key to the field of security – the state and a threat – using a gender-informed approach.

The realist-informed mainstream narrative tells us that the world is made up of states that compete in an anarchic system to maximise their own power (Mearsheimer, 2001: 30). This narrative, that believes states to be the only actor worthy of attention in the study of IR, thus characterises states as self-reliant, rational and independent (Mearsheimer, 2001: 31). This realist discourse defines security in highly militaristic terms (Mearsheimer, 2001: 56). According to the influential neorealist Mearsheimer, the most 'powerful' state is the one with 'the most formidable land forces' (2001: 56). A 'threat' to global security thus arises in the form of a military attack against a state's borders (Mearsheimer, 2001: 33). At its core, security studies concerns itself with the question of 'how states think about the use of force' (Fierke, 2009: 17). Finally, a key component of realism is its commitment to positivist methodology, and its pursuit of security policies that are 'value-free' and 'objective', and therefore can be universally applied (Tamang, 2016: 229; Tickner, 1992: 29).

Arguably, this definition of security – one focused upon inter-state conflict – has potential use in explaining the global events of the twentieth century. Mearsheimer argues that Germany's actions from 1868 up until 1945 can be understood as the pursuit of 'regional hegemony', through multiple attempts to expand its borders (2001: 170, 181). Similarly, Waltz explains the Cold War through a framework that emphasises the United States' and the Soviet Unions' distrust of each other, fear of one another's potential military power and use of both offensive and defensive measures in their competition for control (1988: 628). Therefore, some do argue that realist theories can be useful if we are purely thinking about the actions of the 'great powers' during the twentieth century.

Nevertheless I believe that a number of seismic changes have occurred since the end of the Cold War that have contributed toward a fundamental shift in the make up of IR. Globalisation has had a far-reaching and dramatic impact on the world to such an extent that realist definitions of 'security' and 'threat' have been rendered redundant. Although globalisation was occurring during the twentieth century, in the past 30 years globalisation has accelerated

## Gender and Security: Redefining the 'State' and a 'Threat'

Written by anon

exponentially to the point where the flow of knowledge, goods, and people across national boundaries has reached an unprecedented pinnacle (Fukuda-Parr, 2004: 36; Basch, 2004: 6). Consequently, globalisation is responsible for a number of 'new threats' that realism fails to explain (Goetschel, 2000: 266). This creates a void that a gender perspective can help to address.

Gender studies, like globalisation, is in no way a concept new to the twenty-first century, however in this new world order of the post-Cold War era gender theories have become increasingly indispensable to understanding security. A gender perspective forces security studies to re-examine its own normative assumptions (Hudson, 2005: 155). By including gender, security studies finds itself embracing fundamentally different research agendas, priorities and definitions. For many gender scholars, rapid globalisation is key to understanding new types of global insecurities (Basch, 2004: 5). Globalisation has created new threats, while exacerbating old ones. Some of these contemporary threats include cyber warfare, international terrorism, global crime and human trafficking (Fukuda-Parr, 2004: 35). A threat such as cyber warfare is only made possible through technological advances, thus making it a wholly modern threat. Others, such as terrorism, are centuries old, yet have taken on an international scale and an entirely different character due to globalisation. The 9/11 terrorists attacks, for example, made considerable use of mobile phone networks (Blanchard, 2003: 1306). Money laundering now occurs on an international scale due to globalised banking and financial services (Fukuda-Parr, 2004: 37). Ease in international travel has allowed human trafficking to boom (Fukuda-Parr, 2004: 38). Almost all of the threats faced by the world today are fundamentally different in nature than the ones faced in the pre-Cold War era. Therefore, it is absolutely essential, in order for security studies to remain useful and relevant, to tackle these questions anew. I believe that the most useful way to do this is through a gender perspective. The following section will demonstrate the value of a gender perspective, and how it can be used in order to redefine the state, a threat and the concept of 'international security'.

The 'state-centric' nature of security studies is a problem that is often discussed in gender debates (Hudson, 2005: 156). Today, insecurities are largely systemic rather than isolated issues (Peterson, 1992: 31). Mainstream IR's rigid commitment to statist conflict has, therefore, made security studies 'dysfunctional' (Tickner, 1992: 133). The following section will use a gender perspective to critique the concept of the state. As discussed, the traditional narrative of security studies focuses almost entirely on the state, therefore if we want to conceptualise an alternative understanding of security, it is vital to challenge the dominance of the state (Wibben, 2011: 71). According to realists, the state is an atomised, rational, and self-serving actor (Tickner, 2004: 44). These characteristics of the state are based upon what Hans Morgenthau calls 'the nature of man' (1978: 4). Human nature is, according to Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations*, unchanging, and founded on notions of 'objectivity', 'rationality' and 'reason' (Morgenthau, 1978: 4). Consequently, we must understand the state to be 'objective', 'rational' and 'reasonable'. A couple of decades later, neorealist Kenneth Waltz wrote the *Theory of International Politics*, arguing that state behaviour is based upon the behaviour of the 'rational economic man in the market' (1979: 110; Tickner, 2018: 22). Although Waltz's epistemology differs from Morgenthau's, his work reproduces similar assumptions about 'universal' or 'normal' behaviours and values. In spite of realism's positivist neutral intentions, gender scholars have made clear the inherently masculine bias that underlies the notion of the state (Tickner, 1992: 29).

Tickner, a key critic of the state and security, examines some of these masculinised assumptions, for example, the idea that states will only compete and never collaborate (ibid.). Whilst realists remain sceptical of interdependence due to its implication of vulnerability (Mearsheimer, 2001: 33), gender scholars advocate for international cooperation as a vital solution to dealing with threats that are transnational and do not recognise state boundaries, such as terrorism or disease (Tickner, 1992: 133; Abbott, Rogers and Sloboda, 2006: 5). Another gendered assumption that conceptions of the state rely on is the centrality of the family unit within society (Peterson, 1992: 34). Gender scholars argue that the state was instrumental to the construction and subsequent 'naturalisation' of the family unit, and through this, the state is complicit in legitimating the gender stereotypes that establish men as economic earners, and women as household caretakers (Peterson, 1992: 41-43).

Defining the state as a gender-neutral concept is incorrect and misleading. Considering the centrality of the state to security studies, it is essential to challenge and re-define the state. In general, gender scholars define the state as a collection of institutions, which contribute towards the legitimisation of gender identities through laws and practices (Waylen, 1998: 7). Nevertheless, there is no singular feminist position. Different feminists interpret the relationship

## Gender and Security: Redefining the 'State' and a 'Threat'

Written by anon

between the state, security and gender in different ways. Liberal feminists criticise the state for its bias toward the interests of the dominant group in society, which, in many cases, is a group made up of men (Zajicek and Calasanti, 1998: 506). Thus, the state is a powerful force in furthering the interests of men (*ibid.*). Radical feminists see the state as an inherently gendered 'patriarchal power structure'; hence the state *itself* can act as an oppressor (Zajicek and Calasanti, 1998: 506-507). Alternatively, social feminists examine how state policies can negatively impact on women, for example in terms of employment or reproduction (Zajicek and Calasanti, 1998: 507). Although there is disparity within different feminist positions on the state, what these diverging strands have in common is their distrust of the state in its role of 'protector' (Blanchard, 2003: 1289; Young, 2003: 9).

Dominant security theories believe the state to be the protector of civilians, and outside actors as the threat. If we look from a gender perspective, however, we can begin to understand how the state itself can pose a threat to its civilians, or more specifically, women (Hudson et al., 2008: 155). Pettman says that it is often agents of the state, such as the police and the military, who pose a serious threat to women (1996: 10). Evidence of gendered violence at the hands of the state can be found in multiple locations, at multiple points in history. In the late 1980's, for example, over 1000 cases of alleged rape of women by the Indian police were documented (Watson, 1991: 309). In the 1990s, evidence showed that mass rape had been used as a tactic of war in both the Bosnian and Rwandan conflicts (Peterson and Runyan, 1999: 125-127). An estimated 250,000 women were raped in the Rwandan conflict (Peterson and Runyan, 1999: 127). Sexual assault by US military servicemen against fellow colleagues is a well-documented phenomenon. In a survey of US female veterans in 2003, 19% reported having been raped by a fellow officer (Wood and Toppelberg, 2017: 622). Rates of sexual assault by US servicemen against civilians are similar (Wood and Toppelberg, 2017: 621). In all of these examples this violence was highly gendered, committed largely by those embedded in state institutions. Moreover, in each of these cases the state was highly complicit in allowing this violence to occur unchallenged and with little repercussion. Through understanding the ways in which state institutions can be direct threats to both women and men, we can begin to break down one of the core ideas of realist security studies – that the state is the protector of its citizens and therefore threat exists only in the external realm.

Once it is acknowledged that the state itself can pose a threat, space is created in which we can begin to question what the definition of a 'threat' should be. What kinds of issues and events pose a challenge to feeling 'secure'? The following section will look at which kinds of issues have been deemed to be 'threats' and which have not. In order to understand these distinctions between threats and non-threats, we will examine the concept of the public/private divide. We will then look at the very different way in which a gender perspective understands the concept of a 'threat'.

Traditionally, security studies has been largely preoccupied by thinking about war (Blanchard, 2003: 1289; Chenoy, 2000: 20). Realist Stephen Walt argues that security studies – a field that he terms 'statecraft' – should focus exclusively on war, and war-related issues such as arms control and state diplomacy (Walt, 1991: 213). Realists see war between states as a 'constant possibility' (Waltz, 2001: 227), a threat that can be 'managed but never eradicated' (Mingst and Arreguin-Toft, 2014: 250-251). In spite of these perceptions following the end of the Cold War the frequency of inter-state wars dropped significantly. Indications by the World Health Organisation estimate that in 2001, war was responsible for 0.4% of deaths, whereas disease was responsible for 91% (WHO, 2002: 190). If we shift our focus away from traditional war and conflict we allow room for the analysis of other types of dangers. We also find that many of these issues are highly gendered in the way in which they affect men and women differently. A prime example of this is domestic violence. A report by the WHO estimates that 35% of women worldwide have experienced intimate partner violence (WHO, 2013). Even so in the UK in 2016, only 10% of the 1.03 million reported cases of domestic abuse-related incidents ended in a conviction (Office for National Statistics, 2016). This shows how domestic violence as a major problem for women worldwide has been dangerously overlooked by the state. This policy of 'non-intervention' (Peterson, 1992: 46) is justified by the problematic dichotomy between the 'public' and 'private' spheres (Tickner, 1992: 57).

Much literature discusses the notion of the public/private divide. In broad terms, the 'public' sphere is defined as one of politics and economics, and the 'private' as a sphere of family, domestic labour and reproduction (Hooper, 2001: 91). According to traditional IR, the 'public' sphere – that is, the world 'outside' of the state – is characterised by anarchy and danger, and the 'private' sphere – or 'inside' the state – is imagined as a place of order (Pettman, 1996: 4). This distinction is not accidental. Locating threats as external serves to divert attention away from any danger

## Gender and Security: Redefining the 'State' and a 'Threat'

Written by anon

created within a state by its own domestic politics (Wibben, 2011: 69). This boundary is one that gender scholars have invested much energy into breaking down (Hooper, 2001: 91; Hudson, 2005: 162). By ignoring issues that supposedly fall within the 'private' sphere, security studies overlooks some of the problems that present a serious, global threat to women (and many men). Domestic violence is often assigned to the category of the 'private' and thus perceived as an issue outside the responsibility of the state (Tickner, 1992: 57). The distinction between 'public' and 'private' threats is evident all across the globe. Female infanticide and sex-selective abortions have killed forty times more Indian women since 1980 than any of India's wars (Hudson et al., 2008: 8). Again, infanticide and abortion are construed as 'private' issues, ones situated in the home (Hudson et al., 2008: 21) therefore they have been largely ignored by security actors. This provides an important insight into the way security studies have been misinterpreted.

Although war continues to dominate security studies, in reality, it is a comparatively minor threat to ordinary citizens (Hough, 2004: 16). When war does occur, it affects women in specific ways. As discussed earlier, rape as a weapon of war has been used throughout history (Hansen, 2000a: 56). Historically, IR has considered wartime rape to be 'normal behaviour', an accepted consequence of conflict (Hansen, 2000a: 60), thus ignored as a 'private' issue. More recent analysis by gender scholars has pushed for a re-examination of sexual violence in conflict, arguing that wartime rape is a 'systemic' and 'politicised' 'tactic of war', designed to undermine morale and humiliate both the individual and their nation (Kirby, 2012: 798, 809). Peterson argues that 'male violence constitutes a 'global war against women' (1992: 46). IR's current security discourse fails to question the consistency and frequency of male violence against women, why this violence happens and why the state allows it to happen. Only when a gender perspective is adopted does gendered violence get added to the security agenda.

In its attempt to create a more inclusive definition of security, a gender approach focuses its attention on the individual. Methodology is a key way in which gender scholars do this. Gender studies often draws conclusions from narrative-driven research (Stern and Wibben, 2014: 3). Using alternative methodologies such as narratives and interviews is essential to gender studies for a number of reasons. Firstly, incorporating the everyday experiences of women's lives – experiences that are usually ignored within the field of IR – creates a fundamentally different understanding of security (Wibben, 2011: 87). Narratives of 'ordinary' people show how security dilemmas often exist in 'unlikely' places (Stern and Wibben, 2014: 3). Enloe argues that by overlooking the lives of 'ordinary' women – women outside the sphere of elite politics, for example chambermaids, factory workers, diplomat's wives, or military sex workers – security studies fails to understand how power operates, and how gendered hierarchies exist at all levels of society (Enloe, 2014: 7, 9, 11). Enloe uses a feminist narrative methodology to draw connections between the power dynamics that exist at the personal level and how these dynamics play out in the international arena (Enloe, 2014: 351). A narrative-focused gender perspective allows room for a multitude of conflicting and overlapping accounts (Wibben, 2011: 100). This is vitally important, as these differing narratives help to create a more rich and complex picture.

Zalewski and Parpart note a 'turn toward certainty', post-9/11 within the field of IR, as scholars increasingly attempted to establish a 'fixed' and 'authoritative' definition of security (2008: 8). IR's increasing commitment to scientific research grew out of the American belief that most problems can be solved by science (Tickner, 2005: 2174). Nevertheless, contradictory narratives, while often dismissed by traditional IR, are in fact highly useful in challenging the positivist methodology of security studies. A study, conducted by Vaughan-Williams and Stevens, based on individual interviews nicely demonstrates the value of an individual-focused, interview-based approach. Vaughan-Williams and Stevens interviewed 60 participants from across the UK asking what issues people found threatening (2016: 40). They found that the most common referent object of security was not the state, but in fact, the individual and their family (Vaughan-Williams and Stevens, 2016: 47). The participants highlighted numerous issues that were not featured in the UK's National Security Strategy such as local crime, unemployment, home security, and drug misuse (Vaughan-Williams and Stevens, 2016: 47). Their findings help us to begin to challenge pre-existing assumptions around who should be the central focus of security studies – the state or the individual. The study of war highlights the striking differences between a state-centred and an individual-centred approach. Traditional security discourse tells us that wars take place so that states can protect their own citizens from external threats presented by other states (Tickner, 2001: 38, 48). Yet, as gender scholars note, when a state forces war upon its own citizens, this has an impact on a highly individual level – by the end of the twentieth century civilians made up 90 per cent of casualties of war, with most of these being women and children (Tickner, 2001: 49). For gender scholars, focusing

# Gender and Security: Redefining the 'State' and a 'Threat'

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on this individual security is essential to achieving a more complete picture of what constitutes a 'threat'.

After exploring the meaning of 'security' and defining what constitutes a 'threat', finally, security studies turns to understanding how an issue becomes conceptualised as a 'security threat'. Multiple accounts exist that attempt to explain the process of 'securitisation'. The Copenhagen school proposed a framework of securitisation that has become an influential concept in security studies. According to their theory, an issue becomes conceptualised as an existential threat once a 'speech act' occurs (Emmers, 2016: 171). The Copenhagen school defines the 'speech act' as the use of language to articulate an issue as a problem for security (ibid.). Hansen challenges the notion of the 'speech act', arguing that only once a gender lens is adopted can we see the shortcomings of this idea (2000b: 286). The Copenhagen school says that an issue is defined as a security threat once the relevant audience have been convinced of its danger (Hansen, 2000b: 289). Yet, this idea is flawed, as it fails to consider what Hansen terms, 'security as silence' (ibid.). 'Security as silence' exists when the person or people under threat are unable to voice the danger they are in (ibid.). Hansen provides the example of honour killings in Pakistan as evidence to her point. She argues that any attempt by Pakistani women to raise honour killings as a security threat would most likely aggravate their situation and exacerbate the level of threat against them (Hansen, 2000b: 294). When the state is complicit in sanctioning these kinds of threats, using a 'speech act' in order to convince the state of the existing danger is futile. The process of securitisation is undermined by the hierarchy of the public/private divide. Relegating issues that mainly affect women to the private sphere contributes toward a silencing of women's voices. By excluding women from the public sphere, from political roles and from positions of public influence, gendered threats, such as honour killings, remain unchallenged. If women are unable to vocalise the security threats that they face everyday, then this model of securitisation is flawed.

The end of the Cold War presented security studies with a 'window of opportunity' (Blanchard, 2003: 1291), as for the first time issues that traditionally fell outside the realm of security began to be added to the agenda. Growing dissatisfaction with realism's inability to anticipate threats to international security created a vital opportunity for other schools of thought to challenge the dominance of realism. The gender school of thought is an approach that I believe most comprehensively answers the questions that realism fails to. As this essay has established, the momentous changes that have occurred since the end of the Cold War have left the traditional definitions of the state and of a threat obsolete. The realist framework that assigns the state as a protector of civilians and locates threats in the external does not account for the kind of contemporary, transnational threats that exist today. These threats take place within states, can be perpetrated by state actors, and crucially, are highly gendered in the way they disproportionately impact women. Using a gender approach, this essay has critiqued the notion of the state and what constitutes a threat, and offered alternative definitions of both key concepts. Realism sees the state as the most important actor in IR. It defines the state as an individualised entity, designed to protect its own citizens from the threats that arise as a result of the anarchic world system, in which states use military force to compete for political power. A gender approach demonstrates the limits of the definition. Gender scholars have been invaluable in calling attention to the threats that are perpetrated by and within the state. A gender approach shifts focus away from inter-state war and towards the kinds of threats that have an everyday affect on wide sections of the population. A gender approach shines a spotlight on the issues that have been assigned to the private sphere, and therefore ignored by security policymakers. Finally, a gender approach demonstrates how the process of securitisation is highly reliant on masculinised assumptions that fail to consider the relationship between gender, power and security. Essentially, a gender perspective challenges scholars to 'radically rethink security' (Dalby, 1992: 119). It requires us to challenge the idea that security is a universally enjoyed phenomenon, and instead ask who is it that is secure, and who is it that poses a threat? (ibid.).

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## Gender and Security: Redefining the 'State' and a 'Threat'

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# Gender and Security: Redefining the 'State' and a 'Threat'

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### About the author:

The author/s of this content have been verified by E-international Relations, but wish to remain anonymous.