Feminist IR Scholarship on Conflict and Women's Agency Across Time and Terrain

https://www.e-ir.info/2022/04/28/feminist-ir-scholarship-on-conflict-and-womens-agency-across-time-and-terrain/

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The number of words written about the impact of war on women is as impossible to count as the number of bullets fired in war's name. Well before 'feminist scholarship' took hold in the discipline of International Relations in the 1980s and 1990s (Tickner and Sjoberg 2013), scholars have been examining the effects of conflict on women and girls (Ashworth 2011). They have asked questions. They have analysed data sets. They have sought and synthesised views of women with first-hand experiences and reflected on their own. Their inquiries have yielded distressing accounts of war's impacts on women and children: targeted as civilians (Manchanda 2005); subjected to sexual and gender-based violence (D'Costa 2011; Hedström and Olivius 2021); forced into trafficking and slavery (Rehn and Sirleaf 2002); widely displaced (Parashar 2014); and made to suffer "extraordinary pain, loss, physical damage, and despair" (Ní Aoláin, Haynes, and Cahn 2011). But the scholarship also reveals the impact of conflict can be complex, even positive. Scholars describe not just enslavement, but *empowerment*. Not just suffering, but *suffrage*. Women as *actors*, not merely those who are acted upon. This essay will observe how feminist IR scholarship has viewed the relationship between war and women's agency.

To navigate this vast terrain within the short journey of an essay, four pieces of scholarship will act as compass points across geography and time: Helena Swanwick's *"Women and War"* (1915); Punam Yadav's *"Can women benefit from war? Women's agency in conflict and post-conflict societies"* (2021); Marie E. Berry's *"From Violence to Mobilization: Women, War, and Threat in Rwanda"* (2015); and *"Civil War and Female Empowerment"* from Ingrid Vik Bakken and Halvard Buhaug (2021). This selection yields useful observations and contrasts. The four articles differ in terms of their viewpoints on whether conflict can catalyse women's empowerment (ranging from yes to no); their observations on women's role in achieving increased agency during conflict (ranging from women's self-driven empowerment to women as recipients of improved conditions); their views on the relationship between women's agency and peace (varying in terms of which condition enables the other); the methods and style of their feminist scholarship (from auto-ethnographic accounts to statistical analysis); and the era from which their scholarship originates (from the early 20th century to today). Other feminist scholars will be referenced where relevant to help situate these pieces in the discipline.

These four featured texts can all be considered feminist IR scholarship. Although Swanwick would not have been described as a feminist IR scholar at the time, Ashworth (2011) argues that she can be categorised as such because her analysis of IR was a direct spin-off of her feminism. Further, the inclusion of a piece from 1915 highlights the importance of this often-overlooked era of feminist contributions (Stöckmann 2018). The three contemporary pieces can be considered feminist IR scholarship because they use gender as a category of analysis. Scholars, including Tickner and Sjoberg (2013) and Smith (2017), have broadly defined 'feminist scholarship' as that which makes women visible and focuses on women in decision-making structures. Berry does this by focusing on women's agency and the Rwandan genocide in 1994, Yadav by writing about women's empowerment and the civil war in Nepal from 1996-to 2006, and Bakken and Buhaug by analysing civil conflict and women's agency across 160 independent countries between 1975 and 2017. Although they illustrate various perspectives and methods, the four pieces do not capture the full diversity of feminist IR scholarship. No four pieces could. They can, however, serve as anchors for a parsimonious approach that enables some considered reflections. What follows are definitions of key terms and an explanation of how this essay will chart the course through those reflections.

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This essay defines conflict to include its myriad types: from the large world wars of Swanwick's day to the civil and small wars more typical after World War II (Cederman and Vogt 2017). Further, this essay uses the words 'conflict' and 'war' interchangeably and defines this concept to include the lifecycle of warfare – its onset, manifestation, and termination – because the story of women's agency is woven through that continuum. Manchanda (2005) has explained how war and peace are not separate, self-contained phases but overlapping ones. Lastly, the terms 'agency' and 'empowerment' are also used interchangeably.

This essay unfolds over two main sections. Section 1 'Women and War' contrasts the different ways the featured scholars view the relationship between conflict and women's agency. Section 2 'Women and Peace' outlines how they see this relationship operating during conflict's termination and maintenance of peace, as well as the essentialised idea of women as 'peaceful' and how this relates to the agency. Finally, the conclusion argues that feminist IR scholarship views the relationship not as a linear one-way trip from Point A (conflict) to Point B (women's agency). Rather, it views it as an interconnected and circular journey, charted not only by those acting on women's behalf but by women themselves. In a nod to those contours, the main body of the essay is presented in a circular structure, starting and ending in 1915.

Section 1 – Women and War

Swanwick was in no doubt about the relationship between conflict and women's agency when the Union of Democratic Control published her paper in London in the midst of the First World War. Although she argues that men are the primary victims of war's physical impacts (by being "killed or mangled" through the "shattering of bones" and "tearing of flesh"), Swanwick claims war has a less direct but more pernicious effect on women: it subordinates them. If violence is the arbiter of winners and losers, and winning means the obtaining of political power, women must be relegated to a position of diminished/no agency: "Women … will never be able to oppose men with destructive force. If destructive force is to continue to dominate the world, then man must continue to dominate woman." (Swanwick 1915)

Conflict and power struggles were not mere theoretical notions for Swanwick. War was hitting close to home in London that year. Zeppelins air raids blasted a crater in Bartholomew Close (Goebel and White 2016) and smashed the buildings of South Western Bank and Moorgate Hall (Imperial War Museums 1915a, b). Food prices were soaring (The Observer 1915, 13; Playne 1931, 48) and men vanished from homes and jobs as they enlisted in large numbers (White 2016). Years later, Swanwick would reflect that this rendered her "as near despair as I have ever been"(Swanwick 1935, 242). That despair is evident in the tone of *Woman and War* and provides some context for Swanwick's arguments, which are based on her auto-ethnographic reasoning rather than data or other evidence. She argues that women suffer as mothers when a nation is in a constant state of preparedness for war because the state's energies are directed towards a competitive increase in armaments rather than supporting the lives of children and young people. (In a similar vein, contemporary IR scholars have argued that defence readiness can de-emphasise roles traditionally associated with women; see Webster et al., 2019). Swanwick also argues that many women's jobs – such as typists and clerks – are contingent on the men's jobs they support: if the men's jobs disappear, so do the women's. Further, the vacancies created by a shortage of men do not equal a gain in employment opportunities for women because men and women do different kinds of work. This, she argues, results in "pinching and penury" – a significant loss of women's economic power. In summary, Swanwick argues that war affects women's agency "altogether evilly".

Like Swanwick, Yadav argues that war can cause enormous upheaval, but she differs on where this rupture leads. Yadav's article for the *Journal of Peace Research* argues that the war in Nepal left many villages with only women, children, and elderly people. These demographic changes opened employment opportunities, which increased women's empowerment. Yadav draws this finding from her field interviews with women across Nepal, an approach she says is inspired by Cynthia Enloe's model of feminist curiosity which emphasises "taking women's lives seriously … listening carefully" (Enloe 2004). Yadav's analysis is also informed by her own ethnographic account as a Nepali woman with first-hand experience of the war. Unlike Swanwick arguing that women were largely unable to assume men's vacated jobs, Yadav argues the opposite, using the example of women driving a form of public transport common in Kathmandu called a tempo. Before the conflict, female tempo drivers were rare. But as the conflict

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escalated, women migrated to the capital seeking employment to support their households, which led to them seeking income as tempo drivers. After meeting initial resistance from tempo owners and harassment from other drivers, female tempo drivers increased in number, and a normative shift was created: women's entry into this previously male-dominated space became accepted. The result was not only economic empowerment. It incentivised women to engage with non-governmental and governmental organisations to seek better pay and conditions.

In addition to the tempos, Yadav cites another example of a normative shift: the expectation that widows wear a white sari for the remainder of their lives. Before the war, widows were typically older, so this obligation was carried over a shorter timeframe, but the violent conflict produced many more young widows with decades of life ahead of them. These young widows said this practice made them feel vulnerable as it publicly signified a lack of a male partner, putting them at risk of sexual violence. With the assistance of a non-governmental organisation, widows began questioning and then defying this norm until a critical mass was reached, and today the white sari is no longer widely expected.

Yadav claims the breaking of these two norms (tempo driving and sari wearing) was not only beneficial but long-lasting. She explicitly rejects a 'backlash argument' made by some scholars who argue that women's post-conflict empowerment may be temporary (e.g. El-Bushra 2003; Pankhurst 2016). Yadav believes the backlash argument views social transformation narrowly, overlooking women's post-conflict gains by not considering the transformative potential of "women's everyday agency".

In summary, Yadav describes the relationship between conflict and women's empowerment as a sequence: conflict creates demographic change; this then incentivises women to change societal norms (around tempo driving or widowhood) in ways that support their survival and increase their agency. She does not attempt to quantify how much of women's increased agency was a product of external forces (such as the NGO in the case of the saris) and how much was driven by the women themselves. Rather, Yadav emphasises a connection between the improvement of women's agency and the breaking of traditional ideas of women's roles and behaviours.

The chain of cause-and-effect Yadav describes is also reflected in Berry's arguments. In her paper for *Mobilization*, Berry uses field interviews to inform her analysis of the effect of mass violence on women's agency during the Rwandan genocide. Firstly, she points to the disruptive effect of the demographic changes wrought by war (as do Yadav and Swanwick), which in Rwanda's case meant about 70 percent of the non-incarcerated population was female. This created a need for women to undertake tasks normally done by men – such as cutting bushes or hard-stone farming – which improved women's agency, as they gained access to spaces and behaviours previously off-limits to them. Secondly, the violent upheaval led women to establish informal self-help groups to support one another to survive the catastrophe; these gave rise to more regular grassroots organisations, as captured by this quote from one of Berry's interviewees: "At first, we usually met in the places we got food from. That is how we would see who survived, … then people would start crying, and we could try to console each other… it became a regular thing." (Berry 2015)

Thirdly, Berry notes that NGOs and other foreign actors supported these small groups and brokered connections with larger international organisations (a similar phenomenon as that described by Yadav). These larger organisations were able to assist women with material necessities, such as iron sheets to rebuild homes. They also amplified local voices agitating for more women in leadership roles and supported them to eventually be elected to political office. (The political representation of women in Rwanda's parliament will be discussed in Section 2). Berry's paper goes further than Yadav's in trying to locate the precise drivers of women's increased agency during the conflict. She argues that although NGOs and other foreign actors played an important role in supporting and reinforcing women's agency, her data shows that women's mobilisation was well underway before any external intervention.

Bakken and Buhaug share Yadav's and Berry's views that conflict can lead to an increased agency for women. In their paper for the *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* they make similar 'societal shake-up' observations to Yadav and Berry, adding that even conflict-related sexual violence can lead to an improved women's agency because it can generate a collective solidarity response leading to mobilisation and empowerment (this has also been argued by

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other feminist IR scholars, e.g. Kreft 2019). Bakken and Buhaug take a generalisable statistical approach, analysing indicators of women's empowerment worldwide over 42 years, and examine how these indicators correlate with the incidence of civil conflict. They limit their definition of women's agency to two manifestations of political empowerment: an individual capacity (such as the ability to interact with civil society organisations); and a public capacity (i.e. women's representation in political institutions such as parliament). Unlike Yadav, Bakken and Buhaug give credence to the 'backlash argument', cautioning that circumstances for women in post-conflict societies "should not be idealised". They say their findings of improved agency for women are not necessarily inconsistent with 'backlash arguments', as their study focuses on the immediate post-conflict years before any potential rolling-back of women's normative and political gains may occur. Overall, Bakken and Buhaug's main finding is that the most important variable in the relationship between war and women's empowerment is not the conflict itself, but the conflict's *ending* – they argue that peace agreements are the strongest enabler of women's improved post-war agency. As their primary finding concerns conflict termination, it is more appropriately explored in Section 2 on peace.

In summary, the featured scholars all agree on the ability of war to disrupt society, with significant implications for women's agency. Swanwick views this disruption as a gross disfigurement in which women's agency suffers in tangible and theoretical ways; Yadav and Berry see it as creating opportunities for women's self-driven and externally supported empowerment, and Bakken and Buhaug view it as a mechanism to increase women's agency primarily when external factors are involved at conflict's termination via peace agreements. The essay will now track the scholars' arguments regarding the relationship between women's agency and peace.

Section 2 – Women and Peace

Although peace is notionally conflict's opposite, its presentation in the featured scholarship is not a simple mirror image. Section 1 demonstrated that the scholars broadly share a common framework of the notion of conflict (notwithstanding their differences on its relationship to women's agency). They describe the conflict as a distinct set of circumstances, measurable on a scale of severity, occurring within a set of dates, affecting people in distinct ways. Peace, however, appears in the scholarship as a looser, hazier concept; one with scope for broader interpretations and wider definitions. The scholars discuss peace – and its attendant notion of peacefulness – in numerous ways: as a descriptor of the absence or termination of conflict; as an essentialised notion of femininity; and as a legalistic framework prescribed in formal, negotiated agreements. Peace is presented as both *an avoidance of war* that would ideally never eventuate, and *as an end of a war* that does. It is described as both *a pathway* leading to women's agency and *a destination* where women's agency leads. It is conceived as both *a true reflection* of women's nature and as *an enabling device* that can be strategically harnessed. This section necessarily traverses these different conceptualisations of peace and observes how the scholars view the ways they relate to women's agency.

As mentioned earlier, Bakken and Buhaug analyse a large dataset to find that civil wars ending in formal peace agreements lead to increased empowerment for women. They argue that this affirms the interventions of foreign actors in peacemaking settings: "This should serve as a powerful voice in support of mediation efforts by the UN and the international community." (Bakken and Buhaug 2021)

They also analyse the data to test their hypothesis that peace agreements with gender-specific provisions have a stronger positive effect on subsequent female empowerment than those without (they do not define 'gender-specific provisions', but other scholars offer examples, such as mandating gender quotas in governmental bodies, codifying sexual violence as a ceasefire violation, and provisions related to women's land and inheritance rights; see True and Riveros-Morales, 2019). Perhaps surprisingly, they find only partial support for this hypothesis: it holds true regarding gains in women's empowerment in political representation, but not regarding gains in women's individual political agency. They speculate that this may be because most gender provisions address the former and not the latter: "Post-conflict countries might be willing to improve the gender balance of the political institutions without simultaneously improving civil liberties." (Bakken and Buhaug 2021)

Nonetheless, they argue that this finding underscores the importance of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women Peace and Security, which "calls on all actors involved, when negotiating and

implementing peace agreements, to adopt a gender perspective" (United Nations Security Council 2000). The scholars suggest that these gender perspectives may be adopted without necessarily involving women at the negotiating table. However, they argue that they are more likely when women have mobilised effectively and had access to those negotiations.

This leads to the observation that Bakken and Buhaug see the relationship between women's agency and peace as one which comprises both active and passive dynamics. Women can be passive beneficiaries of increased empowerment by way of negotiated peace agreements, which may or may not have involved them in the negotiations. However, women's empowerment in political spheres is enhanced if peace agreements contain gender provisions; those provisions, in turn, are more likely to be included when women have been involved. Put another way, Bakken and Buhaug argue that peace is the pathway to women's empowerment, but that pathway is more solid and reliable if women have helped pave it.

Yadav also connects post-conflict peace agreements with increased women's agency. She argues that the 2006 accord ending Nepal's civil conflict led to the dismantling of gender and class barriers to women's political representation. Although the accord did not specify gender quotas, it did call for "an inclusive, democratic and progressive restructuring of the state … to address the problems related to women" (National Legislative Bodies / National Authorities 2006). This was then referred to in Nepal's interim constitution that mandated a minimum quota of 33 percent female candidacy for election to the Constituent Assembly, giving women a voice in the constitution-making process (National Legislative Bodies / National Authorities 2007). Today, Nepal's constitution reserves 33 percent of parliamentary seats for women (Upreti and Kolås 2016) and there is a marked difference in female parliamentary representation before and after the war. Previously, female representation never exceeded 6 percent (Yadav 2021); as of 1 January 2021, the proportion of women in Nepal's lower house and upper houses was 32.7 percent and 37.9 percent respectively (UN Women and Inter-Parliamentary Union 2021).

Yadav identifies three possible sources behind the push that led to this increased agency: the ideologies actively championed by the Maoists during the civil war; the "influence of international discourse"; and a strong women's movement in Nepal. Together, these factors led to women's equality being written into the peace agreement, which contributed to a "strong social inclusion discourse", which in turn created momentum to open the political space to women (and men) from lower castes. To illustrate the endpoint of this phenomenon, Yadav uses the story of Devi, a member of Nepal's first Constituent Assembly. Because of the momentum built by the chain of events described above, Devi's multi-layered disadvantage ironically became the enabler of her agency: "Devi was a highly desirable candidate – a woman from a lower caste with a poor economic background." (Yadav 2021)

In summary, Yadav describes a combination of efforts – by government authorities, foreign actors, including the United Nations, proponents of a political ideology championing women's rights, and women themselves – producing a head of steam powering a journey from peace to women's agency in which women were both passengers and drivers.

There are echoes of this trajectory in Berry's analysis of post-conflict Rwanda. As mentioned in Section 1, NGOs and other foreign actors in Rwanda supported small self-help groups and brokered connections with larger international organisations. These larger organisations also amplified local voices agitating for more women in leadership roles and political office. This, in turn, was promoted by leaders of the new regime, particularly President Paul Kagame, and then strengthened by a new constitution stipulating a quota. This led to Rwanda's parliament having the world's highest proportion of female representation. As of 1 January 2021, 61.3 percent of Rwanda's lower house members were women (UN Women and Inter-Parliamentary Union 2021).

However, Berry also refers to an additional driver of women's post-conflict agency. Women, she argues, were able to leverage their image as a more "peaceful" gender to justify to a war-weary nation their admittance to the previously male-dominated decision-making body. At times, Berry observes, emerging women leaders harnessed this essentialised idea of women for explicitly strategic purposes – it served as a useful contrast with the image of men as warriors who were largely responsible for the calamitous bloodshed. This social appropriation does not seem to be wholly cynical. Many women interviewees appear to believe this idea of women as peaceful, e.g.: "Women are the

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peace-actors; they are the ones who carry out peace." (Berry 2015)

This is the opposite of Yadav's observation that women's agency is the result of the *breaking of traditional conceptions* around women's roles and behaviours (the norms in Nepal that women should not drive public transport and should perform widowhood with a white sari). In Berry's observations of Rwanda, it is the emphasis and commodification of traditional conceptions of women (as peaceful) that is the mechanism leading to their empowerment as political actors. As Berry points out, this conception is even referenced in a 2005 Rwandan Government document:

"[Women are] bearers of life [who] can offer a special perspective and experience … Since military conflicts and diplomacy, which have traditionally been exclusively orchestrated by men, have failed to be a reliable system to safeguard peace, the inclusion of women in all stages of the peace process becomes imperative."

(Republic of Rwanda 2005, as cited in Berry 2015)

Berry's paper thereby generates several new overlapping perspectives: that peace can lead to women's agency; that women can exercise their agency by leveraging their 'peaceful' image to engineer increased agency for themselves; and that women are genuinely more peaceful and their agency (as members of parliament) can therefore lead to an avoidance of future conflict. Viewed in this way, the pathway between women's agency and peace looks more like a circle. Women's empowerment is both the end of the story and its beginning.

This brings us back to where we began: in the company of Helena Swanwick in 1915. Although separated by a continent and a century, Swanwick's paper uses characterisations of women's and men's essential nature that bear striking resemblance to those used in the Rwandan Government paper referred to in the preceding paragraphs. Swanwick says women are "the life-givers and the home-makers"; while war is "waged by men only". Furthermore, she says women: "… have a point of view distinct from the point of view of men towards this matter of peace and war … the whole course of their life's work gives to woman a standard of values different from that of men."

This essentialisation leads Swanwick towards the same fundamental conclusion reached in Rwanda: that to prevent war, women's peaceful nature should be harnessed, and therefore women's agency should be increased. Whereas in Rwanda this 'agency' meant political representation, for Swanwick it meant women having equal voting rights with men, which in 1915 was still more than a decade away (UK Parliament website).

Swanwick also makes a more philosophical link between suffrage and peace, referring to British Prime Minister H.H. Asquith's notion of the 'public right'. Asquith had defined public rights in a speech in 1914 as the repudiation of militarism and the belief that smaller, less powerful nations had the right to an independent existence (Asquith 1927). Swanwick argues that the "only way humanly possible" to establish this public right is to grant universal suffrage because broad enfranchisement is the "one unassailable foundation of the rights of the weak." This chain of events is the opposite of that described by Bakken and Buhaug. Where they argue that peace is the pathway to women's agency, Swanwick argues that women's agency (suffrage) is the pathway to peace.

Conclusion

This essay's round-trip across time and terrain has demonstrated that feminist IR scholarship has viewed the relationship between conflict and women's agency as complex, layered, and interconnected. It describes multiple actors and factors combining to produce interweaving chains of cause and effect. It observes a relationship of seemingly oppositional forces and dynamics: women are not just *passive recipients* but also *active creators* of their increased agency; their path to agency can be paved by *rejecting* or *invoking* traditional notions of femininity, and peace can enable women's agency, but women's agency can also enable peace. It demonstrates that feminist IR scholarship has been concerned with these matters of war and women's empowerment for well over a century; and while some ideas have withered over time, others have echoed across the decades. And it describes a relationship in which conflict inflicts much suffering but seeds much strength.

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In a nod to feminism's emphasis on the centring of women's voices, this essay concludes with a quote from one of Berry's interviewees:

"Everybody suffered but women suffered the most…. And they all got together and said … now there are new doors open to us. We need to take advantage of this, we need to be determined, and we need to have the will and the strength to make this happen for us."

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