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Jill A. Irvine

Maureen Hays-Mitchell

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Gender and Political Transformation in Societies at War¹

By Jill A. Irvine² and Maureen Hays-Mitchell³

Introduction

In recent years, the role of gender in societies undergoing significant political change has received increasing attention both theoretically, in the literature on democratization, and practically in the international financial support provided women's groups for the promotion of democracy. As a result, scholars and policy-makers are well positioned to consider systematically (i) the relationship between gender and democratic transformation in general, and (ii) the conditions under which women's groups and other activists can effectively promote gender equality in the emerging governmental structures. This themed issue investigates a set of questions and cases in need of thorough and methodical analysis: the relationship between gender and democratic political transformation in societies beset by high levels of violence, in which the means of political change necessarily involves a process of establishing civil peace, political reform, economic reconstruction, and social reconciliation. It asks how war-to-democracy transitions, to use Jarstadt and Sisk's term, lead to fundamental change, with particular reference to gender justice and empowerment of women (2008). Analysis is premised on the dual assumptions that (i) violent struggles over the state and polity are influenced by gender roles, relations and ideologies and (ii) the outcomes of violent

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² Jill A. Irvine is President's Associates Presidential Professor and Director of Women's and Gender Studies and the Center for Social Justice at the University of Oklahoma. She is author of *The Croat Question, Partisan Politics in the Formation of the Yugoslav Socialist State* and co-editor of *State- Society Relations in Yugoslavia 1945-1991* and *Natalija: Life in the Balkan Powderkeg 1880-1956*. She has written numerous articles, book chapters and government reports about gender and democratic transformations in the Balkans. She is currently working on a book on women, war, and political transformation in the Balkans funded by the International Research and Exchanges Board and the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research

³ Maureen Hays-Mitchell is professor of geography at Colgate University. Her teaching and scholarly interests include international development, political geography, feminist thought, and spatial justice. She has conducted grassroots fieldwork in Andean America on the urban informal economy and on micro-enterprise development. Her current scholarship involves human rights, post-conflict landscapes, truth commissions, and gendered dimensions of reconciliation and reconstruction in several Latin American countries. She is co-editor of *Cities of the World: Contemporary Regional Urban Development* (2012, Rowman & Littlefield) and numerous book chapters and articles in journals such as *Society and Space*, *International Journal of Regional Research*, and the *Journal of Latin Americanist Geography*.

struggles in turn affect gender roles, relations and ideologies. Accordingly, this collection applies a gendered lens to countries experiencing democratic transformations, located in diverse regions of the world, that have been characterized by persistent and high levels of civil and/or interstate strife. The findings of these cases advance our understandings of the prospects for achieving greater gender equality and civil liberties in some of the most volatile areas of the world.

In an effort to understand the relationship between gender and political change in conflict-settings, the articles here draw upon two rich and growing bodies of literature: (i) the literature on gender, war and peace and (ii) the literature on gender and democratic transformations. Putting these overlapping but often parallel bodies of literature in conversation with one another can lead to exciting theoretical insights. In order to identify patterns and similarities, the cases chosen for study in this themed issue are drawn from different geographical areas that are experiencing a wide variety of conflicts. Understanding gender as comprised of multiple, diverse and overlapping femininities and masculinities, the authors bring diverse disciplinary perspectives and multiple positionalities to their investigations of how gender roles, relations, ideologies and movements have both shaped and been shaped by political transformations in violently conflicted societies. Although the articles included here focus primarily on women, we understand “gender” to be a broader concept and “feminism” to imply a more inclusive critique. Similarly, our understanding of “gender justice” extends beyond women’s concerns to engage LGBTQ grievances and, in the dismantling of hetero-normative and patriarchal structures and the renegotiation of femininities and masculinities, to benefit society as a whole, of which men are a constituent part.

Analysis of the articles included in this themed issue is guided by the following two sets of questions:

(i) In what ways do conflict and political change open spaces to renegotiate femininities and masculinities? How do women and other gendered groups (e.g., LGBTQ communities; male war resisters) mobilize and organize in response to war, and to what effect? Under what conditions does this organizing translate into postwar gains for gender equality? When, and how, do women’s groups form coalitions or break with other actors in civil society and in the formal political arena?

(ii) How do international intervention and assistance policies affect and/or shape efforts to achieve gender equality in conflict and post-conflict settings? What is the impact of global feminist ideas and activism on these efforts in the countries considered here? How are global gender norms negotiated, remade, applied or rejected at the local scale in conflict and post-conflict settings, and with what outcomes?

Mobilizing Strategies and Outcomes

Over a decade ago, Cynthia Enloe suggested that, while war victimized women in particular ways, it could also open space for a reconfiguration of gender relations and a more egalitarian gender order (2000). Subsequent scholarship revealed ways in which women’s organizing during periods of conflict, for example to deliver humanitarian aid or bring an end to conflict, translated into postwar social and political gains. The articles

presented here draw on detailed case material to provide a richer picture of the mobilizing possibilities of war in terms of gender equality and justice. According to Simona Sharona, the first intifada provided “an opportunity and an excuse for women to become involved in the women’s movement.” Carolyn Kissane’s account of women’s activism in Afghanistan reveals the mobilizing potential of prolonged social and political strife. Indeed, as Patterson-Markovitz, Oglesby, and Marston’s article on women’s efforts to use transitional justice mechanisms in Guatemala makes clear, the postwar setting continues to present transformative possibilities for decades as women and others struggle with the legacy and memory of repression, violence and civil strife.

War, then, appears to offer opportunities for the establishment of a more egalitarian, postwar gender order. But can it explain these political outcomes? Mary Moran tackles this important question in her study of the gender dynamics of the conflict in Liberia. Moran traces the election of the first African female head of state, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, to the support she received from women peace activists subsequent to the signing of the peace agreement in Liberia. Nevertheless, Moran cautions us against assuming that, while war and civil strife can open up transformative possibilities, they necessarily *explain* Johnson Sirleaf’s election victory. Rather, she argues “that the profound transformations in gender ideologies which emerge from any post-conflict situation must be seen as grounded in *both* pre-war social institutions and forms of authority as well as in the new opportunity structures characterizing both the wartime and postwar contexts.” Johnson Sirleaf was successful, she argues, because her election powerfully fused two separate discourses — the “powerful mother” rooted in pre-war kinship-based political relations and the “Iron Lady” modern technocrat motif associated with postwar democracy building.

While the fact of war alone, thus, cannot explain successful political outcomes for gender equality, an important task of this themed issue is to investigate whether some forms of mobilization during conflict are more effective than others in reconfiguring gender relations in more egalitarian ways. An important form of organizing in response to war, considered by many of the contributors to this themed issue, are women’s peace movements, often constituted on the basis of the moral authority of motherhood. Beginning in the 1970s with “Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo” in Argentina, women’s peace movements have received a great deal of attention by feminist scholars and journalists alike (Cockburn 2007; Hernandez 2002). As the articles on Israel, Liberia, Palestine, Guatemala and Nepal in this volume demonstrate, reference to motherhood provides a particularly powerful basis for anti-war organizing and a potent and highly resonant symbol among the public. Women’s peace movements in places like Liberia, drawing upon the discourse of powerful (and aggrieved) motherhood, have proven highly effective in translating their peace activism into postwar gains for political liberalization, civil reconciliation, transitional justice and democracy. Moreover, women’s organizations in places like Guatemala have continued to use the powerful symbol of motherhood to pursue justice and reconciliation for decades after conflicts come to an official close.

But is the effectiveness of peace movements, particularly those drawing heavily on the moral authority of motherhood, limited by their inherent inability to challenge hetero-normative and patriarchal structures, as some scholars have suggested (Nikolić-Ristanović 1998)? Are such movements effective precisely because they resonate with

oppressive and essentialist cultural scripts and social practices? The articles here offer at least two responses that would appear to allow for more transformative possibilities to emerge from the deployment of politicized motherhood. First, as Moran points out in her article on Liberia, different cultural conceptions of motherhood offer different political possibilities. The construction of woman-as-mother carries more power in the African context and, combined with what Moran calls an “embodied citizenship,” offered Johnson Sirleaf a successful postwar political strategy based on powerful mother motifs. Second, as Patterson-Markovitz, Oglesby, and Marston’s article on women’s efforts to use transitional justice mechanisms in Guatemala makes clear, women’s peace initiatives before and after conflict have successfully linked violence against women during war to violence against women before and after war. According to the authors, the successes of women’s organizations in Guatemala suggest that transitional justice mechanisms may offer an excellent tool to promote greater gender equality in the postwar era. Work on organizations such as “Women in Black” in Serbia reaches similar conclusions (Irvine 2012).

In her article “For my torturer’..., Priya Narismula explores the potential of transitional justice processes from a distinctly humanistic perspective. Narismula draws upon the theoretical perspective of cultural critic Audre Lorde to consider how artistic and literary expressions provide women with a way to endure and heal from the horrors of civil strife and oppression. Drawing upon Lorde’s central insight that culture is the domain of struggle, Narismula analyzes the poem of Algerian activist Leila Djabali, a woman imprisoned and tortured by the colonial authorities during the civil war in Algeria. She argues that this poem can be understood in the context of “creative communication strategies to promote social change, peace-making and transitional justice.” Indeed, the “radical openness and truth telling” evident in the poem “represent an integral part of a shift that is a precursor to the trust that is at the root of genuine peacemaking.” Genuine peacemaking must involve addressing all power disparities, including most centrally the oppression of women. For Narismula, literary expression – and presumably artistic expression of many types -- is essential not just for the transformation of oppressed subjectivities at the individual level, but as the basis of more organized and institutionalized mechanisms of transitional and gender justice.

As several articles here suggest, women’s responses to war may carry potential for change, but it is a mistake as Simona Sharoni cautions, to romanticize women’s unique abilities as peace-makers. Ample cases exist of peace movements that have not proved enduring or effective as they are subject to splits over goals and strategies as well as robust challenges from sectarian, religious or national liberation groups. Much of the research on women’s organizing in response to war has emphasized their “unique” abilities to reach across sectarian lines and build alliances. In her article on women’s organizing in Palestine, Sharoni challenges this view. Women’s organizing based on a presumed similarity runs the risk of ignoring important structural power disparities and sources of oppression. Thus, the initial emphasis on similarities in joint Israeli and Palestinian women’s initiatives was doomed to failure. Although Sharoni does not explicitly reference this literature, this was precisely the point of early critiques of liberal feminism by women of color and the large literature on intersectionality that has followed. A homogenizing or “global” feminism that does not recognize the intersections of race, class, ethnicity and other important categories of difference, and the

power differentials these produce, cannot succeed. Thus only when the power differential between Palestinian and Israeli women was acknowledged and activism allowed to proceed along parallel but separate tracks did Palestinian women have genuine prospects for achieving their goals. Sharoni's study of the challenges of coalition-building among Palestinian and Israeli women dispels essentialist notions about women's natural collaborative abilities and reveals the structural challenges to cooperation among women in situations of civil strife. Moreover, acknowledgement of different positionalities leads Sharoni to dispute what she claims is the skepticism of much feminist literature toward national liberation movements. These movements can be profoundly emancipatory, she argues, to the extent that women are able to use their involvement in them strategically.

While some strategies of resistance to war have potential to create a more democratic and egalitarian postwar order, war similarly offers opportunities to women who organize in support of war and the patriarchal ideals upon which it rests. Indeed, according to Simić, focusing primarily or exclusively on women's peace movements has the effect of narrowing our understanding of women's agency in war. In fact, important work has been done on women's participation in combat forces as well as right-wing movements in conflict settings, though this work is often disconnected theoretically and spatially from the study of women's peace, resistance and humanitarian activism (Blee & Deutsch 2011). In her contribution to this themed issue, Tamar Mayer considers the important role that women have played in the religious settler movements in Israel such as Gush Emunim. According to her, the prolonged conflict in Israel has offered many opportunities for women to become engaged on the right, and their involvement has profoundly reshaped the conflict. Mayer argues that, while the national project of Zionism "began as a masculine project directed primarily at secular European Jews, in recent years, women, primarily religious women, have contributed greatly to the core mission of Zionism, and in the process they have attempted to shape both the memory of boundary and the boundary of memory in Jewish Israel. Their efforts and those of their male counterparts have deepened the schisms within Israeli Jewish society and pushed Jewish nationalism to the political and religious right." Although women's organizing on the right may play an important role in shaping the dynamics of the conflict, it is unlikely to reshape the dynamics of gender relations in more egalitarian ways in the postwar period.

The Impact of International Actors and Intervention

The second set of questions considered in this themed issue, involve the impact of international actors on gender and democratic transformations in societies at war. A shared feature of conflict zones, which is reflected in the cases here, is that international intervention is likely to be prolonged and its impact profound, as myriad international actors, ranging from IOs to INGOs to state governments, become involved in ending conflicts and in promoting post-conflict political transformation. To this end, international actors have invested significant resources in women's organizations, seeing in them good partners for conflict resolution and democracy promotion. Indeed, in 2010 alone, the US government spent over \$200 million dollars on women's programs in Afghanistan. Promoting women's rights has become an integral part of the international

intervention projects of the past two decades and essential to the discourse of post-conflict reconstruction.

Women's organizations may be perceived as useful to international democracy promoters, but are democracy assistance programs helpful to women's organizing and gender equality? Whether external assistance has helped or hindered women's activism more generally in post-conflict eras and countries experiencing democratic change has been the subject of fierce debate (Bagic 2006; Corrin 2001; Hemment 2009; Jaquette 2001; MacMahon 2006; Mendelson and Glenn, 2002; Ottoway and Chung 2002). While some authors point to the generally positive effects of international assistance efforts, others argue that international assistance has rewarded local elites, skewed local priorities, and resulted in NGOization and demobilization of women's organizations. Many charge that it has served primarily to further the interests of neoliberal models of development that exploit and hurt the very marginalized populations they claim to serve. Most agree that the impact of international assistance in conflict and post-conflict situations is, at best, mixed and mired in unintended consequences.

This is the picture of international assistance to women's education that emerges in Caroline Kissane's study of Afghanistan in the post-NATO intervention period. Kissane agrees that international aid has been important for the funding and maintenance of girls' schools. But she observes that promotion of democracy and gender equality by outsiders has inherent limitations. First is the tendency of aid providers to see women in Afghanistan as victims only. That the U.S. government instrumentalized women's suffering and victimization in order to justify military action against the Taliban is well understood. Kissane shows how this pervasive view and discourse among the aid community has undermined efforts to improve the education of girls and women over time. Moreover, the US and its allies have failed to seek wider support for girls' education among important sources of popular authority, particularly Islam, which they view with suspicion. Kissane argues that "Islam must be respected and invoked as a catalyst to promote women's education and rights." And, most importantly, Islamic feminists should be empowered to engage in critical Qur'anic scholarship that can introduce concepts of gender equality into the educational process. Supporting only those women's groups that look like western liberal feminists is short-sighted and counterproductive. I (Jill Irvine), too, in my own work in Bosnia-Herzegovina, have observed the extent to which Islamic women's organizations, even ones with feminist projects, are excluded from the aid community and its recipients. And, I (Maureen Hays-Mitchell) have observed the exclusion of women's organizations in Peru that offer a host of important social, economic and political programs because a single service (abortion counseling) is deemed unacceptable by international funding agencies (religious and state-based). Thus, instrumentalizing assistance to women's organizations, focusing on women's victimization, and assuming that liberal feminism must be reproduced everywhere compromise international assistance.

Judith Pettigrew offers a fascinating glimpse of how Tamu *janajati* village women in the village of Kwei Nasa in Nepal benefitted from a local development project aimed at providing child care and health care. Pettigrew considers the competing discourses of women's empowerment deployed by Maoist insurgents and the post-conflict state authorities. While the former focused on women's empowerment through joining armed insurgency, the latter has focused on the institutional mechanisms of

gender quotas. Neither explains the growing leadership skills of the village women during and after the conflict, Pettigrew argues. Rather, these women eventually took over a state sponsored daycare facility and negotiated the dangerous waters of Maoist opposition and state absence to expand its functions. When an international aid organization offered to fund the project, the women decided that a health clinic would best serve them and their children and strategized to gain the approval of the local Maoist commander. Thus, “these women are not the passive victims that the dominant development discourse presents them to be...” and the skills they learned in executing this development project served them well in increasing their participation and influence in public life at the official end of the conflict. A major conclusion of this article is that development projects can be empowering. Indeed, such projects may, Pettigrew argues, be far more effective in producing real empowerment than institutional mechanisms such as gender quotas. The conditions for success in this case, however, seem to have been at least partially related to the fact that the project was entirely locally initiated and operated. Rarely is this condition met by international assistance projects, which often proceed from the assumption of women’s victimization.

Is global feminist activism able to counteract the tendency of many international actors to reduce women’s agency and potential role in democratizing societies? Most studies of global feminist activism have highlighted its positive role in producing new norms and institutions to promote gender equality and democratic institutions and practices in postwar settings. Nevertheless, feminist activists operating internationally have not been immune from tensions and struggles over women’s agency and victimhood. As Keck and Sikkink among others have argued, the emphasis that feminists and human rights activists place on the particular ways in which women are victimized during war has produced a host of international norms and institutions (1998). As Karin Engle argues, it has also “inadvertently functioned to limit the narratives about women in war, denying much of women’s sexual and political agency.” Olivera Simić challenges this tension while exposing gender-based violence during war in her article on the sexual relationships of Bosnian women with UN peacekeepers during and subsequent to the war. According to Simić, the prohibition of sexual relations between peacekeepers and civilians through the zero-tolerance policy is based on the assumption of “‘vulnerability’ and inherent victimhood of local women and of an ‘imbalance of power’ between them and the peacekeepers,” and it serves to reduce and obscure the extent of women’s agency during conflict. Focusing on women’s sexual agency in times of war, as Simić does in her research, is an important corrective to this reductionist vision of women’s lives. Simić concludes that seeing women primarily as victims can have a profoundly negative impact on their ability to play significant and constructive roles in post-conflict reconstruction and the promotion of gender equality. The rich literature on gender, war and political transformation continues to be preoccupied with questions of victimhood and agency, which seem locked in opposition to one another. Instead, by breaking the tension that locks in opposition women’s victimhood and women’s agency and placing them in a dialectical relationship, Simić offers a fruitful avenue for research and discussion.

Conclusion

And so, we return to the fundamental questions that have guided contributors to this themed issue. Can violent conflict over the state and polity create spaces for a reconfiguration of gender relations and a more egalitarian gender order? Can transitions from war to democracy lead to fundamental change, with particular reference to gender justice and empowerment of women? How can international actors and assistance policies contribute to efforts to achieve gender equality in conflict and post-conflict settings? These are vexing questions, yet the case materials presented here offer insight into the transformative possibilities of war in terms of gender empowerment, equality and justice.

Although war may offer opportunities for the establishment of a more egalitarian, postwar gender order, our contributors caution against assuming that this is the “silver lining” of war. They emphasize that war cannot explain particular empowering political outcomes, and that tragedy should not be a necessary precursor to gender equality. They further stress the centrality of local contextual factors in producing post-conflict transformations. Each article is grounded in a distinct region of the world that is characterized by a high level of civil or interstate strife, and in each setting local conditions (pre-war social institutions, for example) encounter new opportunities (often informed by global sensibilities or international intervention). The outcome is not preordained. In some cases, the mobilizing efforts of women and other gendered activists may result in a more democratic and egalitarian post-war order, where formerly disenfranchised populations experience empowering conditions. In other scenarios, mobilizing strategies in support of the patriarchal ideals that undergirded pre-war regimes may ensure the persistence and dominance of those repressive ideals. The gender roles, relations and ideologies that influence violent struggles over the state and polity and that are, in turn, influenced by the outcomes of such struggles are important contextual factors. Moreover, regardless of intentions, the success of international efforts will be limited – whether cloaked as global feminism, humanitarian activism, or democratic reform – if they are not informed by local context. Indeed, any effort that does not account for local understandings of important categories of difference (e.g., race, class, ethnicity), the power differentials these produce, and the agency of seemingly “victimized” women risks thwarting prospects for gender equality and other forms of social justice in the post-conflict order.

In bringing divergent literatures, multiple positionalities and diverse perspectives into conversation, the contributors and editors of this themed issue offer a model by which entrenched perspectives may be challenged and exciting theoretical insights may be shaped. We invite you to immerse yourself in these provocative articles and, in turn, guide the conversation toward our collective goal. That is, to advance understandings, in both theory and practice, of the relationship between gender and political change in societies beset by severe and often prolonged episodes of violence.

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