

Gendered participation, well-being, and representations in political violence: An introduction

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Since the October 2000 adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, scholarly study and policy attention on the inclusion of women and gender into peace and conflict processes has grown tremendously. Although UNSCR 1325 advocates presumed that incorporating women and gender issues into peace processes would improve the prospects of peace and security around the globe, critics point to its core tenets' reliance on an essentialist view of women (e.g. Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007). All the articles in this collection question the assumption that “women” constitute a monolithic group. The authors see, examine, and query variation in the impacts of war and conflict on women's statuses and lives as well as in the effect women have on war, conflict, and post-conflict environments.

Research on women and politics similarly focuses on disaggregating women's experiences and interactions with politics, because women are rarely a cohesive group with a single unifying set of political priorities or preferences (e.g. Childs and Krook, 2009; Htun, 2004). This collection's authors critique and challenge both the portrayals and the empirical reality of women's involvements in conflict and peace, focusing on the differentiated ways that institutions, agency, and conflict dynamics condition how women are affected by and affect conflict and the post-conflict setting. In particular, the articles examine the diverse ways in which women participate and are portrayed participating in conflict and war (e.g. as victims, perpetrators, and as variously positioned in hierarchies), how conflict and the threat of conflict affects women's security and welfare, and how the integration of gender into security and legal frameworks influences the post-conflict environment.

The first article investigates the social contexts of how women participate in conflict. In “The social origins of female combatants,” Jakana Thomas and Reed Wood focus on the social gender norms and economic conditions that create opportunities for women to be recruited by and join rebel organizations, not only in supportive roles but also as combatants.² The authors conclude that societal gender expectations and equality condition the

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circumstances under which rebels recruit female fighters and that women join the cause in order to (physically) fight.

The next two articles explain how conflict dynamics affect the security and welfare of women in broader society, rather than the actions of women who actively participate in conflict. First, in “The effect of sexual violence on negotiated outcomes in civil conflicts,” authors Tiffany Chu and Jessica Braithwaite argue that wartime rape is a barometer of low popularity and recruitment problems, rather than a strategic weapon (cf. Cohen, 2013), and correspondingly find that higher levels of sexual violence by government forces, or similar levels of sexual violence by government and rebel forces, are associated with an increased likelihood of a conflict reaching a negotiated settlement. This suggests that the physical security of women³ is conditioned by broader conflict dynamics,⁴ with greater insecurity indicating a higher likelihood of the government’s willingness to negotiate rather than continue to fight. Similarly, in “Painting too ‘rosie’ a picture: The impact of external threat on women’s economic welfare,” Jaroslav Tir and Maureen Bailey show that when states are in an unfavorable conflict situation, women’s welfare suffers. In particular, when external threats to their territorial homeland arise, states are more likely to centralize government decision-making and increase military spending to prepare to combat that threat. This shift de-prioritizes attention to women’s issues, leading to a reduction in women’s employment. Thus, when states experience unfavorable domestic conflict scenarios or hostile international environments, women’s well-being suffers.

The next pair of articles shifts focus to the distinct effects of international and domestic factors in the post-conflict environment. Laura Huber and Sabrina Karim’s article, “The internationalization of security sector gender reforms in post-conflict countries,” examines the factors that explain how women are integrated into security sector and law enforcement reform. They find that while domestic factors such as women’s representation in the legislature and the level of democracy have limited effect on gender-balancing, the presence of a UN peacekeeping mission increases the will and resources necessary to incorporate women into the security sector. This suggests a broader range of positive effects of peacekeeping missions beyond the reduction of violence (e.g. Hultman et al., 2014). Conversely, in “Enforcement of sexual violence law in post-civil conflict societies,” Jillienne Haglund and David Richards investigate the process of enforcing gender-based violence laws and reducing gender-based violence outcomes, showing the tremendous impact of domestic factors on women’s well-being.⁵ They find that where strong laws are written and carried out under independent judiciaries, law enforcement of gender-based violence in the post-conflict environment improves; subsequently, where law enforcement improves, so do the chances of reducing rape prevalence.

Finally, in “Jihadi brides and female volunteers: Reading the Islamic State’s war to see gender and agency in conflict dynamics,” Laura Sjoberg comes full circle to some of the questions posed by Thomas and Wood, focusing on the ways in which women are *portrayed* participating in conflict. She highlights that while media stories predominantly portray women as victims of the Islamic State (IS), they also cover women’s agency in actively fighting against IS. Media portrayals, the author reminds us, largely reinforce but may also challenge traditional narratives of gender, war and conflict, and paying attention to those portrayals reveals gendered conflict experiences and expectations. In a conclusion that could just as easily serve to introduce many of the themes addressed this special issue, Sjoberg reviews how these narratives may affect women’s different roles and experiences as investigated by the other authors in this collection.

As a whole, the articles in this issue answer Sjoberg et al.'s (2017) call for more synergy between large-*n* statistical analyses and critical feminist work on gender and international relations. Not only does Sjoberg's discourse analysis help us situate other articles' statistical findings within gendered narratives that are socially constructed and tell us where we might expect to see and to not see women, other authors' theory development often relies on insights from feminist interrogations. For example, we have a deeper understanding of why and when gender-conforming and gender non-conforming treatment, representation, inclusion, or exclusion of women is harmful to women themselves (e.g. women as perpetrators and victims of violence, women's unemployment) or society (e.g. gender-balanced Security Sector Reform). At several junctures, the first five articles draw on feminist understandings of the co-constitution of conflict and gender to generate hypotheses. For example, Tir and Bailey build their hypothesis predicting lower rates of female employment by reasoning that when external threats are high, societies simultaneously value women less in deference to needs to masculinize the state via militarization and assume that doing so will still ensure their protection as peaceful, incompetent, and weak bystanders. Similarly, the theoretical premise of the articles by Thomas and Wood and Huber and Karim is that gender norms can be broken, and those authors query the conditions under which women become participants in traditionally masculine roles like combatants in armed resistance movements or security sector workers.

Beyond its theoretical contributions and challenges, the collection also features three original datasets on gender, war, and conflict. Thomas and Wood's article relies on an original dataset of female armed combatants that covers a global sample of 170 rebel organizations between 1979 and 2009, Huber and Karim's article relies on a new dataset of security sector reforms that covers a global sample of conflict and post-conflict states between 1989 and 2012, and Haglund and Richards's article relies on an original dataset of strength and enforcement of domestic legal statutes addressing violence against women that covers a global sample of post-conflict states between 2007 and 2010. Careful analysis of this novel, global data, along with rigorous theoretical arguments and insight from feminist critiques and understandings, ensure that the articles in this collection will make a real impact on future research in the study of gender, war, and conflict.

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Notes

1. Authors' names listed in alphabetical order.
2. This moves beyond previous work (Thomas and Bond, 2015) that focused on proximate group-level motivations, highlighting broader societal expectations and norms that shape recruitment incentives from the perspective of both the recruiter and the recruited.
3. Men, of course, may also be victims of sexual violence during war, but civilian women are disproportionately likely to be the victims of sexual violence perpetrated during conflict.

4. This dynamic reflects findings regarding broader civilian victimization in civil war (e.g. Wood and Kathman, 2014).
5. These findings complement and extend those of scholars such as Htun and Weldon (2012), who focus on the role of civil society organizations in the adoption of such laws.

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